

Border fencing

India’s decision to allocate a staggering sum of over Rs 3 lakh crore towards fortifying its border with Myanmar undoubtedly reflects the gravity of the challenges it faces in safeguarding its territorial integrity and national security. This substantial investment underscores the government’s resolve to confront issues of smuggling, illegal immigration, and other transnational threats that have long plagued this porous frontier. The porous nature of the India-Myanmar border has been a cause for concern for decades, allowing illicit activities to thrive and posing significant security risks. The recent escalation of tensions in Myanmar following the military coup in 2021 has further exacerbated these concerns, with a surge in refugees fleeing to neighbouring Indian states, particularly those sharing ethnic and familial ties. Beyond immediate security concerns, India’s decision to erect a physical barrier along this border also reflects broader geopolitical considerations.

With the rise of China’s influence in the region, India must assert its presence and secure its borders to prevent any encroachment on its sovereignty. By fortifying its eastern frontier, India sends a clear message of its commitment to defending its territorial integrity and asserting its strategic interests in the region. Doubtless, the troubles in Manipur would have influenced decision-making.

However, the decision to allocate such a substantial budget towards border fortification raises questions about priorities and resource allocation. At a time when the country faces pressing challenges on multiple fronts, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure development, the allocation of billions towards border fencing may appear disproportionate to some. But the same guns or butter argument would apply to every aspect of strengthening security.

Furthermore, the decision to end the decades-old visa-free movement policy for border citizens raises concerns about its impact on the communities living in the border regions. While the rationale behind this policy shift is undoubtedly rooted in national security concerns, and the situation in a sensitive border state, it risks alienating and disrupting the lives of those who have long benefited from cross-border interactions. The exorbitant cost of approximately Rs 3 lakh crore for the border fence, more than double the cost of the fence with Bangladesh, underscores the formidable challenges posed by the difficult terrain and the need for advanced technological solutions.

While ensuring the effectiveness of border security measures is paramount, it is imperative that such investments are made judiciously and transparently, with due consideration for cost-effectiveness and accountability. India’s decision to invest heavily in fortifying its border with Myanmar reflects the complex security dynamics of the region and the government’s commitment to safeguarding its territorial integrity. However, it also raises important questions about priorities, resource allocation, and the impact on local communities. As India navigates these challenges, it must strive to strike a balance between security imperatives and broader developmental goals, ensuring that its border management policies are both effective and equitable.

Blame Game

Amidst the chaos and horror of the recent massacre at a Moscow concert hall, one thing is abundantly clear: the finger-pointing and blame game have already begun. As the smoke clears and the grim reality of over a hundred lives lost sinks in, the question of who is responsible looms large. Islamic State’s claim of responsibility has sent shockwaves through an already shaken community, but the attempt by Russian President Vladimir Putin to implicate Ukraine adds another layer of complexity to an already murky situation. It’s easy to see why Mr Putin would want to shift the blame away from his own doorstep. Such is the tangled web of geopolitics and power dynamics at play. The Kremlin’s involvement in conflicts, such as its contentious actions in Ukraine and its intervention in Syria, has left a trail of resentment and animosity. Russia’s assertive foreign policy has garnered both allies and adversaries, contributing to a complex landscape where alliances shift and tensions simmer.

The timing of the attack, coming just weeks after warnings from Western embassies of potential terrorist threats in Moscow, adds another layer of intrigue. It begs the question: could this massacre be a calculated move by those seeking to destabilise Russia’s power and influence? While Islamic State’s assertion of responsibility cannot be dismissed outright, it’s imperative to explore alternative motives and potential actors involved. The interconnected nature of global politics demands a nuanced understanding, one that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of conflict and the myriad forces at play. The timing of the attack, just weeks after warnings, raises suspicions. Could this have been a calculated move by those looking to undermine Russia’s stability and sow chaos within its borders? The fact that the venue targeted was owned by a businessman with close ties to Mr Putin only adds fuel to the fire.

But perhaps most concerning is the attempt by Mr Putin to pin the blame on Ukraine. The suggestion that Ukraine provided an escape route for the terrorists, without providing any evidence to support such a claim, reeks of political manoeuvring. It is a dangerous game to play, one that risks escalating tensions between the two nations at a time when diplomatic efforts are needed more than ever. Ukraine’s swift denial of any involvement in the attack should come as no surprise. The last thing the war-torn nation needs is to be dragged into a conflict of this nature, especially when it relies so heavily on support from the West.

On the face of it, Ukraine has little reason to target civilians. As the investigation into the massacre unfolds, it is crucial that we resist the temptation to jump to conclusions or assign blame without concrete evidence. The lives lost in this senseless act of violence deserve justice, and that can only be achieved through a thorough and impartial investigation.

The Missing Links

Clearly Bharat Ratna Dr MS Swaminathan, who became synonymous with his mentor Dr Norman Borlaug for ushering in the Green Revolution, was way beyond being an agri-geneticist or one preoccupied with agri-production. In the month we celebrate World Water Day, it is appropriate to underscore, recount and underline the importance which he gave to water, water conservation and irrigation in the pioneering work he did, the volumes of reports, papers he wrote and speeches and the interviews he gave across the world for several decades



Often asked to summarise a prepared speech in five minutes, Bharat Ratna Dr MS Swaminathan would demonstrate his innate ability to fluently explain complexities of agriculture, economics, and nutrition in easy-to-understand points. At an international conference in 2011, agile and alert at age 85, Dr Swaminathan explained, “when every nation is searching for methods to meet UN Development Goals, to eradicate poverty and hunger, the synergy between agriculture, health, and nutrition, in my view, is a missing link in many of the cases in government efforts, including India. We are not able to achieve targets because those linkages, which are necessary, are missing.”

Like a 21st century Charles Darwin emphasizing gaps or missing linkages in the evolution of agriculture in modern times, Dr Swaminathan’s mind straddled centuries when he spoke about India’s traditional indigenous systems and their relevance in contemporary India. “We seem to have forgotten our tradition of bringing agriculture-health-and nutrition together. In Ayurveda, which is a holistic system, the diet is questioned and prescribed by the practitioner not merely the drugs: it deals with the entire life-cycle of an ailing person. The linkage of this food and drugs approach cannot be over-emphasized,” he said. Clearly Dr Swaminathan, who became synonymous with his mentor Dr Norman Borlaug for ushering in the Green Revolution, was way beyond being an agri-geneticist or one preoccupied with agri-production. It is appropriate to underscore, recount and underline the importance which he gave to water, water conservation and irrigation in the pioneering work he did, the volumes of reports, papers he wrote and speeches and interviews he gave across the world, for several decades.

When Dr Swaminathan was helming the National Commission on Farmers, he submitted five reports between December 2004 and October 2006. Following the first four, the final report focused on causes of farmer distress and the rise in farmer suicides, and recommended addressing them through a holistic national policy for farmers. “Agrarian distress has led farmers to commit suicide in recent years. The major causes of the agrarian crisis are: unfinished agenda in land reform, quantity and quality of water, technology fatigue, access, adequacy and timeliness of institutional credit, and opportunities for assured and remunerative marketing. Adverse meteorological factors add to these problems,” stated the report.

The National Crime Records Bureau of India reported that

a total of 296,438 farmers who died between 1995 and 2014 and whose deaths were registered as ‘suicide’. NCRB data showed incidence of farmer suicides remained high between 2014 and 2020, with over 5,600 farmers committing suicide in 2014, and 5,500 farmers in 2020.

The NCF report was a pointer to this agrarian distress, and recommended that “farmers need to have assured access and control over basic resources, which include land, water, bio-resources, credit and insurance, technology and knowledge management, and markets.” It recommended that ‘agriculture’ be inserted in the Concurrent List of the Constitution. Water, its quantity and quality, was high on its priorities

and one of the major causes of farmers’ suicides. Out of the gross sown area of 192 million hectares, rainfed agriculture contributed to 60 per cent of the gross cropped area and 45 per cent of the total agricultural output. The NCF report recommended a comprehensive set of reforms to enable farmers to have sustained and equitable access to water; Increased water supply through rainwater harvesting and recharge of the aquifer should become mandatory; “Million Wells Recharge” programme, specifically targeted at private wells should be launched; substantial increase in investment in irrigation sector under the 11th Five Year Plan apportioned between large surface water systems was necessary as were minor irrigation and new schemes for ground-water recharge.

While the report focused on water, the life blood of agriculture which was under severe threat, it acknowledged the real challenge lay with the allocation of water to agriculture facing a losing battle with the industrial, domestic, power, and other sectors. At the same time, there was a compulsion to intensify agriculture even when production per capita land and water availability was declining. For dedicated men of science like Dr Swaminathan the lack of water availability on the one hand, and inefficient use of available water on the other, were the reasons for limited agricultural production, way below potential.

The war-cry in the NCF Report was for ‘Efficient Water Management’, despite several constraints and challenges. There was gradual deterioration in the quality of water. Added to it were the adverse impacts of expected climate change on precipitation, temperature, and sea

level rise as a consequence of global warming. Thus Indian agriculture at any time was facing a precarious situation.

Top priority must be given to conserving every drop of water, declared the Report, and sought rendering “water as everyone’s business” to ensure most judicious and efficient use of this precious resource. Hydrological balance, water security and water-use policy, water users’ associations, storing water everywhere, recharging million wells, reviving dying wisdom for water conservation and use, energy and water pricing, integrated watershed management and convergence and synergy among missions comprise major water conservation and use initiatives.

Being a strong votary of convergence in agriculture, health and nutrition, Dr Swaminathan kept an unwavering focus on nutrition. A true Gandhian in orientation, he often quoted the Mahatma’s words “For those who are hungry, God is bread.” He wanted every Indian home to be blessed with life-giving and life-saving bread. Not many are aware of the deep influence of Mahatma Gandhi on Dr Swaminathan’s life and work. In his archives, there are photographs of Dr Swaminathan seated at his work table, with only a framed photograph of the Mahatma adorning it.

“Our agricultural policies have to be Pro-Nature, Pro-Poor and Pro-Women,” he explained in an interview with Doordarshan. Pro-Nature referred to the entire spectrum of natural resources whose sustainability and productivity was to be ensured over the long-term: land, air, water, forest, plants and trees, animals, and cattle. Being conscious of the social, ecological, and cultural diversity in our land, Dr Swaminathan advocated for policies that would holistically and positively impact agriculture, especially lives of the small farmers and landless labour who tilled the land.

“Pro-Poor policies are essential,” he said, quoting his mentor the Mahatma who judged policies and programmes on how they affected the lives of the poorest. “The third aspect is Pro-Women: our initiatives recognise the feminization of agriculture and the critical role played by women.” He highlighted the example of ‘bio-villages’ where women are gainfully employed in non-farm activities.

When asked whether globalization was adversely affecting Indian agriculture, Dr Swaminathan would explain, “our social

structure, our population growth – from 300 million in 1947 to over a billion in seventy years – are not related to globalization. These are the issues which we need to address.” There is tremendous pressure on land, and almost 70 per cent of India’s population continues to be dependent on agricultural or non-farm activities in rural areas.

“Even small farms, less than one hectare, can produce more. Japan, Taiwan, and China have demonstrated increased productivity in small farms. In India, however, the small farmer has no access to credit, technology, irrigation, or production inputs,” was the explanation, radiant with the clarity of Dr Swaminathan’s words and hopeful that public and private investment in Indian agriculture would grow.

“What is the purpose of agriculture,” questioned Dr Swaminathan at the 2011 conference in New Delhi, adding, “agriculture has to become an instrument for both health and nutrition.”

While precision agriculture and efficient water management were paramount, Dr Swaminathan called for collaboration among the scientists, field functionaries, and the farmers. He stood for the convergence of scientific thought and government policy formulations, always ready to bridge modern science with ancient wisdom on agriculture.

“We must put faces before figures, if we are to understand the sad plight of farm families. To assure farmers that Government measures agricultural progress not merely on the basis of production targets, but also on the basis of real growth in farmers’ income, figures on annual growth rate in farmers’ income should be given. Such a change in mindset, which regards farm families as the custodians of food security and national sovereignty and not just as ‘beneficiaries’ of small Government programmes, will become explicit by redesignating the Ministry of Agriculture as the ‘Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare,” he said.

As the NCF report recommended in August 2015, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare and the Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare was announced. In June 2019, the Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries was separated from the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare to form an independent Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying.

In Dr Swaminathan, modern India was blessed to have a scientist who brought technology and public policy on agriculture together to transform not just the lives of millions of farmers but shape the destiny of our Republic.

ASIAN VOICES

Animal rights as humanity's test

Humanity’s “true moral test,” the late novelist Milan Kundera wrote in his seminal work, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being,” “consists of its attitude toward those who are at its mercy: animals.” By that standard alone, the Philippines has been an abject failure, in light of its culture of animal cruelty that extends not only to endangered wildlife but domesticated animals like livestock, strays, and the pets in our homes.

One example of the latter was the sad case of Killua, a golden retriever beaten to death by a resident of Bato town, Camarines province, on March 17. Killua’s owner Vina Arazas accused her neighbor Anthony Solares of mauling her three-year-old pet after the dog escaped from the house. Later, a video showed Solares chasing the dog before its lifeless body was found in a sack, triggering a social media furor.

The man claimed self-defense, saying the dog tried to bite him, and there are reports it tested positive for rabies, but the Philippine Animal Welfare Society said there are more humane ways to handle a rabid dog.

Before Killua, there was the case of the pets in the unfortunate care of the girl band 4th Impact. In early March, the group’s members drew brickbats after they raised funds to purchase land where they planned to house their 200 shih tzus.

Some were aghast at the conditions the dogs must have been put through, as they bred and multiplied in such staggering numbers uninter-



rupted. Of course, there were grumblings against the inordinate public attention given to the purebred dogs in the two instances, when so many “aspin” or asong Pinoy, the colloquial term for mutts of mixed pedigree, are known to suffer even worse treatment, like the puppy thrown from a footbridge by a security guard in Quezon City in July last year or “Erika,” another aspin stabbed dead by a Korean in a Manila grill house on March 9.

The same is true of “puspin” or pusang Pinoy, the equivalent term for cats. Take the case of the neglected cats at a farm in Dasmariñas City in Cavite, which, according to reports, were in such terrible state they had resorted to cannibalizing each other.

The matter came to light last week after a cat owner in the city found her missing pet at a farm owned by Jeffrey Fresni, village chief of San Jose, who had converted a section of his property into a pound for strays.

“Upon visiting the farm, the cat owner was dismayed to find her black cat, Macky, eating a deceased cat, a result of starvation,” animal welfare advocate Sherrie Hinojales-Matthews wrote in a letter to Interior Secretary Benhur Abalos.

Two more dead cats were seen at the property, the apparent “victims of starvation and cannibalism,” prompting local officials to investigate. In response, Fresni told the Inquirer: “There was no animal cruelty. We are spending money on sacks of food for their daily needs.”

But his words betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of animal cruelty. Feeding pets or livestock is the bare minimum that anyone tasked with caring for an animal must do. Our responsibility toward animals goes well beyond that, for, like humans, they deserve not only to be well-fed but to be safe, secure, and content in their environment.

Last week, Sen. Grace Poe cited the need to integrate animal welfare literacy into the basic education curriculum, as she sponsored her pet bill seeking harsher penalties under the Animal Welfare Act of 1998, as amended.

In its present form, the maximum penalty under the law for any person who subjects an animal to “cruelty, maltreatment or neglect” that results in its death is one-year imprisonment and a fine not exceeding P100,000.

But the public is still woefully unaware that such a law even exists.

In a landmark case in May 2011, a court fined a University of the Philippines student for killing a cat in 2009, forgoing a prison sentence after he volunteered for community service.

The SAD felt that power at the Centre would be at the cost of the interests of the farmers of Punjab.

The BJP has perfected the art of crafting and maintaining alliances in the last three decades but it appears that the party sometimes fails on its promises to parties with strong regional bases.

Learning such skills will help the party on a gloomy day.

Yours, etc.,
Sanjay Chopra,
Mohali, 28 March.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

BJP and SAD

SIR, Although the BJP has claimed that the NDA will win more than 400 seats in the LS elections, its failure to revive the alliance with SAD in Punjab will go against this aim.

The Akali Dal is one of the oldest partners of the BJP, second to only the Shiv Sena. In fact, the SAD with a strong anti-Congress policy was part of the Janata Party

government in 1977.

The SAD, led by P S Badal, with its unconditional support to the newly-formed NDA in 1996, helped the BJP improve the dented image it had acquired after the Babri Masjid demolition.

The 24-year-old alliance ended in 2020 when the two parted ways on the issue of the now-scrapped agricultural laws.



Maritime security has made the country safer

APARNA GEORGE

Mumbai, formerly Bombay, is revered as the City of Dreams, symbolizing boundless aspirations and opportunities. Countless individuals have realized their ambitions and attained prominence within its embrace, while many others navigate its lanes amidst unfulfilled dreams and disillusionment. Yet, the city perpetually surges forward, heedless of those struggling to keep pace with its relentless rhythm.

It was on the night of 26 November 2008 that Mumbai became synonymous with tragedy as ten militants orchestrated an unforgivable assault etched deeply into the collective memory of every Indian. Although not the first time that it had become victim to such an attack, 26/11 saw attacks that were not only unprovoked but also aimed at multiple soft targets simultaneously such as luxury hotels, railway stations, hospitals, and cinemas. The militants held the city captive for over 48 hours, claiming the lives of nearly 160 innocent people. By the end of it, all of them except one had been killed.

In response to this, the State Government of Maharashtra convened a committee led by former Home Secretary, RK Pradhan and former IPS officer V. Balachander. The revelations from the lone captured terrorist unveiled chilling details of the militants' infiltration into India via sea routes. Beginning their journey from Karachi, Pakistan aboard the vessel Al-Hussaini, the militants embarked on a perilous route covering four days to reach Porbandar, Gujarat.



Here, they hijacked an Indian fishing vessel named Kuber and killed all the men on board. They kept the Captain alive so that he could speak the local vernacular should the Coast Guard stop them. Once he had fulfilled this role, he was also ruthlessly slain. Their journey culminated in Mumbai, where they docked near a fishing village, marking their first steps on Indian soil. From here, the 10 fanned out to different locations, proceeding to hold the city hostage for close to two days.

Despite intelligence alerts warning of potential maritime assaults, including specific threats to Mumbai's coastal establishments, the attacks transpired with devastating efficacy.

Six alerts had been released by the Intelligence Bureau about a sea-bound attack on Mumbai aimed at soft targets. Eleven alerts were also made on possible simultaneous attacks in commando mode. This underscores the critical importance of bolstering coastal security measures.

The matter of coastal security came up first in the aftermath of the Kargil War. It was regrettably relegated until tragedy struck on 26/11. In 2009, immediately after the attack, the Indian government initiated the construction of 26 Coastal Radar Stations and 16 Command and Control Rooms as part of the Indian Coast Surveillance Systems. These installations play a pivotal role in regional

coastal security within the Indian Ocean Region by facilitating the detection, location, and monitoring of maritime activities. They also keep track of all movement on seas including that of small boats, dinghies, and vessels.

Additionally, most of these radars operate on software that facilitates Data Fusion. Radars can exchange information with each other and keep track of a particular vessel irrespective of the pace at which it moves. Areas can be designated as "sensitive" zones that then trigger an alarm when a boat arrives in such locations. In 2018, India also set up these stations in Seychelles and Maldives.

If we were to apply this technolo-

gy in 2008, this is how it would have worked. This means that when Al-Hussaini (the boat the militants used to travel from Karachi) entered Indian waters, the radar along Mumbai and Gujarat would have picked up that information: that a boat from Pakistan had crossed over and that it needed to be watched. Since 2018, the Automatic Identification System or AIS has also been mandatory which means a boat without AIS entering the borders would have been located as well, causing officers to be on alert.

The radars through data fusion would have picked up the highjacking of the Kuber. Automatic Identification System would have meant that the men on board Kuber would have had the chance to send distress calls to the Coast Guard who would then have been alerted early enough to intercept and stop the militants from getting close to the coast. It is an admitted fact that no terrorist attack, through the sea or otherwise, has taken place in India since the deadly night of 26 November. This gives much credence to the steps that were taken to preserve maritime security.

However, security is an ongoing project and not a one-stop shop. Given the immense importance that international organizations such as Quad and BIMSTEC give to maritime security, the country seems to be moving in the right direction in its quest to attain the spot of First Responder in the Indian Ocean Region.

(The writer is Assistant Professor of Law, Jindal Global Law School.)

The pesky stone in Pakistan's shoe

KHURRAM HUSAIN

It has not even been a month since the new Pakistan government was sworn in and important cracks in its otherwise powerful edifice are already beginning to show. Last week, for example, the prime minister had to announce the composition of some important cabinet committees, and within a day, make changes to the list.

One of these was the Cabinet Committee on Privatisation (CCoP), and the other was the crucial Economic Coordination Committee (ECC). This is not just some bureaucratic wrangling. These are vital decision-making centres, especially considering that the areas they will be dealing with have direct bearing on the successor IMF programme.

In the first draft, the prime minister appointed himself the chair of the ECC, but then a day later issued a new notification appointing the finance minister instead. The position is usually held by the finance minister so it was only natural that questions arose when the prime minister appointed himself in that seat.

For most people the answer was simple. The PML-N wants to keep as much of executive decision-making authority inside the family as is possible. Mr Ishaq Dar, the foreign minister, has surprisingly been appointed to chair the CCoP, which has historically been chaired by the finance minister.

In at least one instance, that of the ECC, the decision was reversed quickly but some damage had already been done. What everyone feared — that the new government will lack a strong centre for economic decision-making — had been stoked. What went into the reversal of this decision is not a



matter of public record, but it is not difficult to guess that Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb (*photo*) would have had to mount an effort in persuasion to get the prime minister to reverse his own decision.

But it doesn't end there. As time goes on, we will likely see more and more such actions designed to keep Aurangzeb in a tight box. People are wondering whether his experience will be much different from that of Miftah Ismail, who found himself being second-guessed and criticised by his own party colleagues, most notably Ishaq Dar. Is that history set to repeat itself? Signs are increasingly appearing that would suggest that, yes, it is.

But it doesn't end there. The new government appears on the surface to be one of the strongest Pakistan has ever had, with a two-third majority in parliament and full backing from the

powerful establishment, including the army as evidenced from the central role the Special Investment Facilitation Council is already playing in crucial decisions, a body that has the army chief represented on it alongside the prime minister.

With such powerful legs to stand on, within and outside parliament, the government should be exuding confidence and a crisp sense of direction. To some extent this is happening, as evidenced in the speed with which the PIA structuring transaction is advancing. But in other areas, reversals such as the one on the composition of the ECC, inspire anything but confidence, especially when they show a desire to side-line the newly minted finance minister before he has even begun working in earnest.

Beyond the economic decision-making, the government is increasingly finding itself consumed by the scale of

the score-settling that the system is now pregnant with. This is important because it affects the quality of the decisions the leadership will be able to make as things move forward under this set-up. It turns out that the country is not really made of Lego after all, and building it in one shape, then dismantling it only to rebuild it in another, is not as straightforward a task as it would be for a child playing with the construction toy. Yesterday's bad guys cannot become today's good guys, and vice versa, without leaving some scars; above all, some questions are raised that erode the legitimacy of the entire edifice.

Today, the ghosts of the past are rising up to haunt the country all over again. Both the opposition PTI and the ruling PML-N are hobbled by this. The PML-N has to run the country and navigate tough economic times ahead, while the PTI has to swat away questions about its 'same page' days. With-

out closure on these crucial questions, the state of affairs at the top will remain unsettled, ghosts from the past will continue to haunt, and decision-making will remain hostage to political considerations.

This is how it works in every government that has a stone in its shoe, whether it is a military dictatorship, or a 'same page' champion. And it permeates every corner of decision-making, from the ability of the government to undertake the deeper structural reforms, to its ability to maintain macroeconomic stability. The stone in the shoe aggravates dissension within the ranks of the ruling coalition, and creates pressure on the rulers to deliver quick feel-good results to the populace.

If it does not reckon with the stone in its shoe, this government will find it very difficult to walk the path of adjustment that will be laid out for it in the successor Fund programme. At that point, attempts to snatch more decision-making powers out of the hands of Finance Minister Aurangzeb, will gather momentum. Pressure will mount to switch out of adjustment towards growth instead, and the inability to do this will be seen as the failure of the new man in the building.

A small glimpse of this was already seen last week with the committee composition. The ghosts of the past were seen coming out of the woodwork at the start of this week, with the letter from the six judges of the Islamabad High Court. The stone in the shoe is now starting to do its work, and despite the powerful legs the government is standing on, it can still induce a limp in its stride. And the game has only just begun.

Dawn/ANN.

100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

AFTER the diabolical series of outrages they have already perpetrated, no crime committed by the Bolsheviks can excite surprise, but the shooting in cold blood of the son of the Khan of Khiva and of twelve of his followers in a concentration camp at Moscow is hardly calculated to promote their popularity amongst the Mahomelans of Central Asia. Although he does not enjoy quite the same prestige in Islam as the Emir of Bokhara, the deposition of the Khan by the Bolsheviks certainly caused great uneasiness to important tribes like the Uzbegs and Turkomans, and when the Emir of Bokhara himself had to fly before the advance of the Red troops, the neighbouring Pathans and Afghans were forced into a definitely anti-Russian attitude. The arrival of the Emir and his followers in Kabul with their tales of plunder and outrage so affected the feeling in that city that the Afghans were forthwith permitted to enlist in the guerilla army that Enver Pasha was raising against the Bolsheviki. Enver Pasha himself may be dead, but it is known that for the past two years bands of armed Uzbegs and Turkomans have been harassing the Soviet garrisons of Merv, Bokhara, Samarkhand, and Khiva. The Bolsheviks excuse the murder of the son of the Khan of Khiva on the ground that it is a reprisal for the shooting of Commissars by Junaïd Khan, Chieftain of Turkistan, "during the latter" recent attack on Khiva." This is the first news that has come through of any such attack, nor is it generally known who Junaïd Khan may be, unless he is Junaïd Khan, a Turkoman noble whom the British assisted with arms at the time when it was considered necessary to hold the Central Asian railway as a precaution against a German-cum-Bolshevik advance upon India. In any case, it is an indication of growing strength amongst the at Turkomans that Khiva itself should have been attacked.

NEWS ITEMS

ENTERTAINMENT TAX AND TOWN BAND

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "STATESMAN".

SIR,-The Troubadour quotes Mr. Clynes, the Labour Member, as having said that it is only fair and proper of the State to make some return out of the entertainment tax towards the enrichment and encouragement of the great endeavours being made to popularize music, the greatest of the arts. The Troubadour went on to say that "it would truly be a blessing if our Government would hold similar ideas and policy and make some return out of the entertainment tax collected in Calcutta for the help and betterment of the Calcutta Town Band."

I see from your issue of to-day that the revenue derived in Bengal from the amusement tax was Rs. 25,15,305-4-10 in 1922-23 and Rs. 18,15,211-4-10 in ten months of 1923-24.

Will Government take a hint and help our Town Band? It needs help badly. Perhaps, Mr. Editor, you will second the proposal Yours, etc.,

K. BURNETT
Calcutta, March 27,

THE JUTE (AND OTHER) INDUSTRIES

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE STATESMAN"

SIR, With reference to the comments made upon the above subject by an extremist paper as well as subsequent correspondence in the columns of your valuable paper, I shall deem it a favour if you will publish the following lines.

True it is to a certain extent that the ryot in Bengal is hard hit, and is perhaps not well remunerated for his labour, but this is not so much the fault of the manufacturer or trader as the result of trade depression, etc. If the European exploiter," after having satisfied the demands of the various middlemen who are for the most part Indians, can successfully carry on this trade, why on earth do not the Indians also see their way to getting into this line of business as well, and have their own mills instead of merely grumbling? The truth is they cannot succeed. To successfully conduct manufacturing or industrial ventures (unlike buying and selling) as well as to discharge the trust reposed by the public in the personnel of the respective companies, calls for qualities of the head and heart which also even by a "greater irony of fate" seem to be the exclusive assets of the European exploiter." The miserable state of affairs existing among come of the Indian-managed industrial concerns bears testimony to the above statement.

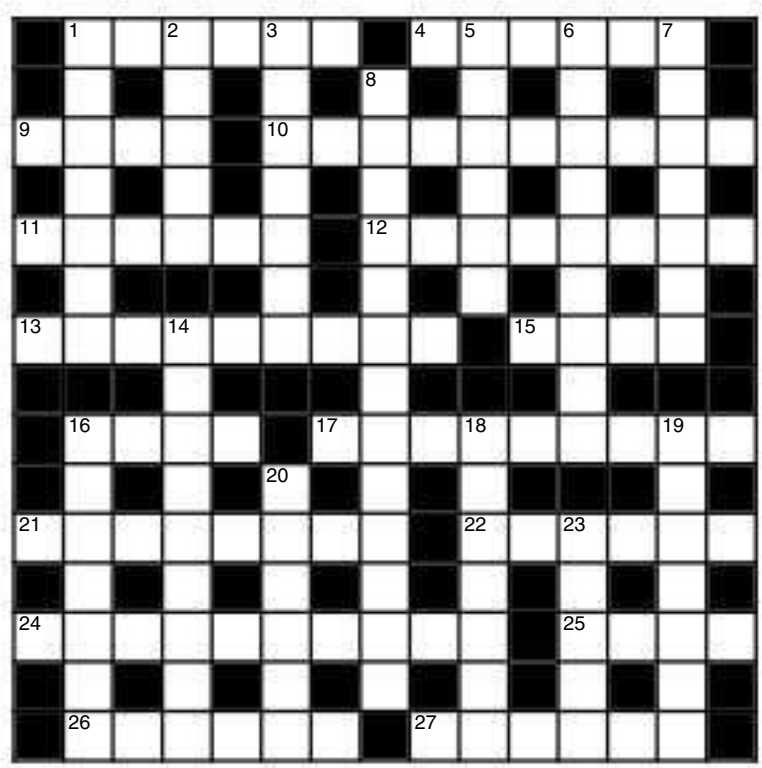
This particularly applies the editor and shipping industries, and it is really a matter of wonder how this could be improved even with a dozen "Indian Mercantile Marines," unless some of the root causes of the failures have been eliminated.

Any propaganda started with the object of persuading the ryot to discontinue jute cultivation in Bengal, will only result in the ruin of the cultivator, who will be deprived of his permanent if not only means of living.

S. K
Calcutta, March 26.

CROSSWORD

NO-292734



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

ACROSS

- Porridge maybe? Visit company stocking it (6)
- Extremely happy taking part in best classes (6)
- Ignore number in boat (4)
- Horses stood nervously in group (10)
- Animal circles farmer's last source of milk (6)
- A bundle of nerves, band meets hero (8)

DOWN

- I cried during speech, being stared at (9)
- At least one drop should help this Fashion lacking length (4)
- Mark correct disease vector (4)
- Cultivated angelicas offering relief (9)
- Wild swimmer always dives in (8)
- Cocky parish priest is seen in posh hotel (6)
- Border is quiet at this place, one of two in the world (10)
- Pacify Liberals mobbing leader of Unionists (4)

- Band play, heading off across river (6)
- Organ spotted outside public library (6)

DOWN

- Benefit from merger, say, releasing a bit of work in city (7)
- Rather upset, having swallowed one bone (5)
- Like ring road section during test (7)
- Defeat current racket appearing in The Mercury (6)
- Corn grows here — not much to eat at first (6,3)

- Mike bore nasty 14 (7)
- Order huge necktie to keep performing for fun (6,2,5)
- Bug etc turns up in contents of meal prior to X-ray (9)
- Name first words of Somewhere (7)
- Spoil left overs then finish (5,2)
- Slight cut in hormone (7)
- Spot empty mousetrap in big house (6)
- Vegan food that's often taken by medical staff (5)

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



EDITORIAL

Essential dialogue

The 29th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC), held in Beijing, signifies a mutual recognition of the need for dialogue and peace along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Western Sector of the India-China border areas. Over the last few years, two of the most powerful nations of Asia—the emerging epicentre of global geopolitics—have been at loggerheads with each other on the border issue. To the dismay of the region, dialogue through multiple platforms has not yielded significantly favourable outcomes. Furthermore, thanks to the evolving geopolitical configurations, the chasm between the two nations is only increasing with time—tainting the prospects of resolution of the border issue and other bilateral issues. Nevertheless, the relevance of the dialogue under the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs cannot be questioned altogether, particularly as India and China now engage less frequently in bilateral terms and at other fora. The WMCC, in a way, keeps the way for dialogue open.

However, as mentioned earlier, things are not quite rosy for Indo-Chinese relations and border disengagement. To put the 29th WMCC meeting in context, one may point out China's recent reiteration of its "absurd" claim on Arunachal Pradesh—a land which it erroneously refers to as "Zangan, an inherent part of China's territory." Renaming of Indian lands and subsequent territorial claims by China are frivolous attempts to exert diplomatic pressure. Such endeavours are an onslaught to India's sovereignty as well, and are intolerable. The lukewarm negation of claims by Indian authorities may not be sufficient. The situation demands condemnation and rebuke by the topmost officeholders in the government. As the notorious adage goes, "a lie, if spoken a thousand times, acquires the texture of truth". China might be trying to create a perception of contention where there is none. India cannot afford to lag behind in this game of perception building. One may take the liberty to draw an exaggerated simile—comparing Russia's appropriation of Ukrainian territories, first in perception and then in reality, with Chinese attempts. Seemingly innocuous, Chinese endeavours may hold considerable threat in future.

Ostensibly, the reason behind this very fresh reiteration by China can be seen in Chinese bitterness arising out of India's intervention in the South China Sea. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's meeting with his Philippine counterpart in Manila has probably irked China. The minister there expressed "India's support to the Philippines for upholding its national sovereignty." *The Global Times* reported in no uncertain terms that "if New Delhi continues to misjudge the situation and underestimate China's determination and will, it will only lead to more risks and losses for India in the future".

In this complex scenario, the pursuit of dialogue and peace through forums like the WMCC is crucial. It provides a mechanism for both nations to articulate concerns, propose solutions, and build consensus on de-escalating tensions. The shared history, cultural ties, and economic interdependencies between India and China offer a foundation upon which diplomatic engagements can build. Recognising mutual interests and the costs of confrontation could facilitate a more conducive atmosphere for addressing and eventually resolving border disputes.

Needless to say, the road to peace and stability along the LAC is fraught with challenges. It requires not only the resolution of immediate military stand-offs but also addressing underlying political, historical, and strategic issues that fuel these tensions. The commitment to dialogue, as evidenced by the WMCC meetings, is a step in the right direction. Yet, the effectiveness of these dialogues in achieving lasting peace and disengagement will depend on the willingness of both nations to compromise and find mutually acceptable solutions.



NARENDRA MODI

The principles championed by saints like Swami Smaranananda are eternal and will act as a source of strength as the nation embarks on developing a Viksit Bharat during the Amrit Kaal

Tribute to a spiritual icon

Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj, whose demise has left the nation mourning, was a pioneer of India's spiritual consciousness and dedicated his life to propagate the ideas of Ramakrishna Mission

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the grand festival of Lok Sabha elections, the news of the demise of Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj brought my mind to a standstill for a few moments. Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj was a pioneer of India's spiritual consciousness and his demise is like a personal loss. A few years ago, the demise of Swami Atmasthananda Ji and now the departure of Swami Smaranananda Ji on his eternal journey has left many people bereaved. My heart, like that of crores of devotees, saints and followers of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, is deeply saddened.

During my visit to Kolkata earlier this month, I had gone to the hospital to enquire about Swami Smaranananda Ji's health. Just like Swami Atmasthananda Ji, Swami Smaranananda Ji too dedicated his entire life for spreading the ideas of Acharya Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Mata Sharada Devi and Swami Vivekananda across the world. While writing this article, the memories of meetings and conversations with him are getting refreshed in my mind.

In January 2020, during my stay at Belur Math, I meditated in the room of Swami Vivekananda. During that visit, I had a long conversation about Swami Atmasthananda Ji with Swami Smaranananda Ji.

It is widely known that I had a close relationship with Ramakrishna Mission and Belur Math. As a seeker of spirituality, I have met different saints and mahatmas and been to many places over the period of more than five decades. Even in Ramakrishna Math, I got to know about the saints who dedicated their lives



Swami Smaranananda Ji (right) laid great emphasis on social empowerment

PTI/FILE PHOTO

to spirituality, among whom personalities like Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji were prominent. Their sacred thoughts and knowledge provided contentment to my mind. In the most important period of my life, such saints taught me the true principle of *Jan Seva hi Prabhu Seva*.

The lives of Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji are an indelible example of the motto of Ramakrishna Mission '*Atmano Mokshaartham Jagaddhitaaya Cha*'.

We all are inspired by the work being done by Ramakrishna Mission for the promotion of education and rural development. Ramakrishna Mission is working

on India's spiritual enlightenment, educational empowerment and humanitarian service. In 1978, when the disastrous flood struck Bengal, Ramakrishna Mission won the hearts of everyone with its selfless service. I remember, when an earthquake ravaged Kutch in 2001, Swami Atmasthananda Ji was among the first people to call me and offer all possible assistance for disaster management on behalf of the Ramakrishna Mission. Under his direction, Ramakrishna Mission helped many people who were affected by the earthquake.

Over the past years, while holding various positions, Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji laid great emphasis on social empowerment. Those who

know the lives of these great personalities will definitely remember how serious these saints were towards modern education, skilling and women empowerment.

Among his many inspiring traits, one thing that impressed me the most was Swami Atmasthananda Ji's love and respect for every culture and every tradition. The reason for this was that he used to travel continuously and had spent a long time in different parts of India. He learned to speak Gujarati while living in Gujarat. He used to even speak with me in the language and I loved listening to his Gujarati!

At different points in India's development journey, our motherland has been blessed by many saints and

seers like Swami Atmasthananda Ji, Swami Smaranananda Ji who have ignited the spark of societal change. They have motivated us to work with a collective spirit and address all the challenges our society faces. These principles are eternal and will act as our source of strength as we embark on developing a Viksit Bharat during the Amrit Kaal.

Once again, on behalf of the entire nation, I pay homage to such saintly souls. I am confident that all the people associated with the Ramakrishna Mission will further move ahead on the path shown by them.

Om Shanti.
The writer is the Prime Minister of India. Views expressed are personal

Quest for joyous progress

India's low ranking on Human Development Index and Happiness Index is a clarion call for policymakers to reorient their focus on health, education, diversity, good governance, environment etc.



ALOK RANJAN

Two very significant and relevant international reports have been recently released—the World Happiness Report (WHR) 2023-24 and the Human Development Report (HDR) 2024. Both are indicators of the level of development of various countries and the quality of life of the people living there. The HDR ranks countries on three factors—the average healthy life expectancy, mean years of schooling, and quality of life. It is a measure of health, education and quality of life of people living in different countries, and is based on data that is available with the countries concerned. The WHR, on the other hand, is based on a Gallup poll survey where questions are put to a representative sample size in each country on five variables, which are: healthy life expectancy, social security (which means one has someone to count on), freedom to make life choices, generosity and perception about corruption. In addition, there is a sixth variable—gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, which is taken from the data available with various countries.

India's rank in the WHR is 126th out of 143 countries, meaning that India is amongst the unhappiest countries in the world. One may have issues with this ranking, particularly since Pakistan and Nepal are shown as being happier than India, which is a little difficult to accept. However, these rankings are based on a survey, and it is also a fact that ever since the world happiness surveys started in 2012, India has consistently been ranked at the bottom of the pile. Finland has been ranked as the happiest country for at least the last five years, and has maintained the top position in WHR 2024 as well. It is followed by Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and



The World Happiness Report, 2024, found that there is an increase in the inequality of happiness

Israel. The report points out that the survey regarding Israel was done before the Hamas attack and the resultant conflict. While the United Kingdom is at the 20th place, the USA and Germany have been dropped out of the top 20 for the first time, ranking 23rd and 24th respectively.

This year, the WHR has also tried to make a correlation of age with happiness in different countries. It finds that there is a lower level of happiness in people born after 1980. However, the association between age and happiness varies according to region. For instance, in general, the young are happier than the old in many regions, while in Western Europe, the happiness level is the same for old and young. In North America, the old are happier than the younger people. For India, it was found that old age is associated with higher life satisfaction but older women have a lower level of life satisfaction than older men. The caste factor comes into play for India, with upper castes being generally happier than other castes. Also, those who have completed at least secondary education are happier than those who have

not been educated. For India, as well as for the entire world, the WHR 2024 finds that there is an increase in the inequality of happiness.

In the ranking of countries on happiness among young people below the age of 30 for the period 2021-2023, the WHR finds that Lithuania gets the highest rank, followed by Israel, Serbia, Iceland, and Denmark. Finland is at the 7th position, while the UK slips down to the 32nd position, and most surprisingly, the USA gets the 62nd rank. China is 79th, while India is once again at the lower end, being ranked 127th. WHR 2024 then ranked countries according to happiness for old people whose age is greater than 60 years. Denmark turned out to be the country having the happiest old people, followed by Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. In this ranking, the USA is at the 10th position, and China is 30th. This shows that older people in the USA and China are far happier than the younger ones. Unfortunately, India continues to languish at the 121st position. It seems that the old and the young are equally unhappy in India, though the report says that the

young are happier than middle-aged people in India. The happiness ranked for the old people in India is slightly better than that for the younger ones.

The HDR 2024 also does not present a good picture about India, with the Indian rank being 134 out of 192. These rankings should act as a wake-up call for our public policymakers. It should set them thinking that in terms of GDP we are the 5th largest economy in the world, poised to become the 3rd largest by 2028. India is being recognised all over the world for its annual growth rate of about 7 per cent, and is currently the fastest-growing economy in the world. In terms of per capita income, India ranks 140th in the world, and this could be a possible explanation for the low happiness rankings. Also, the inequality, both social and economic, is high in India, which might be contributing to a lower level of happiness. The HDR rank clearly shows that health and education are the most important components of human development, and India must prioritise the both in its development agenda. We must be concerned

with an overall improvement in the quality of life of the people rather than just be satisfied with high GDP and growth rate. Many thinkers and economists have argued that GDP is an imperfect measure of development because it does not take into account all that is important for improving the quality of human life. Simon Kuznets, who has done pioneering work in studying the development of countries, was clear that GDP was limited in trying to explain development. Kuznets wrote, "the welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income." The most scathing attack on GDP came from Bobby Kennedy, who was a candidate for the president of the United States. He said, "GDP measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything but that which makes life worthwhile."

Bhutan introduced a gross national happiness index several years ago. The United Nations has also recognized the importance of the happiness index as a measure of human welfare and has declared March 20 as the International Day of Happiness. India must also consider domains such as health, education, diversity, resilience, good governance, environment, and living standards in policymaking if it aims for greater happiness, higher human development index, improved quality of life, and a positive sense of well-being among its people. Despite concerns about the methodology used to compute the index, we cannot deny that Indian policymakers must strive to make India a happier country.

The writer is an ex-Chief Secretary, Govt of Uttar Pradesh. Views expressed are personal



Dear Editor

A GRAVE FAILURE

This is in reference to "A brief breather". The United States, at last, refrained from using its veto power which resulted in a ceasefire. But this act has angered Israel as they stopped their delegations to visit the USA to discuss the war. So now the US has said that it is not binding on Israel and it can still pursue Hamas. This means that things are almost back to square one. The world needs permanent resolution of this crisis, and the international community needs to put pressure on Israel so that better sense would prevail over them, as they must realise that the war has its own limitations. It will not be an exaggeration if we say that the United States has failed to fulfil its duty in this matter.

— BAL GOVIND, NOIDA via email

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Truth travels freely

Kejriwal’s arrest gets international attention; vendetta politics may boomerang on ED

Brought to the Rouse Avenue Court amid high drama, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has described his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate in the excise policy case as a “political conspiracy.” Himself making submissions in the court after taking the special judge’s permission, he expressed confidence that the public will give a “fitting reply to this injustice”. Seeking to establish a link between the Electoral Bond donations received by the ruling party and his arrest, the Delhi Chief Minister said that people were being turned ‘approver’ in the case and being forced to change their statements. “My arrest by the ED is a political conspiracy ... the approver gave the BJP Rs 55 crore,” he said. As a precursor to this setting, Kejriwal’s wife, Sunita, broke her silence and hinted at the impending revelation of this crucial piece of information. Kejriwal, known for his anti-corruption stance and vocal criticism of the Centre, was arrested last week on charges of being embroiled in a multi-crore liquor scam. The arrest sparked widespread outcry and protests, with supporters of Kejriwal alleging political vendetta and the BJP’s bid to settle political scores with the AAP upon losing the MCD elections after 15 years. Apart from being charged with soliciting kickbacks from liquor traders in exchange for favours, the Delhi Chief Minister is also accused of being the “kingpin and key conspirator” in the now-scrapped policy. The agency has already arrested at least 14 top AAP leaders, including Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia and Minister Sanjay Singh, in connection with the case.



Meanwhile, the international community has also been drawn into the fray, with the US making remarks regarding Kejriwal’s arrest that have drawn the ire of Indian officials. The US State Department expressed concern over what it termed as “the apparent suppression of dissent” in India, calling for due process and respect for human rights. However, Indian authorities swiftly responded, asserting that the comments were unwarranted interference in the country’s internal affairs. Germany was the first country to speak against Kejriwal’s arrest. Whenever a politician is put behind bars, there are consequences to it. The Union Government should be doubly sure that it has a watertight case against the accused person, else there are high chances that it will boomerang. Due to the lack of information on the case in public domain, we shall assume that the authorities have a strong case against the Delhi CM and that due process of law would be followed. But if it is an exercise in haste, Kejriwal’s words might prove prophetic as elections are just around the corner. The citizens are discerning enough to read any signs of political vendetta. The outcome of this legal battle and its broader implications remain uncertain, but one thing is clear – the events unfolding around Kejriwal have captured the attention of the nation and the world, highlighting the enduring struggle for transparency, accountability and justice in the corridors of power.

PICTALK



A shepherd with his sheep near a mustard field on the outskirts of Srinagar

PTI

Dandi March: Salt, soul and satyagraha

The Dandi March serves as a reminder that peaceful protest can be a potent weapon against injustice and oppression

The 1980s film ‘Mard’ immortalised a poignant scene that encapsulates the essence of patriotism, rebellion, and sacrifice in Indian cinematic history. In this scene, the protagonist, amidst relentless flogging by the heroine armed with chains, whispers with unyielding spirit, “For this salt, our Mahatma led a revolution.” This homage vividly captures the spirit of the Salt Satyagraha of 1930, a pivotal moment in India’s quest for independence, led by Mahatma Gandhi. The Salt Satyagraha, which took place from March 12 to April 6, 1930, galvanised a nation against British colonial rule. Gandhi’s symbolic act of picking up salt at Dandi defiantly challenged the salt taxes imposed by the British, symbolising defiance and resilience in India’s freedom struggle. Over 90,000 brave souls willingly embraced brutality in their pledge for non-violence, standing as a beacon of hope against tyranny. The genesis of the Dandi March was rooted in the momentum established by the Bardoli Satyagraha in 1928, led by Sardar



Vallabhbhai Patel. This successful movement unified farmers and nationalists against oppressive British taxation, revitalising the spirit of the freedom struggle. By 1930, the Indian National Congress boldly articulated its aspiration for independence, setting the stage for Gandhi’s Salt Satyagraha. Gandhi’s letter to Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, articulated the grievances of millions and announced his intention to lead a nonviolent protest against British atrocities. Despite Gandhi’s emphasis on dialogue and peaceful resolution, the Viceroy’s inadequate response led to the commencement of the Dandi March on March 12, 1930. Accompanied by 78 dedicated followers, Gandhi embarked on a significant march covering nearly 241 miles from Sabarmati

Ashram to Dandi. This symbolic journey aimed at challenging the oppressive salt tax and British monopolistic control over salt production. The disciplined resolve of the satyagrahis exemplified unity amidst diversity, embodying the nation’s aspirations for liberation. On April 6, 1930, Gandhi’s defiance of the Salt Laws at Dandi marked a pivotal moment in India’s struggle for independence. His call to civil disobedience catalysed a mass boycott of British goods, prompting a harsh crackdown from British authorities. Despite brutal repression, the spirit of nonviolent resistance persisted, revealing the resilience of the Indian populace. The Salt Satyagraha showcased resolute collective action, with over 60,000 willingly imprisoned and thou-

sands more participating in peaceful protests. Despite Government reprisals, the ‘satyagrahis’ maintained remarkable restraint and non-violent discipline. This non-violent resistance ultimately led to negotiations with Congress leadership and Gandhi’s release after a year of imprisonment. The Dandi March culminated in the historic breaking of the salt laws, a symbolic act of defiance that reverberated globally. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. drew inspiration from Gandhi’s example, recognising the power of nonviolent resistance in confronting injustice. The Dandi March was not just a chapter in history but a transformative moment in India’s fight for independence, marking Gandhi’s emergence as a spiritual force. Through unwavering dedication to love and nonviolence, Gandhi wielded a potent weapon against oppression, demonstrating the profound impact of spirituality in challenging times. (The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)



RAJDEEP PATHAK

A tribute to the two great saints of India

The lives of Swami Atmasthananda ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji are an indelible example of the motto of Ramakrishna Mission ‘Atmano Mokshaartham Jagaddhitaaya Cha’



NARENDRA MODI

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the grand festival of Lok Sabha elections, the news of the demise of Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj brought my mind to a standstill for a few moments. Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj was a pioneer of India’s spiritual consciousness and his demise is like a personal loss. A few years ago, the demise of Swami Atmasthananda Ji and now the departure of Swami Smaranananda Ji on his eternal journey has left many people bereaved. My heart, like that of crores of devotees, saints and followers of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, is deeply saddened. During my visit to Kolkata earlier this month, I had gone to the hospital to enquire about Swami Smaranananda Ji’s health. Just like Swami Atmasthananda Ji, Swami Smaranananda Ji too dedicated his entire life for spreading the ideas of Acharya Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Mata Sharada Devi and Swami Vivekananda across the world. While writing this article, the memories of meetings and conversations with him are getting refreshed in my mind. In January 2020, during my stay at Belur Math, I meditated in the room of Swami

Vivekananda. During that visit, I had a long conversation about Swami Atmasthananda Ji with Swami Smaranananda Ji. It is widely known that I had a close relationship with Ramakrishna Mission and Belur Math. As a seeker of spirituality, I have met different saints and mahatmas and been to many places over the period of more than five decades. Even in Ramakrishna Math, I got to know about the saints who dedicated their lives to spirituality, among whom personalities like Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji were prominent. Their sacred thoughts and knowledge provided contentment to my mind. In the most important period of my life, such saints taught me the true principle of *Jan Seva hi Prabhu Seva*. The lives of Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji are an indelible example of the motto of Ramakrishna Mission ‘Atmano Mokshaartham Jagaddhitaaya Cha’. We all are inspired by the work being done by Ramakrishna Mission for the promotion of education and



THEIR SACRED THOUGHTS AND KNOWLEDGE PROVIDED CONTENTMENT TO MY MIND. IN THE MOST IMPORTANT PERIOD OF MY LIFE, SUCH SAINTS TAUGHT ME THE TRUE PRINCIPLE OF JAN SEVA HI PRABHU SEVA

rural development. Ramakrishna Mission is working on India’s spiritual enlightenment, educational empowerment and humanitarian service. In 1978, when the disastrous flood struck Bengal, Ramakrishna Mission won the hearts of everyone with its selfless service. I remember, when an earthquake ravaged Kutch in 2001, Swami Atmasthananda Ji was among the first people to call me and offer all possible assistance for disaster management on behalf of the Ramakrishna Mission. Under his direction, Ramakrishna Mission helped many people who were affected by the earthquake. Over the past years, while holding various positions, Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji laid great emphasis on social empowerment. Those who know the lives of these great personalities will definitely remember how serious these saints were towards modern education, skilling and women empowerment. Among his many inspiring traits, one thing that impressed me the most was Swami Atmasthananda Ji’s love and respect for every culture and every tradition.

The reason for this was that he used to travel continuously and had spent a long time in different parts of India. He learned to speak Gujarati while living in Gujarat. He used to even speak with me in the language and I loved listening to his Gujarati! At different points in India’s development journey, our motherland has been blessed by many saints and seers like Swami Atmasthananda Ji, Swami Smaranananda Ji who have ignited the spark of societal change. They have motivated us to work with a collective spirit and address all the challenges our society faces. These principles are eternal and will act as our source of strength as we embark on developing a Viksit Bharat during the Amrit Kaal. Once again, on behalf of the entire nation, I pay homage to such saintly souls. I am confident that all the people associated with the Ramakrishna Mission will further move ahead on the path shown by them. Om Shanti. (This is a tribute to Smaranananda ji Maharaj and Swami Atmasthananda Ji by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICIANS HITTING BELOW THE BELT

Madam — Apropos editorial “Political zealotry” published on March 28, this is my response. It pains one to note that exchanges amongst political rivals are getting too personal and downright abusive. Recent examples are Supriya Srinate of the GOP and Dilip Ghose of the BJP. Wish our “netas,” spokespersons and candidates were more accommodating and tolerant, instead of hissing at one another like venomous snakes. I cite here a witty remark by MP Piloo Mody that turned the tables on his opponent. Mody, a big roly-poly man, showed his back to a minister because he felt outraged at some point. The minister took strong objection to Mody’s gesture and interpreted it to be an insult to the House itself. Piloo Mody replied - “Mr. Speaker Sir, I have no front, no back, no flanks. I am round all over. So how could I have shown my back to the minister?” The House exploded in loud laughter. Our (generally) ill-tempered politicians should take a leave from the above incident and shun vituperative language while attacking their political opponents.

Avinash Godbole | Dewas

INEQUALITY RISES IN INDIA

Madam — Apropos news article “Mumbai surpasses Beijing as billionaire hub” published on March 27, this is my response. Paris-based World Inequality Lab has recently published a report titled, ‘Income and Wealth Inequality in India 1992 - 2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj’. As per the report, inequality in India declined till the early 1980s. Thereafter, it started rising sharply. The rise of top-end inequality gained tremendous momentum during the last 10 years. The top 1 per cent of Indians earn 22.6 per cent of the national income and their wealth share has risen to 40.1 per cent. The income share of the top 1 per cent of Indians is among the very highest in the world. The report says that India is now more unequal than during the time of the British Raj. Thanks to rising inequality, the tentacles

Mechanisation is needed



Apropos news article “Mechanisation needed to tackle farm issues,” published on March 28, this is my response. Recurring drought, and scarcity of water for irrigation, combined with a lack of modern farming equipment, have all contributed to a steep fall in productivity and income, forcing our farmers to take huge loans, without being able to repay them. Farmers’ income has not been able to keep pace, such as to cater to increasing production costs, including rising labour wages. Hence, agricultural machinery

becomes the need of the hour to alleviate farmers’ problems. It is also important to note that in farming several activities are highly time-bound and unless executed as per schedule, a farmer will suffer financial loss. Agriculture mechanisation, is, therefore, an appropriate answer to such challenges faced by farmers. Farm mechanisation and crop productivity have a direct correlation as they save time and labour, reduce drudgery, cut down production costs in the long run, reduce post-harvest losses, and boost crop output and farm income. Mechanisation is crucial in the agriculture sector, as it contributes towards improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the inputs used in crop production. Increasing the rate of farm mechanisation is critical for India to sustainably meet production demand and develop value chains and modernised food systems.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

of VIP culture are spreading rapidly with each passing day. My local SBI branch has opened a special counter where customers can withdraw or deposit money with ease avoiding long queues at the general counter. Standing at the end of a serpentine queue at the general counter, an old man leaning on his stick asked if the special counter was for differently-abled persons and senior citizens. Immediately, he was provided enlightenment with the information that the counter was only for the VIPs who would transact a minimum amount of Rs 50 thousand!

Sujit De | Kolkata

INDIA-SINGAPORE TIES

Madam — Apropos news article “India--Singapore to further deepen bilateral ties,” published on March 26, this is my response. The friendship between India and Singapore has stood the test of time for five decades. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had rightly emphasised the fact that Singapore was India’s “gateway” to the east. The phenomenal rise of Singapore from a small nation to a dream country for oth-

ers to emulate is in itself an achievement of sorts. Both India and Singapore have mutually beneficial cultural exchanges, defence relations, economic cooperation and skill building. Defence, sea and space, commerce and infrastructure, too, are areas of bilateral interest. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar’s recent Singapore visit saw him discussing wide-ranging issues with that country’s ministers including his counterpart Vivian Balakrishnan. Singapore is a destination much sought after by tourists. Besides, terror and security — very significant considering the deadlock over the South China Sea — could not escape the attention of the two leaders. India--Singapore have had a long relationship without a tinge of bitterness. That Modi himself has visited Singapore four times after he took over in 2014, underscores the importance attached by New Delhi to the bilateral relations.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

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FIRST COLUMN

IMPACT AND DUALITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media often promotes formation of echo chambers and spread of false news



Social media, a ubiquitous phenomenon in contemporary society, has revolutionised the way people communicate, share information and interact with one another. From its humble beginnings as online forums to the expansive platforms of today like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, Snapchat and many more, the term ‘social media’ has reshaped human interaction and societal norms to a large extent. Today, it has become an integral part of everyone’s life, especially Generation Z and the impact is complex and multifaceted, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. Social media has fundamentally transformed communication dynamics, making it easier for individuals to connect with others globally. It has transcended geographical barriers, enabled real-time interaction and fostered virtual communities based on shared interests, identities and ideologies. Moreover, social media platforms have become instrumental in political discourse, activism and social movements, empowering voices that were previously marginalised and amplifying diverse perspectives. Millennials and Generation Z rely heavily on social media as a primary source of news and information which at times can lead to issues such as the spread of misinformation, echo chambers and filter bubbles, where individuals are only exposed to viewpoints that align with their own beliefs. Various studies have also shown that spending too much time on social media, especially before bedtime, disrupts the sleep pattern. Blue light suppresses the production of melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep, making it more difficult to fall asleep and reducing the overall quality of sleep. Studies also reveal that constant exposure to short-form content and distractions on social media platforms can lead to a decrease in attention span and difficulty concentrating on tasks that require sustained focus. Another major role of social media platforms which is responsible for various disruptions is promoting of unrealistic beauty standards through the use of filters, photo editing tools and the prevalence of influencers with idealised appearances, leading to body dissatisfaction and negative body image among Generation Z.



Such platforms are designed to be addictive, with features such as likes, comments, and notifications triggering dopamine release in the brain and can lead to compulsive use and dependency which is no less like other forms of addiction. Moreover, the constant exposure to carefully curated images and posts can create unrealistic expectations and foster feelings of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) among users. To mitigate the negative effects of FOMO irrespective of the generation gap, it becomes important to promote digital literacy, encourage healthy social media habits and foster offline connections and experiences such as practicing mindfulness, setting boundaries for screen time and cultivating meaningful relationships and activities that are not dependent on social media validation. Additionally, fostering a supportive and inclusive online community can also help alleviate feelings by emphasising authenticity, empathy and acceptance. There is no denying the fact that social media has brought about numerous benefits for Millennials and Generation Z in terms of connectivity, self-expression, and access to information, but at the same time it also poses challenges and risks that require careful consideration and management. Despite its transformative potential, social media presents a myriad of challenges that warrant attention. The addictive nature of social media and its impact on mental health, particularly among young people, raise concerns about excessive screen time, cyberbullying, and negative self-comparison. Balancing the advantages and drawbacks of social media usage is essential to harness its potential while mitigating its negative impacts on their well-being and society as a whole. *(The writer is an educator, views are personal)*

Quantifying happiness is perplexing

The World Happiness Report places India at 126th rank, raising legitimate concerns about the methodology and biases inherent in such assessments



Happiness is complex and difficult to define, but this in no way implies that we do not know when we are happy. Happiness cannot be a permanent state of euphoria as the mind constantly changes its contours and shades and, by and large, remains an individual experience. Hence any exercise that seeks to generalise the impressions of a large number of individuals like those living within a country and brand them as happy or unhappy people is bound to be fraught with controversies. It will also inevitably reflect the biases of the measurers. When the definition of a variable cannot be agreed upon, its measurement will raise more controversies, but when such rankings are internationally publicised for branding countries and peoples which may influence the decisions of investors and donors, it is no longer a benign exercise without any accountability. On March 20 every year for the last seven years, which date has been marked by the UN as the International Day of Happiness, a New York-based agency called Sustainable Development Solutions Network has been bringing out an annual World Happiness Report, whose 2024 edition has placed India at 126th rank among 143 countries, much below countries like Saudi Arabia (28), China (60), Russia (72), Venezuela (79), Senegal (99), Iran (100), Palestine (103), Ukraine (105), Pakistan (108) even Myanmar (118). These countries are either strife-torn or war-ravaged, where the basic security of human life is not guaranteed, or ruled by autocrats and dictators who ruthlessly suppress the civil liberties of their people, especially of women, countries which are reeling under relentless crises in their democracy, polity and economy. This raises legitimate questions about the methodology used in the exercise that can produce such weird results. Finland has topped the ranking in each year so far, and the top 10 countries have also remained more or less the same, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Luxemburg, Switzerland and Australia. A common thread runs through all of them - high per capita income. Other higher-capita income countries also rank higher in the list, like New Zealand (21), UK



WE DO NOT NEED TO FEEL DEPRESSED AT OUR 126TH RANKING. INSTEAD, WE SHOULD IGNORE SUCH A PHONEY INDEX AND GO ABOUT OUR LIVES AND BUSINESS AS USUAL

(20), USA (23), Germany (24), or France (27). This is no surprise, because to the materialistic West hung on a culture of conspicuous overconsumption, money remains the primary and often the only source of happiness, unlike in Asian and other continental cultures. The only Asian country to feature in the list is Kuwait at 13th position, and the next one is Saudi Arabia at 28th. While Singapore features in 30th position, Japan, which has the largest concentration of longest-living people in the world, at 51st position, below Uzbekistan (47) and Kazakhstan (49). This raises natural questions about whether the index also reflects the inherent civilizational bias of the West against Asia, most of which used to be their colonies once—to treat them as superior or even equal would be an anathema to the West. Bhutan which reckons happiness as a core responsibility of Government and has adopted its Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index as a development indicator in its 2008 Constitution, was ranked 95th in 2019 and has not been ranked this year. GNH was the first such index and is far broader - having nine parameters, all non-income. Trying to measure the immeasurable will have its inherent contradictions. Happiness is a state of being, rather than a fixed state like a goal to be achieved that can be quantified and measured. Such measures therefore confuse happiness with “well-being” which is produced by the interplay of numerous extraneous factors like income, health, education, liberties, choices, relationships, physical and social security, etc. But even then, it is a subjective sense of well-being, which is neither measurable nor quantifiable. The rankings used in the World Happiness Report are based on six parameters of “subjective well-being”: (1) per capita income, (2) healthy life expectancy at birth, (3) social support, (4) freedom to make

life choices, (5) generosity, and (6) perceptions of corruption. The happiness rankings are based on what the authors say are “life evaluations”, on which Gallup World Poll (GWP) provides the data by asking respondents to evaluate their current life on a scale of 0 to 10 (happiest), using a typical sample size of 1000 for each country regardless of its population, and using a three-year average. The sample size is too small for a country like India to represent all its diversity and complexity. Data for per capita GDP on purchasing power parity (PPP) are taken from the World Development Indicators (WDI) of the World Bank, and then a natural log that fits the observations better. Data for healthy life expectancy at birth is provided by the WHO Global Health Observatory data repository. Social support is the national average of the binary responses (0=no, 1=yes) to the GWP question: “If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?” Freedom to make life choices is again the national average of binary responses to the GWP question: “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?” Generosity is the residual of regressing the national average of GWP responses to the question: “Have you donated money to a charity in the past month?” on log GDP per capita, while perceptions of corruption are the average of binary answers to two GWP questions: “Is corruption widespread throughout the Government or not?” and “Is corruption widespread within businesses or not?” It does not require superlative intelligence to divine that all these parameters are derivatives of a single parameter, i.e., income or wealth of a nation, and hence will always favour rich nations over the poorer ones.

So, the richer you are, the happier you are; in other words, income is synonymous with happiness, an assumption not validated by facts, just as happiness cannot be equated with success in material terms. The mind is influenced by social and cultural factors; hence how we perceive happiness also depends on these factors. It also depends on the questions asked and the way they have been framed: Just ask “How much time you spend with your parents every week”, or “For how long you have been married to your present spouse”, and see how the scales turn against the rich western nations. In collectivist societies in Asia, people reckon happiness more as a shared experience rather than individual satisfaction with life, whereas in individualistic societies, people perceive happiness more in terms of individual satisfaction. Happy people increase the happiness of others around them; hence bonding within social groups and families contributes positively to happiness. Individualistic Western nations would score higher given the way the GWP questions have been framed. As every Indian knows from experience, we are not unhappy people, having been brought up to regard values and relationships as more important than wealth and to be content to live a simple life with few material possessions, with strong bonds with our extended families and the community. Even though perceptions are changing in a growing economy, these basic values have remained intact. We do not need to feel depressed at our 126th ranking. Instead, we should ignore such a phoney index and go about our lives and business as usual. *(The author, an ex-bureaucrat, is currently a Professor at the Arun Jaitley National Institute of Financial Management; views are personal)*

Navigating the legal and ethical implications of AI

In a world increasingly shaped by Artificial Intelligence, the discourse shifts from its capabilities to the imperative question of its ethical boundaries

In an era increasingly defined by Artificial Intelligence (AI), the pivotal question shifts from what AI is capable of to what it should be allowed to do. This reflection critically examines AI’s potential to reshape our lives within ethical and legal frameworks. As we explore the vast landscapes carved by AI, we must ensure that our technological advancements are matched with an equally profound commitment to ethical responsibility. The advent of AI is a testament to human ingenuity, offering transformative possibilities in virtually every aspect of our existence. Yet, alongside its potential, AI introduces a spectrum of legal complexities that require careful consideration. The evolution of legal



jurisprudence in the face of AI’s rapid development is a topic of paramount importance, dealing with issues ranging from privacy and data protection to intellectual property and employment. The Indian Government’s embrace of AI through initiatives like “Digital India” and a National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence reflects a visionary stance on harnessing technology for societal benefit. However, the journey toward realising AI’s full promise is fraught with challenges that demand vigilant oversight and a principled approach to regulation and ethics. On a global scale, AI raises questions that transcend national boundaries, presenting legal and ethical dilemmas that must be addressed comprehensively. The capacity of AI to analyse and utilise vast amounts of personal data has challenged existing privacy laws, sparking a worldwide reassessment of how we protect individual rights in the digital age. Countries are adopting comprehensive data protection regulations, such as the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation and India’s Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, to

safeguard personal information while fostering digital innovation. The implications of AI on the job market also warrant serious consideration. The potential for automation to displace jobs creates a pressing need for legal frameworks that can mitigate adverse effects and prepare the workforce for an AI-driven future. Similarly, the intersection of AI with intellectual property rights challenges



conventional notions of creativity and authorship, calling for legal innovations that recognise and protect the contributions of all stakeholders, including those of AI. The issues of bias and discrimination in AI highlight the critical need for our technological systems to be as impartial and inclusive as possible. The development and deployment of AI must be guided by anti-discrimination laws adapted to

the digital age, ensuring fairness and equity in the application of AI. Internationally, the regulatory approach to AI varies significantly, with entities like the European Union adopting comprehensive frameworks while others pursue more sector-specific guidelines. This diversity reflects the complex interplay of legal, cultural, and societal factors that influence AI governance, emphasising the need for a globally coordinated dialogue on AI ethics and regulation. Integrating AI into the legal profession offers a glimpse into the future, showcasing AI’s potential to enhance legal analysis, predict outcomes, and even assist in judicial decision-making. However, these advancements under-

score the imperative for stringent ethical standards to uphold the integrity of the legal system. As AI continues to evolve rapidly, it becomes crucial for societies, especially within the diverse context of India, to engage in proactive discourse. We must anticipate future developments and craft legal frameworks that are flexible enough to adapt to the unpredictable technological landscape. This includes ensuring that the benefits of AI extend to all and democratising access to services like healthcare and education. In conclusion, as we chart the course of AI within the legal domain, our focus must steadfastly remain on enacting and refining laws that protect human rights and dignity. Achieving harmony between

emerging technology and legal norms requires a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, where laws are designed not just to respond to the challenges posed by AI but to foresee and embrace its vast possibilities. With India at the forefront of AI innovation, buoyed by progressive policies and a wealth of intellectual capital, we stand on the brink of leading the global conversation on ethical AI. As we venture deeper into this new frontier, our collective aim should be a future where technology amplifies the noblest goals of law and justice, and in return, legal frameworks foster the responsible growth of Artificial Intelligence. *(The author is a legal expert. Views expressed are personal)*



THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: One man practicing sportsmanship is far better than a hundred teaching it.

— KNUTE ROCKNE



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EDIT

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Govt can't be run from jail

Delhi is facing a constitutional crisis with Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal stating that he would rule the state from jail. Already, he is claimed to have issued two orders from there. How the papers were presented to him and how he passed on his decisions to his colleagues like Minister Atishi Singh are already subject to speculation. In Delhi, as elsewhere, what is followed is the Cabinet system of governance where the chief minister is just the first among equals. Since he cannot hold a Cabinet meeting inside the jail, it can be said that the Cabinet system of governance has totally collapsed. The prospect of a quick release is bleak as the Delhi High Court has granted the Enforcement Directorate time till April 3 to file its reply to Kejriwal's plea that his arrest was legally, politically, and morally untenable.

Allowance has to be made for the fact that it is already one year since his number two in the Cabinet, Manish Sisodia, was arrested. As of now, there is no certainty about when the trial would start. As the ED claims that it has not been able to even access the files on Kejriwal's devices because they are password-protected, it means that it is not in a hurry to take the case of bribery in the implementation of Delhi's excise policy to its logical culmination. The point is, should the people of Delhi suffer for no fault of theirs? It's not the first time that a chief minister has been arrested. It happened in Bihar and recently in Jharkhand. In such cases, the chief ministers concerned resigned. In one case, the vacancy was filled by the chief minister's wife. At least they did not allow a constitutional vacuum to remain for long.

Resignation from chief ministership would not amount to acceptance of guilt, for under the law, every person is presumed to be innocent until he is proven guilty. That the person who was declared an approver in the case against Kejriwal and others had contributed a substantial sum to the BJP through the electoral bond scheme has cast a shadow on the case. Significantly enough, even countries like the US, which is India's strategic partner, have been forced to remind the nation that everything is not fair in the investigation. However regrettable such interventions may be, the state cannot shirk its responsibility from treating Kejriwal fairly and equitably.

Abuse of the aged

The appalling video depicting Deepak Sen and his wife Pooja viciously assaulting his 87-year-old grandmother in Bhopal is deeply disturbing. The grandmother, defenceless and extremely vulnerable, was subjected to competitive blows from her own grandson and his wife, who even went as far as inserting a wooden log into her private parts while he gagged her. The barbarity of the act is horrifying, and it's a relief that the couple has been apprehended while attempting to flee the city. Sen's relative affluence, as evidenced by his ownership of a salon in the Jehangirpuri area, juxtaposes starkly with the heinous nature of the crime. Bhopal, known as the 'city of lakes,' gained infamy for the world's worst industrial disaster when poisonous gas leaked from the multinational Union Carbide factory. Notwithstanding such notoriety, the plight of senior citizens remains a pressing issue. Elderly individuals suffer neglect and abuse as their children shirk their responsibilities.

The dire state of senior citizens is not unique to Bhopal; it's a nationwide crisis. After events like the Kumbh Mela, thousands of elderly individuals are found stranded, unable to recount how they ended up there. With limited support systems in place, some seek refuge in religious institutions where they're promised a meal a day. States like Himachal Pradesh have resorted to passing laws mandating care for grandparents, highlighting the failure of familial and societal obligations. Addressing this crisis demands a comprehensive welfare system that provides pensions to those without regular income and unable to work due to age or infirmity. Additionally, moral education must emphasise the sacred duty of caring for parents and grandparents. As India's population ages, especially in states like Kerala where the elderly outnumber the young, proactive measures are essential to safeguard the dignity and well-being of senior citizens. The state has as much responsibility as the people concerned in this regard.



INDO-BRITISH DEFENCE PACT IN OFFING

London's Anxiety And Our National Needs
New Delhi, March 28. Simultaneous statements from London and New Delhi on the Commonwealth Conference by Mr. Attlee and Pandit Nehru on Tuesday evening will give the outline of discussions to be held in London by Commonwealth Premiers in April.

A pioneer of India's spiritual consciousness

Guest Column



✦ Narendra Modi

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the grand festival of Lok Sabha elections, the news of the demise of Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj brought my mind to a standstill for a few moments. Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj was a pioneer of India's spiritual consciousness and his demise is like a personal loss. A few years ago, the demise of Swami Atmasthananda Ji and now the departure of Swami Smaranananda Ji on his eternal journey has left many people bereaved. My heart, like that of crores of devotees, saints and followers of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, is deeply saddened.

During my visit to Kolkata earlier this month, I had gone to the hospital to enquire about Swami Smaranananda Ji's health. Just like Swami Atmasthananda Ji, Swami Smaranananda Ji too dedicated his entire life for spreading the ideas of Acharya Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Mata Sharada Devi and Swami Vivekananda across the world. While writing this arti-

cle, the memories of meetings and conversations with him are getting refreshed in my mind.

In January 2020, during my stay at Belur Math, I meditated in the room of Swami Vivekananda. During that visit, I had a long conversation about Swami Atmasthananda Ji with Swami Smaranananda Ji.

It is widely known that I had a close relationship with Ramakrishna Mission and Belur Math. As a seeker of spirituality, I have met different saints and mahatmas and been to many places over the period of more than five decades. Even in Ramakrishna Math, I got to know about the saints who dedicated their lives to spirituality, among whom personalities like Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji were prominent. Their sacred thoughts and knowledge provided contentment to my mind. In the most important period of my life, such saints taught me the true principle of Jan Seva hi Prabhu Seva.

The lives of Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji are an indelible example of the motto of Ramakrishna Mission 'Atmano Mokshaartham Jagaddhitaaya Cha'.

We all are inspired by the work being done by Ramakrishna Mission for the promotion of education and rural development.



A heartfelt tribute to Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj, whose life is an indelible example of the motto of Ramakrishna Mission — 'Atmano Mokshaartham Jagaddhitaaya Cha'

Ramakrishna Mission is working on India's spiritual enlightenment, educational empowerment and humanitarian service. In 1978, when the disastrous flood struck Bengal, Ramakrishna Mission won the hearts of everyone with its selfless service. I remember, when an earthquake ravaged Kutch in 2001, Swami Atmasthananda Ji was among the first people to call me and offer all possible assistance for disaster management on behalf of the Ramakrishna Mission. Under

his direction, Ramakrishna Mission helped many people who were affected by the earthquake.

Over the past years, while holding various positions, Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji laid great emphasis on social empowerment. Those who know the lives of these great personalities will definitely remember how serious these saints were towards modern education, skill and women empowerment.

Among his many inspiring traits, one thing that impressed me the most was Swami Atmasthananda Ji's love and respect for every culture and every tradition. The reason for this was that he used to travel continuously and had spent a long time in different parts of India. He learned to speak Gujarati while living in Gujarat. He used to even speak with me in the language and I loved listening to his Gujarati!

At different points in India's development journey, our motherland has been blessed by many saints and seers like Swami Atmasthananda Ji, Swami Smaranananda Ji who have ignited the spark of societal change. They have motivated us to work with a collective spirit and address all the challenges our society faces. These principles are eternal and will act as our source of strength as we embark on developing a Viksit Bharat during the Amrit Kaal.

Once again, on behalf of the entire nation, I pay homage to such saintly souls. I am confident that all the people associated with the Ramakrishna Mission will further move ahead on the path shown by them.

Om Shanti.

Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of India

What about the anonymous cash donations?

Rational Analysis



✦ S Murlidharan

The indulgence shown to cash donations has encouraged enactment of an elaborate farce bordering on a charade by all parties. When the cap on cash donations was Rs 20,000, a hefty cash donation of Rs 2 crore from out of black money required invention of 1000 fictitious donors to hide the true identity of the donor. In 2017, the Income Tax Act was amended to tone down the leeway and put the cap at Rs 2000. This hasn't fazed the political parties and their accountants a wee bit. Only they have to do a bit of extra work — instead of finding 1000 fictitious small donors so that each one on paper didn't donate more than Rs 20,000, under the new dispensation they have to find 10,000 donors with each not contributing more than Rs 2,000.

In India, you give an inch and people take a foot. Any leeway or latitude is exploited to the hilt. Before KYC norms occupied the nation's consciousness and linking of PAN with Aadhaar made mandatory, one with an income of Rs 1 crore would divide his income among 40 assessable units so that each had a taxable income of only Rs 2.50 lakh which is the tax-free threshold. Splitting and splintering then comes naturally to crooks, be it for income tax avoidance or to hoodwink people and the Election Commission of India (ECI).

In this day and age, why at all give concession to cash? With the advent of UPI, payment through mobile phones is fast catching on. Therefore, there is no reason why anonymous cash donations upto Rs 2,000 should be countenanced and condoned. There should be a complete ban on cash donations, period. It is surprising that the Supreme Court, which was outraged by the opaque electoral bonds enough to strike them as unconstitutional, hasn't acted with the same anger against anonymous cash donations, given the fact that the latter intuitively play a greater role in political party funding. Will their Lordships of the Supreme Court be pleased to take a suo moto initiative in this regard? This is all the more necessary now that electoral bonds have been demonetised by the Supreme Court vide its 15th February order. In its wake, there is an apprehension that political parties would certainly revert back atavistically to anonymous cash.

There is absolutely no reason why all registered political parties should not be mandated to accept donations only through the payment gateways mentioned in their websites so as to leave a trail and digital footprint.

More realistically though it must be conceded that lion's share of political donations emanates from corporate houses who would like to donate in return for exercise of discretionary power by the powers that be. So, let us not fool ourselves that political donations are given for ideological reasons or connect between the industrial house and a political party. The fear of reprisal argued by the government counsel



There is no reason why anonymous cash donations upto Rs 2,000 should be countenanced and condoned. There should be a complete ban on cash donations, period

before the apex court in the electoral bonds case if anonymity was cast asunder may be an exaggerated one given the political acumen of our business houses which know which side of the bread to butter and often butter both sides just in case! Be that as it may, whatever the theoretical compulsions for anonymity, it has no place in a democracy.

Incidentally, the EC as recently as in September 2022 had written to the then Law Minister Kiren Rijiju to remove the anomaly of the Income tax law and the Representation of People Act speaking in divergent voices — the latter still persisting with disclosure of dona-

tions in excess of Rs 20,000 quite oblivious of the reduction of the latitude to Rs 2,000 by the former. Concomitantly, it also proposed a 20% limit for cash donations as a percentage of overall donations. To wit, if a political party had received Rs 100 crore as donations in a financial year, only Rs 20 crore could be in cash. This may appear to be in the direction of weaning cash away from the electoral sweepstakes but deep down it raises the question — what happens if at the year-end cash exceeded 20% of the overall donations?

Half solutions or partial indulgence don't work. Cash must be stamped out lock, stock and barrel.

The Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman was right when she said while no system is perfect, electoral bonds at least had the virtue of leaving banking footprints which to the chagrin of the benefitting political parties has come home to roost. The Supreme Court could override the anonymity character of the electoral bonds and lift the veil of secrecy only because Late Arun Jaitley the then Finance Minister in 2017 whose brainchild it was thought (naively in hindsight) that no one would dare flutter the dovescotes of the political parties and the donors by demanding the banking footprint left by the purchasers of the electoral bonds and the political parties to be revealed and made public. Perhaps, he deluded himself in the lulling belief that the Supreme Court would not rate right to information above right to privacy. Electoral bonds were convoluted and circuitous — what could have been achieved by direct cheque payment was twisted into a grotesque bond. The purpose of the contrived convolution was to retain anonymity that cash donations conferred and confer even today. And BTW, those in the know were not fooled by the argument that electoral bonds emanated out of clean money given the fact that all bank deposits don't ipso facto translate into clean money. After all, money laundering is all about making illicit money legit by bringing them into the banking mainstream. It is not only Swiss banks which harbor illicit money by not questioning their origins.

S Murlidharan is a freelance columnist and writes on economics, business, legal and taxation issues

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Where's the justice?

The report 'Man serves eight years, gets five-year sentence' (Mar 24) reveals the true picture of the justice system in this country. This is not an isolated example. Many cases drag on for years. When such cases are decided, the accused does not necessarily get justice — he gets a decision from the court. There are many cases where the supposed accused are in jail for years but eventually get acquitted. Social activists and law veterans talk of reforming the justice system but in reality, no reforms are taking place. The right of a citizen to get justice from a court has real meaning only if there is a time constraint for getting justice, otherwise, it becomes a routine ritual.

Ravindra Bhagwat, Kalyan

Risks of social media

Social media has become an integral part of our daily lives, especially for students. While there are many benefits to using social media platforms, there are also dangers that students need to be aware of.

MIKA'S MATRIX



TS Karthik, Chennai

Unfettered right to elect Oppn

When the convener of a national party that won by a landslide in two states is arrested, after notification of elections, the concept of level playing field would

seem vitiated. Coming as it does with the general elections announced and Code of Conduct in force, there could well be a case of infringement on the prerogative of the electorate who has as much right to elect a government as to elect an Opposition. This must then shift within the purview of the ECI whose primary remit is being the keeper of its electorate. In the US, the courts have rightfully provided electoral leeway to the Republican candidate Donald Trump, who is charged with far serious offences and convicted in some, by giving as much primacy to the right to an unfettered campaign as to the rights of the electorate to choose at its wisdom. Thus the ECI ought to be seeking the bail of the convener of a national party, to enable strengthen sinews of a progressive electoral democracy. The law courts may well continue addressing the judicial aspect, but the ECI has the larger onus to keep up electoral equilibrium and provide fair opportunity to every contesting party. That remit should prevail over all else.

R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

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GODDESS LAKSHMI MESSAGE FOR THE DAY

A day to be vigilant, move ahead, travel and progress. Someone will try to manipulate or fool you, so be careful.

You will move ahead with great speed, don't let it overwhelm you, take one step at a time. Follow the right path for more abundance. I loved the fragrant flowers that you offered.

Tip for the day: Offer red roses to your mother /wife /sister and express gratitude to her.



Lots of divine miracles your way, Sheetal Sapan Mhatre.



OPINION

The
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{ OUR TAKE }

Addressing the jobs challenge

ILO report on India's employment crisis is prescriptive. Policymakers need to take note

The India Employment Report released by the International Labour Organization on March 27, gives a much-needed broad-brush picture of India's employment challenge. It has reiterated some basic stylised facts such as a worsening of labour market outcomes in the decade ending with the pandemic and the subsequent improvement in indicators such as labour force participation and unemployment rate. However, what makes the report important and attention worthy is the fact that its analysis goes beyond a comparative statistics approach. Here are three things which are worth reiterating. The most important takeaway is that leaving the resolution of India's employment challenge to the markets alone is not going to work. This is because of the simple reason that production, especially in manufacturing, is becoming increasingly capital-intensive. This means that even if we manage to get high manufacturing growth, employment generation might continue to disappoint. This basic point cannot be overemphasised in India.

The second important takeaway from the report is the emphasis on the broken link between education and employment. "A large proportion of highly educated young men and women, including the technically educated, are overqualified for the job they have," the report notes. This should not be a surprise in a country where hundreds of thousands, with qualifications as high as PhDs, apply for blue-collar public sector jobs in the hope of job security. The third key takeaway from the report is the emphasis on the need for an active policy engagement to solve both qualitative and quantitative aspects of India's employment challenge. It flags the challenges of addressing inequalities, improving the quality of jobs, putting in place an effective skill enhancement framework and fixing information asymmetries in the labour market. The report rightly calls for giving "primacy to labour-intensive manufacturing employment to absorb the abundant unskilled labour" and to support "the emerging employment-generating modern manufacturing and services sectors".

To be sure, this is not the first time an academic study has underlined these points about India's employment challenge. Will these recommendations find favour with politicians and eventually governments? This is a more difficult question to answer in a country where politics tends to gravitate towards populist solutions such as blanket hiring for government jobs or demanding or extending the scope of reservations when it comes to dealing with employment concerns.

ECI, parties must curb misogyny in campaign

Name-calling opponents is something of a fixture in Indian politics. However, this can't become a free pass for misogyny, a point the Election Commission of India (ECI) did well to underscore on Wednesday, by serving show-cause notices to the Congress's Supriya Shrinete and the Bharatiya Janata Party's Dilip Ghosh for their offensive remarks against women leaders from rival parties. Ghosh has issued an apology and an FIR has been filed against him in West Bengal while Shrinete failed to land a seat this time. ECI needs to be alert to misogynist remarks, especially when the campaign picks up, and be even-handed in pulling up all transgressors irrespective of their stature. Anti-women talk needs to be treated on par with hate speech and censored accordingly. Politics in India is largely a male affair, where women participants at every level — *panchayats* to Parliament — are viciously targeted. Indira Gandhi was once described as *goongi gudiya* (dumb doll); even popular leaders such as J Jayalalithaa, Mayawati and Mamata Banerjee have not been spared by far less capable political opponents. In fact, crude sexism is deployed as a strategy to dissuade women from entering politics. This, however, will have to change. A majority of members in Panchayati Raj institutions in many states are women; earlier this year, Parliament legislated for 33% reservation to women in the Lok Sabha. Women are asserting themselves electorally, outnumbering male voters in many constituencies. To be sure, the problem of misogynist mindsets extends beyond politics and draws from the larger societal thinking. But political leaders and parties will have to take the lead in ushering in change.

IRDAI signs off on investor gouging

Early exits from life insurance will continue to haemorrhage savings

How would you react if your bank kept half your money when you withdrew a fixed deposit before the maturity date? There would be huge depositor angst and the regulator, the Reserve Bank of India, would step in to stop this money gouging. However, in another part of the financial sector, the insurance regulator has just signed off on rules that allow life insurance companies to continue to gouge investor money for an early exit. In a gazette notification on March 22, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) released an updated list of product regulations that continue with the old structure of surrender values. In December 2023, IRDAI proposed a re-haul of the surrender value regulations in an effort to make the product a bit more investor-friendly. In a shocking move, IRDAI has abandoned this draft and seems to have given in to lobbyists from the insurance industry to continue with the high cost to investor route. For a government that is focused on the average citizen, this is a very regressive step — to allow a regulated product to loot trusting

investors just because they want to exit a policy earlier than they signed up for. Investment-bearing life insurance products that are called "traditional" or "non-linked" include policies such as endowment, money back and whole-life policies. Think of them as a very long-term fixed deposit with a crust of a life cover along with the deposit. These policies mainly invest in government bonds and seek to give a predictable return to the investor. Unfortunately, they have very hard rules that are harmful to investors who want to exit the policy earlier than the maturity date. A surrender value is the minimum money that the investor who exits the policy before the maturity date will get. These values have been very low and IRDAI's attempt to reduce investor loss has failed. The new rules perpetuate the old system of very low surrender values. How high are the losses to investors? The rules say that policies will gather a surrender value after two premiums. This means that after one premium if the policy is discontinued, no money comes back to the investor. The surrender value rises over the life of the policy but not by much. After two premiums, if a third is not paid, an investor gets back just 30% of the total premiums paid. After three premiums, if the fourth is not paid, 35% of the first three pre-

miums is returned. For policies between years four and seven, the investor gets back half the total money invested. After the seventh year, insurance companies can use a self-determined sliding scale such that 90% of the total premiums paid are returned if the policy is discontinued during the last two years of the policy. This means that should the investor exit even till one year before the end of the policy, she does not even get back the full principal invested — even if she has been in the policy for 20 years. She gets only 90% of the money invested returned. But do many people surrender early? In other words, how big is this practice of early surrender? IRDAI data shows that the surrenders are huge and less than half the policyholders continue with their policies after paying five premiums. This data for some insurance firms is abysmal, showing a surrender rate of over 70% after five years of the policy. This means that insurance companies pocket more than half of the total premium paid and investors take home capital losses! News reports say that IRDAI gave into the insurance industry which cited an asset liability mismatch as the reason they needed the current surrender value system to continue. If true, this is a very sad reflection on a regulator that is allowing the goug-



Monika Halan

year, the ₹20 lakh invested becomes ₹18 lakh. Or compare it with an early exit from a fixed deposit. Investors lose half a percentage point in interest — that's it. The principal is safe and most of the promised interest is given back. It is only in the case of traditional life insurance policies that there is such a heavy price on investors for an early exit. A regulator's first job is to protect the interest of the investor — the weakest link in the chain, but on whose money the whole industry lives off and profits. For a regulator to allow such investor gouging is a shocking statement of irresponsibility and looks like a textbook case of regulatory capture. That the regulator is appointed by the government of India, makes it the final responsibility of the government to prevent such a capture. For a government that is focused on the benefit of the average citizen, this regulator-allowed loot is inexplicable.

Monika Halan is the author of the best-selling book *Let's Talk Money*. The views expressed are personal

CAA and the TMC's solo act blur poll picture in Bengal

Two developments look likely to dominate electoral dynamics in West Bengal — the implementation of the Constitution (Amendment) Act (CAA) 2019 and the Trinamool Congress (TMC)'s decision to fly solo. The notification of the CAA rules on March 11 set off celebrations among the Matuas. To recap, they are a sect of the Scheduled Caste Namasudras, who migrated from East Pakistan/Bangladesh in two waves — after Partition and in the 1970s. The enthusiastic reception has prompted sections of the media to declare this as an electoral game-changer that will swing the fortunes decisively in favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). One of the reasons for the move was consolidating the Matua vote as the BJP launches an assault on a citadel they desperately want to conquer. But the gambit will not help the party break new ground. It's essentially a rearguard action. The Matuas swing two Lok Sabha constituencies decisively: Bongaon in North 24 Parganas and Ranaghat in Nadia, while they have a scattered presence in other parts of these districts and less so elsewhere. The BJP holds both seats. The reason for implementing CAA is that it had been losing support among the Matuas because of the delay in implementation. They'll win back this support only if the rollout is smooth. But, there are hurdles. It appears that applicants will have to furnish documentation/information that will be difficult to produce, relating to country of origin and date of entry, nationality, details of passports they don't possess, and ancestral residence, a tall order. Union home minister Amit Shah is slated to visit Bengal to hard sell CAA, but that will not necessarily grease bureaucratic wheels. Unless the process moves at warp speed to make citizens of Matuas before they vote, they will suffer further disillusionment. Bengal votes in seven phases from April 19 to June 1 — Ranaghat votes on May 13 and Bongaon on May 20. The delay in implementation could create problems. In North Bengal, large sections of the autochthonous Rajbanshis of six districts/constituencies — Darjeeling (the plains part), Jalpaiguri, Alipurdwar, Cooch Behar, North and South Dinajpur (the Raiganj and Balurghat seats) — are not unequivocally in favour of CAA, because it does not directly benefit them and entrenches groups they consider interlopers. As it is, between the

1971 and 2011 Censuses, their share in the population fell from 80% to 30%. The BJP, which holds all six seats, could lose more on the heavily weighted North Bengal swings than what they stand to gain on the North 24 Parganas and Nadia roundabouts. So, there are no straightforward readings of the citizenship tangle. But the TMC's solo act, finalised with the announcement of candidates for all 42 constituencies on March 10, could hurt it. The decision is puzzling. Certainly, no possibility existed of the Left and the TMC reaching a deal because of visceral animosities and the improbability of vote transfers. Moreover, the TMC could benefit if the Left fractures the Opposition space. Equally, given the BJP now has 17 of 42 seats, consolidating votes by allying with the Congress was possible and potentially beneficial. The 2021 assembly election results highlight this. The polarising campaign run by the BJP worked — it got 38% of the vote. But it didn't yield the desired results, because the anti-BJP vote consolidated behind the TMC, giving it 48% of the vote and a big majority. The Left Front was squeezed, getting only 4.73% of the vote. Since that debacle, the Left has raised its game. Mamata Banerjee could be hoping it will win back some of the 15% of the vote it lost, mostly to the BJP. The 2019 Lok Sabha elections tell us the same story. The Left and the Congress lost almost 21% of their combined vote, while the BJP increased its vote share by around 23% to reach almost 41% and win 18 seats, up 16 from 2014. It makes sense for Banerjee to have the Left in the fray. This is not true of the Congress. Votes are transferable between the two parties because their bases are congruent. The Congress's vote share has been falling, but the fact that it is concentrated in Malda and Murshidabad gives its numbers greater salience. The Congress also has significant support in North and South Dinajpur. In 2019, the TMC lost the Raiganj seat to the BJP; Debasree Chaudhuri's margin over Kanaia Lal Agarwal was around 60,000 votes, while the Congress's Deepa Das Munshi polled over 80,000 votes. In Malda North, the BJP's margin over the TMC was around 85,000 votes, while the Congress polled over 300,000 votes. In Balurghat, too, the Congress polled more than the BJP's winning margin. Given the obvious benefits, Banerjee's refusal to deal with the Congress could be because of the games the latter played. While central leaders talked about seat adjustments, they did not do what they had to facilitate a deal — removing Behrampur MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury as president of the Pradesh Congress Committee. He is one of Banerjee's fiercest critics, employing rhetoric that matches the stridency of BJP and Left leaders. With him around, a deal was impossible, because the task of campaigning and making sure votes got transferred on the ground would be overseen by Chowdhury, not leaders in Delhi. In short, the TMC's decision to be on its own hurts the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance while providing a leg-up to the BJP.



Suhit K Sen



Mamata Banerjee's refusal to deal with the Congress could be because of the games the latter played

AFP

Suhit K Sen is an author and political commentator based in Kolkata. The views expressed are personal

{ DMYTRO KULEBA }

UKRAINIAN FOREIGN MINISTER

The Ukrainian-Indian cooperation is important... Building on the dialogue between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Narendra Modi, we will pay specific attention to our peace formula

Reading fine print of India-EFTA trade deal

It took 16 years of negotiations for India and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) — comprising Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein — to clinch a free trade agreement (FTA). A crucial aspect that has generated immense buzz is that the FTA will bring foreign direct investments (FDI) worth \$100 billion to India in the next 15 years. Furthermore, EFTA countries, through their FDI, shall generate one million direct jobs in India within 15 years of the FTA coming into force. While these are laudable objectives written into the text, the devil always lies in the details. Does the FTA obligate the EFTA countries to invest \$100 billion in India in 15 years? Not really. The obligation imposed on the EFTA countries, enshrined in Article 7.1(3)(a) of the FTA, is to "aim to" increase FDI to \$50 billion within 10 years of the FTA coming into force followed by another \$50 billion in the succeeding five years. Likewise, Article 7.1(3)(b) provides that the EFTA states shall "aim to" facilitate the generation of one million jobs. Furthermore, these objectives, captivatively, are linked to India sustaining a nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of 9.5% for the next 15 years. In legal terms, these articles codify what is known as an obligation of conduct — an obligation to make an honest endeavour towards achieving a goal, notwithstanding the outcome or the result. This differs from an obligation of result, which would require achieving a specified outcome. The EFTA countries are only under a legal obligation to make an honest effort to invest \$100 billion and generate one million jobs in India. They are not required to realise these outcomes. Nonetheless, incorporating such specified obligations of conduct in the FTA's investment chapter is pathbreaking. The other aspect that has created enormous excitement is that India can withdraw tariff concessions given in the FTA to the EFTA countries if the promise of \$100 billion of investment and one million jobs does not materialise. While Article 7.8 recognises such rebalancing of concessions, it is not as straightforward as many suggest. The FTA provides a mechanism to review whether the obligations of conduct mentioned in Article 7.1 are being complied with. This review will not be done by any judicial body but by an investment sub-committee (ISC) comprising government representatives of India and the EFTA countries. The ISC shall undertake the review in three stages — no later than five years, 10 years, and 15 years after the FTA comes into force. If, after 15 years, as provided

in Article 7.7(6), "India considers" that "the EFTA States have not fulfilled the obligations to promote investments", the former may request consultations with the latter. Using the word "considers" in Article 7.7(6) gives India the right to determine whether the agreement's objectives have been satisfied unilaterally. However, in making this determination, India must answer whether EFTA states have made an honest endeavour to invest in India, not whether they have actually invested the said amount. The difficulty in determining whether a country has violated its obligation of conduct, as against an obligation of result, is the non-availability of benchmarking. It will be arduous to make a case that the EFTA countries have not tried to invest in India. What if India fails to maintain the required nominal GDP growth rate?

Furthermore, even if India makes a unilateral determination that the EFTA states have not tried to invest in India, withdrawing tariff concessions is not automatic. India and the EFTA states shall enter into consultations to resolve the differences through different graded mechanisms. As per the time periods provided for these consultations in Articles 7.7(6) to 7.7(12), it may take around five years. Only if these consultations fail, India has the right to take "temporary" and "proportionate" remedial measures in the form of withdrawal of tariff concessions given to the EFTA States. In short, any rebalancing of concessions can occur only after 15 years of the FTA coming into force and around five years spent diplomatically settling differences. This, too, is subject to several other requirements. Despite these limitations, provisions related to rebalancing concessions are a welcome development, and India should use such a template for its other FTA negotiations.

The final point is about investment protection. The India-EFTA FTA does not contain investment protection features. So, there are no provisions promising protection from unlawful expropriation, fair and equitable treatment, national treatment and most favoured nation treatment. The lack of these promises assumes significance because India's bilateral investment treaties guaranteeing investment protection to investors of countries like Switzerland and Iceland stand unilaterally terminated. Can India extract such large amounts of FDI from these countries without promising investment protection under international law?



Prabhash Ranjan

Prabhash Ranjan teaches at the Faculty of Legal Studies, South Asian University. The views expressed are personal



Easily provoked

India is not showing confidence about its own democratic record

New Delhi and Washington appear to be squaring off for a fight over the U.S. expressing its concerns about the Modi government's actions ahead of the general election. After the U.S. State Department spokesperson first made a comment on the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) summoned the acting Deputy Chief of the U.S. mission in Delhi and sternly called on the U.S. to desist from interfering in India's internal affairs. A dressing down was also handed to a German diplomat for a similar statement by Germany. However, while the German government appeared to tone down its remarks subsequently, the U.S. administration seems to have doubled down – repeating statements on the need for “fair, transparent, timely legal processes”, and adding the freezing of the Congress Party's accounts during the election campaign amongst its concerns, prompting yet another rebuke. The U.S.'s statements, galling for the government, are not new, and its concerns over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, farmers' protests, actions against NGOs, and legal action against Opposition politicians have been growing. The Modi government may wish to introspect about whether any of these interventions are valid concerns, and it may be of significance to probe whether this brinkmanship is a symptom of a larger problem in the India-U.S. relationship. Since the U.S. announced an indictment into an alleged assassination plot against a Khalistani separatist and India critic, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, claiming a link to a top Indian national security official, the quality of public engagement appears to have suffered a setback, even though trade, technology sharing, and military and strategic cooperation remain strong. The decision by U.S. President Joe Biden to decline India's invitation as Republic Day chief guest and to attend the Quad summit, and the cancellation of U.S. NSA Jake Sullivan's visit, even as the post of Indian Ambassador to Washington lies vacant, merit close examination. Given the kerfuffle over Mr. Kejriwal's arrest, New Delhi has a few choices: it can choose to continue this high-decibel, public and unseemly spat; it can pay the U.S. back in the same coin by commenting on its internal developments; or it can refuse to be provoked. The last option may seem the least attractive to this government, which has made a habit of pugilistic public diplomacy, but in fact would come from a place of strength and security. Global leadership, of the kind that India aspires to, requires broad shoulders, and a thick skin when it comes to criticism, along with a quiet confidence that its democratic record should speak for itself.

Jobs outlook bleak

Training for a technologically evolving economy must be accorded primacy

A recent report that focused on the current status and outlook for youth employment in India paints a grim picture of the country's widely touted 'demographic dividend', which appears set to waste away unless there are immediate and targeted policy interventions. "The India Employment Report 2024", by the Institute for Human Development/International Labour Organisation, posits a bleak outlook for the approximately 7-8 million young people being added to the labour force each year, with youth accounting for almost 83% of India's unemployed workforce. Even more distressing is that among the unemployed, the proportion of educated young people, those who have had a secondary level education or higher, had almost doubled to 65.7% as of 2022, from 35.2% in 2000. Also, graduates among the youth experienced a nine times greater unemployment rate (29.1%) than young persons who could not read or write (3.4%). These depressing statistics underline both an absence of jobs capable of absorbing educated young people aspiring for better paying jobs and the shortcomings in the quality of education that are leaving large numbers of educated youth still incapable of qualifying to meet job criteria. Further, wages, after accounting for inflation, have either stagnated or witnessed a decline. The window for India to leverage its sizeable cohort of youth for wider socio-economic gains is fast closing, with the share of young people forecast to decline to 23% by 2036, from 27% in 2021. As the report's authors note: "Unemployment and the rate of youths not in employment, education or training are high, and working conditions among a majority of employed youths are poor, although the economy has been growing at a high rate. This severely constrains the realisation of this potential [the harnessing of the demographic dividend]." Other trends, be it the significant gender imbalance in the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), with the women's LFPR of 32.8% in 2022 about 2.3 times lower than the 77.2% for men, or that 90% of workers still have informal jobs, essentially emphasise the lack of a concerted overarching policy vision to ensure better jobs for all. The Chief Economic Adviser's hand wringing over the government's limitations to engender change has to only be juxtaposed against the U.S. Federal Open Market Committee's primary policy mandate 'of promoting maximum employment along with stable prices' to realise intent ultimately holds the key. With the general election process underway, politicians have their task cut out to ensure jobs and the quality of education and training for a technologically evolving economy are accorded primacy not just in their campaigns but in policy formulation thereafter.

In March 2021, an extraordinary call for a pandemic treaty was issued by 25 heads of government and international agencies, marking a pivotal moment in global health governance. The ninth meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body (INB), the final leg of negotiations for the 30-page World Health Organization (WHO) Pandemic Agreement, commenced last week (March 18). This is the most momentous time in global health since 1948. As we approach the World Health Assembly in late May, where the final draft will be presented for approval, the fate of the Pandemic Agreement hangs in the balance, with the risk of collapse looming large amidst contentious debates.

The key features

The WHO Pandemic Agreement aims to address the systemic failures revealed by the COVID-19 crisis, with the goal of strengthening global defences and averting future pandemics from spiralling into catastrophic human crisis. The world's first pandemic treaty aims to "strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response" with "equity as the goal and outcome". It addresses the searing inequity witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic including a lack of preparedness in countries and the lack of coordination at international levels.

The draft negotiating text covers several issues, that includes pathogen surveillance, health-care workforce capacity, supply chain and logistics, and tech transfer to support the production of vaccines, diagnostic tests and treatments, and the waivers of intellectual property (IP) rights. It seeks to strengthen surveillance for pathogens with "pandemic potential". The Agreement requires countries to also commit to better managing antimicrobial resistance, strengthening their health systems and sanitation, and making progress toward universal health coverage. Separate talks at WHO aim to amend the International Health Regulations, which compel countries to report health emergencies within their borders.

There is a significant emphasis throughout the text on equitable access to medical products. This theme shows up across provisions from language on principles, articles on preparedness, production, technology transfer, access and benefit sharing, supply and procurement.

The current negotiating texts have also proposed an establishment of the Conference of Parties (COP) to oversee the implementation of the Pandemic Agreement. The proposed establishment of a COP suggests that the Agreement could be a classic international treaty adopted under Article 19 of the WHO



Kashish Aneja

is a Delhi-based lawyer and Lead, Asia at the O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law, Georgetown University

The World Health Organization Pandemic Agreement represents a critical step towards rebuilding trust and coordination between nations, but there are indications that it runs the risk of collapse

Constitution as opposed to the alternative Article 21 opt-out regulations.

At the ongoing negotiations, the developing countries have largely embraced the revised negotiating text (perhaps for the first time in two years of negotiations), while the developed countries uniformly criticised it, stating that the text now contains elements that are 'redlines' for them including on financing and matters related to IP. Countries including Australia, Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States went to the extent of referring to the text as a 'step backwards'. Other than the few major substantive disagreements, there is also a general disagreement on the modalities for the conduct of these negotiations in this final stretch.

India, representing the South-East Asia region, has emphasised the importance of clarity on obligations *vis-à-vis* responsibilities, especially between developed and developing countries, to effectively operationalise equity within the Agreement.

The concerns

The most contentious aspect of the Agreement, essentially between developing countries, and others, mostly developed countries and some stakeholders, lies in the establishment of a global system for sharing pathogens and their genetic codes, while ensuring equitable access to the 'benefits' derived from research, including vaccines. Developing countries are hesitant to share information on pathogen spread and evolution if they perceive little in return, a situation exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic by "vaccine nationalism".

To address this issue, the current draft of the Agreement proposes a quid pro quo mechanism, formally titled the WHO Pathogen Access and Benefit-Sharing (PABS) System that compels countries to share genome sequence information and samples with WHO-coordinated networks and databases. In return for access to these data, manufacturers of diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines will be required to provide 10% of their products free of charge and 10% at not-for-profit prices. The current text of the provision aims to establish legal obligations on benefits-sharing for all users of biological materials and genetic sequence data under PABS.

A robust PABS system, particularly for low- and middle-income countries, including some African nations, seems non-negotiable for promoting equity in access to medical countermeasures. On the other hand, many developed countries and the pharmaceutical industry are not satisfied with the language on access and benefit sharing in the current negotiating text, including the perceived

trade-offs. The challenge of global governance, enforcement, and accountability is the second major sticking point of the Agreement negotiations. Without adequate accountability and enforcement mechanisms built into the Agreement, the whole endeavour is merely an exercise in symbolism. The absence of adequate enforcement capabilities also hampers coordination efforts for pandemic countermeasure stockpiles, the deployment of international medical response teams, as well as monitoring and data sharing.

The Agreement risks being rendered ineffective even if the Global North was to reach a consensus on key issues such as technology transfer, the PABS System, and intellectual property waivers, without robust enforcement mechanisms.

The existing International Health Regulations are already legally binding. However, they failed to prevent unjust travel or trade restrictions, and hoarding of vaccines and other medical countermeasures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Proposals for a decision-making body, comprising the COP along with a secretariat, have been included in the negotiating text. However, it remains uncertain whether negotiators will reach consensus on this structure. This model mirrors the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) summits, where all nations receive equal voting rights.

One of the thorniest issues within the Agreement negotiating text is the proposed requirement for firms that received public financing to waive or reduce their intellectual property royalties.

What next?

The current round of negotiations in Geneva ends this week, with the goal of reaching a consensus decision by the World Health Assembly at the end of May. The risk of a watered-down Agreement, driven by the imperative to secure consensus, remains palpable. Although the draft Agreement touches upon most of the relevant concerns that unfolded during the recent pandemic, much of the language around contentious issues such as IP waivers is arguably watered down by referring to national circumstances and using best endeavour language.

To be sure, this is a mammoth ask. One of the potential outcomes of not reaching an Agreement is not ruled out. Failing to reach an agreement would, however, be a serious blow. The Pandemic Agreement represents a critical step towards rebuilding trust and coordination between nations, acknowledging that no single government or institution can confront the threat of future pandemics in isolation.

Understanding India's coal imports

The spectre of electricity shortages rises again as hot weather descends across the country. In recent years, increasingly unpredictable weather patterns and a fast-growing economy have led to big increases in electricity demand, the meeting of which in a reliable way becomes a challenge. But some of the discourse in this context deserves greater scrutiny.

More about logistics

First, a shortage of domestic thermal coal, the kind used in electricity generation, is primarily blamed for the electricity shortage. Consider August, the month with the greatest electricity shortage in 2023, though the story is similar even in summer months. Electricity shortage in August was about 840 million units due to a poor monsoon, in turn leading to increased demand and reduced supply from some sources. It is pertinent that this shortage was just 0.55% of demand that month. Moreover, 0.6 million tonnes of domestic coal would have addressed this shortage even as over 30 million tonnes of coal were available in coal mines in August and September. This illustrates that the challenge is not really about the availability of domestic thermal coal *per se*, but of insufficient logistics to move the coal to power plants. A recent Ministry of Power advisory corroborates this, saying "supplies of domestic coal will remain constrained due to various logistical issues associated with railway network".

Addressing the logistics challenge would take some time. How best to deal with shortages in the meantime? Since coal is currently India's best bet to meet shortages, the obvious answer is alternative sources of coal. This leads to the second conflation – that the only alternative source is imports. Coal India Ltd. sells about 10% of its production, or 70 million tonnes-80 million tonnes each year through spot auctions. While

Ashok Sreenivas

is with Prayas (Energy Group), Pune

Maria Chirayil

is with Prayas (Energy Group), Pune

Rohit Patwardhan

is with Prayas (Energy Group), Pune

The discourse around coal shortages in India needs course correction

the price of such coal is higher than the coal that many plants get, it is much lower than the price of imported coal. Though some plants may not have logistics constraints to get coal from the auction sites, even such plants do not consider auctions as an alternative.

The issue of imports

Some thermal coal imports to blend with domestic coal may be required even if auctions are used. The question then is about how much of imports for which coal plants. The Ministry of Power issued a recent advisory to power generators to continue monitoring their coal stocks until June 2024 and import coal as required (up to 6% by weight).

This was widely reported as extending a "mandate" for importing 6% coal. It is convenient, as some might say, for such advisories to be interpreted as mandates by many coal-based generators since the increased costs arising out of coal imports can be 'passed through' to electricity consumers via distribution utilities. Therefore, it is up to electricity regulators, responsible for ensuring prudence of electricity costs, to not interpret such advisories as mandates.

There is little justification to treat the MoP advisory as a mandate, given that the letter itself repeatedly uses the word "Advisory" and the operative sentence reads "… opt for blending as per the requirements …". Moreover, preliminary analysis shows that a mere 0.3% additional blending in addition to the 3.4% imported coal that was blended between April to December 2023, would have eliminated all shortages in that period.

Thus, the third misleading narrative is that 6% coal imports are necessary when it is just an indicative upper limit of imports that may be required.

Interpreting the advisory as a mandate can

have significant cost impacts, with coal still supplying over 70% of India's electricity. Mandatory blending of 6% imported coal by weight for all coal-based generation, instead of the current blending levels, can increase the variable cost of coal-based electricity by 4.5%-7.5%. Indeed, as in the report on Annual Rating of Power Distribution Utilities, power purchase costs increased by 15% in FY23 due to increases in demand, coal imports and prices of imported coal. Regulatory mechanisms that enable such blending 'automatically' without even consulting the distribution utilities concerned run the risk of 'authorising' such higher costs for a much longer period than may be justifiable.

Generation and location

Not all power plants are the same. Typically, the plants that generate the most (the so-called pit-head plants) are situated close to mines, far away from ports and do not face coal shortage. Shortages in periods of high demand are more likely in plants far away from mines which typically do not generate as much. Thus, there is no justification to interpret the advisory as a mandate to import 6% coal by weight for all plants in the country.

Clearly, the discourse around coal shortages in the country needs course correction. It cannot be assumed that coal imports are the default way to address shortages. The fundamental challenge is to overcome the logistics bottlenecks that are preventing coal reaching the locations where required. In the interim, regulatory commissions and distribution utilities must ensure that all coal-based plants are alert to the possibility of coal shortages and identify the cheapest alternative sources – which may not be imports – to bridge the gap. Otherwise, the hapless consumer would be left to pick up the tab for inefficient coal procurement.

MI matches, chemistry

Mumbai Indian fans are disappointed not just with the way their team is losing but also at the lack of camaraderie among the team members that is very much visible on the field. It is the team's interests that should count.

V. Subramanian, Chennai

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

Did the electoral bonds scheme enable extortion?



Subhash Chandra Garg

is former Finance and Economic Affairs Secretary, Government of India



Anjali Bhardwaj

is a Right To Information activist and founder of Satark Nagrik Sangathan, a citizens' group working to promote transparency and accountability in government functioning

PARLEY

Many companies that faced regulatory action from the Enforcement Directorate (ED) or Income Tax (IT) Department donated electoral bonds worth crores of rupees to ruling parties via the electoral bonds route, show data submitted by the State Bank of India (SBI) to the Election Commission of India (ECI). Some companies which got huge government contracts purchased bonds for large amounts. Some new companies, which were incorporated during the COVID-19 pandemic, purchased bonds worth crores of rupees just months after starting out. Was the electoral bonds scheme used as an extortion tool? Subhash Chandra Garg and Anjali Bhardwaj discuss this question in a conversation moderated by **Vignesh Radhakrishnan**. Edited excerpts:

Many companies purchased bonds worth crores of rupees after ED/IT action. Most of these funds went to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); some went to the ruling parties in various States. Some have called this scheme an extortion tool? Do you agree?

Anjali Bhardwaj: Data in the public domain shows that several companies that were under the scrutiny of the ED, the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation), and the IT Department bought electoral bonds. A significant portion of these were encashed by the ruling party at the Centre. This raises two questions. The first is whether agencies were being used to target companies and extract funds from them. The second is whether companies with cases against them made donations to ruling parties in the hope that the investigations against them would go slow or be dropped altogether. These will have to be a subject matter of deeper investigation.

Subhash Chandra Garg: I trust the investigative analysis that civil society has been doing after the data became available. It is also possible to connect the time of action by investigating agencies and the date on which electoral bonds were purchased. But those who purchased the bonds perhaps trusted the anonymity which this scheme was designed to provide. They would have possibly avoided this route had confidentiality been in doubt. So, this scrutiny might not have been possible without the transparency of the scheme; donations could have remained untraceable.

Strong correlations can also be seen between companies making large donations and receiving high-value government contracts. Is it right to treat these cases as quid pro quo?

SCG: Quid pro quo is a common practice. Companies donate not out of altruism but to serve their business interests, whether it is to secure contracts or to get protection. The existence of quid pro quo in political donations is often seen as the primary motivation behind such contributions. The electoral bonds scheme was seen as a way of making political donations more transparent, using legitimate funds for donations, while maintaining confidentiality. It



The five-judge Constitution bench headed by Chief Justice of India, Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, during a hearing on the electoral bonds case, in New Delhi. PTI

was quid pro quo but in a more transparent way.

AB: Quid pro quo is nothing new. Political party funding has been the fountainhead of corruption in India. Companies do not donate in public interest; they donate to influence policy and law, and give kickbacks to secure contracts. To be sure, this was happening before the introduction of the electoral bonds scheme as well. Some of these transactions were taking place through banking channels and a lot of them through cash. And unless somebody was caught red-handed, quid pro quo was impossible to establish.

So, what's the difference? Earlier, regulators had information on what was coming through the banking channels, but the electoral bonds scheme made even that information opaque. The main contention of the government counsel was that the scheme was brought in to reduce cash. The Supreme Court then asked a few questions. First, with the scheme, has there been a ban on accepting cash? The answer was 'no'. So, along with the scheme, donations through cash continued. Second, although it was expressly forbidden to trade electoral bonds, in reality, there were no safeguards against trading these bonds. Anyone who had money in the bank could buy these bonds and these bonds could then be traded. So, effectively, money gets laundered. The Court weighed these issues against the intended benefits of the scheme and found the loss of transparency and public rights more significant. The names of purchasers of electoral bonds and the redeeming parties were never supposed to be in the public domain. Had there not been a judgment or had the SBI not recorded this alphanumeric number, citizens would have never known what was happening.

SCG: The argument that cash donations should have been stopped is inaccurate. Cash donations were transparent if they were above ₹20,000; this number was then brought down to ₹2,000. This was as good as banning cash transactions. After the electoral bonds scheme was introduced, cash donations reduced.

The anonymity between donors and political parties was designed to protect companies from potential retribution. The debate on the public's right to know donor identities overlooks the privacy of business transactions, which are not typically disclosed to the public or to the government. These include sales, purchases,



Large corporates are absent among the donors. This raises questions about the use of shell companies for donations.

ANJALI BHARDWAJ

and patents. The electoral bonds scheme, however, allowed some transparency, as companies disclosed political donations in their financial statements, providing a balance between anonymity and public interest in political financing. I also have to say that the government interferes with our culture of doing business. High taxes and numerous regulations, alongside the government as a major player in sectors such as electricity, mean businesses often have to please the government to succeed. Electoral bonds is a symptom of the sorry state of affairs of doing business in the country. The solution isn't just to blame companies but to make it easier to do business.

Some companies donated crores of rupees months after getting incorporated. Some that started during the COVID-19 pandemic donated more than ₹30 crore within a year. Many of them do not even have a website. Some companies donated more than ₹50 crore despite facing losses in a financial year. What could these findings indicate?

SCG: The decision to allow loss-making companies to donate by removing the profit cap aimed to level the playing field. There is a question on why loss-making companies should be disallowed from making donations, especially since such a condition could put them at a disadvantage in competing for contracts. The instances of some companies being incorporated just before donating, or changing their names, suggest that some may have sought additional anonymity layers. But this doesn't necessarily indicate criminality.

AB: The electoral bonds scheme was introduced after amending at least four laws, three of which the Court found unconstitutional. The scheme allowed even loss-making companies to donate, a shift from earlier norms where only profit-making companies could donate a capped percentage of their profits. Why would loss-making companies make contributions? It has to be a quid pro quo.

The amendments facilitated the creation of shell companies to funnel anonymous donations to political parties. Critics, including the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the ECI, warned that this could lead to generation of black money and obscure political funding. Reducing the cash donation cap to ₹2,000 hardly curtailed the flow of undisclosed cash donations, as parties could still break down large amounts into smaller, untraceable contributions. The substantial income from electoral bonds reported by parties indicates that the scheme became a significant funding source, not necessarily reducing cash donations but by adding another layer of anonymity. Surprisingly, the data reveal few large corporates among the donors, raising questions about the use of shell companies for

donations. The scheme's stated goals of reducing cash in politics and increasing funding transparency have not been met.

SCG: The concerns about shell companies and the potential for misuse of electoral bonds were addressed in consultations with the RBI. Adjustments were made to minimise risks, including setting a finite life for bonds to prevent them from being used as bearer bonds or for money laundering. The fear of shell companies being used extensively under the electoral bonds scheme is overstated. Direct donations from companies' accounts are logical and transparent, negating the need for shell companies. The scheme's design, focusing on anonymity, was intentional, and while the SBI's detailed data might have been released, it offers a chance to understand donation patterns without undermining the scheme's purpose.

The SBI had asked for four months to match unique numbers but delivered them under a week after a rap from the Court. The Finance Ministry had claimed that the unique numbers were not recorded anywhere, but the latest disclosure shows that they were recorded. What do these contradicting statements show?

SCB: There is no contradiction. The scheme did not recognise the alphanumeric code as an identifier. It was a security feature, not supposed to exist for anyone, similar to how currency notes have multiple security features which are not publicly detailed. The government's statements saying there are no identifiers meant the alphanumeric codes were not meant for identification. In retrospect, using a number as a security feature might have been regrettable. A non-digitisable security method may have been more suitable. The SBI recorded this number confidentially, and since it was so securely handled, it remained unknown for a long time, which aligns with the scheme's intentions.

AB: It is questionable that the SBI claimed it needed four more months to collate data, a task it later completed in just hours, suggesting an attempt to misinform the Court and delay disclosing information. This delay sought was significant because it aimed to push the disclosure past the election date, undermining voters' right to information as emphasised by the Court's three-week deadline. Furthermore, if the alphanumeric code was solely a security feature and not meant for creating an audit trail, its recording on both the purchaser and depositor sides potentially compromises the electoral bonds scheme's integrity. This action by the SBI, a government bank, could have made sensitive information accessible to the ruling party, thus affecting the electoral process's fairness. Both issues warrant thorough investigation, and citizens have a right to understand the SBI's role in this context.



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Scan the code or go to the link
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NOTEBOOK

An avoidable trend at political rallies

Leaders would do well to announce policies and promises at rallies instead of launching a diatribe against the media

Abhinav Deshpande

In an increasingly polarised world, the safety of journalists is often under threat. The traditional hazards of the job are legal reprisals, rejoinders, and political pressures, to name a few. But now, there is a more immediate and visceral danger: the hostility of crowds when they are incited by their leaders. For reporters covering public meetings or political rallies, this is a legitimate fear.

At such gatherings, some politicians turn the crowd against the media by weaving an 'us versus them' narrative. In such a charged environment, reporters risk verbal abuse and even physical violence from an audience that has been conditioned to see journalists not as essential messengers of information, but as adversaries who favour their opponents.

I experienced this recently at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra as it made its way into Maharashtra. During a public meeting in Nandurbar, Mr. Gandhi said, "*Yeh media wale app ko sach batate nahi hai* (the media doesn't show the truth anymore)." Instantly, the mood shifted. The crowd began shouting anti-media slogans even as a group of reporters and camera persons present at the site tried to cover the event.

Instead of standing in the designated press area, I had chosen to stand amid the people so that I could chat with them during the rally. But on hearing Mr. Gandhi's words and sensing the anger of the crowd, I swiftly tucked my media card into my pocket. I realised that being anonymous was wiser than entering a confrontation. This is because, in my experience, an aggressive crowd does not distinguish

between one journalist and another or care for which media house they represent; they paint all media with the same brush. To them, all media are biased.

Later that week, I went with two other journalists to meet Mr. Gandhi. I shared my experience with him and said that it was unfair of him to have said what he did, especially since we reporters from different publications had travelled to Nandurbar to cover the yatra, much like how we cover the rallies and yatras of other political parties. He understood our concerns. During the INDIA bloc rally in Mumbai, just two days later, he refrained from directing his criticism towards the media.

To be sure, it is not just Opposition leaders who do this. In Andhra Pradesh, Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy often targets media houses by denting their credibility in the eyes of the public. In Telangana, K. Chandrasekhar Rao, when he was in power from 2014 to 2023, also employed a similar tactic to incite the crowd. Some leaders don't allow journalists from certain media houses to attend their press conferences, and if they do, they do not allow reporters to ask questions. Such practices do not suit a democracy.

The primary duty of a journalist is to inform the public about events on the ground that affect their daily lives. As the country gears up for the Lok Sabha elections, it is hoped that the leaders of all political parties will minimise their diatribe against journalists and instead use their rallies to announce policies, promises, and explain why the people should vote for them instead of their opponents.

deshpande.abhinav@thehindu.co.in

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

A rainbow haze



Thousands of people celebrate Holi in Ahmedabad. Holi, often called the 'festival of colours', celebrates the beginning of spring and the victory of good over evil. VIJAY SONEJI

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 29, 1974

President's Rule in Pondicherry: Assembly dissolved

New Delhi, March 28: The Central Government to-day issued a notification under Section 51 of the Union Territories Act, 1963, dissolving the Pondicherry Assembly and



suspending the operation of the relevant provisions of the Act relating to Pondicherry's governance through the local Legislature, which in effect amounts to the imposition of President's rule. The notification was issued by the Home Ministry after the Union Cabinet accepted the recommendation of the Lt. Governor, Mr. Chhedi Lal, for the dissolution of the Assembly, since there was no hope of an alternative Ministry being formed after the fall of the Anna DMK-CPI coalition Government.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 29, 1924

Burma Council

Rangoon, March 27: Today was the last day of this session of the Legislative Council. On its reassembling this morning a Nationalist member brought to the notice of the President what he called a scandal caused by the arrest yesterday under Civil warrant of a member in the Council hall without the permission of the President or the Secretary and asked whether such action was permissible in the precincts of the Council Chamber.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of mountains with species facing extinction

17 According to new research by the journal *Nature*, the mountains included those in the Iran-Pakistan region, Northeast Asia, Brazilian highlands, Western America and Mexico, and the Mediterranean basin. PTI

Amount of borrowing approved by IREDA for FY25

24,000 in ₹ crore. The borrowing proposal includes fundraising through bonds, perpetual debt instruments and term loans. PTI

Coal supply achieved by Coal India till March 27

610.8 million tonne. Coal India Ltd (CIL) has surpassed its annual supply target of 610 million tonnes to the thermal power sector, according to a company official. PTI

Rise in bank credit to industry in February 2023

8.6 in percentage. Growth in bank credit to the industry, compared with 6.8% in February 2023, was mainly due to the accelerated pace of borrowing by sectors like infrastructure and textiles. PTI

Americans signing up for unemployment benefits

2.1 in lakh. The number of jobless claims in the U.S. dipped by 2,000 last week, another sign that the labour market remains strong, according to U.S. Labour Department. AP
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Tech giants facing EU scrutiny

What are the main reasons behind the European Commission's initiation of non-compliance investigations against tech giants like Apple, Meta, Google's parent Alphabet, and Amazon? How does the Digital Markets Act (DMA) aim to regulate 'gatekeepers' and ensure fairer competitive practices in the digital market space?

Saptaparno Ghosh

EXPLAINER

The story so far:

In a slew of measures to ensure “contestable and fair markets in the digital sector” in line with the provisions of the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the European Commission on March 25 initiated ‘non-compliance investigations’ against Apple, Meta and Google’s parent Alphabet. It will also investigate Amazon’s ranking practices in its marketplace.

Where is the context of these non-compliance investigations?

The non-compliance investigations concern Alphabet’s alleged rules on steering or directing its customers to its in-house services over those of its competitors. Apple will be investigated for allegedly similar practices in its App Store, as well as the way it positions its Safari browser. Lastly, Meta will be investigated for its “pay or consent model.”

The investigations fall in with the primary objective of the DMA to better regulate ‘gatekeepers’ and ensure fairer competitive practices in the digital market space. The idea is to mitigate paradigms that may create a “bottleneck” in the digital economy and fairness in competition and consumer access.

Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, TikTok’s parent company ByteDance, and Microsoft were designated as ‘gatekeepers’ in September 2023. They were expected to fully comply with obligations under the DMA by March 7 this year. The Commission assessed the mandatory compliance reports submitted by these companies and gathered feedback from stakeholders, including in the context of workshops, before launching the investigation.

“We have been in discussions with gatekeepers for months to help them adapt, and we can already see changes happening in the market,” Margrethe



Keeping an eye: The announcement of the investigation has not enthused participants. AFP

Vestager, Executive Vice-President in charge of competition policy at the Commission said in a press statement, adding, “But we are not convinced that the solutions by Alphabet, Apple and Meta respect their obligations for a fairer and more open digital space for European citizens and businesses”.

How are the steering rules non-compliant?

DMA provisions stipulate that app developers be allowed to steer consumers to offers (and services) outside the gatekeeper’s app store, free of charge.

The Commission aired its concerns about Alphabet and Apple not being fully compliant “as they impose various restrictions and limitations.” Apple has maintained that the tight integration associated with its App Store is essential to provide a “uniquely secure and seamless user experience.”

“It (DMA provisions) equates size with harm, and then imposes a one-list-fits-all set of regulatory obligations without providing an opportunity for the platform to explain, and the regulator to assess, whether – on balance – there are broader benefits to consumers or businesses,” Apple had said in an unrelated January 2020 submission.

In a blog published this January, Spotify, however, had the following to say: “For years, even in our own app, Apple had these rules where we couldn’t tell you about offers, how much something costs,

or even where to buy it.” It added that with the DMA, it would be able to share details about Spotify promotions, deals and better-value payment options with consumers in the EU.

Further, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) on March 15 also ordered a detailed probe against Google for alleged discriminatory practices on its Play Store pricing policy after having discovered a prima facie violation of competition law.

What about Alphabet engaging in self-preferencing?

The Commission wants to determine whether Google search results are discriminatory; in other words, whether the search giant engages in self-preferencing for its verticals over rival services. It has stated that Alphabet’s measures to comply with the DMA may not have ensured that third-party services featured on Google’s search results page are treated in a “fair and non-discriminatory manner” in comparison to their own services.

In October 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) accused Google of “unlawfully maintaining monopolies through anti-competitive and exclusionary practices in the search and search advertising markets” and sought it “remedy the competitive harms.”

According to the DoJ, the conduct harmed consumers by reducing the quality of their search, lowering choices, and impeding innovation. The case is ongoing.

Amazon too is facing heat for similarly tailoring the listings on its marketplace.

What about Apple enabling choice?

The Commission is looking to assess if Apple enables users to easily uninstall any pre-installed (or presently default) software applications on iOS, change default settings, and if prompts users with choice screens that allow them to effectively and easily select alternatives to the default service. The investigation emanates from the Commission’s concern that Apple’s measures may be preventing users from “truly exercising their choice of services with the Apple ecosystem.” In other words, concerns over ecosystem captivity.

What are the concerns about Meta’s model?

Meta introduced a subscription model that offered people in EU, EEA and Switzerland the choice to use Facebook and Instagram without any ads. Alternatively, they could continue using these services for free while seeing ads relevant to them; in other words, consenting to personalised advertising.

The model, however, did not convince the Commission. It held that the model’s “binary choice” may not provide “a real alternative in case users do not consent, thereby not attaining the objective of preventing the accumulation of personal data by gatekeepers.”

How will non-compliant companies be penalised?

The companies face the prospect of being fined up to 10% of their global turnover or 20% in case of repeated infringement(s). Additionally, should the investigation come across any “systematic infringement,” the companies may be asked to sell a business or parts of it. A ban from acquiring related additional services could also be possible. The announcement of the investigation has not enthused the ecosystem’s participants or stakeholders. Concerns continue to exist if overlapping prerogatives can be addressed.

THE GIST

The European Commission has launched non-compliance investigations against tech giants such as Apple, Meta, Google’s parent Alphabet, and Amazon to ensure fair and contestable markets in the digital sector, as per the provisions of the Digital Markets Act (DMA).

The investigations focus on alleged violations related to steering customers to in-house services, ranking practices in marketplaces, and compliance with DMA obligations.

The Commission assessed mandatory compliance reports and gathered stakeholder feedback before launching investigations, expressing concerns about compliance with DMA provisions by Alphabet, Apple, and Meta.

Measuring internet freedom in India in the last 10 years

How do internet shutdowns affect the daily lives of citizens, particularly in regions where they are frequently imposed? What are the primary reasons cited by the Indian government for imposing internet shutdowns?

Gautam Nirmal Doshi
Saumya Kalia
Rhea Gupta

The story so far:

For five straight years, India has topped the global list of countries imposing internet bans, with about 60% of all blackouts recorded in the world, between 2016 and 2022 having been in India. State imposed shutdowns in the last decade have cited national security and threats to public order. However, rights groups have argued that these shutdowns also violate court directives.

Internet shutdowns

The Indian government imposed a total of 780 shutdowns between January 1, 2014, and December 31, 2023, according to data collected by the Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC). Shutdowns flared up during the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019, the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, and the

introduction of Farm Bills in 2020. Internet disruptions in India accounted for more than 70% of the total loss to the global economy in 2020. Data shows India shut down the internet for over 7,000 hours in 2023.

Indian States and Union Territories can impose an internet shutdown only in case of a “public emergency” or in the interest of “public safety”, according to the Indian Telegraph Act. However, the law does not define what qualifies as an emergency or safety issue. The Supreme Court, in the landmark *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* case, reiterated that internet shutdowns violate fundamental rights to freedom of expression and shutdowns lasting indefinitely are unconstitutional. Moreover, Courts have asked governments to make shutdown orders public, a provision poorly complied with, experts have noted.

British-era law

Regionally, Jammu and Kashmir saw the highest number of shutdowns – at 433 –

in the last 12 years. The longest blackout in 2023 took place in Manipur from May to December, amid ethnic clashes.

As of February 15 this year, internet shutdowns were active in Haryana amid the farmers’ protests.

The Union government invoked powers under a British-era law to suspend mobile internet as Punjab farmers are holding protests in Delhi.

Activists have pointed out that India failed to meet the ‘three-part test’ in imposing blackouts in J&K and Manipur. Under international law, to block any access to content or invoke coercive measures that violate people’s fundamental rights, countries should check if the action is provided for by law; pursues a legitimate aim; and follows standards of necessity and proportionality. The majority of internet outages in the last decade were localised to specific districts, cities and villages.

The trends differ globally: protests are the most common reason for internet shutdowns, followed by information

control and political instability.

Between 2015 and 2022, more than 55,000 websites were blocked, according to SFLC data. The biggest share of content censored was done under section 69A of the IT Act, by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. URLs were blocked due to links to organisations banned under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Recently, the Ministry ordered news outlet *The Caravan* to take down a story which alleged abuse, torture, and murder of civilians by the Indian Army in Jammu’s Poonch district.

On social media, almost 30,000 social media URLs (including accounts and posts) were blocked between 2018 and 2022, with the majority of requests sent to X.

A commonly cited reason for blocking websites is the escalating threat of cybercrime. As compared to 5,693 cases in 2013, India recorded more than 65,000 cases last year. Cases have risen by almost 434% between 2016 and 2022, according to the National Crime Records Bureau.

India and global trends

Global Internet freedom has declined for the 13th consecutive year, and the environment for human rights online has deteriorated in 29 countries, according to the latest Freedom House report. India’s ranking has hovered around the same benchmark in the last three years. This is a dip from 2016 and 2017, when India scored 59 points, to 50 points in 2023.

THE GIST

India has consistently topped the global list of countries imposing internet bans, with approximately 60% of all recorded blackouts worldwide.

Shutdowns have been implemented citing reasons such as national security and threats to public order, with notable instances during protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, the abrogation of Article 370, and the introduction of Farm Bills.

Indian States and Union Territories can impose shutdowns only in cases of a ‘public emergency’ or in the interest of ‘public safety,’ as per the Indian Telegraph Act. However, the law lacks clear definitions for what constitutes an emergency or safety issue.

IN THE LIMELIGHT



A still from *Gunaa*.

Gunaa: how a twisted tale conjured by the greatest minds has stood the test of time

Tamil film, *Gunaa*, directed by Santhana Bharathi, and starring Kamal Haasan, has experienced a resurgence in popularity due to its iconic song *Kanmani Anbodu* being featured in the Malayalam film *Manjummel Boys*, reigniting interest in the 1991 cult classic

Gopinath Rajendran

It certainly seems impossible to scroll through Instagram without seeing a reel video carrying the ‘*Kanmani Anbodu*’ track from the Tamil film *Gunaa*. Unless you were living under the gigantic rocks of Guna Caves, you are likely to know that the placement of the track in the sensational Malayalam hit *Manjummel Boys* – which is about a tragedy that befalls a group of friends visiting the Guna Caves – has brought back the 1991 Kamal Haasan starrer to the centre of attention. But ask the cinephiles and they will vouch for how *Gunaa*, which was criminally under-appreciated during its release, has always been a cult classic set in stone.

The story of how *Gunaa* came to fruition calls for a film on its own. When Kamal was 19, he was not satisfied with the monotonous work he was getting in Tamil films and that’s when his mentor figure Ananthu (remember this name) asked him to give Malayalam cinema a shot, an endeavour that garnered him huge success apart from rejuvenating his thirst for the craft. His last film as the lead in Malayalam was *Chanakyan* (1989) helmed by National Award-winning filmmaker T.K. Rajeev Kumar in his directorial debut. It also marked the debut of writer Sab John and his first collaboration with Kamal.

The following year, the duo, along with director Sibi Malayil and cinematographer Venu, decided to team up for a film on insurgency in Sri Lanka, an idea that was shot down by veteran Cho Ramaswamy citing the feathers it might ruffle. Sab John found another plot from his childhood, which was about this man who would be seen frequently in his neighbourhood and was called by everyone ‘Pottan’ (a derogatory term for a person intellectually slow to learn and follow). Kamal, intrigued by the idea, gave his nod. Malayil was not available by the time the film took shape and Kamal’s longtime friend and filmmaker Santhana Bharathi (who in 1987 made the Sathyaraj-starrer *Kadamai Kanniyam Kattupaadu* which Kamal produced) took over the direction reins. When the team started with recce works near the Berijam Lake, Kodaikanal, they spotted a milestone for the national park named Mathikettan Solai (the forest of the lost minds) and Sab John

recommended that as the title. But because of the negative connotation, the makers went with the name of its primary lead; and thus, *Gunaa* was born.

Gunaa, condensed into a one-liner, is the story of a newly released psychiatric patient who kidnaps a heiress, believing it’s their destiny to get married. The plot might sound similar to the Spanish film *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* by auteur Pedro Almodóvar that came out just a year before, but John had earlier clarified *Gunaa* had nothing to do with it; the layers John, Kamal and Bharathi add to *Gunaa* would prove that. For starters, the initial portions of *Gunaa* are set in Andhra Pradesh and the very first shot introduces us to Gunaa standing atop a building in the pose of Nataraja as the camera moves along showing how he’s the only man in a brothel managed by his god-fearing mother. As the story progresses, we learn that his uncle, unaware of his mental health issues, used to tie him up to a Gunaseelan temple from which he escaped, sought medical care and was diagnosed with Obsessional psychoneurosis.

In a fantastic 150-second arc shot that has become synonymous with the film, Gunaa explains how he’s waiting for his ‘Abirami’ with whom he wants to escape from this god-forsaken world. His abandoning father became a villain he never knew and the repercussions that led his mother to take up sex work are all “impurities” for him. He wants to settle down with Abirami atop a cold “Pentothal hill,” far from this ugly world that’s cold enough to lie that his mother has died to get him out of hospital.

Immediately, we cut to a montage song in which the film’s composer Ilaiyaraaja lends his voice to the ‘*Appan Endrum*’ track and Vaali pushes home the point of Gunaa’s need to purification with lines like ‘*kuppai aga vandha udambu*’ and ‘*endha Gangai aatril indha azhukku pogum*’. The ‘*Unnai Naan*’ track deserves a special mention for how, visually, we get to see both Gunaa’s mother and Rosy, the only two souls that care for our titular hero, take turns pacifying him. Just like *Chanakyan*, John’s *Gunaa* is also about a love story that does not end on a positive note.

Gunaa finds his Abirami when another fantastic track, ‘*Paarthu Vizhi*’, plays; the song is from Abhirami Pattar’s ‘*Abhirami*

Anthadhi’, a Tamil collection of poems sung on goddess Abirami, and in the film’s context, the lyrics coincide with Gunaa finding the almighty in Rohini (Roshini) who he believes to be Abirami. The song is also when Gunaa goes into a dream sequence featuring the lead pair dancing together dressed as gods. In fact, *Gunaa* is laced with many such religious references from both Hinduism and Christianity. The heist sequence in which Gunaa inadvertently stabs a thief with a trident, the church sequence, and Abirami, dressed in white, compared to that of an angel are some examples with a personal favourite being shot where blood from Gunaa’s injured hand unwittingly lands on Rohini’s forehead resembling smeared vermilion.

Probably as an extension of Kamal’s beliefs, nature takes over as the almighty once the film shifts to the third act, featuring the intimate moments between Gunaa and Rohini where the latter embodies the Abirami persona. It’s a whole new world where the hills of Kodaikanal turn into their version of Mount Kailash; for us, it’s where a schizophrenic person and a Stockholm syndrome victim find peace and love. The Devil’s Kitchen – that Subash and his friends dreaded in *Manjummel Boys* – turns into a comforting home for the couple. The writing also makes sure there is a breadcrumb trail to showcase how Gunaa has been one with the nature around him. In an earlier sequence, we see him talking to a cow and when asked for the reason by his uncle, he retorts with “*manushangaluku en thukkam puriyathu*” (humans won’t understand my grief). There’s also a pair of sparrows nesting in the church which acts as a metaphor for the lead pair and one of the sparrows getting killed by a gunshot is a prophesy of how Rohini meets her end.

Gunaa started a sub-genre of films that paved the way for titles like *Kaadhal Kondein* (2003) and *Kadhalil Vizhunthen* (2008). Apart from influencing an era of filmmakers who would often cite it as the film that got them into movie-making, *Gunaa* is also one of those rare films that made real-world differences; the Devil’s Kitchen turned into a touring spot, with its name changed to Guna Caves. *Gunaa* was also an addition to Kamal’s list of films that dealt with mental health issues, like *Sigappu Rojakkal*, *Moondram Pirai*

and *Aalavandhan*. Kamal and Bharathi would even go on to team up for *Mahanadhi*, which, like *Gunaa*, also sheds light on the plight of sex workers.

Gunaa might not have gotten an astounding financial success when it was released. Nothing had prepared the audience for a film like it; Bharathi’s previous films were mostly romance dramas or cop flicks. An actor who didn’t stick to the norms of a traditional “hero”, *Gunaa* was similar to what he had previously done in films like *16 Vayathinile* and *Kalyanaraman*, and the hard-hitting film came sandwiched between comedy capers like *Michael Madana Kama Rajan* and *Singaravelan*. The fact that the film was released alongside titles like *Bramma*, *Rudhra* and of course, Rajinikanth-Mani Ratnam’s *Thalapathy*, didn’t help it either.

Nifty touches

The nifty touches, references, and treatments of its lovely songs make it one of the best films from the Tamil film industry. Speaking of nifty touches, remember Ananthu who I had earlier mentioned about? He plays a cameo as Gunaa’s roommate at the hospital who inculcates the concept of Abirami within Gunaa, just like how Ananthu mentored Kamal Haasan.

The Malayalam film industry has referenced *Gunaa* and the ‘*Kanmani Anbodu*’ track in many of its films like *Premam* but *Manjummel Boys* takes this a step ahead and turns it into a tribute to the film. Even the plot of it, which’s got a bunch of friends paying no heed to the warnings and signs, feels like a reference to the meaning of Mathikettan Solai which has its own share of urban legends. At the core, both the films deal with the affection and the attachment between the lead characters, though it’s love for Gunaa and friendship between the boys in the new film. Nevertheless, *Manjummel Boys* certainly feels like a love letter to *Gunaa* complete with the ‘*Kanmani anbodu kaadhalan naan ezhuthum kadithamae*’ line. It’s undoubtedly a wonderful homage to Gunaa, a brilliant film made by some of the best talents in the country whose love for this craft of filmmaking had no bounds. Could we fathom it? Probably we will never get it. Probably they meant it when they went “*Manidhar unarmdhu kolla idhu manitha kaadhal ala, adhayum thaandi punidhamanathu!*”

THE DAILY QUIZ

The movie *Manjummel Boys* shattered records and became the first Malayalam movie to enter the ₹200-crore club. Here is a quiz on movies based on real life incidents

Abhinava. K

QUESTION 1

This 2011 road-action thriller is based on a real-life incident that happened in Chennai. The movie which was remade in Tamil and Hindi pertains to heart transplants. Identify the movie.

QUESTION 2

This film starring Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer and Janelle Monáe is on three African-american women mathematicians at the space agency NASA. Their behind-the-scenes work is responsible for the launch of which astronaut?

QUESTION 3

Air hostess, hijack situation, Ashok Chakra, Shabana Azmi are all key elements of this popular Hindi-language movie. It won two National Film Awards. Identify the film.

QUESTION 4

Identify the non-fiction book based on which the 2016 film *Lion* was made. The movie starring Dev Patel also has an AR Rahaman song.

QUESTION 5

This Sandra Bullock starrer about the transformation of a homeless kid into a star athlete is said to be based on the life of Michael Oher. It was recently in the news due to the controversy surrounding the athlete and the Tuohy family. Identify the film.



Visual question:

This humorous movie revolves around a young man who experiences retrograde amnesia after a cricket incident two days before his wedding. Identify the movie.

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily

quiz: 1. In the inner region of the asteroid belt lies an asteroid about 10 km wide, discovered by astronomer Martin Watt in 1982. Name the British philologist and writer for whom Watt named the asteroid. **Ans: J.R.R. Tolkien**
2. Astronomers discovered two asteroids in 1989 and 1996 and named them right then. Name the asteroids. **Ans: Megryan, Tomhanks**
3. This asteroid was discovered in 2004 and subsequently given the name of an antagonist from the TV show Star Gate SG-1. **Ans: Apophis**
4. A Japanese astronomer discovered this asteroid in 1991 and named it after a monster that appears in a famous nonsensical poem. **Ans: Jabberwock**
5. This asteroid is named for a poem and a warrior of Old English literature. It belongs to a group that also includes the asteroid Benu, which has a 0.13% chance of smashing into the earth between 2178 and 2290. Name the asteroid. **Ans: Beowulf**
Visual: Name this Indian astronomer. **Ans: M.K. Vainu Bappu**
Early Birds: K.N. Vishwanathan | Rajmohan V



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

MR. N. S. Mani, Maraimalai Nagar, Madras, want to know the exact meaning of ‘flak’ and how to use it.

‘Flak’ literally means ‘anti-aircraft fire.’ Figuratively, it means severe criticism or abuse.

The proposal to increase the price of petrol has come in for a lot of flak.

It means that the proposal has been severely criticised.

Her recent speech came in for a lot of flak.

The ‘a’ in ‘flak’ is pronounced like the ‘a’ in ‘fan’. ‘Flak’ is also spelt ‘flack’.

Mr. K. Bomma Raju, Malleswaram, Bangalore, wants to know the meaning of (a) Tom, Dick and Harry (b) cakewalk.

‘Tom, Dick and Harry’ is a Victorian term for ‘the man in the street.’ It has a derogatory meaning. It means ‘people unworthy of notice.’

Do not expect me to listen to every Tom, Dick and Harry.

A ‘cakewalk’ is a ‘dance developed from an American black contest in graceful walking with a cake as a prize.’ The prize is given to the couple who walks most gracefully around the cake. Figuratively, it means ‘an easy task.’

Winning from this constituency is not going to be a cakewalk for him.

‘Cakes and ale’ means ‘merry making’, ‘a good time.’

Life is not cakes and ale.

Cakes and ale is the title of a novel by Somerset Maugham. ‘It’s a piece of cake’ means that it is something that can be done with little effort, something that is easily done. ‘To take the cake’ means ‘to be conspicuously foolish, amusing, annoying, astonishing, outrageous.’ This expression is from ‘cakewalk’. It originally meant ‘to win a prize.’ Now it is used ironically.

He takes the cake for sheer stupidity.

‘To take the cake’ or ‘to take the biscuit’ is used informally in British English.

Mr. M. P. V. Shankar, Channapatna, wants to know how to pronounce the past tense of ‘beat’.

It rhymes with ‘feet’ and ‘seat’. Most people in this country pronounce it ‘bet’. It is incorrect. There is no difference in pronunciation between the present and past tense of the word. Their spellings are also the same. Beat-beat-beaten. The ‘ea’ in ‘beaten’ is pronounced the way ‘ea’ is pronounced in the present and past tense of the word.

Mr. V. Sankaran, S.P. Hospital, Madras, wants to know what is meant by ‘back-formation.’ development is a linguistic term. It describes the formation of a new word by the removal of the prefix or suffix of an existing word. Generally, verbs are formed in this fashion from nouns and adjectives. The word ‘enthuse’ was formed from ‘enthusiasm,’ ‘laze’ from ‘lazy,’ ‘burgle’ from ‘burglar,’ and ‘edit’ from ‘editor’. Other back-formations are legislate, televise, automate, diagnose, liaise, and self-destruct.

Ms. D. Sailaja Sarma, Ukkunagaram, Visakhapatnam, wants to know the meaning of ‘primrose path’. It means ‘the pursuit of pleasure, especially with disastrous consequences.’ Be careful.

The primrose path appears attractive. But you will be ruined eventually if you take that path.

Published in The Hindu on June 4, 1991

Word of the day

Amerce: punish with an arbitrary penalty

Synonyms: fine, charge, forfeit

Usage: *The judge decided to amerce the defendant.*

Pronunciation: bit.ly/amercepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /əˈmɜːs/

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

A job half-done

ILO report could have provided more policy insights

The recently released India Employment Report 2024, brought out by the International Labour Organization and the Institute of Human Development, tells us that the labour market has seen a churn after Covid, marking a sharp break from the 2000-2019 period. Chief among these is the rise in workforce in agriculture, implying that the reverse migration of the Covid period was not temporary. Meanwhile, the quality of jobs or incomes generated also fell after 2019, alongside a widening gender gap.



A major feature of the report is that it highlights a sharp rise in ‘open unemployment’, of the 371 million youth in the 15-29 age bracket, 28 per cent, largely women, are out of ‘education, employment or training’, which points to a failure of the education system to make them job-worthy. The need to invest more in the skills of this cohort, 41 per cent of whom barely have a secondary education, should be given utmost priority. Those who have the formal education, too lack the basic skills that should accompany it. Theoretically speaking, the Kuznets-Lewis model of the rural workforce shifting to higher productivity jobs in industry has not happened at all, and in fact been reversed after 2019, the report notes.

The distribution of jobs among youth in 2022 shows that 26.3 per cent of them are employed in unskilled jobs in farming, industry and construction, 64.8 per cent in low skilled jobs and just 8.9 per cent in medium and high-skilled jobs. While the share of unskilled jobs has fallen from levels of 36.1 per cent in 2000, that of low skilled jobs has risen from 60.5 per cent in 2000 and medium and high skilled jobs from 3.4 per cent in 2000. In other words, little has changed in two decades in terms of labour productivity and earnings. There has been a reversal post-Covid, with a fall in the share of high and medium skill jobs since 2019, when it was 10.4 per cent. The ILO could have taken a granular look at the skills mismatch across sectors for a range of manufacturing and services activities. While it is well known that capital intensity in manufacturing has held up job creation, the potential of labour-intensive sectors should have been more clearly spelt out so that it yields policy insights. But for now, the recent setback to micro, medium and small industries must be reversed to bring the situation back to 2019 levels. The Centre’s focus on farm-led enterprises holds immense potential to absorb the surplus workforce in rural areas. Indeed, it may not be necessary to create Lewis-Kuznets type population transfers to urban centres.

There are the usual conceptual grey areas. If unemployment is a vague term in the Indian context, characterised by disguised unemployment, so is self-employment. The report’s last lines sum it up: “The rise in real earnings and wages from self-employment and casual work, especially among men, indicates some improvement in the labour market — which needs further exploration.” India’s labour challenges call for complex solutions.

POCKET: SUMMER OF ‘24

RAVIKANTH



VS SESHADRI

India signed its first free trade agreement (FTA) with European countries earlier this month. Called the Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA), signed with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) grouping of four countries — Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland, it is another step towards trade and investment liberalisation with select partners. Together, EFTA has a market of only 14.65 million people, but they are capital rich with high investment potential. The highlight of TEPA is a commitment by companies in these countries to inject fresh FDI of \$50 billion into India in 10 years and \$100 billion in 15 years, which is expected to generate direct employment to one million. In comparison, from the year 2000, inward FDI from this group add up to only \$10 billion.

TEPA advances India’s evolving FTA template. Tariff elimination or reduction is offered in several areas but sensitive sectors are shielded. Giving space for our manufacturing under PLI schemes to grow is also a factor. Still, India’s offer provides substantial opportunities for the FTA partners, considering our relatively higher tariff levels. In return, we seek fuller access in their markets.

Through TEPA, India will have full and free access to the EFTA market for industrial products, but not for sensitive items in agriculture. In all, 92.2 per cent of their tariff lines covering 99.6 per cent of India’s existing exports will benefit. That said, TEPA will only offer a level-playing field to Indian exporters since EFTA’s FTA coverage is already extensive with 29 existing FTA partners (that also includes a few FTA groupings like the EU) apart from individual members like Switzerland being parties to a few more. Even so, India’s exports of chemicals, garments, jewellery, steel and machinery items can gain to some extent. Even fresh vegetables, fruits and flowers have improved access with some receiving freer access during off-season.

India is offering tariff concessions on 82.7 per cent of its tariff lines, covering 95.3 per cent of imports from EFTA. Switzerland will not, however, benefit for its gold exports, accounting for 80 per cent of its total, since reduction under TEPA will be only 1 per cent from bound rate (of 40 per cent, while the MFN applied rate is much lower). But it will benefit from its exports of chocolates, wines, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, watches and machinery items. For Norway, the other major exporter in EFTA, benefits will



India improves on its FTA template

EFTA DEAL. Integral to it are data protection and scope for review, if FTAs with third parties offer more favourable terms

accrue for its exports of fish, chemicals, petroleum gases, fertilizers and certain machinery items. Unwrought nickel, a substantial item, is however imported into India at nil MFN duty.

On services, the commitments made are on India’s preferred positive list basis. All four modes are covered with improved market access for several services. India has made commitments in 105 sub-sectors (against a total of 155) as against Switzerland’s 128, Norway’s 114, Liechtenstein’s 107 and Iceland’s 110.

A horizontal commitment by all EFTA countries on movement of natural persons also include intra corporate transferees and contractual service providers. Norway and Switzerland also have committed on movement of individual professionals. There will be no labour market and economic needs testing for their entry. There is however no further provision on social security beyond stating that respective domestic laws shall apply. Provision for mutual recognition of qualification or licences for practice is also generally worded.

The Ministry of Commerce is hoping that the FTA will stimulate our IT, business, personal, cultural, and recreational services exports.

AREAS OF DEPARTURE

Noteworthy also are certain areas of departure in TEPA in relation to India’s earlier FTAs. The rules of origin are, as EFTA itself has claimed, designed more on their model. There are also new concepts included such as providing for ‘chemical reaction’ as conferring origin for certain chemical products. However

it appears that India’s products of particular strength and interest like cut and polished diamonds (CTSH + 6 per cent value addition) have been suitably tailored to our requirements.

The chapter on intellectual property confines itself largely to TRIPS standards but amplifies on enforcement. Noteworthy, particularly of relevance to the pharma sector, is a record of understanding on data protection that is integral to the agreement. It calls for both EFTA and India to enter into consultations one year after entry into force of TEPA to discuss ‘issues relating to protection of undisclosed information from unfair commercial use’.

The chapter on government procurement is rather brief exchanging only points of contact, unlike the FTA with the UAE that provided for some market access. However, there is a commitment by both sides to examine within three years the possibility of developing and deepening cooperation in this area.

For the first time in an FTA, India has agreed to have a detailed chapter on Trade and Sustainable Development that covers environment and labour standards, even if largely in consonance

Both India and EFTA have given themselves the possibility to review and further deepen the Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement.

with multilateral environment agreements and ILO standards, and due consideration for gender. These provisions will not be subject to dispute settlement but issues if any can be taken up in consultations and the joint committee under TEPA. Provisions on labour standards, however, have also figured in the IPEF supply chain agreement signed last year.

Both India and EFTA have also given themselves the possibility to review and further deepen TEPA in case the other party enters into FTAs with third parties offering more favourable terms. EFTA could, for example, seek a review if India’s future FTAs with the UK or the EU carry deeper concessions.

How did EFTA and India, between whom FTA negotiations began in 2008, paused in 2013, and recommenced only six months ago managed to move so quickly to the finish before the election announcement? The momentum of interest in India could be a factor. Perhaps they also wanted to get the first-mover advantage among European countries. The speed is also discernible in their decision to keep negotiations on government procurement to a later date. For India, the investment commitment by EFTA must have been attractive. It could also help if this prods the UK and EU to be more forthcoming in their negotiations.

Finally, an FTA can only be an enabler. It is important for our trade and industry to study and make best use of its provisions with appropriate strategising.

The writer is former Ambassador and Senior Fellow Delhi Policy Group

Crowdsourcing, a good model for delivering services

For businesses, it’s cheaper and more versatile than AI. And for workers, it opens up a lot more opportunities

Milind Kumar Sharma
Sharad Sharma

In the ever-evolving landscape of modern commerce, Tom Godwin’s quote from *Digital Darwinism* has become an often-repeated cliché: “Airbnb and Uber are the largest companies in their respective industries, without owning any hotel or car, respectively.”

Often, technology is considered as the sole driver for these new age organisations. While technology undoubtedly serves as the catalyst for disruption, it is the symbiotic relationship between technology and the crowd that truly propels these new-age organisations forward. Enabled by digital platforms and the ubiquitous reach of the internet, millions of individuals now act as the backbone of services provided by many such companies. This phenomenon, commonly known as crowdsourcing, has become integral to their business models.

With technological enhancements and organisations exploring further optimisation in their operating model, crowdsourcing can be considered as an option for delivering services across many domains. Tasks such as



DIGITAL DIVIDE. Needs to be bridged

review/tagging images, audio and videos, synthesizing data/information from public domains in media and entertainment, product cataloging related tasks in retail, customer service, etc., in a variety of industries, can be effectively outsourced to multiple individuals, facilitated by digital platforms that connect supply with demand.

THE AI CHALLENGE

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and associated technologies introduces a potential challenge to these crowdsourcing models. These technologies are capable of performing tasks without human intervention, prompting a critical question: should organisations invest in AI solutions or

continue to rely on human crowdsourcing? It’s a conundrum faced by many.

The allure of AI is undeniable, offering unparalleled efficiency and scalability. However, one significant drawback is its lack of contextual understanding and nuanced decision-making abilities.

Another consideration is the cost associated with setting up and regularly updating technology solutions. The initial investment required for development and implementation can be substantial and would require ongoing investment, continuous monitoring and updates, to remain effective. On the other hand, human workers, possess the ability to adapt and learn new skills over time, making them more flexible and versatile.

Further, for India this narrative takes on a unique dimension. The demographic dividend with a large educated population, presents the unique opportunity. The recent ILO report has highlighted high unemployment rates among educated youth, especially in non-farm sectors. The ability to connect with the crowd to get work done may also open up new possibilities for workers in rural and other economically depressed areas.

Progressive labour laws, such as those enacted in States like Rajasthan and Karnataka, offer a conducive policy for the growth of the gig economy. Platforms like UrbanClap have been instrumental in empowering blue-collar workers by providing them with access to a digital marketplace to connect with customers, and earn a livelihood.

Enabling these opportunities for India’s large white-collar workforce requires a paradigm shift in how we conceptualise and implement such platforms. Beyond serving as mere marketplaces for tasks, these platforms must evolve into comprehensive service delivery ecosystems, seamlessly integrating with existing business workflows and processes.

There are challenges that India has to surmount. There remains a stark digital divide between urban and rural areas, with access to high speed internet connectivity still limited in many hinterlands. Empowering workers from these demographics with the necessary skills and training is also paramount to ensure their success in the crowdsourcing economy.

Milind is Professor at MBM University, Jodhpur, and Sharad is Senior Associate Director at KPMG, Gurgaon. Views are personal

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Timing of Fed rate cut

This refers to ‘Are we heading towards higher inflation globally?’ (March 28). The current dilemma faced by the US Federal Reserve appears to stem from a lack of coordination between fiscal and monetary policies. This discord has compelled the Fed to determine the timing of rate cuts independently. Among the four influencing factors indicated, global developments stand out due to their significant impact on inflation, necessitating robust fiscal measures for containment. Regrettably, these global dynamics are heavily influenced by political factors such as tariff escalations, sanctions, and policy stances towards China. These

political undercurrents are likely to persist, leaving the Fed with limited immediate option. The concern arises whether the US will once again lag behind in adjusting interest rates, reminiscent of the post-Covid pandemic scenario. It’s time for the US Fed to take a call on whether inflation is transitory or entrenched in real time.

Srinivasan Velamur
Chennai

Productive employment

The National Statistical Office (NSO) and the RBI have recently projected the Indian economy to grow at a healthy pace in 2024-25. However, legitimate concerns about the state of the labour market and the

capacity of the economy to generate more productive forms of employment remain. While reaping the demographic dividend would require more productive forms of employment for the country’s youth, there are numerous challenges as the production process has become more capital-intensive and labour-saving. Given that the issue of job creation has been central to India’s development project, it is time we adopted a multi-pronged strategy, from ensuring quality education and skills to facilitating large-scale labour-intensive manufacturing to absorb the millions of low- and semi-skilled workers.

M Jeyaram
Sholavandan, TN

Tribal welfare

This is with reference to ‘Uplift in tribal welfare’ (March 28). Only development and economic growth can empower tribals. This can be done by improving infrastructure, constructing roads, and building hospitals and schools in tribal areas. This requires iron will on the part of the government. In its quest to become a superpower, the country at no cost should ignore its poor tribal population. The tribals deserve a slice of development. Let us not forget that insurgents are not born but are direct products of poverty and the state negligence.

Veena Shenoy
Thane

Glaring inequality

It has become glaringly obvious that religion and nationalism are being used to keep the people from fighting for their fair share in national wealth. Much is being made about how the nation is progressing. But 1 per cent of the population holding 40 per cent of national wealth is unacceptable. It is time for the people to wake up and see how the political class is taking them for a ride. People should stop getting involved in emotive issues and instead concentrate on economic issues which would end this staggering inequality of wealth in the nation.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

Sugar millers seek relief

Want higher MSP, prioritising of ethanol blending

Uppal Shah

The sugar industry, a vital backbone of the agricultural sector, finds itself at a crossroads as it approaches the 2024-25 sugar season. Unfavourable weather conditions, global market fluctuations, and constrictive government policies have collectively cast a shadow over this crucial commodity. It is important to delve into the intricacies of the current sugar scenario, exploring its multifaceted challenges and potential solutions.

It is the second largest agro-industry, providing livelihoods to more than 5 million farmers and their families. Beyond its primary role in sugar production, a key kitchen staple, the industry plays a vital role in the production and delivering of environmentally friendly biofuel, ethanol, to oil marketing companies. This ethanol is blended with petrol, serving as a green fuel for automobiles.

PRODUCTION SHORTFALL
The shortfall in sugar production, attributed to reduced rains in the 2023-24 season, doesn't bode well for the industry. Sugar millers, dissatisfied with the imposed restrictions on exports and ethanol production, argue that a more liberal approach could significantly boost revenue and safeguard it against future financial shocks.

The government's decision to raise the Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) by 8 per cent from October 2024 aims to support farmers, but it has raised some concerns among sugar millers, regarding their ability to pay farmers their cane price on time, repay bank loans, and keep enough in their kitty to spend on maintenance and other overhead expenses. They argue that the government should increase the Minimum Selling Price (MSP) of sugar corresponding to the increase in FRP.

The last time when the government increased sugar MSP to ₹31/kilo, the FRP in the country was ₹275 per quintal. Since then, the FRP has seen an increase of almost ₹65/quintal (including the latest increase of ₹340/quintal), whereas the MSP continues to remain static at ₹31/kilo. As the MSP is determined taking FRP and other factors into account, sugar millers are asking for an immediate increase in MSP, to mitigate the increase in the cost of production.



SUGAR. Production worries

The sugar prices in key domestic markets continue to remain soft, raising fears that sugar millers may not be able to recover the cost of sugar production, which will financially incapacitate them. The price of S-grade sugar in Kolhapur market in western India is trading at ₹34-34.40/kilo. And the price of M-grade sugar in the North in the Muzaffarnagar market is ₹37.40-37.80/kilo.

Moreover, the global sugar market continues to be volatile, led by a cocktail of factors. Both ISO and Sueden, in their latest reports, talked about tightening of global sugar supplies, which caused a rally in international sugar prices. However, Unica's latest report of a bumper Brazilian crop has put pressure on prices.

With ethanol production prioritised to C Heavy molasses, sugar millers stress the need for the government to reconsider its stance, and allow additional quantities of sugar towards ethanol production in the current supply year.

The government's cautious approach raises questions about the delicate balance between economic stability and political imperatives. Striking the right chord is crucial to safeguarding the interests of both farmers and the broader economy.

The upcoming monsoon will play a pivotal role in determining the success of the 2024-25 sugar season. For a good sugar season, ample and well-distributed rains are vital, which will feed the standing crops as well as the water reservoirs, especially in States which are irrigation-dependent.

The sugar industry faces a complex web of challenges. Balancing the needs of farmers, millers and the economy requires proactive measures, including reconsidering export restrictions, reassessing MSP, and prioritising the ethanol blending programme.

The writer is Co-founder and CEO, AgriMandi Live



S ADIKESAVAN

The recent protests by farmers in the vicinity of Delhi underscore a major oversight by India's agricultural economists and policymakers in creating a sustainable and effective framework to ensure fair compensation for farmers.

While scientists succeeded in engendering the Green Revolution and farmers increased "output" leading to food security for the nation, the latter are ensnared in a low-income trap. This reflects agro-economics' inability to deal with the issue of "price".

The NSS survey 77th round of the Situational Assessment of Agricultural Households (Report No 587) reveals a grim reality. The average monthly income per agricultural household is ₹10,218. A household consists of 4/5 persons, the per capita monthly income therefore is just ₹2,500.

Of this, the net surplus from crop cultivation is 37 per cent and the highest share is wages (40 per cent) — most households earn more by labouring for others (*see table*). In response, some economists have cited a simplistic "demand-supply" theory and said that even dismantling the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system will favour farmers.

Leaving farmers to the vagaries of "demand-supply" will not be in their interest and not even consumers, especially because a logical outcome of this theory will be free agri imports/exports and the resultant price volatility.

Also, the assumption that farmers in sectors like dairy/poultry/fisheries (where there is no MSP) are flourishing is fallacious. The average monthly income of ₹10,218 represents households engaged in allied sectors too (Reply to Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No 741 dated February 7, 2023).

The irony of dairy farmers receiving just ₹35 for one litre of milk "poured", when one litre of bottled water itself retails for ₹20, is lost on agri-economists. There is undervaluation of labour and output in dairy too. The absence of protests does not mean that the problem can be wished away.

SOLUTION AT HAND

But there is a solution with which the Centre is actively engaged — building the cooperative network. What has been missing in our agri ecosystem is a working model of mediated value chains at least in identified essential commodities — grains, pulses and, say, "TOP" or tomato, onion potato —



RAJEEV BHATT

Cooperatives — answer to farmers' woes

BETTER HARVEST. Large cooperatives for key crops encompassing production, processing and marketing can bring gains to producers, consumers

Average monthly income (₹) of agricultural household

Income from wages	4,063
Income from leasing out of land	134
Net receipt from crop production	3,798
Net receipt from farming of animals	1,582
Net receipt from non-farm business	641
Total income	10,218

SAS Report No: 587 (MoSPI)

cooperative sector making its presence felt. The creation of a separate Ministry for Cooperation offers a beacon of hope.

Early signals are that the long-standing problem of finding a "fair price" is beginning to be addressed through entities like Nafed and NCCF.

Cooperation Minister Amit Shah had announced in January that the entire produce of pulses of farmers who register with Nafed and NCCF (at start of production) on their portal, will be bought at MSP.

The same can be done for oilseeds and TOP too, if infrastructure for decentralised storage can be worked out for TOP under Nafed/NCCF leadership utilising Agri Infra Fund loans. Sorting/grading, basic processing and packing can also be taken up under this.

In the backdrop of this push by the Ministry of Cooperation, a five-step strategy is suggested to increase

farmers' income without causing inflationary pressures:

Ministry of Cooperation to announce a "policy of assured procurement" at MSP of, say, 10 crops including pulses, oilseeds and TOP through Nafed/NCCF. Make this "assured procurement" applicable for all farmers who register on a procurement portal at the time of sowing itself along with land details. (Verification through digitised land records can be used to eliminate aggregators/traders from this process)

Nafed/NCCF to plan and "capture" the entire value chain of the commodities under the guaranteed MSP items from procurement to primary processing to packaging to retail sales.

Nafed/NCCF to set up retail outlets all over the country for "Bharat" brand agri commodities. These outlets will be a conduit for regular supply to consumers. Franchisee models can be worked out and bank funding may be available to entrepreneurs for setting up "Bharat" brand outlets.

Alongside, plan, procure and hold appropriate buffer stocks of pulses, oilseeds and TOP utilising shared and decentralised infrastructure which can be built by member cooperatives of Nafed/NCCF.

Agriculture, which is a State subject, to be moved to the Concurrent List so that Central Government initiatives through Nafed/NCCF do not run into legal hurdles.

The writer is a former banker with experience in agri-credit operations

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 29, 2004

LIC board adopts Deloitte report; IPO likely

Another mega IPO of a state-run entity is quietly brewing — an equity offering by the LIC of India. LIC Chairman SB Mathur confirmed that among its major proposals was the corporatisation of the entity with an eye on accessing the capital market to meet its future requirements.

New telecom licensing: No favours for existing players

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) is unlikely to recommend any compensation to existing telecom service providers in lieu of the forthcoming unified licensing regime. The operators have been seeking compensation on the grounds that they had paid high entry fees for providing basic, cellular and long distance services.

Synchronous trades in GTB

SEBI is expected to pass orders very soon on the investigations into the role of ICICI Brokerage Services Ltd (IBSL) with regard to certain synchronous trades in the shares of Global Trust Bank in association with Ketan Parekh and associates in early 2000. A SEBI enquiry officer has found that IBSL was a party to synchronised trades on the NSE and BSE involving one crore GTB shares in April 2000.

Sathya Saran

This I know: the good that one does, unselfishly, sometimes comes back to give a measure of joy. Yes, it happens, though rarely. And when it does, the joy is worth sharing. Long years ago, as a member of the Women's Edition, where 11 women editors from 'developing' countries met to learn about reproductive health issues, I visited a 'Rape Crisis Centre' in New York.

A quiet building with an unmarked door, through which we were allowed to enter. Nothing prepared me for the quantum of pain and suffering that lived behind that door. Victims of sexual abuse, rape, some almost children, others older, all of whose faces seemed shut against the world. Working quietly to bring them back to life and feeling, and lead them back into the world were the caretakers who were employed by or worked as volunteers at the Centre. Sound and art therapy were some of the tools used, along with a large measure of patience and love.

The visit left a deep impression. I had till then no idea of the emotional

trauma that a rape survivor lives with. And the thought haunted me, that in India, rape is a common occurrence, and abuse is a constant as much outside the home as inside it.

It was during a visit to a local LTMG government hospital in Sion, Bombay (as it was known then) for researching a story that I presented the idea, and the guide book I had brought along with me about the Centre to the Dean of the hospital and suggested such an initiative be opened up at the hospital. Dr Armida Fernandez was interested, but warned me about the red tape that could tie the idea up into an un-openable bundle.

However, soon enough she had set up a wing in the hospital for women in crisis, avoiding the word rape, knowing the stigma attached to the word would keep women away. A few months later, when I was invited to plant a tree to inaugurate the Centre, already many women from the nearby slums of Dharavi were waiting in the corridors, seeking help. The good doctor had also set up an outreach programme, and was sending para medical staff to suss out



WOMEN. At the receiving end

women too timid to ask for help at the Centre.

This was all in the mid-1990s. Sometimes when I drove past the hospital I would wonder how the Centre was doing, or whether with changes in administration, it had closed down.

I got my answer a few weeks ago. Sitting at a friend's place, I was introduced to her landlady. I realised I was face to face with the same kindly and forward thinking Dr Fernandez who had taken the tiny seed of an idea

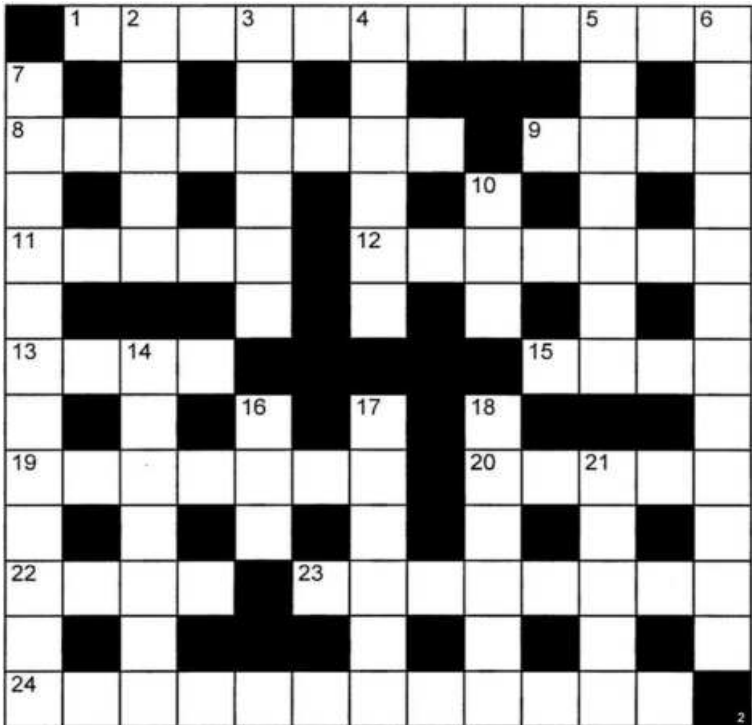
forward and planted a tree of hope.

And what Dr Fernandez told me still fills me with a joyful warmth. She said the Centre is going strong. They have added five more, in areas that have women who might most need help. And the outreach programme touches many more beyond these Centres.

How wonderful, I thought, the small tree is now a family of trees under whose shade so many voiceless women can find shelter and help. Women, whom governments scarcely notice, and who live suppressed by families even as they do their bit to earn and run their homes. Women of the slums and the shanties, of the streets and the *chawls*, women who labour, washing and sweeping, carrying bricks on their head, a baby slung on the back, women who beg at traffic lights and succumb to predatory men at night to be allowed the right to beg... for all of them the shelter can provide counselling, a ready ear, a helping hand. The thought tells me there is good in the world. And that makes me feel good.

The writer is a Consulting Editor with Penguin India

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2406



EASY

ACROSS

- Fireworks (5,7)
- Means (8)
- Bitterness (4)
- Spill (5)
- Photograph (7)
- One fighting alongside another (4)
- Profound (4)
- Monk's haircut (7)
- Go one better (5)
- Cycle of duty (4)
- Pieces of paper substituting for sweetmeats (8)
- Moving seat (7-5)

DOWN

- Begins (5)
- Stands in expectation (6)
- Moves very slowly (6)
- Time off (7)
- Sounding 'in the round' (12)
- Maker (12)
- Chill (3)
- Madman (7)
- Teacake (3)
- Appertain (6)
- Fibrous gourd network used in bathroom (6)
- Word instructing all players to play (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- They might have enlightened Julius Caesar as to fireworks (5,7)
- Cricketing figures positively declare sage is mistaken (8)
- The Liberal upset displayed some ill-humour ... (4)
- ... a word from which is at University for a bit of tennis ... (5)
- ... a part of which one might imagine, with a trice (7)
- The lot at the end of May join in marriage (4)
- Dark in colour, one may not be able to stand up in it (4)
- Fashion certain to be seen ahead of certain monks (7)
- Tudor king removed somehow: ring will go one better (5)
- It shows duties or gets backing with the Terriers (4)
- Paper missiles apparent if once TT gets fuddled (8)
- Not a safe seat for somebody wishing to stay put? (7-5)

DOWN

- Begins by breaking the seal? (5)
- Is expecting it in a tailless wasp (6)
- Slowly moves to scatter spectres after the Saint has left (6)
- The French one, certain to get time to reflect (7)
- Nice hot prose form sounds as if it's all around one (12)
- He's on the make for a living (12)
- Apply sweet layer of diamonds (3)
- After a loss, nautical turn-out makes him mad (7)
- Something for tea made of hair, perhaps (3)
- Earnestly ask to hold half the capital to be another's property (6)
- An ass turning up with an exclamation in the bathroom (6)
- When all play and click their tongues, it turns up (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2405

ACROSS 1. Stands 8. Delve 9. Caption 11. Decrease 12. Reply 15. Skin 16. Ask 17. Cure 19. Beefy 21. Stalwart 24. Yawning 25. Incur 26. Toddle

DOWN 2. Trade 3. Nettling 4. Shod 5. Adorn 6. Flea 7. Mere 10. Necessary 12. Risk 13. Screened 14. Deny 18. Sworn 20. Final 21. Skip 22. Arch 23. Taut

Generating employment

Technological changes will increase challenges

The International Labour Organization (ILO), together with the Institute for Human Development, has released a large-scale analysis of available data regarding employment in India since 2000. For the years up to 2012, this survey has relied on the “Employment and Unemployment Survey”; and, for data between 2019 and 2022, the report has considered the National Statistical Office’s Periodic Labour Force Survey as its primary source. Given that these data sources have already been described at length, the empirical content of the report is familiar: Stagnant real wages in the formal sector; a recent return to agricultural employment; and a female labour participation rate, which was first declining but has more recently turned up but is driven mainly by self-employment and unpaid family work; and far too many educated young people out of jobs. The ILO has done a good job integrating two otherwise incompatible surveys, but given the familiarity of the data, the main interest of the report lies in its conclusions and recommendations.

The report identifies five priorities. First, production and growth should be made more employment-intensive. Second, job quality should be improved through investment in support for migration and for new-age sectors like the care economy, as well as ensuring labour rights. Third, inequalities in the labour market — which affect women, young people, and marginalised groups — should be addressed by policy. Fourth, skill training and “active labour market policies” must be increased. And fifth, there should be more and better data on employment. Many of these are unquestionably important. Few can argue with the need for better and timely data, for example. Others, when examined more closely, throw up questions. How can inequalities be directly addressed, for example? It is clear that the inability to increase female employment outside home or the farm is in many cases because of cultural factors in parts of India, and in other cases by the lack of a conducive environment and law and order concerns. Is such large-scale social reform being called for?

Perhaps the most pointed recommendation, however, comes in the matter of making production more “employment-intensive”. The report argues that “the employment benefits of service-led growth alone are likely to be inadequate in meeting the current employment challenge ... Industry and manufacturing absorb the relatively low-skilled labour moving out of agriculture at a productivity premium”. This argument must be seen in the context of recent arguments, including those made by former Reserve Bank of India governor Raghuram Rajan, that India’s growth will have to be led by or dependent on the services sector. Those who make this argument point out that manufacturing has been affected strongly by technological innovation, and automation means that it is more capital-intensive, as distinct from labour-intensive, than earlier.

Labour wage arbitrage no longer works as effectively on the international stage. This report points out that similar processes are at work in the services sector, however. It is also argued by many that the services sector will not be able to absorb low-skilled individuals with great effectiveness. This means that there are few good choices facing policymakers in India. Given the rapid technological developments and emerging global order, some of the standard prescriptions for growth and employment generation may not work in the coming years. Thus, a broad openness about the way forward may be necessary, and India will need to be prepared to tap every opportunity and maximise the level of employment generation.

Big Tech test

European Commission’s investigations will be followed globally

A few weeks after the Digital Markets Act (DMA) came into force, the European Commission (hereinafter “Commission”) has initiated investigations of Google, Meta, Amazon, and Apple for non-compliance with key principles aimed at creating fair and competitive digital markets. These investigations will, one way or the other, be landmark events since the companies under investigation are globally dominant. Specifically, the Commission is looking into Alphabet’s rules on steering in Google Play and self-preferencing on Google Search, Apple’s steering in App Store and in the choice screen for Safari, and Meta’s “pay or consent model”. In addition, the Commission has launched investigation into Apple’s new fee structure for alternative app stores and Amazon’s ranking practices. The DMA has a set of objective criteria for qualifying a large online platform as a “gatekeeper”. The gatekeeper must have a strong economic position and significant market impact and be active in multiple European Union (EU) nations. It must have “strong intermediation”, linking a large user base to many businesses, and it must have met these criteria in each of the last three financial years. Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, ByteDance, Meta, and Microsoft are the six global giants designed as gatekeepers.

The DMA demanded compliance with its regulations from gatekeepers by March 7. The Commission is of the view that Alphabet’s and Apple’s measures impose various restrictions and limitations, including financial charges that constrain developers’ ability to freely communicate and promote offers, and directly conclude contracts. It is investigating if Google’s searches, which prominently feature Google Shopping, Google Flights, Google Hotels, etc, lead to “self-preferencing” over rival services. It is examining Apple’s measures to comply with obligations to allow users to easily uninstall any software applications, change default settings on iOS, and prompt users with choice screens, which easily allow them to select alternative services such as a browser or search engine on iPhones. In Meta’s case, the Commission is examining the recently introduced “pay or consent” model for users in the EU to see if it complies with the DMA, which requires gatekeepers to obtain consent from users when they intend to combine, or cross-use personal data across different platform services. Meta’s binary “pay or consent” model may not provide a real alternative for users who do not consent. Amazon may also be self-preferencing its own brand products and Apple’s new fee structure and other terms and conditions for alternative app stores may be contrary to DMA obligations.

The Commission can impose fines up to 10 per cent of the company’s global turnover, rising to 20 per cent for repeated infringements. In extreme cases, it may oblige a gatekeeper to sell a business or ban acquisitions of related services. The DMA represents an acid test for large digital monopolies. These are often believed to be “natural” monopolies — a user may be interested in only one search engine, online store, or social media platform. Once that platform is big enough, it benefits from network effects. But anti-competitive practices by dominant players can also throttle competition. The EU is a market big enough and lucrative enough for the Commission to force even very large players to comply with the DMA through the threat of cutting off access. Depending on the outcome of the investigation, the DMA could lead to similar legislation in other regions. The ensuing competition may lead to a wave of innovation that benefits consumers and entrepreneurs.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Empowering people to monetise their data

India has an opportunity to lead the conversation on rewarding individuals for their data used by Big Tech

Data is the new oil. In fact, its potential for value extraction surpasses that of oil. Unlike oil, data is non-rivalrous, meaning multiple users can exploit the same dataset without reducing its supply for others. It is easily replicable and its value generally does not diminish once revealed, although sometimes that is the case.

Throughout history, models have emerged for extracting value from data. Initially, data’s value lay in its application within algebraic equations, even before the technological era. With the advent of software, data-analysis ascended to greater sophistication, facilitating the rapid processing of vast quantities of data. Technology catalysed just-in-time management, amplifying data’s value further. Yet these models primarily augmented existing business activities.

However, a paradigm shift occurred as data itself became the core basis of businesses. Google epitomised this transformation, leveraging data as both raw material and product, birthing a trillion-dollar enterprise. Concurrently, alternative forms of data-based businesses like business intelligence and data-marketplaces emerged. Companies like Amazon brought about yet another paradigm shift. They not only revolutionised online commerce but also demonstrated the power of separating data from the core business. This birthed the platform economy, where businesses leverage user data to create a valuable and distinct offering. The platform model often became bigger than the original businesses. Yet, a new class of data-based businesses evolved — the social media platforms. For this model, the world was the factory and individuals its workers, creating data that added value to them. All these models gave credence to the adage that when something is free, you are the product.



OFF THE GRID

AJAY KUMAR

The most recent business model harnessing the value of data is artificial intelligence (AI). AI uses data to train models. Moreover, the anticipated ubiquity of AI has taken the importance of data to a new high.

The immense market capitalisation of companies like Google and Meta underscores the value of individual user data. This begs the question, what is the value of an individual’s data? Alphabet (Google’s parent company) is worth \$1.75 trillion. That can be traced back to the data of its 5 billion users, which translates to roughly \$350 per person. Meta (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Messenger) boasts a market cap of \$1.25 trillion, thanks to its 3.98 billion users, which works out to about \$250 per user. Amazon, with its 10 million sellers and 300 million-plus buyers, owes a big chunk of its \$1.85 trillion market cap to its data users. And don’t forget OpenAI, already a \$100 billion company that built its empire on internet users’ data. In

all these cases, data users — that is, the big-tech companies — have capitalised on user data. Yet, for the individuals whose data these companies use, the rewards have been minimal. This is despite the growing emphasis on control over one’s personal data.

India presents a compelling case study in this emerging trend. It boasts a massive digital population, generating an estimated 20 per cent of the world’s data — the largest single-country contribution. This data is immensely valuable due to its diversity and richness, given India’s youthful demographics. The landmark 2017 Supreme Court judgment in *Puttaswamy vs Union of India* established privacy as a fundamental right. This legal foundation was further strengthened by the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, granting individuals control over their per-

Why this fuss about income inequality?

India has always had income inequality. In the past, it housed a large swathe of the world’s poor, and now it also houses some of the world’s richest, and many in between. This columnist, a homegrown, non-economist people researcher, struggles to understand the expectation that moving from socialism to capitalism should have decreased income inequality, despite the starting point of a steep pyramid on income and human development parameters.

After 1991, a smaller group with skills, assets, education and enterprise, set free with the world as their oyster, seized the opportunity and made quantum leaps in income and wealth. A much larger group, with lower income and poor skills were — and still are — not equipped to make a big income and social mobility leap. However, their incomes did not stagnate or deteriorate and their quality of living did improve. There has been a significant increase in the quality and quantity of public amenities, though far from enough for the size of the country. Obviously, there are miles to go before victory can be called. But is a part of the answer to the question that visiting foreigners invariably ask about widening income inequality and visible wealth causing social tension to spill out onto the streets?

The rest of the answer, as always in India, is that God is in the details and that People India has its own logic that bears listening to.

The rich club today is pleasantly more inclusive than it was in the 1970s. In addition to mega-inheritor industrialists, there are equally large first-generation industrialists. IT czars, startup prodigies with modest education who sold their companies for billions, stock option CEOs with well-positioned companies in a booming stock market, sports star in IPL, whizz financial investing professionals, and more. And then there is a huge inequality even among the rich. According to the latest Hurun



RAMA BIJAPURKAR

report, there are 271 billionaires in India with a combined wealth of \$1 trillion. One of them has 11.5 per cent of this wealth and another has 8.6 per cent, so less than 1 per cent of billionaire India has 20.1 per cent of its wealth. Of course, 271 dollar billionaires is a big deal as billionaires go, but it is a nano fraction of India.

This phenomenon of professionals and first-generation wealth creators is noticed and admired, serving as inspiration and aspiration for many young people from very modest-income homes. They say in focus groups that unlike earlier, you don’t have to be born rich, people with smarts and talent are making it super rich too.

A research article available online at *PNAS.org* titled “People are more tolerant of inequality when it is expressed in terms of individuals rather than groups” holds some clues as to why we struggle socially with caste-based inequalities more than with individual inequality. It observes that “the success of individuals at the top can also seem more inspiring and exciting than success of groups... the sense of awe that sustained individual success tends to inspire”.

Of course, in India, every narrative will have an opposite one, which is also true. The narrative of envy and anger that Booker winner Aravind Adiga so chillingly writes about in his book, *The White Tiger*, is also evident. But it is safe to say that aspiration for one’s own progress in life is the more dominant societal theme than the envy of the haves. People tell us they want their family’s quality of living to improve, social mobility through better skills and education for their children, and better jobs with higher income and more predictability.

A canny politician described this as “sweating your mind not your body”. Expectations are pragmatic, graded and focused on themselves. If there

proved crucial determinants for the direction that the national movement eventually took. Lajpat Rai in this period was a decisive personality who gave strength to the developments and other key personalities. Dr Bhargava argues that Lajpat Rai’s position was certainly not that of a leader who is (still) considered by many as a precursor to Savarkar.

The final phase of Lajpat Rai’s life begins in the post-Khilafat period and ends with his death from injuries sustained while protesting the Simon Commission. The nationalist is now firmly part of the Hindu Mahasabha. The author depicts the nationalist as being an oddity within the

Mahasabha, which increasingly adopted an anti-Muslim stance. In contrast, Lajpat Rai, the author contends, not only “did not turn to Savarkar’s ascendant Hindu nationalism, but aimed to realize a vision of secularism.”

The book paints the nationalist leader as someone who was secular but also

accepted the notion of Hindus as a majority. Lajpat Rai’s presence as a towering nationalist underscores the notion that one can be Hindu and Indian at the same time. This is because he embraced the idea of India’s diversity and was willing to provide space to other religious communities. Significantly, Dr Bhargava establishes that in Lajpat Rai’s views, they could be part of a united India without being assimilated in the majority community.

The characterisation of Lajpat Rai as someone who imagined the nation differently at various times while always believing there was space for everyone makes this an important book in today’s context, especially when, over the past decade, there have been consistent attacks on Muslims.

Given this, revisiting the life of Lajpat Rai and understanding his philosophical fluidities becomes critical. As this exhaustive and probing book shows, Lajpat Rai’s life is evidence of the existence of multiple strands of nationalism during the national movement. The strength of this book lies in detailing them without taking a prior position on him.

The reviewer is an author and journalist based in Delhi-NCR. X: @NilanjanUdwin

Lajpat Rai beyond the Hindutva construct



BOOK REVIEW

NILANJAN MUKHOPADHYAY

For many Indians, Lala Lajpat Rai remains one pillar of the nationalist triumvirate Lal-Bal-Pal — Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Bipin Chandra Pal. Fewer Indians would think of the Lala, or Lajpat Rai, as the person whose death, after being brutally assaulted while protesting the arrival of Simon Commission in Lahore, was the trigger for Bhagat Singh to seek revenge and thereafter walk to the gallows.

Even fewer Indians, including this reviewer, would have wondered for long why the radical Singh, influenced by Marxist thought, would have taken retribution on the British for their attack on a nationalist, considered by many as an antecedent of later Hindu Nationalist

ideologues, especially Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. When the book’s full title was first shared, I was struck by the coinage, “Ideas of Nationhood” — which clearly indicated that Lajpat Rai was possibly guided by multiple opinions, each professing a different view of nationhood. What were these and how were they strung within his persona?

Vanya Vaidehi Bhargava has set out to address these questions by structuring the book around the complex and evolving political vision and perspectives of the nationalist leader in various phases of his long political career. Starting in the 1880s and continuing till his death in 1928, the book has been split into four phases.

The first phase tracks the first two decades of Lala Lajpat Rai’s political life from the 1880s. This is the period in which he emerged as a political being in Punjab and was firmly ensconced within the world of the Arya Samaj. It was from this position that he reacted to the emergence of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his rejection of the Congress. Lajpat Rai was in complete disagreement with Khan’s view that Indian representation in the

legislative councils must be drawn from the aristocratic elite and instead argued that there must be elected representation from a much wider section of Indians.

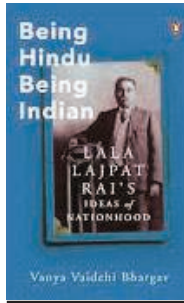
In this first phase, Lajpat Rai is shown by the author as having engaged with a wider Hindu identity, even exploring the idea of a Hindu nation. But he was consciously driven to include other religious communities in this nation. The author establishes that Lajpat Rai in his construction of Indian history did not at any point demonise Muslims. In her introduction and at various points of the book, she contends that scholars who have researched and written on the nationalist leader before her labelled him as someone who preceded Savarkar, and possibly contributed to the latter’s evolution in writing his tract, *Essentials of Hindutva*. Dr Bhargava contends that they did so by viewing the articulations of the early Lajpat Rai in isolation and not within a frame where he also expressed contrasting views.

There were more similar views of Lajpat Rai in the second phase of his life from 1900 to 1915. The author shows her

subject as engaging with the notion of Hindu nationalism. But, other “religious nationalities” not just existed cheek by jowl in his imagination, he also considered a potential “unity” as a probability in a “future” Indian nation.

There were complications, even problematic aspects, in Lajpat Rai’s formulations, because Dr Bhargava points to his acceptance of the viewpoint of the foreignness of Muslim rule, indicating that he subscribed to identity-based history, which eventually communalised the understanding of the past.

Part three probes the years when Lajpat Rai becomes a firm adherent of the emerging notion of inclusive nationalism. This was the period, from 1915 to 1922, when developments, most importantly the Khilafat movement,



BEING HINDU, BEING INDIAN: Lala Lajpat Rai's Ideas of Nationhood
Author: Vanya Vaidehi Bhargava
Publisher: Penguin
Pages: 748
Price: ₹1,299



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Addressing the jobs challenge

ILO report on India's employment crisis is prescriptive. Policymakers need to take note

The India Employment Report released by the International Labour Organization on March 27, gives a much-needed broad-brush picture of India's employment challenge. It has reiterated some basic stylised facts such as a worsening of labour market outcomes in the decade ending with the pandemic and the subsequent improvement in indicators such as labour force participation and unemployment rate. However, what makes the report important and attention worthy is the fact that its analysis goes beyond a comparative statistics approach. Here are three things which are worth reiterating. The most important takeaway is that leaving the resolution of India's employment challenge to the markets alone is not going to work. This is because of the simple reason that production, especially in manufacturing, is becoming increasingly capital-intensive. This means that even if we manage to get high manufacturing growth, employment generation might continue to disappoint. This basic point cannot be overemphasised in India.

The second important takeaway from the report is the emphasis on the broken link between education and employment. "A large proportion of highly educated young men and women, including the technically educated, are overqualified for the job they have," the report notes. This should not be a surprise in a country where hundreds of thousands, with qualifications as high as PhDs, apply for blue-collar public sector jobs in the hope of job security. The third key takeaway from the report is the emphasis on the need for an active policy engagement to solve both qualitative and quantitative aspects of India's employment challenge. It flags the challenges of addressing inequalities, improving the quality of jobs, putting in place an effective skill enhancement framework and fixing information asymmetries in the labour market. The report rightly calls for giving "primacy to labour-intensive manufacturing employment to absorb the abundant unskilled labour" and to support "the emerging employment-generating modern manufacturing and services sectors". To be sure, this is not the first time an academic study has underlined these points about India's employment challenge. Will these recommendations find favour with politicians and eventually governments? This is a more difficult question to answer in a country where politics tends to gravitate towards populist solutions such as blanket hiring for government jobs or demanding or extending the scope of reservations when it comes to dealing with employment concerns.

ECI, parties must curb misogyny in campaign

Name-calling opponents is something of a fixture in Indian politics. However, this can't become a free pass for misogyny, a point the Election Commission of India (ECI) did well to underscore on Wednesday, by serving show-cause notices to the Congress's Supriya Shrinete and the Bharatiya Janata Party's Dilip Ghosh for their offensive remarks against women leaders from rival parties. Ghosh has issued an apology and an FIR has been filed against him in West Bengal while Shrinete failed to land a seat this time. ECI needs to be alert to misogynist remarks, especially when the campaign picks up, and be even-handed in pulling up all transgressors irrespective of their stature. Anti-women talk needs to be treated on par with hate speech and censored accordingly. Politics in India is largely a male affair, where women participants at every level — *panchayats* to Parliament — are viciously targeted. Indira Gandhi was once described as *goongi gudiya* (dumb doll); even popular leaders such as J Jayalalithaa, Mayawati and Mamata Banerjee have not been spared by far less capable political opponents. In fact, crude sexism is deployed as a strategy to dissuade women from entering politics. This, however, will have to change. A majority of members in Panchayati Raj institutions in many states are women; earlier this year, Parliament legislated for 33% reservation to women in the Lok Sabha. Women are asserting themselves electorally, outnumbering male voters in many constituencies. To be sure, the problem of misogynist mindsets extends beyond politics and draws from the larger societal thinking. But political leaders and parties will have to take the lead in ushering in change.

IRDAI signs off on investor gouging

Early exits from life insurance will continue to haemorrhage savings

How would you react if your bank kept half your money when you withdrew a fixed deposit before the maturity date? There would be huge depositor angst and the regulator, the Reserve Bank of India, would step in to stop this money gouging. However, in another part of the financial sector, the insurance regulator has just signed off on rules that allow life insurance companies to continue to gouge investor money for an early exit. In a gazette notification on March 22, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) released an updated list of product regulations that continue with the old structure of surrender values. In December 2023, IRDAI proposed a re-haul of the surrender value regulations in an effort to make the product a bit more investor-friendly. In a shocking move, IRDAI has abandoned this draft and seems to have given in to lobbyists from the insurance industry to continue with the high cost to investor route. For a government that is focused on the average citizen, this is a very regressive step — to allow a regulated product to loot trusting

investors just because they want to exit a policy earlier than they signed up for. Investment-bearing life insurance products that are called "traditional" or "non-linked" include policies such as endowment, money back and whole-life policies. Think of them as a very long-term fixed deposit with a crust of a life cover along with the deposit. These policies mainly invest in government bonds and seek to give a predictable return to the investor. Unfortunately, they have very hard rules that are harmful to investors who want to exit the policy earlier than the maturity date. A surrender value is the minimum money that the investor who exits the policy before the maturity date will get. These values have been very low and IRDAI's attempt to reduce investor loss has failed. The new rules perpetuate the old system of very low surrender values. How high are the losses to investors? The rules say that policies will gather a surrender value after two premiums. This means that after one premium if the policy is discontinued, no money comes back to the investor. The surrender value rises over the life of the policy but not by much. After two premiums, if a third is not paid, an investor gets back just 30% of the total premiums paid. After three premiums, if the fourth is not paid, 35% of the first three pre-

miums is returned. For policies between years four and seven, the investor gets back half the total money invested. After the seventh year, insurance companies can use a self-determined sliding scale such that 90% of the total premiums paid are returned if the policy is discontinued during the last two years of the policy. This means that should the investor exit even till one year before the end of the policy, she does not even get back the full principal invested — even if she has been in the policy for 20 years. She gets only 90% of the money invested returned. But do many people surrender early? In other words, how big is this practice of early surrender? IRDAI data shows that the surrenders are huge and less than half the policyholders continue with their policies after paying five premiums. This data for some insurance firms is abysmal, showing a surrender rate of over 70% after five years of the policy. This means that insurance companies pocket more than half of the total premium paid and investors take home capital losses! News reports say that IRDAI gave into the insurance industry which cited an asset liability mismatch as the reason they needed the current surrender value system to continue. If true, this is a very sad reflection on a regulator that is allowing the goug-



Monika Halan

year, the ₹20 lakh invested becomes ₹18 lakh. Or compare it with an early exit from a fixed deposit. Investors lose half a percentage point in interest — that's it. The principal is safe and most of the promised interest is given back. It is only in the case of traditional life insurance policies that there is such a heavy price on investors for an early exit. A regulator's first job is to protect the interest of the investor — the weakest link in the chain, but on whose money the whole industry lives off and profits. For a regulator to allow such investor gouging is a shocking statement of irresponsibility and looks like a textbook case of regulatory capture. That the regulator is appointed by the government of India, makes it the final responsibility of the government to prevent such a capture. For a government that is focused on the benefit of the average citizen, this regulator-allowed loot is inexplicable.

Monika Halan is the author of the best-selling book *Let's Talk Money*. The views expressed are personal

CAA and the TMC's solo act blur poll picture in Bengal

Two developments look likely to dominate electoral dynamics in West Bengal — the implementation of the Constitution (Amendment) Act (CAA) 2019 and the Trinamool Congress (TMC)'s decision to fly solo. The notification of the CAA rules on March 11 set off celebrations among the Matuas. To recap, they are a sect of the Scheduled Caste Namasudras, who migrated from East Pakistan/Bangladesh in two waves — after Partition and in the 1970s. The enthusiastic reception has prompted sections of the media to declare this as an electoral game-changer that will swing the fortunes decisively in favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). One of the reasons for the move was consolidating the Matua vote as the BJP launches an assault on a citadel they desperately want to conquer. But the gambit will not help the party break new ground. It's essentially a rearguard action. The Matuas swing two Lok Sabha constituencies decisively: Bongaon in North 24 Parganas and Ranaghat in Nadia, while they have a scattered presence in other parts of these districts and less so elsewhere. The BJP holds both seats. The reason for implementing CAA is that it had been losing support among the Matuas because of the delay in implementation. They'll win back this support only if the rollout is smooth. But, there are hurdles. It appears that applicants will have to furnish documentation/information that will be difficult to produce, relating to country of origin and date of entry, nationality, details of passports they don't possess, and ancestral residence, a tall order. Union home minister Amit Shah is slated to visit Bengal to hard sell CAA, but that will not necessarily grease bureaucratic wheels. Unless the process moves at warp speed to make citizens of Matuas before they vote, they will suffer further disillusionment. Bengal votes in seven phases from April 19 to June 1 — Ranaghat votes on May 13 and Bongaon on May 20. The delay in implementation could create problems. In North Bengal, large sections of the autochthonous Rajbanshis of six districts/constituencies — Darjeeling (the plains part), Jalpaiguri, Alipurdwar, Cooch Behar, North and South Dinajpur (the Raiganj and Balurghat seats) — are not unequivocally in favour of CAA, because it does not directly benefit them and entrenches groups they consider interlopers. As it is, between the

1971 and 2011 Censuses, their share in the population fell from 80% to 30%. The BJP, which holds all six seats, could lose more on the heavily weighted North Bengal swings than what they stand to gain on the North 24 Parganas and Nadia roundabouts. So, there are no straightforward readings of the citizenship tangle. But the TMC's solo act, finalised with the announcement of candidates for all 42 constituencies on March 10, could hurt it. The decision is puzzling. Certainly, no possibility existed of the Left and the TMC reaching a deal because of visceral animosities and the improbability of vote transfers. Moreover, the TMC could benefit if the Left fractures the Opposition space. Equally, given the BJP now has 17 of 42 seats, consolidating votes by allying with the Congress was possible and potentially beneficial. The 2021 assembly election results highlight this. The polarising campaign run by the BJP worked — it got 38% of the vote. But it didn't yield the desired results, because the anti-BJP vote consolidated behind the TMC, giving it 48% of the vote and a big majority. The Left Front was squeezed, getting only 4.73% of the vote. Since that debacle, the Left has raised its game. Mamata Banerjee could be hoping it will win back some of the 15% of the vote it lost, mostly to the BJP. The 2019 Lok Sabha elections tell us the same story. The Left and the Congress lost almost 21% of their combined vote, while the BJP increased its vote share by around 23% to reach almost 41% and win 18 seats, up 16 from 2014. It makes sense for Banerjee to have the Left in the fray. This is not true of the Congress. Votes are transferable between the two parties because their bases are congruent. The Congress's vote share has been falling, but the fact that it is concentrated in Malda and Murshidabad gives its numbers greater salience. The Congress also has significant support in North and South Dinajpur. In 2019, the TMC lost the Raiganj seat to the BJP; Debasree Chaudhuri's margin over Kanaia Lal Agarwal was around 60,000 votes, while the Congress's Deepa Das Munshi polled over 80,000 votes. In Malda North, the BJP's margin over the TMC was around 85,000 votes, while the Congress polled over 300,000 votes. In Balurghat, too, the Congress polled more than the BJP's winning margin. Given the obvious benefits, Banerjee's refusal to deal with the Congress could be because of the games the latter played. While central leaders talked about seat adjustments, they did not do what they had to facilitate a deal — removing Behrampur MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury as president of the Pradesh Congress Committee. He is one of Banerjee's fiercest critics, employing rhetoric that matches the stridency of BJP and Left leaders. With him around, a deal was impossible, because the task of campaigning and making sure votes got transferred on the ground would be overseen by Chowdhury, not leaders in Delhi. In short, the TMC's decision to be on its own hurts the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance while providing a leg-up to the BJP.



Suhit K Sen



Mamata Banerjee's refusal to deal with the Congress could be because of the games the latter played

AFP

Suhit K Sen is an author and political commentator based in Kolkata. The views expressed are personal

{ DMYTRO KULEBA } UKRAINIAN FOREIGN MINISTER

The Ukrainian-Indian cooperation is important... Building on the dialogue between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Narendra Modi, we will pay specific attention to our peace formula

Reading fine print of India-EFTA trade deal

It took 16 years of negotiations for India and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) — comprising Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein — to clinch a free trade agreement (FTA). A crucial aspect that has generated immense buzz is that the FTA will bring foreign direct investments (FDI) worth \$100 billion to India in the next 15 years. Furthermore, EFTA countries, through their FDI, shall generate one million direct jobs in India within 15 years of the FTA coming into force. While these are laudable objectives written into the text, the devil always lies in the details. Does the FTA obligate the EFTA countries to invest \$100 billion in India in 15 years? Not really. The obligation imposed on the EFTA countries, enshrined in Article 7.1(3)(a) of the FTA, is to "aim to" increase FDI to \$50 billion within 10 years of the FTA coming into force followed by another \$50 billion in the succeeding five years. Likewise, Article 7.1(3)(b) provides that the EFTA states shall "aim to" facilitate the generation of one million jobs. Furthermore, these objectives, captivatively, are linked to India sustaining a nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of 9.5% for the next 15 years. In legal terms, these articles codify what is known as an obligation of conduct — an obligation to make an honest endeavour towards achieving a goal, notwithstanding the outcome or the result. This differs from an obligation of result, which would require achieving a specified outcome. The EFTA countries are only under a legal obligation to make an honest effort to invest \$100 billion and generate one million jobs in India. They are not required to realise these outcomes. Nonetheless, incorporating such specified obligations of conduct in the FTA's investment chapter is pathbreaking. The other aspect that has created enormous excitement is that India can withdraw tariff concessions given in the FTA to the EFTA countries if the promise of \$100 billion of investment and one million jobs does not materialise. While Article 7.8 recognises such rebalancing of concessions, it is not as straightforward as many suggest. The FTA provides a mechanism to review whether the obligations of conduct mentioned in Article 7.1 are being complied with. This review will not be done by any judicial body but by an investment sub-committee (ISC) comprising government representatives of India and the EFTA countries. The ISC shall undertake the review in three stages — no later than five years, 10 years, and 15 years after the FTA comes into force. If, after 15 years, as provided

in Article 7.7(6), "India considers" that "the EFTA States have not fulfilled the obligations to promote investments", the former may request consultations with the latter. Using the word "considers" in Article 7.7(6) gives India the right to determine whether the agreement's objectives have been satisfied unilaterally. However, in making this determination, India must answer whether EFTA states have made an honest endeavour to invest in India, not whether they have actually invested the said amount. The difficulty in determining whether a country has violated its obligation of conduct, as against an obligation of result, is the non-availability of benchmarking. It will be arduous to make a case that the EFTA countries have not tried to invest in India. What if India fails to maintain the required nominal GDP growth rate?

Furthermore, even if India makes a unilateral determination that the EFTA states have not tried to invest in India, withdrawing tariff concessions is not automatic. India and the EFTA states shall enter into consultations to resolve the differences through different graded mechanisms. As per the time periods provided for these consultations in Articles 7.7(6) to 7.7(12), it may take around five years. Only if these consultations fail, India has the right to take "temporary" and "proportionate" remedial measures in the form of withdrawal of tariff concessions given to the EFTA States. In short, any rebalancing of concessions can occur only after 15 years of the FTA coming into force and around five years spent diplomatically settling differences. This, too, is subject to several other requirements. Despite these limitations, provisions related to rebalancing concessions are a welcome development, and India should use such a template for its other FTA negotiations.

The final point is about investment protection. The India-EFTA FTA does not contain investment protection features. So, there are no provisions promising protection from unlawful expropriation, fair and equitable treatment, national treatment and most favoured nation treatment. The lack of these promises assumes significance because India's bilateral investment treaties guaranteeing investment protection to investors of countries like Switzerland and Iceland stand unilaterally terminated. Can India extract such large amounts of FDI from these countries without promising investment protection under international law?



Prabhash Ranjan

Prabhash Ranjan teaches at the Faculty of Legal Studies, South Asian University. The views expressed are personal

OUR VIEW



Kahneman's embrace of irrationality enriches us

The academic work of Daniel Kahneman (1934–2024) yielded the field of Behavioural Economics. His legacy grants us insights into investor behaviour and much else of value

The embrace—or co-option—of Daniel Kahneman (1934-2024) by the discipline of Economics was a historic moment, a nod to the sway held by irrational behaviour over phenomena long modelled by economists on the assumption of rationality. On Wednesday, the world lost a psychologist who won a Nobel Prize for Economics. Along with fellow scholar Amos Tversky, he laid down the basics of Behavioural Economics with Prospect Theory. As an author, he will fondly be remembered for his best-seller *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, a modern classic on instant versus deliberative thought. As for the buzz-words he gave us, 'loss aversion' ranks high for showing us how attitudes matter in the world of finance. For an example of this aversion, consider a coin-toss gamble. Heads, you win ₹150, say, and if it's tails, you lose ₹100. Since either outcome is half likely, this punt's pre-toss expectation value is ₹75 to be won and ₹50 lost—which should make us go for it. Yet, many of us would shrink from it because "losses loom larger than gains." So, while the ₹25 extra on the table is a rational prospect, it may still fail to cover the psychic pain of possibly losing ₹100. And so long as folks behave this way, as studies have found they do, we had better look beyond economic models that make no leeway for evident human foibles.

Losses are painful to any investor, of course, and pain does not always lend itself to clarity of thought. As Kahneman's psychology experiments revealed, we tend to let our memory of pain dominate our actual experience of it, with the result that the patchy imprint left by its peak and most recent sensation matters above all else. In his 'cold hand' experiment, subjects

were asked to immerse one hand in a tub of painfully cold water at 14° Celsius for 60 seconds. This was Option A. Of course, they could pull their hands out if the chill got unbearable and were given warm towels at the end. After a break, they were asked to dunk their other hand in similarly chilled water for 60 seconds in an identical ordeal, except that it was followed by 30 more seconds of immersion, this time with warm water slowly flowing into the tub, raising its temperature by 1° Celsius by the time the hand was withdrawn. This 90-second trial was Option B. After another break, all hand-dunkers were asked which episode they would repeat if they had to choose between A and B. All votes counted, a vast majority opted for the longer trial. In other words, most people were ready to suffer half a minute extra—an irrational pick. As Kahneman notes in his book, "The evidence presents a profound challenge to the idea that humans have consistent preferences and know how to maximize them, a cornerstone of the rational-agent model."

This does not render economic models useless, but calls for reality checks to update and thereby enrich theory-based analysis. With luck, it should also call off any search for a "one-handed" economist who stoutly refuses to speak of trade-offs between stuff on one hand versus the other. The world is far too complex for that, especially if we cannot really trust ourselves to recall whether the left or right one emerged better or worse. Or if we're all too willing to endure what we needn't so long as it ends nicely. What we do know, broadly, is that we want better lives in spite of our failures to think deliberately. For that, as Kahneman would advise, we must avoid mental shortcuts—and think slowly when we must.

GUEST VIEW

The TVS Group's nuclear family pact is path-breaking

GEORGE SKARIA



is a columnist and co-author of 'Beyond Three Generations: The Definitive Guide to Building Enduring Indian Family Businesses'.

Last week, there was a rather unusual news report in some business papers about a new agreement in the family of Venu Srinivasan. As chairperson of TVS Holdings Ltd (formerly Sundaram-Clayton) and chairman emeritus of TVS Motor Company Ltd, he announced that his nuclear family members, comprising himself, his wife Mallika Srinivasan, daughter Lakshmi Venu and son Sudarshan Venu, had executed a memorandum of understanding (MoU), effective 21 March 2024, to avoid competition among themselves with specific reference to the use of the 'TVS' brand name, complete with a non-compete pact and more.

This is an interesting and unique family business development for three reasons. One, it is between the father and son on one side and the mother and daughter on the other. Second, while Venu Srinivasan inherited parts of the larger TVS Group in an earlier family settlement, Mallika, who originally hails from another large South Indian

business family (of the Amalgamations Group) inherited Tractors and Farm Equipment (TAFE) from her father, A. Sivasailam. Third, the current family agreement is partly with regard to the use and non-use of the TVS brand, an intangible asset.

An accomplished business leader in her own right, Mallika Srinivasan is the chairperson and managing director of the tractor-maker TAFE. Their daughter Lakshmi Venu is director of TVS Motor Company and deputy managing director of TAFE Motors and Tractors Ltd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of TAFE. Their son Sudarshan Venu is the managing director of TVS Motor Company.

On the face of it, the division of responsibilities drawn out within this nuclear family appears to be on gender lines, with Venu Srinivasan and Sudarshan Venu aligned in the management of the TVS Group and Mallika and Lakshmi Venu largely with TAFE. It also conveys a semblance of succession planning for the two children, both of whom are married. In India's traditional and large family businesses, members of well-known business families often marry among themselves. The marriage of Venu Srinivasan and Mallika Srinivasan was one such. However, the difference here is that rarely do women inherit a major business from their family. In

the case of Mallika, she may have done at least partly because her parents had only two daughters, though the dominance of male succession has come down in recent years. Between Venu and Mallika Srinivasan, they inherited and now own two significant businesses from two different family groups.

The latest agreement, which partly pertains also to the ownership and use of the TVS brand, assumes significance because as we have seen in the past, there have been disputes within other family businesses, like the Hero Group, where competing claims to use of the 'Hero' brand between two factions of the same extended family, one under Naveen Munjal of Hero Electric and the other under Pawan Munjal of Hero Motocorp, had to be resolved through courts.

Which brings us to an important point. A brand is a valuable intangible asset. In the past, such assets were not given much heed to. But, as we have seen in recent times, especially in fields

of technology where companies like Apple and Google in the US and even the troubled Byju's and Paytm in India see their valuations rise and fall to a large extent based on perceptions, reputations and assessments of intangible more than physical assets, brands matter enough to be bones of contention.

Even though the phenomenon of family businesses in India is a few hundred years old and constitutes a dominant segment of the Indian economy, we have seen that most of them do not last beyond three generations. One of the many reasons is that family brand names are not nurtured well enough. There have been exceptions, like Tata and Mahindra, with their families having paid greater attention to this aspect. It is in this context that the move by Venu Srinivasan's family should be seen.

The other interesting aspect of the TVS family agreement is its barring of competition amongst its four members by means of special clauses. In this age of conglomerates and

diversification, it is important for a business family to delineate sectors of interest so that the probability of infighting is reduced. It can be recalled that the larger TVS Group, which included Venu Srinivasan's cousins, had made effective a family settlement in 2022 which among other things also related to the TVS brand name. However, this comes with a caveat: as we have seen in cases of some other business families, the dominant faction of the family business sometimes tends to ride rough-shod over other factions and it is difficult for those at the receiving end to find a remedy.

Venu Srinivasan is 71 years old and Mallika is 64. By Indian family business standards, they are not too old. There have been many instances of business family patriarchs refusing to let go, which can lead to conflict and infighting in the next generation. The apparent fight that erupted between Mukesh and Anil Ambani of the Reliance Group in the early 2000s may perhaps have been partly responsible for the proactive succession planning done by Mukesh Ambani for his three children.

Proactive succession planning and sound management of intangible assets by the TVS family could serve as role models for other family businesses in the country.

MY VIEW | TECH WHISPERS

AI is turning search engines into thought drivers in mutual rivalry

Gen-AI has created a buzzy arena of tools that aim to offer much more than Google search ever did



JASPREET BINDRA is a technology expert, author of 'The Tech Whisperer', and a Masters in AI and Ethics from Cambridge University.

Many people would be surprised to learn that the foundational algorithm for Generative AI and Large Language Models (LLMs) was first 'invented' at Google, with eight researchers there writing a landmark 2017 paper, 'Attention is All You Need.' This laid the basis of the Transformer algorithm, one that made GenAI more efficient and effective. Surprisingly, Google dithered with this amazing discovery, and let a startup called OpenAI take the lead in leveraging it to create its series of GPTs, culminating with GPT3.5 or ChatGPT. The rest, as they say, is history.

Speculation abounds over why the world's most innovative company did not capitalize on its discovery. People point to reputational risk arising from hallucinating LLMs; some speak of corporate inertia. Others say it had to do with the fear of its profitable business model of search getting cannibalized. AdWords and AdSense-driven ad revenue works very well in a deterministic, database-driven model like search, but would fail in a probabilistic LLM construct. A score of companies have tried to topple Google from its lofty perch, like Microsoft's Bing and startups like DuckDuckGo and Neeva, but Google has been unassailable. The hallucinatory behaviour of even the best LLMs like GPT4 seems to preserve the status quo, with Google still the go-to tool for

factual information. LLMs like ChatGPT are not optimized for the truth, but for factual believability.

This seems to be changing, though, with a couple of GenAI-based startups threatening Google's mighty search engine. The best known is Perplexity, built on top of GPT and a proprietary LLM built on Meta's open-sourced LLaMA. It takes a different approach. When you ask Perplexity's 'search' bar a question, it does not return with 10 blue links plus advertising-pushed websites. Instead, Perplexity hunts the web and uses AI to write a succinct summary of its findings and annotates the same with the sources it used for its answer. It also offers a few suggested follow-up questions. So, when I asked Perplexity to give me the name of its founder, it spouted 'Aravind Srinivas,' told me that the sources were LinkedIn, Wikipedia, YouTube and *Wired*, and then checked whether it wanted me to know Perplexity's mission or its co-founders' background. Precise and useful. For \$20 a month, it also opens up its Copilot, which helps you arrive at a precise query by asking you clarifying questions. If a student researching the impact of climate change on marine ecosystems were to ask it a question, for example, the Copilot would ask her for regions or species, and then scour sci-

entific journals and environmental reports. It then summarizes the answer with deep insights and helps her build a comprehensive literature review. It also allows you to search within a specified set of sources, such as YouTube, Reddit or academic papers.

Another impressive contender is Arc Search from New York-based The Browser Company. Its philosophy is that "a browser, a search engine, an AI chatbot, and a website aren't different things. They're all just parts of an internet information finder, and they might as well exist inside the same app" (bit.ly/4a55DVC). So, again, rather than offer 10 links, Arc creates a kind of a webpage with relevant information around the query. Arc is also built on OpenAI and other LLMs and will improve as these models do.

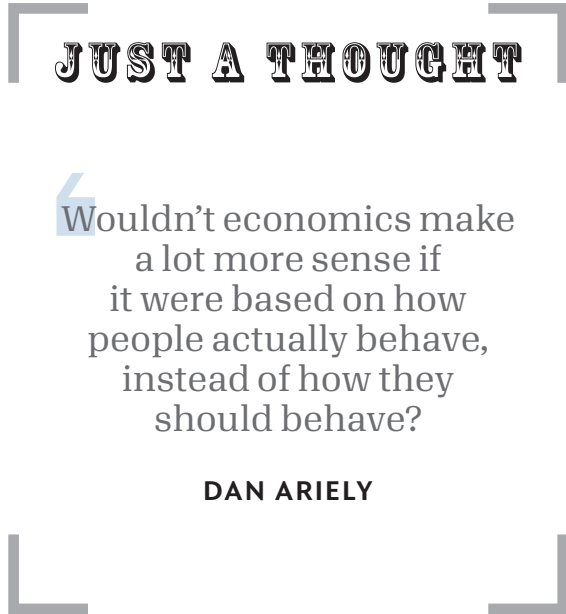
These upstart Google competitors are not perfect. They hallucinate, though much less than bare-boned LLMs. They do not have a business model yet, though one could evolve. Publications fear that they will not send traffic to their sites, as Google does. However, Google should be worried; its search engine seems to have lost its simplicity and transparency along the way. It has shifted from being made for users to being optimized for advertisers, and its monopoly has let it squeeze the latter.

I believe that newer search constructs like Perplexity and Google will live together; I now have a browser tab permanently open for Perplexity and another for Google. Depending on what I am looking for, I choose which to use. It would be good for Google to have some semblance of competition; hopefully, it will make the firm pivot towards the consumer again, bring back the clarity of its search and shake off the corporate sclerosis which appears to have bogged it down. Shaan Puri, a tech thought leader, differentiated the two in an X post: "Google is a search engine. ChatGPT is a thought engine." Innovators like Perplexity and Arc seem to be blurring those boundaries.

QUICK READ

It's baffling that Google didn't take the lead in launching GenAI chatbots despite having created its foundational models. Could the dominance of its search tool have had a role in this?

Upstarts like Perplexity and Arc Search are challenging Google with the help of AI that enables them to function as 'thought engines' which do much more than spout weblinks.





A FRAGILE CORRIDOR

Spate of attacks in and around strategic sites, deaths of Chinese civilians, expose CPEC's — and Pakistan's — vulnerability

OVER JUST ONE week, Pakistan has witnessed three major attacks on strategic sites. On Tuesday, a suicide bomber drove a vehicle filled with explosives into a convoy near Besham in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, carrying Chinese workers from a hydel power project in Dasu. Five Chinese nationals and a Pakistani driver were killed in the attack. On Monday night, Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) fighters attacked a naval airbase in Turbat in Balochistan, killing at least one soldier. And days before that, the BLA attacked Gwadar, where the port is a major part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC is the lynchpin of Beijing's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. It would be a mistake for Rawalpindi and Islamabad to view the attacks as merely a security issue. They point to the broader vulnerability of Pakistan's political-economy.

China has reacted strongly to the attacks while reiterating its ties with Pakistan. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian exhorted Islamabad to "hunt down the perpetrators and bring them to justice" and said that "no attempt to sabotage China-Pakistan cooperation will ever succeed". The rhetoric around the "iron-clad friendship" notwithstanding, the strategic and political costs of the CPEC are growing. The latest round of attacks is not the first, of course: In 2021, nine workers from the Dasu plant were killed in a suicide bombing, allegedly by the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Outfits like the TTP and ISIS-K have long harboured anti-China sentiments and Baloch insurgents and the BLA see the CPEC as detrimental to their broader aspirations.

Pakistan's security issues — ranging from its conflicts with Iran and Afghanistan on its western borders to the Baloch separatist insurgency — demand more than just a military response. The fact is that the country's leadership has placed far too many eggs in the CPEC basket. The reliance on China, coupled with its prolonged economic crisis, has made Pakistan more vulnerable on multiple fronts. To address this vulnerability, the country needs a systemic overhaul. The first step should be to open up and diversify the economy. Opening up trade ties with India could send a much-needed signal: It would indicate a much-needed level of maturity on the part of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. It would display to the global community that Pakistan's leadership has the capacity to keep parochial political rhetoric in its place for the sake of the economy. A more broad-based economy is an end in itself. But it will also make Pakistan safer — as things stand, CPEC sites and personnel are prime targets as a disruption to the project has the potential to trigger a larger instability.

YOUNG AND THE OLD

Lancet report on fall in fertility rate in India should alert policymakers to ageing population's needs

INDIA WILL TURN into an ageing society in the next three decades, according to a report in the Lancet. The medical journal has flagged that India's TFR — the average number of children born to a woman — will fall to 1.29 in 2050. One in five persons in India will be above the age of 60 in 2050. The Lancet is not the first to shine a light on this impending demographic shift. Last year, the UN Population Fund's (UNPF) India Ageing Report projected that the number of elderly in India will more than double from 149 million in 2022 to 347 million by mid-century. The challenges of a growing ageing population may well be decades away. However, the young country would do well to prepare for them in advance.

The Lancet report is a message that India's demographic dividend is not for perpetuity. Global experiences could be illustrative for the country's policymakers. In China, for instance, the proportion of the working age population crossed 50 per cent in 1987 and peaked around the middle of the last decade. This was also the period when the country registered impressive economic growth. By last year, China's TFR had dropped to a record low and its working-age population had contracted by more than 40 million. The Chinese government's pro-population-growth measures do not seem to be working. In fact, the last 60 years' history of developed nations suggests that once fertility rates fall below the replacement rate, it's almost impossible to set them back. At 1.9, India's TFR is currently just below the replacement rate, and according to UNPF calculations, the share of the country's working-age population will peak in the late 2030s, early 2040s. Policymakers must, therefore, utilise this window to maximise India's demographic dividend, as China did from the late 1980s till the early years of the last decade. No time must be lost in putting in place measures to overcome skill deficits and plug gaps in the knowledge economy. The challenge will also be to generate jobs outside of agriculture — they must not be in the low-paid informal sector.

Going ahead, policymakers will also have to ensure adequate social security and healthcare provisions for the growing elderly population and create opportunities to harness their skills effectively. The varying TFR rates across states in India could present the country's planners with a somewhat unique challenge — in fact, there are already signs that parts of south India and west India are greying faster than those in the north. Policymakers must be ready to understand the demographic shift in all its dimensions, and prepare for the change.

THE WAY WE THINK

Kahneman's contribution to economics has been in questioning the assumption that all economic agents are rational

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING riddle: "A bat and a ball together cost \$1.10. The bat costs a dollar more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?" Think for a moment but go easy on yourself if your answer was 10 cents. Of course, it is wrong. If the ball was 10 cents the total cost of bat and ball would be \$1.20. The correct answer is 5 cents. But the point of the riddle is to underscore that most people had a number in their mind and that number was 10 cents. According to psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who died on March 27 at the age of 90, this example showed how people often make decisions in a hurry, without checking, and are also quite confident about it.

Kahneman was an Israeli-American psychologist who revolutionised the world with his experiments and insights — so much so that even though he was not an economist, he went on to win the Nobel prize in economics in 2002 "for having integrated insights from psychological research into economic science, especially concerning human judgment and decision-making under uncertainty". Kahneman wrote several seminal books and papers. The most-widely read was titled "Thinking, fast and slow". The book explained how people think, the errors they make and why, the biases they have and the fallacies that often cloud their decisions. His latest book, "Noise", focused on the unwanted variability, as opposed to bias, in judgments that should be identical.

Kahneman's lasting contribution to economics has been to question the dominance of the assumption that all economic agents are "rational". Through his experiments he underscored the flaws in such assumptions. In doing so, he helped establish behavioural economics as a field and many such as Richard Thaler (winner of the 2017 Nobel prize in economics and most commonly associated with his book "Nudge") have further advanced the use of such psychological insights in economics. At a macro level, however, even Kahneman knew that society rewards overconfidence. "We want our leaders to be over-confident. If they told us the truth about the uncertainty, we would discard them in favour of other leaders who give an impression that they know what they are doing".



RAJAT KATHURIA

THE DISPUTE BETWEEN a Big Tech Goliath like Google and a host of Indian firms is neither new nor unexpected. And I can predict with a near degree of certainty that it will not be the last. The dispute began several years ago — a complaint was filed by app developers before the Competition Commission of India (CCI) over Google exploiting its dominant position in the Android and the Play Store ecosystem. The search engine was accused of coercing app developers to use Google's proprietary billing system or pay a fee if they chose a competitor. Either way you pay. It's akin to corkage at a restaurant — the difference is that the restaurant business is fairly competitive so you can carry your liquor elsewhere. With Google's monopoly over Android, that's not possible. When the developers refused to comply, Google removed the offending apps only to reinstate them after public outrage.

The drama is still on with CCI having asked its Director General to conduct an investigation and file a report in 60 days. Perhaps the outcome will, as CCI expects, implicate Google's actions as infringing the Competition Act, 2002.

Google is not a lone wolf. We have seen this playbook before from monopolists of all hues, whether of the brick-and-mortar variety, as in the past, or digital, as in the norm nowadays. The only apparent difference is that competition crimes in the digital space are more pervasive, visible and harmful. Why is this so? And why must regulators be more prepared and ready to intervene than before? I will offer some reasons and end with a dash of optimism.

Let's start with a poser — do markets function more effectively in the digital space? Let me give an economist's favourite answer to this unresolvable question — yes, and wait for it, no. More information is available. So in theory, markets should work better, but monopolies are more easily created by successful firms, which axiomatically undermines their functioning. Of the top seven listed companies in the world with market value above \$1 trillion, six are digital.

So what, ask the sceptics? Markets reflect the value created and the valuation is a tribute to the innovative spirit exemplified in

With US going after digital monopolies, it will become easier for India to do the same

The surprise is not that the US has finally changed its stance towards antitrust enforcement, but the fact that it took so long. The reason this development is significant for the rest of the world, including India, is because the protective shield of the home country for these firms has been lifted. It will, therefore, become that much easier for India and the EU to proceed in case of violations by these firms without geopolitical repercussions.

these trillion dollar leviathans. And we do not need to worry about setting upfront rules for such firms because free markets will unleash Schumpeterian forces of creative destruction that would render it unnecessary to do so. Innovations (that are hurt by government intervention) by smart start-ups would perform the act of disciplining incumbent monopolies much better and more efficiently than any government decree. You don't want a "nanny" state do you, say the defenders of free market enterprise, quite disingenuously one might add. By raising the spectre of government excesses, they extoll the virtues of free market enterprise. The costs of government mistakes are exaggerated to the extent that make regulation an anathema to progress. Corporate excesses are forgotten, and bailouts at the taxpayers' expense are necessary to keep the wheels of commerce ticking.

This is not an invective against markets, but a caution that big monopolies left to themselves do not self-correct, that market dynamics do not unleash forces that discipline incumbents rapidly enough and government intervention isn't that bad after all. The alternatives could be a lot more damaging, killing competition and innovation.

Here is some evidence. Recall Standard Oil Company that decisively monopolised the market and was forced to split by US regulators. Its owner Rockefeller later helped establish the University of Chicago, home to many Nobel laureates and unmatched free market thought. The post-war era witnessed strong decisions against ALCOA (1945) and American Tobacco (1946) for violating the Sherman Act in the US. "No monopolist monopolises unconscious of what he is doing," said the order.

There was however a decisive shift in antitrust enforcement in the US beginning in the early 1970s and especially after the publication of Robert Bork's Antitrust Paradox, questioning the role of antitrust enforcement on consumer welfare. The role of antitrust is to help protect consumers and competition, and not competitors said Bork, and rightly so. But this begs the question whether markets erode monopolies more quickly and effectively than governments.

This is a weighty question that can only be judged empirically. The natural experiment in the US in the last five decades or so suggests that the dice has rolled in favour of markets and against government intervention.

But laissez faire can have its pitfalls. High consumer prices, aborted innovation and extreme inequality to name a few. During this time, IBM and Microsoft got away with mere rap on the knuckles while the EU was busy imposing huge penalties for similar violations. For example, in 2018, the EU fined Google \$5 billion for abusing its market power. The case against Google was built around what competition law calls "exclusionary conduct".

There is growing evidence that things are changing in the US too. The change comes close on the heels of the appointment of Lina Khan as chair of the Federal Trade Commission. Last week, the US Department of Justice and 16 states sued Apple alleging it monopolised and abused the smartphone market. The case against Apple follows a growing list of lawsuits against Google, Meta and Amazon for abusing market power. The modus operandi is familiar — blocking, suppressing, excluding, diminishing functionality of rival products and limiting third-party wallets.

The surprise is not that the US has finally changed its stance towards antitrust enforcement, but the fact that it took so long. The reason this development is significant for the rest of the world, including India, is because the protective shield of the home country for these firms has been lifted. It will, therefore, become that much easier for India and the EU to proceed in case of violations by these firms without geopolitical repercussions. It is to the credit of the Justice Department and FTC that it has not given in to the self-serving argument made by tech giants that more regulation and antitrust action will merely enable the US to lose the technology race to China.

Kathuria is Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences and Professor of Economics at the Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence. Views are personal



NARENDRA MODI

AMIDST THE HUSTLE and bustle of the grand festival of Lok Sabha elections, the news of the demise of Srmat Swami Smaranananda ji Maharaj brought my mind to a standstill for a few moments. Srmat Swami Smaranananda ji Maharaj was a pioneer of India's spiritual consciousness and his demise is like a personal loss. A few years ago, the demise of Swami Atmasthananda ji, and now the departure of Swami Smaranananda ji on his eternal journey, has left many people bereaved. My heart, like that of crores of devotees, saints and followers of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, is deeply saddened.

During my visit to Kolkata earlier this month, I had gone to the hospital to enquire about Swami Smaranananda ji's health. Just like Swami Atmasthananda ji, Swami Smaranananda ji too dedicated his entire life for spreading the ideas of Acharya Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Mata Sharada Devi and Swami Vivekananda across the world. While writing this article, the memories of meetings and conversations with him are getting refreshed in my mind.

In January 2020, during my stay at Belur Math, I meditated in the room of Swami Vivekananda. During that visit, I had a long conversation about Swami Atmasthananda ji with Swami Smaranananda ji.

It is widely known that I had a close relationship with the Ramakrishna Mission and Belur Math. As a seeker of spirituality, I have met different saints and mahatmas and

THE ILLUMINATED PATH

Swami Smaranananda ji will continue to inspire nation's journey in Amrit Kaal

It is widely known that I had a close relationship with the Ramakrishna Mission and Belur Math. As a seeker of spirituality, I have met different saints and mahatmas and been to many places over the period of more than five decades. Even in Ramakrishna Math, I got to know about the saints who dedicated their lives to spirituality, among whom personalities like Swami Atmasthananda ji and Swami Smaranananda ji were prominent. Their sacred thoughts and knowledge provided contentment to my mind.

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The lives of Swami Atmasthananda ji and Swami Smaranananda ji are an indelible example of the motto of Ramakrishna Mission "Atmano Mokshaartham Jagaddhitaaya Cha". We all are inspired by the work being done by the Ramakrishna Mission for the promotion of education and rural development. The Ramakrishna Mission is working on India's spiritual enlightenment, educational empowerment and humanitarian service. In 1978, when the disastrous flood struck Bengal, the Ramakrishna Mission won everyone's hearts with its selfless service. I remember, when an earthquake ravaged Kutch in 2001, Swami Atmasthananda ji was among the first people to call me and offer all possible assistance for disaster management on behalf of the Ramakrishna Mission. Under his direction, the Mission helped many people who were affected by the earthquake.

Over the past years, while holding various positions, Swami Atmasthananda ji and Swami Smaranananda ji laid great emphasis

on social empowerment. Those who know the lives of these great personalities will definitely remember how serious these saints were towards modern education, skilling and women empowerment.

Among his many inspiring traits, one thing that impressed me the most was Swami Atmasthananda ji's love and respect for every culture and every tradition. The reason for this was that he used to travel continuously and had spent a long time in different parts of India. He learned to speak Gujarati while living in Gujarat. He used to even speak with me in the language and I loved listening to his Gujarati!

At different points in India's development journey, our motherland has been blessed by many saints and seers like Swami Atmasthananda ji and Swami Smaranananda ji who have ignited the spark of societal change. They have motivated us to work with a collective spirit and address all the challenges our society faces. These principles are eternal and will act as our source of strength as we embark on developing a Viksit Bharat during the Amrit Kaal.

Once again, on behalf of the entire nation, I pay homage to such saintly souls. I am confident that all the people associated with the Ramakrishna Mission will move ahead on the path shown by them.

Om Shanti.

The writer is the Prime Minister of India

MARCH 29, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

SIKH LEADER SHOT

TWO SIKH GUNMEN shot and killed Harbans Singh Manchanda, president of the Congress (I)-backed Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee. The leader died in hospital after a 12-hour struggle. Jagjit Singh Lamba, vice president of the DSGMC and Mohan Singh, the driver of the car in which the two leaders were travelling, were also shot at but are out of danger.

COURTS VS LEGISLATURE

THE CITY POLICE commissioner failed to produce the chief editor of Eenadu before the bar

of the House in the absence of a "warrant of arrest". He is facing the charge of contempt of state legislative council. This has heightened the suspense in the confrontation between the legislature and the judiciary.

PARLIAMENT SUPREME

THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN the Supreme Court and the Andhra Pradesh legislative Council over the latter's decision to haul up Eenadu editor Ramoji Rao for breach of privilege had its echo in the Lok Sabha when the Speaker asserted that there could be no compromise on the supremacy of Parliament. Though the House did not take a

formal stand, the Speaker took the opportunity to emphatically state that the supremacy of Parliament had never been in doubt.

SRI LANKA TROOPS FIRE

SRI LANKAN AIR force troops opened fire on a Tamil crowd near the northern city of Jaffna, killing at least 10 people and wounding 25. President J R Jayewardene's Cabinet announced an emergency "national freedom defence fund" to "defend the shores of Sri Lanka." A Defence Ministry communique said the incident occurred when troops were returning to their barracks and Tamil-speaking terrorists, hiding in ambush, opened fire.



THE IDEAS PAGE

Who’s angry over arrest of a CM?

Muted outrage over Arvind Kejriwal’s arrest points to a larger reality: When politics is no longer seen as a public good, it leads to thinning conception of citizenship



RUCHI GUPTA

DELHI CHIEF MINISTER Arvind Kejriwal’s arrest was months in the making, with him refusing to appear in front of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for nine consecutive summons. When it happened — the arrest of a sitting Opposition Chief Minister in the lead-up to a national election — a watershed moment in the history of Indian democracy seemed all too prosaic.

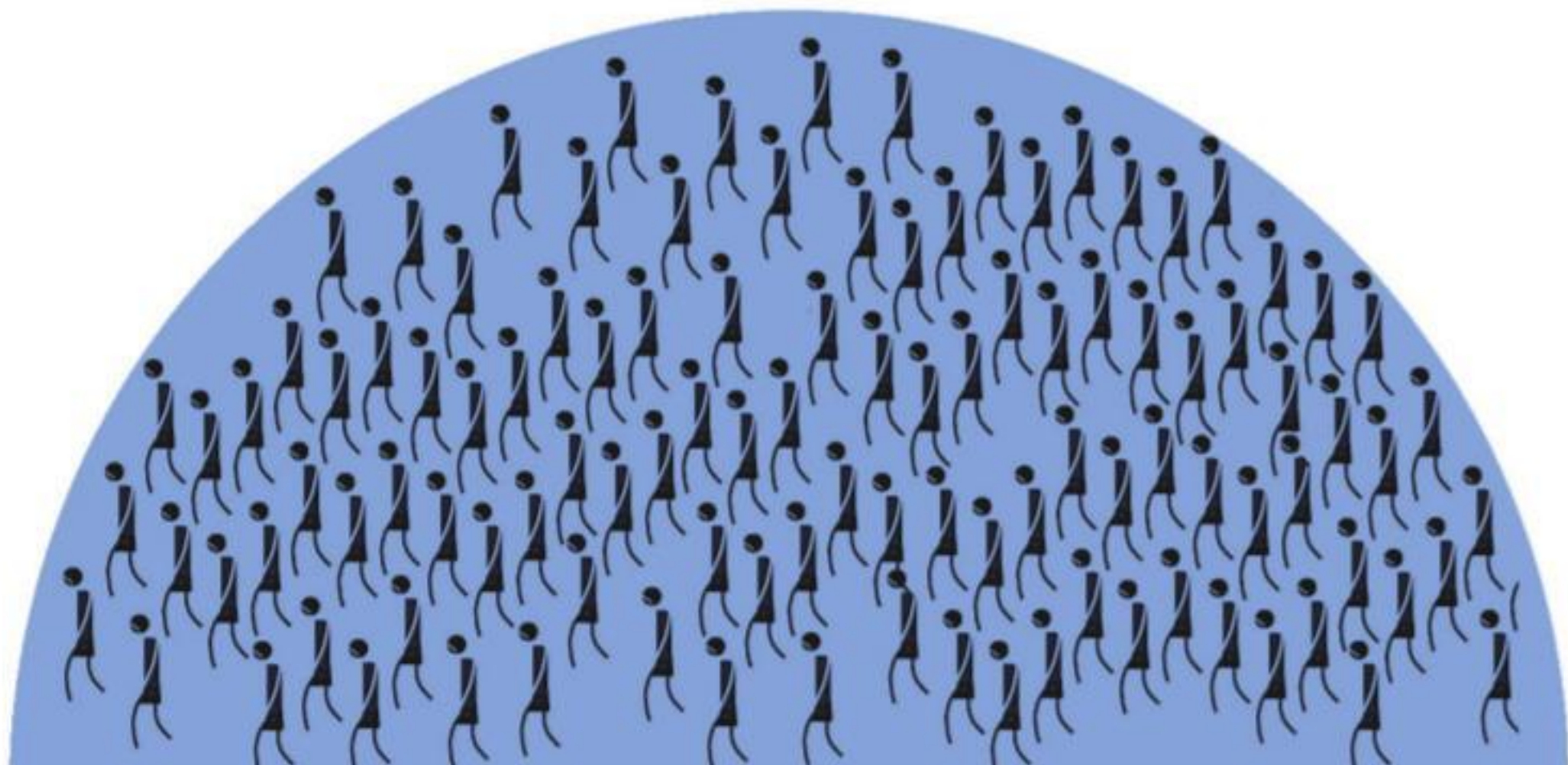
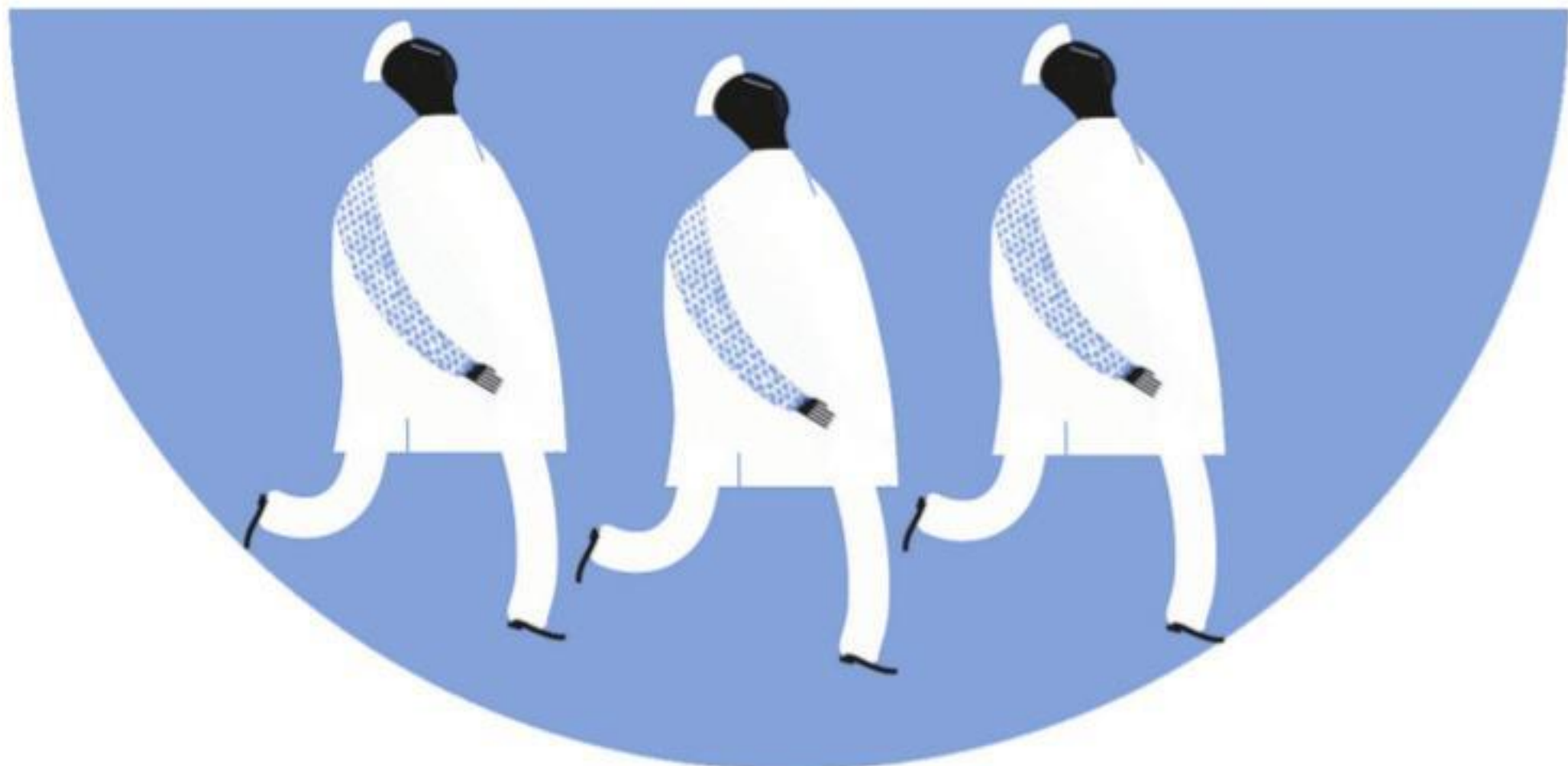
Delhi went about its business as usual. Politicians tweeted their reactions along predictable lines. Courts were moved, with predictable results. Supporters of the BJP and the Opposition argued in various arenas about authoritarianism and corruption. A WhatsApp group of senior public policy and government affairs professionals — a niche set of individuals particularly attuned to and connected with state power — discussed the possibility of traffic jams affecting their day’s programmes. Others reassured that the roads were clear.

It is too soon to predict how this will ultimately play out but some observations are pertinent. First, there’s an unmistakable sense of isolation of the political class. People have opinions about various developments within the political class but as detached observers. The ED raids on Opposition leaders, the freezing of the Congress party’s bank accounts and the arrest of two sitting CMs (Jharkhand CM, Hemant Soren resigned in anticipation) are watched with dispassionate interest — without feeling like these developments have any bearing on their own lives.

It is not difficult to see how we have arrived at this point. Political parties have evolved into closed clubs where the average person has very little visibility in decision-making, let alone influence. Moreover, the political class is seen to be self-serving and the basis of the relationship between political parties and people has become transactional, with the expectation of well-defined economic benefits from voting one party or another into power. This is neither a unique nor durable foundation for substantive affiliation between specific political parties, its leaders and the people.

This has a direct impact on the nature of our democracy. Representative democracy is operationalised through political parties. However, if there is a popular disconnect with democracy’s primary institutional intermediary, then it ceases to be seen as a public good. The inevitable result of this is a thinning conception of citizenship and voter apathy. We can then provide all the information in the world but there is no path to popular investment in democracy without fixing disenchantment with the political class. A sense of personal stake in representative democracy requires not just information but engendering the feeling that the political parties/leaders in question are custodians of their personal interests and thus truly their representatives in Delhi.

Liberals like us may prattle on about the virtues of democracy at large but India’s only liberal political party too suffers from this popular disconnect. This is because the basis of Indian liberalism typically has been institutionalism and the espousal of tolerance and social welfare, instead of a normative vision which can provide people clarity, identity and community. In the absence of personal affiliation, abstractions about democracy often have little bearing on people’s daily lives. There is no doubt that the democratic space in India is shrinking, but this abridgement is targeted. It is thus most keenly felt by the beleaguered minority or on the margins by those who are directly in the crosshairs of the government, such as the Opposition, media and activists. For the rest, the difference, if any, is marginal. The daily wage worker, the peon, the domestic worker, the auto driver who gets slapped around for collection by the policeman have always known arbitrary power and are unlikely to experience a difference in their life unless they are directly engaged and politicised. Even for those at the top who may directly interface with political actors, most people just put their heads down and carry on through a mix of opportunism and sycophancy. This is likely what they would have done in a more expansive democracy as well.



C R Sasikumar

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The popular disconnect with the political class may explain why the BJP is preemptively knocking out its opponents in a con-

Political parties have evolved into closed clubs where the average person has very little visibility in decision-making, let alone influence. Moreover, the political class is seen to be self-serving and the basis of the relationship between political parties and people has become transactional, with the expectation of well-defined economic benefits from voting one party or another into power.

test it was slated to win anyway. It is likely that the electorate at large will not be incensed enough by this predatory behaviour to impose a high political cost on the BJP. On the other hand, there are significant advantages to consolidating political power, not least the ability to implement its full ideological agenda and position itself for the long term by eviscerating the Opposition. This doesn’t bode well for our country going forward because the willingness of the BJP to undermine its own democratic legitimacy removes the last check — self-restraint — on its abuse of executive power.

Finally, what does it mean for the Opposition going forward? It would be hyperbole to predict the demise of Indian democracy, irrespective of the outcome of the national election in 2024. Our country is too large and federated to be suppressed in one shot. Its expanse and diversity will always provide spaces for democratic action even when institutions falter. However, the Opposition must find a way out of its isolation through a deeper connection with people’s lives.

The writer is the executive director of Future of India Foundation

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“Hand-wringing over humanitarian suffering is pointless when you continue to supply the weapons creating the disaster. Monday’s abstention was an important symbolic moment, but it appears that little will alter unless the US makes a substantive change.” — THE GUARDIAN

The deflator problem

NSO should build producer price indices and apply double deflation methodology to GDP data to avoid distortions



RAJESWARI SENGUPTA

OFFICIAL DATA SHOWS that the Indian economy has been growing at 7-8 per cent in recent times. While economic activity seems to have recovered strongly after the pandemic, the actual improvement is uncertain because there are measurement issues. One important issue lies with the GDP deflator. Several experts wrote about this problem after the release of the 2011-12 base year series of national accounts. It’s time to revisit this issue.

According to the latest figures, nominal GDP increased by 10.1 per cent in the third quarter of 2023-24 (October-December). This translated into a real growth of 8.4 per cent, implying that the deflator was 1.7 per cent. Could India’s inflation be so low? We know this is not plausible. So what is going on?

It may help to start with a disclaimer. The statistical problems are quite technical, and get very complex, very quickly. Any brief explanation will therefore need to generalise and sweep away this complexity, so that the outlines of the problem can be perceived clearly. With that caveat, let’s proceed.

In the old GDP measurement methodology, estimates of real GDP relied heavily on volume-based indices such as the index of industrial production. Real growth (for the most part) was calculated directly, and a deflator was then applied to produce a nominal growth figure. Hence, problems in the deflator did not really matter for real growth rate.

Under a new methodology adopted in 2015, GDP is measured in nominal terms, which is then deflated by price indices to derive the real numbers. The deflator has therefore become crucial. If the deflator underestimates actual inflation, then real growth will be overstated. This is what has been happening for the last year.

There are two separate problems with India’s GDP deflator.

First, the National Statistics Office (NSO) does not use the international standard measure of output prices — the producer price index — to deflate GDP. This is because India does not have a PPI. The NSO proxies the PPI with the wholesale price index (WPI). However, the WPI does not track producer prices very well. It is, in fact, heavily skewed towards commodities such as oil and steel which are essential inputs in commodity importing countries like India. Also, the WPI does not measure the price of services, and services constitute two-thirds of the economy.

This skew in the composition of WPI means that whenever commodity prices fall steeply, the WPI will decline, even if producer prices are still rising. This has been a major issue recently. Since September 2022, consumer price index (CPI) inflation has been above 5 per cent, as producers kept increasing prices, but WPI inflation has steadily declined, because global commodity prices have fallen. During April-December, 2023, WPI inflation averaged -1.0 per cent. This persistent

fall in WPI inflation artificially inflated real GDP during 2023-24.

Second, most G20 countries calculate real gross value added (GVA) in the manufacturing sector using a methodology known as double deflation. In this method, nominal outputs are deflated using an output deflator, while inputs are deflated using a separate input deflator. Then the real inputs are subtracted from real outputs to derive real GVA. India, by contrast, deflates nominal numbers using a single deflator.

Why does this matter? It matters because if input prices diverge from output prices, single deflation can misstate growth by a big margin.

Consider what has been happening recently. When the price of inputs falls and price of output increases, profits increase and nominal value added goes up (it helps to think of GVA as profits, which go up when input prices fall). Since real GDP is supposed to be measured at “constant prices”, this increase needs to be deflated away. Double deflation will do this easily. But single deflation using an input price index like WPI will amplify the nominal increase. So, if the nominal increase in GVA is 10 per cent as the result of rising profits, while WPI falls by 1 per cent, the real increase will be calculated as 11 per cent, even if real output has not changed at all.

Can anything be done to quickly resolve this problem?

There is an interim solution that can be easily applied. The NSO can start using the CPI series to deflate nominal value added. The CPI is closer to producer prices than the WPI.

It is interesting to consider what would happen if CPI is used as a deflator for manufacturing GDP computation for 2023-24. Official numbers show that for the first three quarters, nominal growth rates in this sector were 2.2, 12.0, and 10.6 per cent respectively, while real growth rates were 5.0, 14.4 and 11.6 per cent. CPI inflation (excluding food, fuel and house rent) for these three quarters were 5.9, 5.1 and 4.4 per cent. If the correct deflator had been in line with this CPI inflation, then real manufacturing growth rates would instead have been -3.7, 6.9 and 6.2 per cent for the three quarters.

The change to CPI makes even more sense in the services sector. CPI has extensive information on price movements in various services sub-sectors. It would make a big difference to the estimated 2023-24 growth figures in trade/transport/communication and financial services, bringing down their growth rates by around 6 and 4 percentage points respectively.

In summary, whenever there is a collapse of global commodity prices that pushes the WPI-based deflator far below the CPI, the real GDP growth rate of India is likely to be overestimated. Similarly, as the gap between input and output inflation starts to close, the problem will diminish. But that could also send a misleading signal, because it might seem that growth is slowing, when only the measurement bias is disappearing.

The CPI-WPI differential gives a rough indication of the degree to which the real GDP numbers might be distorted. Given how important the GDP data is, it is imperative that the NSO develops producer price indices and applies the double deflation methodology to avoid these distortions.

The writer is Associate Professor of Economics, IGIDR



ASHUTOSH KUMAR

OVER THE LAST decade, India’s polity has been witness to a new phase in the party system with the BJP as the system-defining party. The dominant party has several advantages — a mass leader at the helm and a robust organisation in addition to vast resources have allowed it to turn parliamentary elections more “presidential”. It has also succeeded in creating a “national constituency” phenomenon. With the BJP ruling in 16 states either on its own or in a coalition, the electoral arena of India looks quite flat, excluding perhaps the South.

In this picture, Punjab stands out for several reasons. First, the BJP has not made any headway in the elections held in Punjab over the last decade, both in terms of seats and vote share. Second, while a sizeable number of voters in the last two parliamentary elections in the rest of India have reported voting for the BJP primarily due to the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, voters in Punjab, even the BJP supporters, have not reported being swayed by the “Modi factor”. Third, Punjab is the only state where the AAP has won any Lok Sabha seat to date. As early as in the 2014 elections, the then two-year-old party won four out of 13 seats and went on to become the main opposition party in the 2017 elections.

Fourth, at a time when religious fervour

The Punjab exception

State has been an outlier to national trends. Will BJP be able to change that?

seems to be on the ascendance and sweeping North, Central and Western India after the inauguration of Lord Ram temple, Punjab seems immune. This is despite a sizeable Hindu population. There does not appear to be a revival of radicalism in the Sikh community in response to the push for Hindu majoritarianism — a testament to the historical Hindu-Sikh unity. Fifth, in the “Modi era”, most of the “regionally located” parties like the Samajwadi Party have suffered electorally. Only “regionalist parties” like the DMK, which take up region-specific political, cultural and economic agendas, have done reasonably well. They are likely to survive the BJP juggernaut in the forthcoming election as well. Here, again, Punjab is an exception. The Akali Dal, an ethno-religious party that’s over a century old, seems to be in perpetual decline. Notably, this is not because of the BJP’s ascendance as has been the case in other states but due to its own tactical mistakes and organisational/leadership issues.

Sixth, at a time when parties have been trying to gain electoral dividends by appointing chief ministers from the numerically strong middle and “lower” castes and ministers from numerically smaller castes, the Congress’s last-ditch attempt to fight anti-incumbency by appointing a Dalit chief minister failed miserably in the 2022 assembly elections. This indicated that de-

spite having one-third of its population belonging to the Dalit community, the state is not yet ready for “social engineering”. The social basis of political power has not shifted unlike in the states witnessing “silent revolutions”.

Seventh, as the state continues to remain under the sway of a powerful land-holding peasant community, it is farm sector-related issues like MSP that remain at the top of the electoral agenda. Subjects like national security, international terrorism, India’s exalted place in the global order, or issues raised by the opposition related to religious minority rights, decline of political rights/institutions, and misuse of state agencies are relatively less important.

Will the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections bear witness once more to Punjab’s exceptionalism? Or will it be “mainstreamed”?

Since voting in Punjab is slated fairly late (June 1), the trends are yet to converge firmly. What is clear is that the AAP-Congress alliance has not taken place in the state, unlike in neighbouring Haryana, Delhi and some other places. Here, too, Punjab is an outlier. Unlike in other states where the BJP has been keen to accommodate even smaller parties, it is going solo in Punjab, spurning the chance to revive its ties with the Akali Dal.

Even in a general election, it is the state-level leadership and issues that seem to matter more. The likely absence of Arvind Kejriwal means that Bhagwant Mann will be spearheading the AAP campaign. His leadership skills will be tested in case he faces an electoral reversal. Will he be able to keep the flock together? Similarly, for the Congress, it will be state leaders like Raja Warring, Partap Bajwa, and Sukhjinder Randhawa who will have to lead the campaign. The future of the Akali Dal and Sukhbir Badal too is at stake.

As for the BJP, despite importing Sunil Jakhar — a leader with impeccable integrity and a gifted orator — from the Congress, it will once again bank on PM Modi. A party that seems to be trying to win every seat in India will certainly go all out in Punjab. There are constituencies with a sizable Hindu vote where the BJP in alliance with the Akali Dal secured victories in the past: Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur (five times) and Amritsar (thrice). It would be interesting to see whether the Modi magic finally works out in the state. All in all, an interesting election to watch.

The writer is professor, Department of Political Science, Panjab University, Chandigarh

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BJP-SAD ALLIANCE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Two apart’ (IE, March 28). Although the BJP has claimed that the NDA will win more than 400 seats in the LS elections, its failure to revive the alliance with SAD in Punjab has gone against this aim. The 24-year-old alliance ended in 2020 when the two parted ways on the issue of the now-scrapped agricultural laws. The SAD felt that power at the Centre will be at the cost of the interests of the farmers of Punjab. The same factor has now stopped the party from returning to the NDA fold. With the Congress and its INDIA alliance partner, AAP, contesting separately in Punjab, the state will see a four-cornered contest. The BJP has perfected the art of crafting and maintaining alliances but it appears that it sometimes fails to deliver on its promises to parties with strong regional bases.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

DEMOCRACY IN PERIL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Fear and democracy’ (IE, March 28). In the current scenario, it is clear that the basic principles that signify democracy are vanishing. One such principle is the

contestation on a level playing field. It seems that a ‘jail bharo andolan’ has been initiated against the opposition parties. The political weaponisation of agencies like ED and CBI has proved that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Sarachana, Burari

JOB-SKILL MISMATCH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Jobs, still’ (IE, March 28). The International Labour Organisation’s India Employment report is a sad reflection of our jobless growth, which may not be sustainable for a long time. So to address this and create sustainable employment opportunities for blue collar workers, it is more than essential that proper skills are imparted to our youth by aligning with India Inc which can clearly communicate what all skills are required in next 5-6 years. Since we are living in an ever evolving world, this would require us to be flexible in our approach. To start with, maybe, there can be a few companies that could be a part of this skill development so that after training these youth, they can be suitably recruited by them.

Bal Govind, Noida



Why Nov-Dec temperatures may decide the rabi output

HARISH DAMODARAN
NEW DELHI, MARCH 28

IN RECENT times, wheat has often been hit by a spike in temperatures in March, just when the crop is in the final grain-formation and filling stage. In the current crop season, maximum temperatures have so far been near normal in much of northwestern and eastern India.

With more than half the grain-filling period — 30–40 days of the kernels accumulating starch, proteins and other nutrient matter — over in the major wheat-growing regions, and the crop already or near-harvested in central India, chances of yield loss due to heat seem low. “The crop expression has been overall excellent in Punjab, Haryana, UP, and Bihar. We can expect high yields and good production in these states,” Rajbir Yadav, principal scientist at the genetics division of the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), said.

Less-than-cold start

Yadav was, however, less sanguine about wheat production in central India — Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and parts of Rajasthan. Reason: the late onset of winter. Monthly average minimum temperatures over central India were 1.67 degree and

2.12 degree Celsius higher than normal in November and December respectively. This led to premature initiation of flowering — the crop, whose earheads bearing flowers (and eventually grain) should take 75–80 days to fully emerge from the wheat tillers (shoots), came to heading in 60–70 days.

Northwestern and eastern India too had above-normal temperatures in November and December, but the deviations weren’t as much. Also, in central India, wheat is sowed from the last week of October to mid-November, earlier than the first half of November in northwestern India, and mid-November to mid-December in eastern UP and Bihar.

The delayed winter would have affected the crop sown earlier, cutting short its vegetative growth (roots, stems, leaves) phase. The impact would have been more in central India, where the crop’s growth duration is 125–130 days, compared to 140–145 days in Punjab and Haryana.

While winter did set in fully by late December, the crop in central India suffered due to fog and a lack of sunlight in January. After having flowered early, the wheat now recorded poor pollination and seed-setting.

“There has been a reduction in the number of tillers per plant as well as seeds formed per spike (ear-head), which may translate into lower grain yields in central India,” Yadav said.

EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

EVERYDAY POLITICS

CARRYING CASH DURING ELECTION SEASON: WHAT EC RULES SAY

DAMINI NATH
NEW DELHI, MARCH 28

EARLIER THIS week, a video of Tamil Nadu police seizing Rs 69,400 from some tourists went viral online. While the money was later returned, the incident has spotlighted the Election Commission’s (EC’s) stringent rules for carrying cash and other items around elections.

How does EC deal with ‘money power’ during elections?

The EC caps campaign expenditure at Rs 95 lakh per constituency in bigger states, and Rs 75 lakh per constituency in smaller ones. To ensure that campaigns do not exceed these limits, the EC, prior to every election, issues detailed instructions to police departments, railways, airports, the Income Tax (IT) department, and other enforcement agencies, to keep a strict vigil on the movement of cash, liquor, jewellery, drugs and gifts — anything which could be distributed during polls to influence voters.

Does EC have dedicated officers to tackle the issue?

The EC appoints expenditure observers for every district, alongside static surveillance teams (SST) and flying squads. The teams are headed by a Senior Executive Magistrate, and comprise a senior police officer, a videographer, and three-four armed police personnel. Surveillance teams put up checkpoints on roads, and are supposed to videograph the entire checking process. The final 72 hours before polling, sees enhanced enforcement.

What are the rules for carrying cash and other items?

Authorities are supposed to “instantaneously report to the IT Department” any-



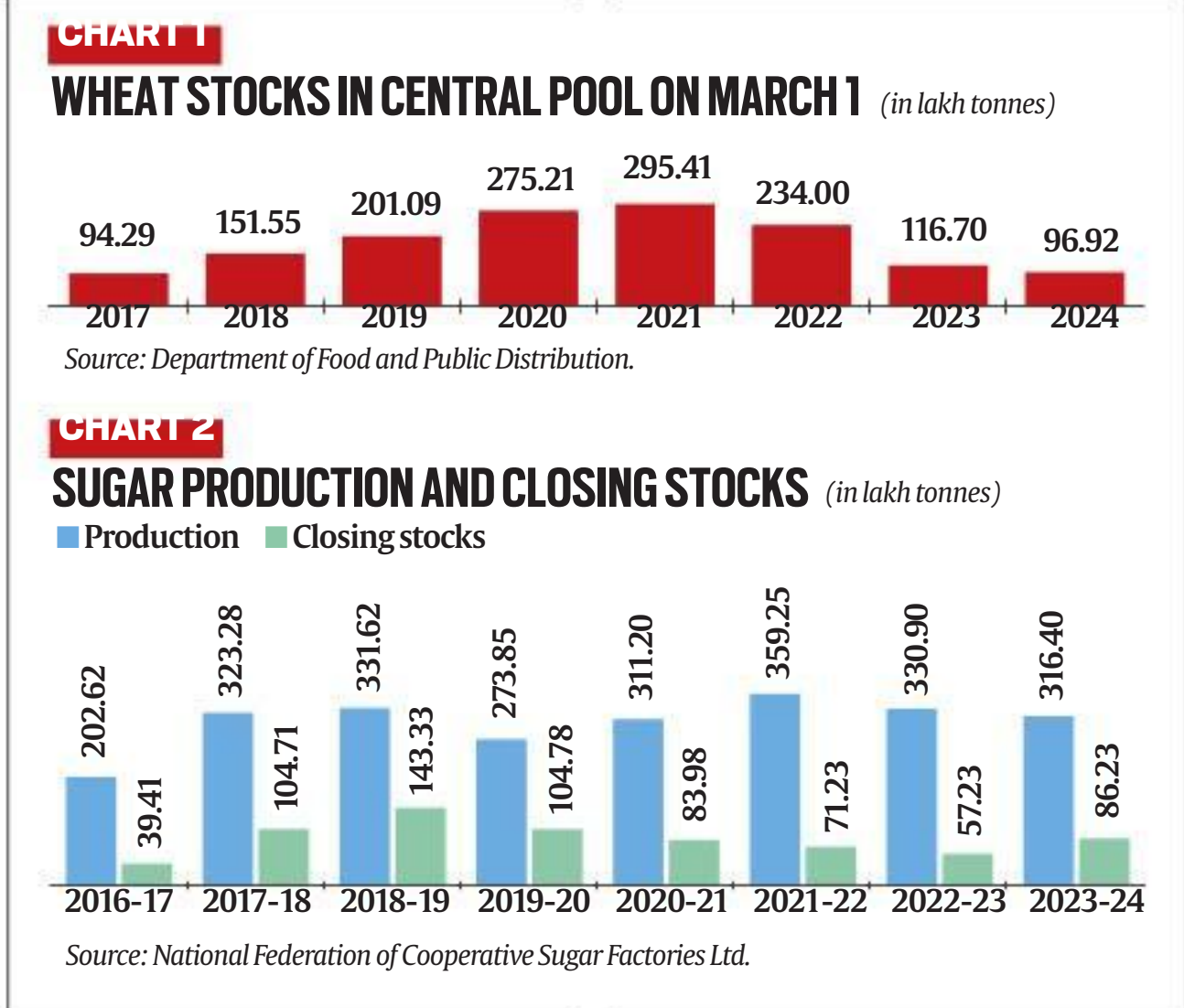
An SST at work during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. *Arul Horizon*

one carrying cash worth more than Rs10 lakh, or more than 1 kg in bullion. Cash or bullion can be seized till verification is completed, in order to ensure that it is not related to any political party or candidate.

If a vehicle carrying a candidate, her agent or a party worker is found with over Rs 50,000 in cash, drugs, liquor, arms, or gift items worth more than Rs10,000, then the items will be instantly seized. If during checking, there is any suspicion of a crime, the seizure will be done under the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC). When it comes to carrying liquor across state borders, the excise laws of the respective state apply.

What happens after a seizure?

In case any cash or other items are seized, authorities are meant to return them if they are not related to any candidate or a crime. A district-level committee looks at grievances, “in order to avoid inconvenience to the public and genuine persons”. The Committee, comprising the district election officer’s nodal officer for expenditure monitoring, and the district treasury officer, shall *suo motu* examine each case of seizure where no FIR/ complaint has been filed, or where the seizure is not linked with any candidate, political party or election campaign.



Production effect

Laxmi Narayan Dubliya, a wheat grower from Polayjagir village in Sonkatch tehsil of MP’s Dewas district, said: “*Pehle do maheeno*

mein vipreet mausam raha. Fasal ko thand nahi mil paayi (The weather was adverse in the first two months, not cold enough for the crop)”

Dubliya, who is also a director of the

EXPLAINED LAW

Governor’s assent to state laws

Kerala has moved the SC against the withholding of assent to Bills by the President and Governor. Over the past year, several Opposition-ruled states have approached the court over the same issue

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM
NEW DELHI, MARCH 28

THE KERALA government last week approached the Supreme Court saying President Droupadi Murmu had withheld assent to four Bills passed by the state “while disclosing no reason whatsoever”, and that Governor Arif Mohammed Khan had withheld assent to seven Bills — some for as long as two years — before referring them to the President. Kerala, which is ruled by the Left Democratic Front, urged the top court to declare the referring of state Bills to the President as “unconstitutional and lacking in good faith”.

This is the newest chapter in the conflict between states ruled by opposition parties, and their Governors, who are appointed by the President on the Centre’s advice. Over the past year, multiple states including Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Punjab, have approached the SC about Governors withholding assent to Bills for long periods of time.

Governor’s role in lawmaking

Article 200 of the Constitution states that after a Bill has been passed by the state legislature, “it shall be presented to the Governor”. The Governor, then, has three options: give assent to the Bill, withhold assent, or reserve the Bill for consideration by the President.

For situations where assent is withheld, Article 200 states that “the Governor may, as soon as possible after the presentation to him...return the Bill...together with a message requesting that the House or Houses will reconsider the Bill or any specified provisions thereof...and if the Bill is passed again by the House or Houses with or without amendment and presented to the Governor for assent, the Governor shall not withhold assent therefrom.”

The latter part of the *proviso* clearly gives the state government the final say on enacting legislation. But it is the part saying “as soon as possible after the presentation to him”, which has led to states approaching the SC. Since the article does not provide a timeline, Governors have often withheld assent to Bills for extended periods, effectively leaving them, and the state legislature, in limbo.

President’s role in the process

In situations where a Bill is sent to the



Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan with Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. *File*

President for consideration, the President can either give or withhold assent. This is dealt with in Article 201.

If assent is withheld, the President requests the Governor to return the Bill to the state legislature for reconsideration. The state government then has six months to reconsider the Bill — failing to do so results in its lapsing.

If the Bill is passed once again by the state legislature, it must be sent back to the President who, unlike the Governor, is under no obligation to give assent when assessing the reconsidered Bill. This is the only situation in which state governments do not have the final say in their own lawmaking process.

Issues raised by Kerala

The Kerala government’s petition terms the actions of Governor Khan and President Murmu as “manifestly arbitrary”, i.e., an action that is unreasonable, irrational and which, as a result, violates the right to equality.

The petition argues that the decision to keep Bills pending violates Article 200 by not making a decision “as soon as possible”. As such, the Governor had “subverted the functioning” of the state legislature and “rendered its existence itself ineffective and otiose” (serving no practical purpose), the

government has said.

On President Murmu’s decision to withhold assent to four of the Bills referred to her, the Kerala government has argued that this was done without giving “any reason whatsoever”. This, it claims, is in violation of Article 201, which states that the President is required to return the Bill with a message containing “such amendments as he may recommend”.

Situation in other states

In November last year, the Supreme Court expressed “serious concern” at Tamil Nadu Governor RN Ravi’s decision to withhold assent to 10 Bills that had been enacted by the state legislature, some of which were pending since January 2020. Three days later, all 10 Bills were returned for reconsideration, with no reasons given for the decision.

Tamil Nadu’s DMK government and Governor Ravi have been at loggerheads for a long time. Most recently, the Supreme Court criticised the Governor for refusing to appoint K Ponmudy as the state’s Minister for Higher Education, despite the apex court staying his criminal conviction. In its petition to the apex court regarding the Governor’s alleged overreach, the Tamil Nadu government claimed

was impeded. “Last year, yields were 250–300 packets (each of 50 kg) per acre. This year, we got 25–35 packets fewer,” he said.

Government data show potato retailing at Rs 20 per kg, compared to its year-ago all-India average modal (most-quoted) price of Rs 10. Retail prices of onion and tomato have posted increases of Rs 20–30 per kg. In the case, dry weather and depleted water levels in reservoirs and aquifers, especially in Maharashtra and Karnataka, has led to a reduction in rabi planted acreages as well.

One sweet story

There’s good news on the sugar front, though. The last sugar year (October 2022–September 2023) ended with stocks of 5.7 million tonnes (mt), the lowest since 2016–17. The current year is likely to see a production decline, and yet closing stocks recovering to a four-year-high of 8.6 mt (*Chart 2*).

Prakash Naiknavare, managing director of the National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories, said two factors were responsible. First, Maharashtra received good rain in November and December, which provided a lifeline to the standing cane. Second, the Centre’s decision in December 2023 to restrict the use of sugarcane juice/ syrup and intermediate-stage ‘B-heavy’ molasses for the production of ethanol. “These factors will contribute to higher than expected output and comfortable stocks position,” he said.

that Ravi “has positioned himself as a political rival” to the state government.

The Telangana government also approached the Supreme Court in March 2023 over former Governor Tamlisai Soundarajan’s refusal to give assent to 10 Bills that were passed by its legislative assembly. She gave her assent shortly after.

Nonetheless, Senior Advocate Dushyant Dave in April still pushed for the court to pass directions in the matter, telling the Bench that the “elected government is at the mercy of the Governor... Telangana is an opposition state and so this is happening”.

At the time, the court refused to pass a detailed order on the subject beyond saying that the expression “as soon as possible” in Article 200 “has a significant constitutional intent and must be borne into mind”.

Soundarajan is now the BJP candidate for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections from Chennai South constituency.

Question of timeline for assent

In November 2023, the SC was to decide if a Governor could withhold assent to Bills passed by the state legislature if he believed that the session where the Bills were passed were convened illegally. The Governor of Punjab, Banwarilal Purohit, had refused to give assent to four Bills passed by the Punjab Assembly, claiming that he had received legal advice that led him to believe that the Bills were passed in breach of law and procedure. However, the Bills were not remitted to the Assembly for reconsideration.

The court held that the Governor did not have the power to “thwart the normal course of lawmaking by the State Legislatures”, and held that the phrase “as soon as possible” in Article 200 means that “the Governor cannot be at liberty to keep the Bill pending indefinitely without any action whatsoever.”

If the Governor decides to withhold assent, he is bound to follow the procedure provided in the first *proviso* of Article 200, and return it to the state legislature for reconsideration, the court said.

Though the court spelled out the obligations of the Governor in the lawmaking process, it stopped short of providing a definitive timeline for the Governor to make the decision. The Kerala government has now approached the Supreme Court to address the same issue.

From birds to animals on land, sea: what’s driving deadly strain of H5N1?

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, MARCH 28

EARLIER THIS week, the United States Department of Agriculture confirmed that a form of avian influenza that has devastated wild bird populations around the world has been found, for the first time, in dairy cattle in Texas and Kansas.

Last week, officials in Minnesota announced that the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain had been found in goats, the first detection of the virus in a domestic ruminant. Since 2020, avian flu has killed tens of thousands of seals and sea lions in a vast area from the coast of northeast United States to Chile. The infection has also infiltrated mainland Antarctica for the time.

In February this year, the Cambodian

health ministry said a 9-year-old boy infected with the virus had died, and several others were sick.

What is this new type of bird flu infection, and how bad is it?

Bird/ avian flu is an infectious viral illness seen mainly among poultry and some wild birds. Not all strains of the virus are dangerous — many of them have circulated for long among at least 100 bird species such as wild waterfowl without causing them much harm.

From time to time, the virus jumps from wild birds to poultry farms. While replicating in cramped warehouses of farmed birds, it evolves into a highly pathogenic form that causes a bigger wave of illness and death than usual.

The currently circulating H5N1 is one such

highly pathogenic type, which is thought to have descended from a virus that devastated farm bird populations in China from 1996 onward. The new H5N1 type first emerged in Europe in 2020, and spread rapidly to Africa and Asia. By late 2021, it had reached North America, and it appeared in South America in the fall of 2022. In February 2024, the virus raced through mainland Antarctica.

As of December 2023, this H5N1 strain had been reported in more than 80 countries, resulted in the culling of millions of chickens and turkeys at commercial poultry farms, and struck numerous species of wild birds such as gulls and terns, killing them by the thousands.

In January, Dr Chris Walzer of the Wildlife Conservation Society said the on-

going bird flu outbreak was the worst globally and in US history, with hundreds of millions of birds dead since 1996.

Which animal species have been infected?

Besides farm birds and wild birds, some of which are already on the verge of extinction, the H5N1 virus has been reported in animals including foxes, pumas, skunks, and black and brown bears in North America, and farmed minks in Spain and Finland. Small mammal species that are often kept in filthy, overcrowded enclosures with ample opportunities for viral reassortment, are considered especially vulnerable.

But it is marine mammals that are the worst affected. More than 20,000 sea lions

and a handful of dolphins have died in Chile and Peru after being infected with H5N1. Deaths of seals have been reported on both US coasts, and in Argentina.

“Sampling efforts suggest that more than 95 per cent of the Southern elephant seal pups born along 300 km of the Patagonia coastline died at the end of 2023. It’s the first report of massive elephant seal mortality in the area from any cause in the last half-century. The sight of elephant seals found dead or dying along the breeding beaches can only be described as apocalyptic,” Dr Walzer said in a statement.

Humans are theoretically also at risk, but they rarely contract bird flu. Most cases of human infection involve people who have come in contact with a large number of sick birds at poultry farms. The Cambodia case represents an exception.

What’s behind the large-scale spread of the virus?

The precise factors behind the outbreaks remain unknown. Some scientists suggest that climate change could be a reason.

Studies have shown that rising global temperatures impact the behaviour of birds in ways that hasten the spread of the flu. Birds are often forced to move into new territories, and mix with species that they usually don’t interact with, which possibly boosts the chances of the virus spreading faster.

Higher sea surface temperatures may also have a role to play. Warmer water near northern Chile has led to a fall in the forage fish population, and that has made sea lions weaker and more susceptible to disease, Liesbeth van der Meer, director of the environmental group Oceana in Chile, told *The Associated Press*.

● INDIGENOUS ENGINES

Union defence minister Rajnath Singh

“ I have asked DRDO to explore what kind of engines can be made in India and what countries are ready to transfer the technology, as we want to make engines in India now. We want to make India an exporter country for engines

The value of wage

A shift in floor pay mechanism may improve worker protection, but we need higher labour productivity

INDIA'S REPORTED PLAN to shift from “minimum” to “living” wages under prodding by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) would at best mark an incremental progress in the country's efforts to protect its large low-income workforce from “unduly low pay.” What is needed to correct the poor wages and rising inequality is a policy mix that would simultaneously spur economic growth and labour productivity. The country's perceived demographic dividend would turn unreal if not reinforced with time-bound skilling of its still-youthful population. More budgetary provisions for primary education and ensuring optimal outcome of such expenditure is equally important. The whole concept of statutory wage-setting as one of the ways for social security comes in when collective bargaining as a tool to ensure decent wages is not effective enough. When the national product is insufficient, as for India, which is still a low middle-income country, wages and per-capita product are bound to be depressed.

But even as the gross national product is at a level where economic and social well-being of all population could reasonably be ensured, economic actors could remain immature and keep worker pays low. This second premise for statutory wage-setting too has always existed in India, and only tends to stay as the country's economic size is growing. Wage floors as a mechanisms to mitigate the issue has had only limited efficacy. The enforcement of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948 has been lackadaisical. Also, there has been an implicit precedence to keeping labour costs low, as the Indian economy struggled to achieve global competitiveness. Labour market reforms in India kept the spotlight primarily on keeping average factor cost of labour from rising faster. India's labour cost is already one of the lowest, but it isn't yielding the desired competitive outcome, because worker productivity too is abysmal.

While job creation in the country has long remained below par, the situation has in recent years reached crisis proportions: The recent ILO-IHD report notes that between 2012 and 2019, the country witnessed no employment growth at all, while gross value added (GVA) expanded by an annual average rate of 6.7%. A reverse migration of job-seekers to the low-paying farm sector is nothing less than alarming. At present, the lowest minimum wages for “scheduled jobs”—those for unskilled workers farm and construction workers in category C areas—are ₹300 and ₹350 respectively. At the all-India level, around 41% of regular and 52% casual unskilled farm workers did not even receive the minimum wages prescribed in 2022.

In fact, “living wages” aren't a new concept—the preamble of the ILO's pioneering 1919 Convention spoke of a “provision of adequate living wage” and India's Constitution also referred to it under the directive principles. Put simply, what the ILO seeks is to ensure “minimum income required for a worker to cover essential expenses.” This may require a one-time steep upward revision of the current minimum wages in India and subsequent periodic adjustments for inflation. However, correcting the structural problems in the economy, by balancing the (mutually complementary) interests of capital and labour, is essential to address the vexed issue of jobless growth meaningfully. Incentives to chip makers and electric car giants may have a persuasive value, but policy priority must shift to job creation across assorted other industries and services, and making people employable. Capital, for its own interest, must be more mindful of the economic value of adequate wages.

China's EV market shows the future is already here

FORGET EVERYTHING YOU'VE heard about how electric vehicles are running out of charge. In the biggest car market, they're on the brink of victory—and the rest of the world will soon follow. Battery metals such as lithium, nickel and cobalt are down by, respectively, 80%, 30%, and 25% over the past year. The cells made out of them are heading the same direction, with Goldman Sachs Group Inc. predicting a 40% drop in pack prices between 2023 and 2025, putting the global average well below \$100 per kilowatt hour. That's a level that carmakers have long viewed as analogous to the technological singularity, the point where AI theorists believe machines will irreversibly take over. Below \$100/kWh, electric vehicles will be cheaper than petroleum-powered counterparts to buy as well as run. The days of the internal combustion engine will be strictly numbered.

In China, the future has already arrived. Six of the 10 best-selling cars in February came with a plug. Wang Chuanfu, CEO of market-leading EV-maker BYD Co., expects half of all cars sold by the middle of the year to be either battery or plug-in hybrid. You might feel tempted to dismiss that as an executive's customary bullishness, but the China Passenger Car Association, an industry group, expects such new-energy vehicles to already comprise nearly 46% of sales this month. BYD's annual results Tuesday confirm the solidity of this shift. It's a truism in other countries that it's impossible to turn a profit selling EVs, but even after China abolished purchase subsidies in 2022, BYD's net income came in at 30.04 billion yuan (\$4.16 billion). That's an 80% increase on the previous year, meaning profit is accelerating faster than the 60% increase in sales volumes.

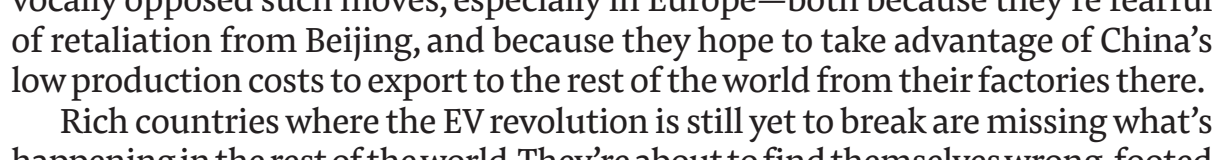
March is traditionally the peak season for China's car industry as consumers return from the lull around Lunar New Year, and sets the tone for the year. With lower battery prices promising relief on costs, EV-makers this year are going in for the kill with price reductions that conventional vehicles will be unable to match. BYD's Seagull, a zippy battery compact which is unlikely to be offered in many overseas markets, now sells for less than \$10,000, as Bloomberg News reported this week. The Qin Plus, a plug-in hybrid with the range and specs to compete head-on against mainstream sedans, is barely more costly at \$11,000. If you're really short of cash, the Wuling Hongguang microcar can be had for less than \$6,000.

That's particularly damaging for offshore brands, who've been slow to ramp up their electric offerings. Volkswagen AG's sales in China last year were their weakest since 2011, while Honda Motor Co. sold the smallest number of vehicles since 2015. Volumes from Nissan Motor Co. and General Motors Co. have fallen about 40% since 2019, when they were respectively the fourth- and sixth-biggest auto brands in the country; neither is even in the top 10 now.

The industry outside China can't expect to stay immune for long. The average price of EVs in the US continues to decline, but at \$52,314 in February is well above the 100,000 yuan to 150,000 yuan (\$14,000 to \$20,000) range where BYD and its rivals are competing most aggressively. Even with a 27.5% import tariff and up to \$1,000 of shipping costs, a Chinese import offers drastically better value than anything available in Europe or North America, one reason that they're likely to take up about a quarter of Europe's EV market this year.

It's not impossible that governments in developed countries try to tighten restrictions even further to protect local industries. Still, those industries have vocally opposed such moves, especially in Europe—both because they're fearful of retaliation from Beijing, and because they hope to take advantage of China's low production costs to export to the rest of the world from their factories there.

Rich countries where the EV revolution is still yet to break are missing what's happening in the rest of the world. They're about to find themselves wrong-footed by the pace of change. Oil demand will keep growing into the 2030s because moves toward electrification outside of the developed world are slowing down, Russell Hardy, chief executive of commodities trader Vitol SA, said in February. Try telling that to a Chinese car dealer.



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THE REAL MAINSTREAM

IT IS TIME THE WORLD REGULATES THE SECTOR OF SOLAR GEOENGINEERING

Warming to a false dawn

SOLAR RADIATION MODIFICATION (SRM), a group of technologies to deliberately reflect sunlight into space to cool the planet, is now being seriously explored as a solution to the climate crisis. In theory, injecting sulphur droplets into the stratosphere, salty water into clouds, or scattering glass over polar ice could slow global warming by changing the Earth's energy balance. But as these experiments involve risks at a planetary scale, we should proceed with abundant caution, communication and transparency, regulated by globally agreed standards. Instead, we see ethical and legal boundaries being crossed by unregulated experiments.

Reckless experimentation

Since 2017, a private initiative, initially called Ice911 Research and later the Arctic Ice Project, has scattered tiny glass spheres to reflect sunlight over 17,500 square metres (or three football fields) of Arctic ice, drawing protests from Alaska Native leaders. Full deployment would involve spheres over 100,000 square kilometres of the Arctic, an area the size of Bihar.

Some of the recent experiments are even more reckless. In 2022, an independent researcher in the UK released sulphur dioxide from a high-altitude weather balloon into the stratosphere and named it SATAN (Stratospheric Aerosol Transport and Nucleation). Around the same time, Make Sunsets, a Silicon Valley-backed start-up, launched nearly 50 such balloons from Mexico. This company now plans to sell “cooling credits” for such launches.

The start-up's response to the question “Is this legal?” is: “Yes, we've been in contact with multiple US government agencies (FBI, FAA and NOAA). They are aware of our business and activities.” This non-answer is at the heart of the problem. Here's why: Experiments that pose planetary risks violate international law if those risks are not clearly

CHANDRA BHUSHAN

President and CEO, iFOREST
X: @Bh_Chandra | Views are personal



assessed, communicated, and consulted on beforehand. This is true even though there is a lack of specific national regulation, which some wrongly believe gives them a free rein. Let me elaborate.

Global warming or ozone hole

Two significant scientific assessments published in 2023 underlined the hazards of SRM. The first, the One Atmosphere report of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), found that “even as a temporary response option, large-scale SRM deployment is fraught with scientific uncertainties”. To address the evident “critical unresolved issues around equity, ethics and consent” around SRM, it recommended a “robust, equitable and rigorous trans-disciplinary scientific review process” based on a precautionary approach.

The second, the World Meteorological Organization's 2022 Scientific Assessment of Ozone Depletion, found that while injecting sulphur into the stratosphere “could reduce some of the impacts of global warming, it cannot restore past climatic conditions and would very likely cause unintended consequences, including changes in stratospheric ozone concentrations”. It also found that the certainty of damage to the ozone layer increases with prolonged and more intensive use of these methods. This finding sits uncomfortably with a finding from UNEP's One Atmos-

phere report: that SRM would need to be maintained for several decades or centuries to limit warming effectively and that abruptly stopping the intervention would lead to “rapid climate change that would increase risks for humans and ecosystems”. Therefore, SRM poses a binary choice: Short-term use could mitigate global warming, whereas long-term deployment risks significantly damaging the ozone layer.

Unfortunately, the Vienna Convention is toothless, and its provisions have been ignored. Rebooting the Vienna Convention to govern SRM research is essential

International law

These findings on the transboundary impacts of SRM have legal implications. There are many international conventions and agreements that call for regulation of activities threatening large-scale modification of planetary systems such as oceans, the ozone layer, climate, and biodiversity, even if their precise effect is not fully understood.

Take the case of the London Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution. In 2008, the Convention prohibited a type of geoengineering known as ocean fertilisation, except for research that undertakes a risk assessment, develops a risk management plan, and commits to sharing and publicising findings through peer review. In 2010, parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) agreed to prohibit geoengineering in general, with a narrow exception for research.

The Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer is particularly

pertinent to Solar SRM. The Convention, ratified by all countries, obligates countries to cooperate on research on “substances, practices, processes and activities that may affect the ozone layer, and their cumulative effects”. Therefore, unregulated unilateral experiments that affect the ozone layer, such as SRM, violate this obligation.

Unfortunately, the Vienna Convention is toothless, and its provisions have been ignored. Therefore, rebooting the Vienna Convention to govern SRM research is essential. Such regulatory processes are also critical at the national level because government support for SRM research is growing in countries like the US and China. While the scale of experiments is currently small, they will likely grow more ambitious. Without a robust regulatory process, the fuzzy line between researching and carrying out geoengineering will be crossed without warning. The potential impacts—such as ozone layer degradation and sudden shifts in global climate—will affect populations worldwide, most of whom have had no say in whether such experiments should proceed.

This is especially important because many countries already use technologies to modify local weather. China plans to bring about 5.5 million square kilometres of its territory under a weather modification programme by 2025. A team in Australia is injecting saltwater into clouds over the Great Barrier Reef to prevent its disappearance. The leap from weather modification to SRM is close.

The stakes for countries like India in geoengineering cannot be overstated. Computational models indicate that SRM could negatively influence monsoon patterns, affecting agriculture and water availability. Hence, it is crucial for India to spearhead the development of an international regulatory framework for SRM, including outdoor experimentation. This proactive approach is essential, as decisions made today will have implications for generations to come.

Happiness in India

NIRVIKAR SINGH

Professor of economics, University of California, Santa Cruz

THE FIRST WORLD Happiness Report (WHR) was published in 2012 by The Earth Institute, led at the time by economist Jeffrey Sachs. Since then, the WHR has expanded in scope and detail, and is now published by the Wellbeing Research Centre at Oxford University. Many economists have been involved, but they have also relied on experts from other disciplines such as psychology—an essential contributor. Happiness might seem to be a fuzzy concept, but surveys that ask people to report their life satisfaction on a numerical scale make it at least partially measurable. The Gallup World Poll conducts this survey across many countries, and it is the basis for country averages and rankings. The WHR supplements this data with more transitory, but still important, measures of positive and negative emotional states (“affect”).

According to the life evaluation ranking based on 2021-23 averages, India ranks 126 out of 143 countries, not much changed from earlier although its numerical score has recovered from the lows of a few years prior. In order to understand the sources of life satisfaction, the WHR also estimates the extent to which other factors (measured independently) are correlated with the happiness measure. In general, material well-being, as measured by GDP per capita, is the most important correlate with happiness, but several other factors are also significant. These include social support,

healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, and reduced corruption. Surprisingly, India's economic growth over time does not show up in an improved happiness score and ranking. Among countries, its happiness ranking is lower than would be implied by its GDP per capita, other things being equal.

This year's WHR investigates the relationship between happiness and age for the first time, and, in a first such exercise, has a whole chapter on the life satisfaction of older people in India, using more detailed country-specific data. In the overall data, there are differences in the age profile of happiness, with the young being less happy than the old in North America, a sharp change from the past. In many countries, the more typical result of the young being happier still holds. The differences are not necessarily large, but trends can still be informative. In India, adults below 30 are the happiest, while the 30-44 age group is significantly less satisfied with their lives. The other two age groups, 45-60 and 60 and above, have similar scores, close to the average across all ages.

In some ways, we might care most about understanding the determinants of happiness for young people, because that may guide policy measures that change

their life trajectories. But the experiences of older adults can provide guidance as well, since the longer-run effects of early life factors can be identified. The India study in the WHR uses a subset of the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI, 2017-19), which has information on demography, health, household socioeconomic status, family and social networks, and life expectations for over 70,000 adults aged 60 years and above.

Unmarried women had the lowest levels of reported life satisfaction, perhaps indicative of biases in traditional social structures. Those without formal education were also less satisfied than their educated counterparts. Poor living situations, being retired, and not being concerned about religion all were associated with lower scores. Good health was, not surprisingly, associated with higher scores. Past experiences of ill treatment or discrimination had lingering impacts, in the form of lower reported scores.

There are many more nuances and complexities in the results for the happiness of older people in India. The implications for policy are not always immediate. Even multivariate regressions do not capture the interactions of various socioeconomic factors in determining life satisfaction, so there can be

Even multivariate regressions do not capture the interactions of various socioeconomic factors in determining life satisfaction

A worrying aspect

Apropos of ‘The jobs gloom’ (FE, March 28), unemployment has been the Achilles' heel of this government. The two crore jobs promised every year are nowhere in sight. The mudra loans were often used by the government to deflect criticism of lack of job opportunities. It would be interesting to learn about how many beneficiaries have been able to make a living using the loan and repaid it.

no rush to any kind of social engineering. Many of the general results for older Indians are probably similar to what one would find in other countries. But if one can pick out a couple of issues that ought to be salient for Indian policy-making, beyond the pursuit of economic growth, the WHR study reminds one of the disadvantaged position of women in India, especially when they are not married. Equally striking are the results on caste inequalities. Caste-based discrimination leads to pervasive disadvantages throughout life, and has direct and indirect effects on life satisfaction. Indian policy debates about economic growth have often focused around the term “inclusive”. Inclusion most obviously refers to whether the poorest in society improve their material conditions when the economy grows overall. But inclusion also applies to women and lower-caste groups, or to others who may be in disadvantaged situations. Often, the data on incomes for national accounting purposes is not collected in a manner that permits more detailed analysis. Recently, indicators that feed into indices of human development have become an important source for measuring well-being. The WHR, both overall and in its specific exploration of the LASI data, provides another source for guiding economic and social policies in India, and in judging their outcomes.

Governments initiatives such as Skill India or Start-up India have not been able to generate much employment. Especially worrying is the fact that 83% of those unemployed are among the youth. This is likely to lead to social unrest and its attendant problems. India is not mechanised enough to have a 65% unemployment rate and a 8.4% GDP growth. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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EC MUST CURB MONEY POWER IN ELECTIONS, ONUS ON VOTERS TOO

UNION Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is not contesting the Lok Sabha polls citing financial constraints. Truth be told, she is stating the obvious—elections have become far costlier over the decades. We are now at a juncture where it is perhaps impossible for a leader with even a decent income to enter the electoral fray. This is especially so in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. In the outgoing Andhra Pradesh assembly, nine out of every 10 legislators are crorepatitis. Read this number with the share of legislators having criminal cases against them—about half—and it is clear that money and muscle power are at play. There is no reason to believe that the next assembly would be any different. In Telangana, 96 percent of the current assembly members are crorepatitis and 82 percent have cases against them.

We can safely infer that politics in the country has become an exclusive preserve of the rich, though they come from different backgrounds—mostly political dynasties, the corporate and business world, and real estate. It is a wonder people make much of political rhetoric but fail to give importance to the money bags. In the pre-independence era, and thereafter for a few decades, politics was considered a service. It was the norm for leaders to sacrifice their lives, not to speak of their wealth, for the country. The system has since been usurped as politics has come to be seen as a sure-shot way to power and money.

We have laws restricting campaign finance. The upper expenditure limit for a Lok Sabha candidate is ₹95 lakh; for assembly, it is ₹40 lakh. In practice, the figure often shoots up to ₹100 crore and ₹50 crore, respectively, depending on the constituency. As for the parties themselves, there is no limit. The Law Commission had in the late 1990s recommended state funding of elections and the Election Commission had recommended a cap. The problem is that lawmakers themselves are the deciders and are unlikely to cede ground. The Election Commission, despite good intentions, has rarely penalised a candidate strictly for excessive expenditure. Ideally, the institution must be empowered to track expenditures and disqualify candidates. The onus is also on voters to make money power redundant and reject those who seek to bribe them. Until then, our democracy will continue to be compromised.

FOCUS ON KATE'S DISEASE, NOT CONSPIRACY THEORY

KATE, the Princess of Wales, will win her medical battle, but it will leave scars. Her house is under attack. Her credibility as a senior royal has taken a hit. The period of healing she may have allowed herself, considering that she is recovering from a serious surgery, will have to be reduced, given the world's obsession with her showing up. Royals must be seen to be believed; Queen Elizabeth II lived by it. Since the so-called #Kategate, cancer patient Kate Middleton—let us drop the royal title for the time being and just see her for who she is at the moment—might not want to.

However, last Friday she went the extra mile by putting out a video from the grounds of Windsor Castle outing herself as a cancer patient, to be a symbol of hope to the cancer community and the ailing of the world. The setting was to the point: in the background were daffodils, long associated with cancer patients, and more importantly survivors. This time, she was not surrounded by her family, choosing to take full responsibility in public view, sacrificing family time before Easter. The world's banal and cruel curiosity, however, has seen no let-up. Despite the collective gasp at that first announcement, the response to the video has ranged between calling the video “an AI-enabled deepfake” and blaming Russian and Chinese hands behind the troll-storm. The intimate plight of a young mother of three having to deal with an unprecedented crisis, of a young husband who may be anxious about the health of the most important woman in his life, seems to have been lost in the surround sound.

Cancer has hit key Windsor royals in quick succession—Sarah Ferguson, King Charles III and now Kate Middleton. That the discovery and announcement of her cancer has not re-focused world attention on the disease is a missed opportunity—especially for the Windsor family, given that it also patronises several cancer charities. Given their track record, the protocol and mechanism for conveying bad news to the public should have been a well-oiled machinery by now. An ailing royal, at the end of day, should evoke empathy. Middleton deserves this for having consistently had the family's back. Social media conspiracy theorists should pause their skulduggery and newspapers their spins—right now.

QUICK TAKE

AVOID HIMALAYAN BLUNDERS

THE latest State of India's Environment report highlights population pressure as a major factor increasing the vulnerability of our Himalayan regions. Almost half the natural disasters in the country recorded in the decade to 2022 happened along this fragile arc that affects our northern watershed and weather. Only half of the 14 hill cities surveyed by the Centre for Science and Environment had, by February, prepared plans to address the population surge. Though urban design is the domain of local authorities, in this case it calls for coordination—so that cities can learn from each others' experiences and ensure best practices.

PAKISTAN'S new government has hardly had the time to settle down before facing challenges on a number of fronts—a poly-crisis of sorts. Last week, militants attacked the Turbat naval base and killed a soldier; all the five militants were killed. Freedom fighters from the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack, the second one on a military facility in a week. The BLA had earlier attacked Gwadar, the port in Balochistan being developed by China with an adjacent industrial zone—the 'jewel in the crown' of the infrastructure projects China is funding as part of its \$62-billion investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Two Pakistani soldiers and eight BLA fighters were killed.

The China connection in both these incidents is evident—Turbat hosts the Chinese drones used to target Baloch freedom fighters and Gwadar, where China has invested in mineral extraction, is seen as exploitation of the province.

More recently, some militants rammed an explosive-laden vehicle into a convoy ferrying Chinese engineers near the town of Besham in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, killing five. The engineers were working on the Dasu dam, which has run into substantial local opposition. No one claimed responsibility for this attack.

Chinese engineers have earlier been attacked in various parts of Pakistan. In 2021, nine Chinese were killed in a bus bombing in Dasu. In November 2018, the BLA claimed an attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi, killing four in a hotel used by Chinese nationals. In June 2020, the BLA claimed responsibility for another attack on the Karachi Stock Exchange, where Chinese companies have heavily invested.

These attacks angered China. Its foreign ministry asked Pakistan to “thoroughly investigate the incident as soon as possible, hunt down the perpetrators and bring them to justice”. Pakistan's President and PM condemned the attacks and asserted that nothing can disturb the bilateral ties. Both sides have reiterated their ‘iron brother’ bond. China's foreign ministry condemned terrorism without reflecting on the fact that it routinely blocks attempts at the UN to designate Pakistani terrorists.

Pakistan's military stated that the sensitive projects are being targeted “as a conscious effort to retard our progress and sow discord between Pakistan and its strategic allies, most notably China”. It also blamed “foreign elements”, a euphemism that includes Afghanistan and India.

The two countries' ties are based on China's hegemonic ambitions and Pakistan's economic needs. The recent attacks on its strategic interests are unlikely to deter Beijing

CHINA & PAKISTAN LOCKED IN EMBRACE THEY CAN'T QUIT

PINAK RANJAN CHAKRAVARTHY

Former Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs; former Consul-General in Karachi; Founding Director, DeepStrat



SOURAV ROY

CPEC is a crucial pillar of China's BRI. So the mounting security challenges are unlikely to deter it from exiting. China's strategic interest is to access the Arabian Sea through CPEC and Gwadar, with an added dimension of using Gwadar as a military logistics base. China is trying a similar model, albeit on a smaller scale, in the Maldives—setting up bases to monitor the Indian Ocean. It has partially succeeded in Sri Lanka, with the long-term lease of Hambantota port.

The China-Pakistan strategic convergence is based on China's hegemonic ambitions in Asia, which requires it to contain India. Pakistan is a valuable proxy for this, as also for minerals and sea access. For Pakistan, India is the foremost threat. Hence, the enemy's enemy becomes

a friend. Pakistan also needs investment in energy and infrastructure, for which China's deep pockets can help. China knows it may never recover its investments and Pakistan knows it is unlikely to be able to pay back. Hence, the two are locked in an embrace both cannot quit.

The recent attacks will likely sour the mood during PM Shahbaz Sharif's upcoming visit to Beijing. It was under former PM Nawaz Sharif that the CPEC became a reality during 2013-2017. Pakistan has few options, since its earlier patrons have not loosened their purse strings to bail out its economy. Pakistan's economy is dependent on IMF doles, a tap that the US can turn off, constituting a significant leverage that the American administration uses. The other factor is the deep

ENVIRONMENTAL FEDERALISM CRUCIAL FOR CLIMATE ACTION

THE all-pervasive global dialogue surrounding climate change has spurred nations to develop their national action plans to mitigate the impact. Two crucial realities need to be recognised within this discourse. First, countries in the Global South encounter disproportionately greater challenges from climate change. Second, India has emerged as a torch-bearer in global climate justice debates, leading the way in formulating national action plans. However, on the domestic front, our quasi-federal climate policy structure harbours internal contradictions, where states shoulder the responsibility of implementing most targets amid constraints posed by limited resources and shrinking space in environmental policymaking.

India's environmental stewardship can be traced from its legislations and judicial journey of embracing environmental constitutionalism. This encompasses both the rights and duties of the state and individuals. Initially, the Constitution did not explicitly address environmental governance.

However, the 42nd constitutional amendment in 1976 altered the jurisdiction over forests and wildlife, transferring them to the Concurrent List. The 73rd amendment assigned panchayats the responsibility for environmental protection and conservation. Subsequent legislations have further solidified this framework. However, a consistent trend across these developments has been a shift towards centralisation in legislative jurisdiction over environmental laws, while mandating greater decentralisation to states in implementation.

Climate change issues manifest more prominently at regional level compared to their aggregate impact nationally. While the legislative frameworks rightfully allocate greater responsibilities to the lower tiers of government, the challenge has been their relative marginalisation in resource access and decision-making processes. Most state functions and powers concerning natural resources require central approval, relegating states to mere implementation roles. These functions include developing forest management plans, diverting forest land, and utilising compensatory afforestation funds through the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority.

Recent changes in regulations of the mining sector have reignited the debate on resource federalism. This trend is highlighted by the diminished autonomy



AMAR PATNAIK

Advocate, former CAG bureaucrat and member of Rajya Sabha from Odisha

of state governments in making decisions related to mining leases while vesting increased authority to the Centre over the utilisation of funds of the District Mineral Funds. The 2020 draft notification of the Environmental Impact Assessment authorised the Centre to appoint members of the State Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA), relegating



EXPRESS PHOTO

There must be a greater involvement of states in crafting climate policies addressing the bottom-up nature of the crisis. They shoulder the responsibility of implementing most climate targets, but are constrained by limited resources and a shrinking policy space

the state governments to a mere recommending role. Consequently, as of February 2024, SEIAA appointments have been stuck for over three months due to the Centre's rejection of state-recommended names. Some State Action Plans for Climate Change (SAPCCs), developed in alignment with national strategies, are formulated without adequate local community engagement, resulting in a lack of institutionalisation, defined targets, and sufficient financial investment.

This brings us to the principal bone of contention that persists in the realm of fiscal federalism in India. The Centre's fiscal prowess reinforces its structural dominance with states tasked with implementation, while a major chunk of the tax reve-

nue is collected by the Centre. The erosion of state tax autonomy subsequent to the GST reforms has coincided with, rather than being offset by, a rise in the proportion of non-shareable revenue (surcharges and cesses) accruing to the Centre.

India's National Environment Policy, 2006, talks of the principle of decentralisation, which advocates “...ceding or transfer of power from a Central authority to state or local authorities, in order to empower public authorities having jurisdiction at the spatial level at which particular environmental issues are salient, to address these issues”. To enhance environmental governance, there is a pressing need for greater involvement of states in crafting comprehensive climate policies given the bottom-up nature of the crisis.

As an immediate measure, all state governments must reform their SAPCCs and policies along with formulating dedicated climate budgets akin to the initiative taken by the Odisha government. A greater involvement of the local government, and hence the local communities like farmers and tribals, shall promote more relevant and efficient environmental policymaking tailored to each state's unique needs.

Lastly, it is imperative to bolster fiscal federalism for environmental federalism to yield positive and sustainable outcomes. While the 15th Finance Commission's recommendation to allocate a fixed percentage of the divisible central tax pool for ecology and forests is a step in the right direction, it is insufficient. Inter-governmental transfers that recognise environmental improvements can incentivise states and local bodies further.

Arguments advanced by developing nations advocate for common but differentiated responsibilities and mobilising the means of implementation, that is, finance and technology. These principles should also guide national-level efforts to ensure climate equity and justice for states positioned differently. A nuanced delegation of powers and resources to state governments would enhance India's effectiveness in combating climate change.

(Views are personal)

state—the Pakistan army is deeply invested in buying Chinese military hardware, co-producing certain items, and managing CPEC projects with their embedded opportunities for personal aggrandisement.

During Imran Khan's tenure as PM, the bilateral ties were soured by Imran's questioning of the CPEC's ways of operating. This irritated China and the army. Before the 2018 election, Imran's party had called for scrutinising and renegotiating the terms of the CPEC loans. A popular perception in Pakistan is that the CPEC does not help common people and benefits only the elite. The reality that the army sets the foreign policy agenda and economic priorities makes Pakistan's civilian leaders fall in line or suffer the consequences, like Nawaz earlier and Imran later.

The China connection helps Pakistan leverage its ties with the US, too. Pakistan's foreign minister recently stated his country was seriously considering reopening direct trade ties with India, which Pakistan suspended unilaterally in 2019 following the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status. The FM is unlikely to have made this statement without clearance from the deep-state minders. Pakistan may expect some *quid pro quo* from India, but concessions will not be on the menu in an election season. The first step Pakistan should consider is to restore diplomatic ties at the high commissioners' level.

But there seems to be a growing constituency in Pakistan for restoring direct trade with India for its own economic interest. India-Pakistan trade did not stop in 2019, but got diverted via Dubai and Singapore, adding significant transportation costs. No concrete move has been made yet, and Pakistan may just be testing the waters and ward off pressure from international donors.

This prospective move would hit an immovable wall if Pakistan puts any prior condition such as restoration of Article 370 on the table. India will surely demand a terror-free region. The ceasefire along the LoC was renewed in 2021, but period infiltration has not stopped. PM Narendra Modi has congratulated Sharif via social media on becoming PM, which the latter acknowledged.

The inevitable question is how long Sharif's unwieldy coalition will last. Meanwhile, an old dilemma persists—whom to talk to in Pakistan? I recall an American diplomat telling me, “When we want anything done in Pakistan, we talk to the army.” India has tried this option unsuccessfully. Hence, there are hardly any new options for an election-bound India.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Disparaging narrative

Ref: A basic test of legitimacy for elections 2024 (Mar 28). The Election Commission's functioning has been by and large fair. Even the post-Emergency election was comparatively fair. We are making a mountain out of a molehill. We should not be carried away by western narratives, which will not miss any opportunity to disparage India. **Dharmarajan A K, Thalassery**

Hero worship

The issue of idolatry, raised by B R Ambedkar, is important. We have always supported idolatry, preferring one hero in an era. In 1939, even when Subhash Bose was elected Congress president by defeating Gandhi's candidate Pattabhi Sitaramayya, he had to resign because of opposition from Gandhian supporters. After Nehru, Sardar Patel, Indira Gandhi and now Narendra Modi. **Prayant Praved, email**

Ceasefire now

Ref: Gaza is a crisis of humanity, not just institutional failure (Mar 28). It is for the first time that the UNSC could demand a ceasefire in Gaza for the Ramadan period. Since the whole world is against Israel now, Netanyahu should listen and agree to a ceasefire, and Hamas should release all hostages. **K Nehru Patnaik, Visakhapatnam**

Shared spoils

Ref: What the new expenditure survey says about poverty (Mar 28). The author has rightly stated that India's quest for emerging as the third largest economy in the world will be meaningless if the benefits are not shared by all. All-out efforts should be made by the government in this regard. **NA Joseph, Ettumanoor**

Poverty status

The article gives us a vivid picture of the poverty status in UP and Rajasthan. During my recent trip to UP, I found that basic needs such as electricity, water and education are not to the expected levels. Self-employment schemes with skill development programmes have not worked in these places. So many people migrate to the southern states for work. **V K Krishnan, Kumbakonam**

Internal affair

It is rather surprising to know that Germany and the US have expressed concerns about the legal process initiated against Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal. In what way are these countries connected to the issue? Is it not interference in another country's internal affairs? **KS Aswathanarayana, Bengaluru**

Delhi Deserves a Mature Liquor Policy

GST can aid market-friendly, graft-proof sales

State governments with inordinate dependence on tax revenue from sale of liquor find it difficult to curb their zeal for regulation — which caters neither to the demands of a maturing market nor to the need for transparency. Delhi is a case in point — and in the news — where allegations of irregularities in efforts to modernise liquor sales in the city have pushed the trade into the public sector, a throwback to an era preceding decades of liberalisation. Over this period, liquor consumption per capita in the country has more than tripled, and demand growth has been more pronounced at the premium end of the market. Imposition of a state monopoly on wholesaling or retailing liquor does little to serve evolving demand, which is predominantly a function of a rising standard of living in a city like Delhi.

There is little to suggest government intervention in business curbs abuse. On the contrary, India's experience with free markets and independent regulation has been superior to state control. Liquor sales in the country face a wide spectrum of regulation, from state monopoly to controlled markets. No system, however, brings down the scope of regulatory capture to a tolerance zone. Solution to tax revenue optimisation, demand dynamics and transparency must be sought further afield in the market mechanism than most state governments are willing to consider.

Most of the disrepute surrounding the liquor trade is on account of government intervention. When such intervention is in sync with the market, it faces heightened scrutiny over corruption, as it is now in Delhi. Devising a market-friendly, graft-proof liquor sale policy could benefit from new tools such as GST. The self-policing tax of offers a clearer line of sight into traditionally opaque businesses such as sale of liquor. The GST system architecture has additional safety features that improve transparency. If, indeed, state governments find it difficult to unclench their regulatory fist around the liquor market, they could consider using superior techniques instead.

No Casting Slurs on Female Politicians

Election season is in full swing, and candidates have begun targeting opponents on various issues. This is fair game and an acceptable part of the electoral exercise. But there are leaders like BJP's Dilip Ghosh and Congress' Supriya Shrinate who have crossed red lines. While Ghosh made derogatory remarks against Mamata Banerjee, Shrinate cast a slur on BJP's candidate from Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, Kangana Ranaut. EC rightly moved swiftly and issued notices to both motormouths. Congress has dropped Shrinate from its candidates list, and after being reprimanded by BJP, Ghosh has tendered an apology. This is action taken from where action should be taken from. This should send out a strong message across party lines that hurling abuses during campaigning is verboten.

Personal barbs in general, and misogynistic remarks in particular, have no place in politics. 'Tradition' and whataboutery cannot be normalised, as it has in the past, for such behaviour even in — especially in — the high-octane, high-visibility grit and dust of poll fights. Women bear a particular brunt during elections. Of the 1,14,000 tweets directed towards 95 women politicians during three months of the 2019 general elections, 14% were abusive — an average of 113 derogatory tweets per candidate daily.

While political parties are getting more vigilant and strict with their candidates and members on the use of uncivil language, both EC and the votary must also be sensitised to transgressions. While the former has the legal power to act against erring politicians, the public, too, must use their vote as a stick to punish behaviour that tells them much about the candidates' world view. Indulging in personal barbs, especially misogynistic ones, cannot be acceptable.

JUST IN JEST
This election season, beating all odds, the Delhi CM has become top-billing

The Arvind Kejriwal Show, Season 1 Ep 2

If one sidesteps the biggest political news of Thursday — veteran actor and former Hero No. 1 Govind Arun Ahuja a.k.a. Govinda joining Shiv Sena (no, not that one, but *that* one) — the top name that comes up is Arvind Kejriwal. After an underexaggerating day at the Rouse Avenue Court in Delhi, he was remanded — a courtly way of saying that the accused was sent away from court until his trial begins — till April Fool's Day. Rather remarkably in Indian politics for at least a decade, the Delhi CM takes top billing in terms of headline space. This is remarkable partly because he has managed to do so while being accused of being part of a supposed contraband operation (kickbacks) involving a (legal) recreational substance (alcohol) — both frowned upon — and partly because less than a month before national election starts, he has the most brand recall among politicians.

True, brand recall doesn't amount to electoral success. But by holding forth at court on Thursday, the AAP leader reaffirmed the truth in that old adage: bad news is good news, good news is no news, and no news is bad news. The timing of The Kejriwal Show can't hurt him more than jail time — or, at least, Enforcement Directorate custody time. How the next episode of this season goes will hold the key to the many twists and turns of plotlines, and knives.

TESSELLATUM Despite robust GDP growth, why is household spending still sluggish?

Consumption Conundrum



Neelkanth Mishra

If the economy is growing so fast, why is our volume growth so weak? Is a question asked by management teams of several large consumer companies. These concerns have intensified after the recent strong GDP release, even as they observe weak trends.

There are four reasons for this divergence:

● **Too invested in investment** India's post-pandemic economic recovery has been investment-led. When households buy new houses, and expand or repair existing ones, as they seem to be doing, they can't consume as much. In an economy growing at 7% annually, if the investment share of GDP rises from 29% to 35% over five years, investment will grow at 10% a year, and consumption, whose share would fall commensurately, will grow at 4.8%. This explains why investments are almost back to the pre-pandemic path (that is, where they would have been if the pandemic had not occurred), while private consumption is well below it.

● **Labour pains** Labour share of national income appears to be falling. An accurate split of capital and labour share is difficult in India. But several proxies point to this trend: weak real wage growth, steady fall in core inflation, especially in services where labour is a large component of costs, like household and personal services, and rising profits of large, listed firms as a share of GDP.

Reason? There are around 15 mn more surplus workers in the economy than before the pandemic. While GDP growth has been positively surprising, its level is more than a year behind the pre-pandemic path, implying more than a year's extra supply of workers. During the pandemic-driven lockdowns, supply of goods and raw materials kept pace with demand (both slowed down). But one



Still slow in the fast lane

could not shut off labour supply. 12 million workers joined the workforce annually in the last four years.

Given that capital ownership in most economies is generally concentrated in the top 10-20% of households, growth in the consumption basket of the rich is likely to be faster than average, and that of the lower 70-80% of households would be slower.

● **Small is beautiful** Nearly 60% of the workforce consists of people running their businesses and helping them employ. Wages account for only 40% of total household income. As much as 35% of household income is the operating surplus generated by own-account enterprises (OAEs) like small retail stores, restaurants, transport providers (bus or auto) and tailoring shops.

Their balance sheets, which were badly hurt during the pandemic as they ate into their capital during lockdowns, are only now starting to heal, as they are now returning to full-scale business. This is also contributing to weakness in volume growth of items in consumption baskets of low-income households.

More importantly, as they regain some of the market

share lost to larger firms, post-pandemic, the latter's reported volume growth would lag market growth. Small firms struggled to operate during intermittent lockdowns. Also, in the global supply shortages during 2021 and 2022, they struggled to get access to raw and packing materials.

For example, if local eateries start offering cheaper pizzas of good quality, larger QSR chains would have to work harder to generate profits.

● **Global links** Global commodity prices are settling at a meaningfully higher level than in 2019, reflecting enormous expansion in the global monetary base and rise of sovereign debt in developed countries. This explains some of the lower volume growth so far. But this should be less of a factor going forward, as global goods inflation has eased.

So, to summarise with ballpark numbers, if annual real GDP growth is 7%, given that capital ownership is usually concentrated in the top 10-20% of households, growth in the consumption basket of the rich should be faster than average, and that of the lower 70-80% slower



When households buy new houses, and expand or repair existing ones, as they seem to be doing, they can't consume as much

the rising share of investment, consumption is likely to grow at, say, 4.5%. Within that, given the falling labour share of income and weak balance sheets of OAEs, baskets representing the bottom 80% of households may see smaller-than-average growth, say, 3.5%. Further, as larger firms give back some of the market share gains of the last few years, their volumes may grow at 2-2.5%.

These trends may persist for a few years. A reviving real estate market suggests consumption growth may continue to lag GDP growth. Slack in the labour market may persist till GDP catches up to the pre-pandemic path, reversing some of the drop in consumption inequality seen in the last decade.

However, if new policy interventions like providing access to digital payments, affordable loans and access to markets via ONDC allow smaller firms to compete with larger ones, OAEs could repair their balance sheets faster by regaining the share lost in the last few years.

Structural factors could also be at play. An incessant annual supply of workers reminds one of the (Arthur) Lewis growth model, which talks of a sustained multi-decade rise in inequality as workers transition from agriculture to industry. Another Nobel laureate, Simon Kuznets, noted the increase in inequality when economies first started to generate meaningful surpluses (Kuznets curve).

However, given the lack of data, and India's somewhat idiosyncratic growth model, it may be premature to jump to such conclusions.

The writer is chief economist, Axis Bank, and Head of Global Research, Axis Capital



Pygmalion Effect

ULLHAS PAGEY

Have you ever dreamt of moulding someone with the power of your belief? In the realm of the human spirit, this phenomenon mirrors the myth of Pygmalion. It draws inspiration from a sculptor named Pygmalion who carved a breathtaking statue and infused with his passionate admiration, the statue miraculously came to life. This myth captures the transformative power of belief. When we hold a positive and unwavering conviction in someone's potential, it manifests. In the Upanishads, we see that the guru recognises the spark of divinity within the student. This belief acts as a catalyst, sculpting the disciples' spirit and guiding them towards Self-realisation.

Imagine a teacher who sees the spark of genius in a struggling student. As the teacher fosters this belief, the student blossoms, exceeding his own perceived limitations. Or consider a parent who showers their child with unconditional love and a vision of its future greatness that enables them to turn their dreams into reality.

The Pygmalion Effect becomes a testament to the power of love and faith to sculpt the human spirit. It is not merely a psychological paradigm but a potent spiritual tool. It reminds us that every individual is a masterpiece waiting to be unveiled. Echoing this belief, Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, 'Our highest destiny in outward life is to attain self-knowledge, or to become conscious of that in us which is above the influence of time and circumstance.'

Chat Room

Khaas Decision For EC, Courts

Apropos 'An Aam Adamant Dilemma' by Pranab Dhal Samanta (Mar 28), when the convenor of a national party that won by a landslide in two states is arrested after notification of elections and the code of conduct is in force, there is a case of infringement on the prerogative of the electorate to elect a government. This must, then, shift within the purview of the EC whose primary remit is to conduct fair elections. In the US, the courts have provided electoral leeway to the Republican candidate Donald Trump, who is charged with far serious offences and convicted in some, by giving as much primacy to his right to an unfettered campaign as to the right of the electorate to choose at its wisdom. So, the EC ought to consider seeking the bail of the convenor of a national party for unfettered canvassing, as must the courts continue addressing the judicial aspect.

R NARAYANAN
Navi Mumbai

Arvind Kejriwal functioning as CM from custody is just a make-believe attempt at administration since his instructions are simple one-liners and do not involve serious application. Both Kejriwal and the LG are waiting for the other to blink first. Kejriwal is trying to create a sympathy factor and the Centre is projecting a righteous posture. The impact on AAP's physical election campaigns cannot be overstated and EC may not do anything to avoid being branded partisan. This dilemma can be resolved only through the legal process and not by administrative actions.



RAJARAO KUMAR
Bengaluru

Google Play to Google 'Play'

Apropos the Edit, 'Guardians of Online Galaxy for Minors' (Mar 28), Florida's HB 3 law serves as a beacon of hope in prioritising child safety online. In a post-Covid world with heightened gadget usage, children's lives increasingly revolve around screens, leading to social isolation and mental health concerns. As children neglect outdoor entertainment leading to lack of physical activity, it's imperative for nations worldwide to follow Florida's lead. Only collective action can preserve children's innocence, ensuring a future in which they can thrive offline as well.

AYUSHI CHOUHAN
Ujjain

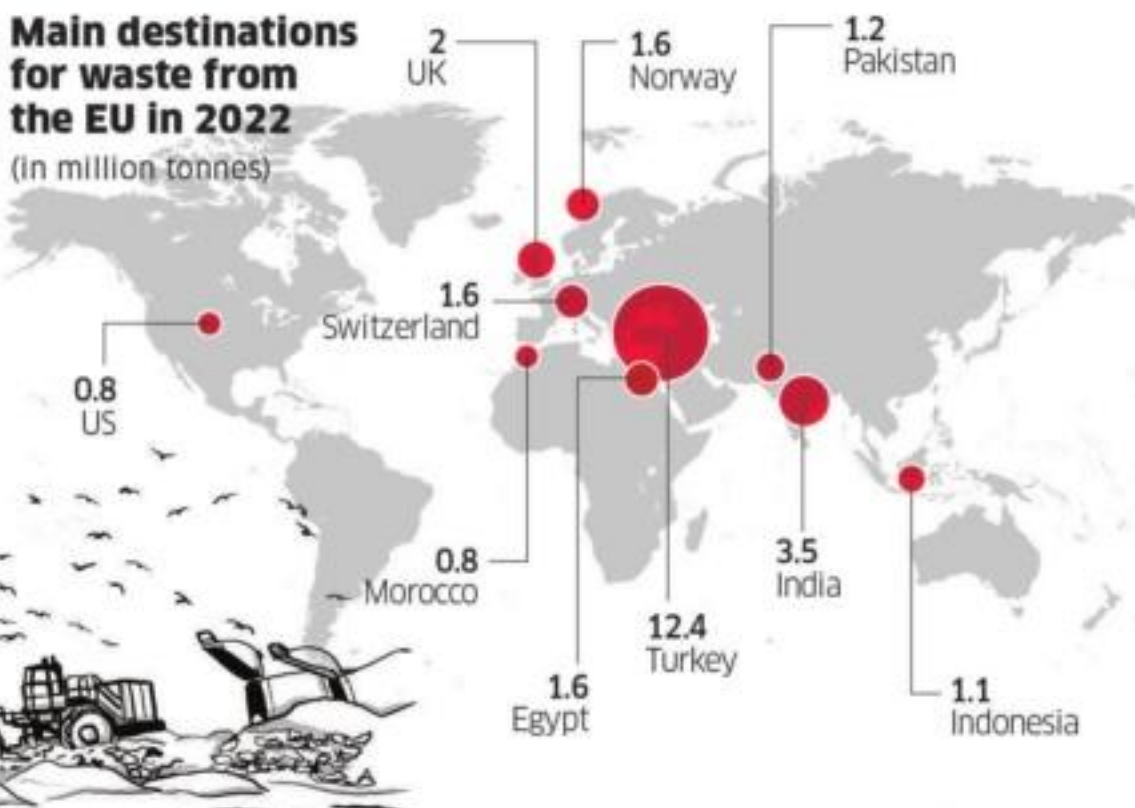
Letters to the editor may be addressed to editet@timesgroup.com

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a man named Kejriwal,
In custody, he felt quite eligible.
But he worried and fretted,
That if he's acquitted,
His stature would grow quite small!

Where EU Dumps Its Waste

The European Union exported 32.1 million tonnes of waste to non-EU countries in 2022, according to Eurostat. Ferrous metals waste (iron and steel) accounted for 55% of the bloc's waste exports. Paper waste (4.9mt) accounted for 15%, with around 30% bound for India...



Market Fix for Inequality



Dhiraj Nayyar

The subject of inequality makes for sensational and incendiary headlines. A March 2024 World Inequality Lab working paper, 'Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj', by Nitin K Bharti, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty and Anmol Somanchi, says that the top 1% of Indians own 40% of the country's wealth and account for around 22% of the nation's income. This inequality, the authors write, has worsened in the two decades of the 2000s, and it is worse than it was under the British Raj. It's a call for action.

But has inequality increased in the last 20 years? It depends on the measure used. At least one analysis of consumption — as opposed to income — data by Surjit S Bhalla and Karan Bhasin shows that urban and rural inequality has declined, particularly in the last decade. This makes sense, as GoI schemes have reached targeted beneficiaries much more efficiently.

With direct cash transfers and ambitious schemes like Ayushman Bharat for health insurance — which prevent families from sinking into poverty at the time of a health crisis like the pandemic — other things being equal, spending power of the lowest strata is bound to be better. At the same time, it is also intuitive that wealth and income inequality may have gone up.

Upper deciles have benefited from an unshackling of entrepreneurship. Lower deciles are still stuck in low-productivity agricultural employment. But everyone is better off than in the 1990s, or even in the early 2010s.

This is important. India is still an emerging economy. Its per-capita income has not touched \$3,000. At this

stage, it needs more and more growth so that everyone can have a share of a bigger pie. Unsurprisingly, India was more equal under the Raj. There were hardly any rich Indians. And the GDP pie was small. Everyone was more equal and poorer. The same could be said about the pre-liberalisation era. Would anyone, including the bottom deciles, want to return to those eras for the benefit of greater equality?

The real danger with the equality messiahs is their favoured policy prescription, namely tax. Applying Western narratives on taxing the rich more on their incomes and wealth is counterproductive in India. This country spent more than 40 years taxing upper-income groups up to 95% of their income. It is what created the black economy and other distortions.

At a time when entrepreneurship is attracting youth in larger numbers than ever before, it makes little sense

to be seen to penalise wealth creation. Even today, the highest income groups pay an I-T (including surcharges) of almost 40%. That is not low by any standard.

The notion of taxing wealth will lead to a flight of entrepreneurs to other jurisdictions. This is a mobile group, and plenty of countries provide legitimate tax havens. India wants her entrepreneurs to live at home as US entrepreneurs do.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that what the World Inequality Lab paper says about widening income and wealth disparities is true to a T, and that something should be done about it. Even then, the solutions to address the challenge do not lie in frowning on billionaires and imposing more taxes. It lies in creating the conditions for the bottom deciles to earn more income and generate more wealth for themselves.

This will not happen until 50% of the labour force works in agriculture to produce 15% of GDP. Taxing the rich more does not alleviate their livelihoods. Every country that has become rich has moved people out of agriculture into more gainful employment, mainly in manufacturing. GoI is adopting the right strategy by focusing on manufacturing. Considerable success is being achieved. However, India needs a robust labour-intensive manufacturing sector, such as textiles or footwear, for a greater dent in income and wealth.

In these sectors, India trails competitors like Vietnam and Bangladesh. Solution is to implement more market reforms, not increase gov intervention. Only reformed land laws, which make land acquisition easy and reformed labour laws that acknowledge the cyclical nature of business in such industries will enable India to achieve the scale required for competitiveness.

It may sound counterintuitive, but to reduce inequality, India needs more markets and more entrepreneurs, and less gov. World Inequality Lab won't tell you that.

The author is chief economist, Vedanta

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



BLISS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Reading Aloud Poetry To Oneself

Reading poems aloud to yourself is a joyous experience that unveils depths of language and emotion. The act transcends mere digging out words from a page, transforming both reading and reading aloud into a stream of sounds, rhythms and meanings that revive the many meanings of words in you.

The cadence of poetry delights your ear. Each line is a note, composed to create harmony or discord. When you read aloud, these nuances of rhythm, cadence and rhyme come alive, enveloping you — both performer and audience — in an auditory journey through the poet's intentions.

Reading poetry aloud lets your mind's boots go deeper into the mud of words. As they escape your lips, they take on new dimensions, revealing hidden onion layers of meaning and emotion. And vocalising them transforms reading from a solitary activity into a shared experience with absent poet and present you — a magical exchange of secrets and truths.

The physical act of speaking poetry can still your mind even while paradoxically rousing it. Your voice acting as a tether connects both listener and speaker — you — in a tight landscape of words, lines, stanzas.



Tap, not tax, the rich more



CONTRAPUNTO

Nobody would say, 'I'm voting for this guy because he's got the stronger chin,' but that, in fact, is partly what happens

DANIEL KAHNEMAN

Leaders & Candidates

Even in parties led by powerful netas, some poll nominees are crucial

BJD founding member, and six-time Cuttack Lok Sabha MP, Bhartruhari Mahtab, joined BJP Thursday. If democracy is a temple, we're in the midst of a desi-style electoral pilgrimage. Or is it more seasonal migration? Either way, flighty MPs and MLAs, heavyweights and sundry politicians, are in flux, ever-ready to catch tailwinds to brighter political horizons.

BJP set | To manage this kumbh of scurrying netas, for most of whom BJP is mecca, the party has a joining committee – helmed by seniors such as Anurag Thakur, Ravi Shankar Prasad and Rajeev Chandrashekhar. There are of course switches from regional to regional, like BSP to SP, or to Congress, but it's a trickle compared to BJP's intake. A report says 80k politicians and workers from other parties are joining BJP – the news itself is good optics for BJP.

Superstar leader | Where a party is personality-led, as BJP is under Modi, candidates' impact is limited. From Patnaik to Mamata, Jagan to Kejriwal, it's the party leader's X factor that draws in the votes. It's why BJP's able to drop over a third of its sitting MPs and field fresh faces, and accommodate imports, at the same time addressing anti-incumbency vibes. Voters can rue why their elected representatives switch loyalties so casually, but it all falls by the wayside when the leader is all-powerful. Not for nothing is AI being invoked to resurrect Karunanidhi or Jayalalithaa.

Immovable assets | On home-turfs voters largely opt for the local family that's held the reins of power, regardless of the party the candidate belongs to. Thus, very often, even when a party upends a politician from his home-turf, he/she would rather fight as an Independent or 'rebel' candidate. In MP (29 seats), Kamal Nath borough Chhindwara is the only seat BJP lost in 2019.

Understanding vote shares | Winnable candidates are those with a voter base. A wild jump in vote share on any seat for any party, regardless of win/ loss, indicates a 'winnable' candidate was imported. So even minor parties swing victories with bankable nominees. In reserved constituencies, that SC candidate who usually wins is the one with support of majority communities.

Mahtab carries to BJP legacy vote shares. BJP's announced 18 candidates of Odisha's 21 LS seats. Does Mahtab get the Cuttack ticket? Or will he be fighting an assembly seat? And can BJD bring on a giant slayer? It's open season.

We're What We Feel

Daniel Kahneman, 2002 economics Nobel winner, showed emotions guide decisions

A young Jewish boy was rushing home in Nazi occupied Paris, trying to avoid attention. He had missed the 6 pm curfew and the Star of David on his sweater, a compulsory identifier for Jews, meant trouble. That seemed to come in the form of an approaching German in a black uniform of the dreaded SS. What happened next would influence the evolution of economic theory later. The German stopped him and spoke with emotion. He pulled out his wallet and showed him the picture of a child. He finally sent the boy home with some money. It led Kahneman to conclude people are "endlessly complicated and interesting".

Economics built its theoretical framework around unemotional human beings who made rational choices. Kahneman and his collaborator Amos Tversky injected a dose of realism into this framework. This happened by integrating lessons from psychology into the decision-making of the economic man. It's intuitive, we have a limited amount of will power or self-control. That can't lead to the always rational "homo economicus". Kahneman's work laid the foundation of behavioural economics, which provides better insights into real world behaviour.

Kahneman's core ideas revolve around decision-making in a world of uncertainties. He emphasised the importance of intuitive judgements, which are a halfway point between perceptions and reasoning. Our intuition depends on mental approaches we are comfortable with. Perhaps it's in financial markets that these psychological insights show up repeatedly. At the end of every asset bubble, the only certainty is that we will repeat the mistakes. Kahneman's work is not judgemental in nature. He observed it's entrepreneurs' "delusional optimism" that is one of capitalism's driving forces. His most important lesson was that economics is about human behaviour. And we're complicated and sometimes unpredictable.

Caste aside

A new kind of census has got me wondering as to who, or what, I'm supposed to be

Jug Suraiya

Jug Suraiya

Last October, Bihar released results of India's first caste-based census after Independence, and this January Andhra Pradesh launched a similar exercise, with officials going from house to house asking people which caste they belong to.

What's worrying me is that Haryana, where Bunny and I live, might follow suit, and also decide to have a caste survey.

Being asked which caste I belong to poses an existential conundrum. Because for the life of me, or that of Manu, I haven't the faintest idea as to what my caste is, if any at all.

Ostensibly, the census is meant to identify underprivileged castes who are entitled to get govt freebies, like gas cylinders. Not so ostensibly, the identification of different castes is said to be an opposition strategy to split NDA govt's supposedly monolithic Hindutva vote.

Whatever the reason behind the exercise, to me my caste is, to quote Churchill about Russia, a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

According to my eldest sister, who taught Hindi, in that language the word Saraiya – which is how my name ought to be spelt – means 'tunnel' or 'hole'. According to her, our family was descended from barbers who traditionally pierced noses and ears for nose rings or earrings. Barbers belong to what are now called OBCs, so I might qualify to be an OBC, even though I don't know the ABC about caste.

Bunny is even more clueless about her caste than I am about mine. Until being enlightened to the contrary, she thought that gotra was an ailment caused by iodine deficiency and varna was a misspelling of an automobile brand of Korean provenance. According to her dad, their family name of Sood might indicate that before settling in Punjab they originated in the south, Sud – pronounced Sood – being the French word for south.

Does that mean that Bunny is what northerners call a Madrassi passing herself off as a Punjabi, and that too of French extraction? Caste has never been more cosmopolitan.

If the census-wallas come around maybe we'll just put ourselves down as out-castes. Or outcasts?

Your Job Is Safe If Your Freedom Is

In a culture of creativity, AI can be used to open up far more opportunities than it shuts down. And this culture can only flourish where individual liberties do too



TK Arun

India's staffing data indicates that AI jobs are growing twice as fast as other digital roles. This underlines that whether someone would end up losing their job to AI or wield AI to create far more value than ever before, depends on the human agency that person possesses.

Someone conditioned to simply follow instructions, and move in a rut, will probably lose their job to AI. Those who are in command of what they do, within their context, will find AI tools to enhance their output. Whether you are Charlie Chaplin of *Modern Times*, who, caught up in the machine, writhes helplessly, or Chaplin of *The Great Dictator*, who delivers that rousing speech at the end, depends on your critical faculties. This, in turn, depends on the political economy within which you function.

Sam Altman, of ChatGPT fame, told the Dubai World Governments Summit that AI needs a global oversight body, on the lines of the International Atomic Energy Agency for nuclear energy. The AI industry is keen to outsource regulation to govts and transnational bodies – it does not want to be held accountable for the things that go awry, it just needs to claim to have complied with the applicable regulation. Imagine laid-off employees of Infosys bringing a class action suit against Open AI for eating their lunch!

Before we give in to the temptation to explore the world of *Terminator*-like cyborg killers and intimate passion with humanoid robots, let us think of what AI could do to jobs.

Developing AI would entail writing smart code, testing the results for hallucination, bias and consistent reliability, producing AI tools, and things like these. That means high-end jobs, calling for high levels of education and innovation. It would generate a fair number of traditional manufacturing, managerial-administrative, marketing, logistics jobs, as well.

Pervasive AI would call for a vast number of advanced computing chips, which would need to be manufactured, transported, deployed in server farms (for cloud computing), or in devices for situations that call for computing in-situ (edge computing, in the jargon). For cloud computing to work, you need ultra-fast networks capable of large data throughput. Laying that network and making the gear for such networks mean yet more traditional jobs.

But the more fascinating part is how AI would impact or transform ordinary jobs. To get a flavour, go to Bing's Copilot and ask it to draw a sketch of Ram temple, or to write slogans for the farmers' protest on

Motorised transport created new jobs in itself, and enabled entire new industries to come up and flourish, creating millions of new jobs and unimagined prosperity.

The tech disruption wrought by AI is unlikely to be any different in its economic fallout. Now, it takes a streaming platform like Netflix to pick up an idea for a television show like *Squid Game*, and make it a global mega hit. Imagine a future in which a combination of satellite broadband and AI enables a thirty-something, stay-at-home Kolkata nerd to produce a graphic novel based on the adventures of *Vikramaditya Vetal*, translate its speech bubbles into every language on earth, and make it accessible from anywhere. Imagine, further, while we are at it, that Taylor Swift dubs it 'adorable' on Instagram!

Or consider a Kalarippayattu aficionado in Kochi thinking up a game franchise based on the martial heroes of Kerala's *Northern Ballads*, with their heady mix of skilled action, ambition, lust, betrayal, loyalty and courage. AI would destroy language as a barrier to universal access. Demand for illustrators and writers would multiply.

AI might sound technologically daunting. But the smartphone in your pocket is a supercomputer far superior to whatever the moon-landing Apollo mission had. That does not intimidate you. Similar would be the case with AI. It would take high skill to develop AI tools, but not to use them.

But that is a risk as well. Someone with AI but no drawing skills could produce decent drawings. An AI-assisted coder could produce 10 times more code. What happens to illustrators and coders rendered superfluous by AI?

Every individual who loses their job to AI will not need to be a creative genius who can come up with new, AI-enabled economic opportunities. But there has to be a large enough number of creative minds tackling this challenge, and succeeding.

That calls for societal dispersal of creativity, an ability to think outside the box, qualities antithetical to obedience to authority and respect for hierarchy. Authoritarian political cultures that crush dissent and demand compliance from citizens are likely to crumble before the AI onslaught, even as political cultures that foster individual freedoms make AI their servant, to achieve more.

A strong argument for not going the China way.

'India buying Russian oil is ok, but don't fund Putin's war machine...we need more jets, ammo...we can work with Trump'

In Delhi for the first time since the start of the war, Ukraine's foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba speaks to Rudroneel Ghosh in a TOI exclusive. Excerpts:

- **What's the current state of the Ukraine war?**
It drags on. You have to assess the war in all its complexities – the situation on land, air and sea. On land, the frontline is more or less stabilised but heavy fighting continues in different areas. We dominate the seas. But Russia, unfortunately, dominates the air because of its ballistic missiles, drones and guided aerial bombs. When we have enough air defence systems, F-16 fighters etc, we'll be able to knock Russia out of the skies and dominate two of the three battlefields. If we receive enough artillery ammunition, we'll be able to take advantage on the ground.
- **Last year's counteroffensive failed. If Nato members send troops to Ukraine, won't it exacerbate the situation?**
Wars of this scale are fought in stages. There are ups and downs. What matters is the end-game. We've already liberated half the territories occupied since the invasion. We defeated Russia's Black Sea fleet and restored our export corridors, even our exports to India.
We never asked for foreign troops. We're proud of our soldiers and only ask to give them everything they need. We know how to win but just need the tools to do it. I don't know how things will evolve, but I do see any appetite in the collective West to deploy combat troops? Definitely not.
- **But you're facing a crunch in ammunition and equipment. Are your war plans changing?**
Strategy doesn't change. Goal is to make another large-scale invasion by Russia impossible. Tactics to achieve this may change. If we had five more batteries of Patriot air defence systems and sustainable supply of artillery rounds, we would be doing much better on ground. But that isn't the case. So, we have to adapt while looking

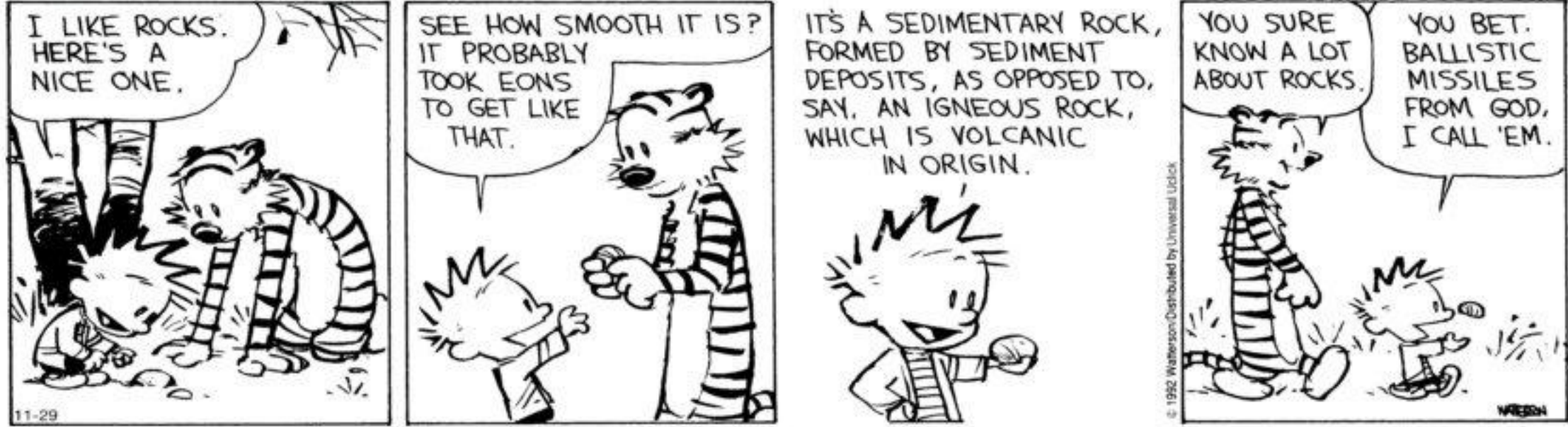


for capabilities to do better.

Yes, US couldn't pass the \$60bn aid package, but they found a way for another military assistance package recently. Meanwhile, Europe's decided to purchase artillery ammunition from outside Europe for Ukraine.

- **But can you actually deter Russia? Putin's into another term, Russia's economy withstood West's sanctions.**
What if we spoke in 1940s and I asked what are India's chances of Independence? Back then many would say chances were zero. But today, India is an independent global leader. What Ukraine is for the Russian empire is what India was for the British empire. This is why Russia's desperately fighting for control over Ukraine.
It understands that losing Ukraine will be the end of Russia's imperial project.
- **How do you see Ukraine fighting under a potential Trump presidency?**
Outcome of the US election is not known. But we have experience of dealing with Trump. By the way, Trump was the first US president to sell lethal weapons to Ukraine. So there are ways to work with Trump.
- **You criticised India in the past for buying Russian oil.**
Anything that makes the Russian war machine benefit is bad. India is buying Russian oil, but the rupees with which it is paying, is not making it to the Russian economy – this is good. So we're not, per se, against cooperation between India and Russia. But we're against anything that helps Russia make money to invest in its war machine. Early in the war, we saw more engagement between India and Russia, and less between India and Ukraine. But that's changed of late. Conversations our leaders had, and my visit to New Delhi, are testament.
- **So, you're not against India-Russia cooperation so long as it doesn't fuel the Russian war machinery?**
Our job's to convey a simple message to New Delhi. When you decide to engage with Russia, please know the red line for Ukraine is financing Russia's war machine. So structure your deals with Russia such that you're not financing Russian weapons.
- **This is very different from your earlier stand about isolating Russia.**
I want Russia to be isolated and be part of the ocean. That's my perspective. But how to achieve that is all tactics. I can demand India sever all ties with Russia, but that's not going to happen. But what I can achieve, is to deprive Russia of income to produce more weapons.
- **Do you see India mediating a truce between Ukraine and Russia?**
I'm in New Delhi to discuss moves India can make as a leader. It doesn't have to be an immediate truce or ceasefire, because everything we know about Russia and its purposes tells us that peace is probably not what they're looking for. But we have to identify steps and areas where India will use its reputation and authority to lead other nations. One such measure is the Peace Formula proposed by Ukraine. This will be my subject matter here.
- **Are you looking to move beyond the conflict? Is there war fatigue?**
We are trying to get support for a post-conflict situation. I will be discussing with minister Jaishankar and other Indian representatives the eventual participation of Indian companies in the reconstruction of Ukraine – post war, it'll be one of the world's largest construction sites. And we want Indian businesses to take part. We look forward to a boring life, where war is remembered but not experienced on a daily basis. But to achieve that we have to win. If we lose we cease to exist. And you do not tire of fighting for your existence.
- **Are you open to freezing the conflict?**
No, because freezing the conflict means another large-scale invasion will follow. We have to create a reality where Russia will accept once and for all the independence of Ukraine. If Russia accepts the independence of Ukraine, that would be the beginning of a completely different story.

Calvin & Hobbes



Cross Is A Symbol Of Death And Abundant Life

Janina Gomes

On Good Friday, Christians venerate the cross of Christ. According to Sarah Coleman, an author, "The cross is a symbol of death but so much more – death and life, hate and love, violence and peace, accusation and forgiveness, sin and purity, brokenness and wholeness, all is lost but everything is gained, destruction and restoration, death and victory. The cross, once the cruelest form of execution, is now a symbol of abundant life."

For her, the cross has several meanings. The cross means love. Christ died for people who lost their way. It was his choice – a choice made in love. The message of the cross is that it is a gift of God to the undeserving. In I Corinthians 5:8, St Paul, an apostle of Jesus, said: "Let

us celebrate the Passover, no longer with the old yeast, which is sin and perversity, let us have unleavened bread that is purity and sincerity." And in his Letter to the Romans 5:8 he said, "But see how God manifested his love for us, while we were still sinners." The crucifixion was not the end but only the portal to the resurrection, when Jesus rose from the dead. That is the beginning.

The cross is personal. St Paul, in his Letter to the Philippians 3:10-11, said that he would like to know Jesus and experience the power of the resurrection by sharing in his sufferings and become like him in his death, and through this attain the resurrection from the dead.

The Cross is wilful humility. St Paul in

his Letter to the Philippians 2:6-8 said, "Though he was of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking on the nature of a servant, made in human likeness, and in his appearance found as a man, he humbled himself by being obedient to death on the cross."

Therefore, our life's prayer should be, 'Not my will but yours be done.' Being in the will of God is not a passive thing. It is an act of will.

The Cross is prophetic. There are many prophecies of the cross in the Bible from Genesis, the first book, to Revelation, the last book. From the beginning of time, God has been planning to rescue humanity from the clutches of evil by Jesus's horrific death on the cross.



THE SPEAKING TREE

The cross is also final. Past hurts, pain, and problems don't belong on your back any longer, says Coleman. Jesus has taken them on his. The debt is paid, so all we have to do is to look at the cross, repent and receive our salvation.

Bishop Robert Barron, an authoritative speaker on the Gospels, says that the cross was a brutal instrument, but God, in Christ, accepted it and overcame it through his divine love. And in this sign, the fallen powers of the world are subverted; sin, death and the devil are vanquished.

So, when you gaze at the cross of Christ, place at its feet, all your pain and anguish, struggles and achievements. See in them a meaning that goes way beyond the perspectives of this earthly life, praying that for you too, they are a portal to the resurrection that Christ promised us.

Truth travels freely

Kejriwal’s arrest gets international attention; vendetta politics may boomerang on ED

Brought to the Rouse Avenue Court amid high drama, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has described his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate in the excise policy case as a “political conspiracy.” Himself making submissions in the court after taking the special judge’s permission, he expressed confidence that the public will give a “fitting reply to this injustice”. Seeking to establish a link between the Electoral Bond donations received by the ruling party and his arrest, the Delhi Chief Minister said that people were being turned ‘approver’ in the case and being forced to change their statements. “My arrest by the ED is a political conspiracy ... the approver gave the BJP Rs 55 crore,” he said. As a precursor to this setting, Kejriwal’s wife, Sunita, broke her silence and hinted at the impending revelation of this crucial piece of information. Kejriwal, known for his anti-corruption stance and vocal criticism of the Centre, was arrested last week on charges of being embroiled in a multi-crore liquor scam. The arrest sparked widespread outcry and protests, with supporters of Kejriwal alleging political vendetta and the BJP’s bid to settle political scores with the AAP upon losing the MCD elections after 15 years. Apart from being charged with soliciting kickbacks from liquor traders in exchange for favours, the Delhi Chief Minister is also accused of being the “kingpin and key conspirator” in the now-scrapped policy. The agency has already arrested at least 14 top AAP leaders, including Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia and Minister Sanjay Singh, in connection with the case.



Meanwhile, the international community has also been drawn into the fray, with the US making remarks regarding Kejriwal’s arrest that have drawn the ire of Indian officials. The US State Department expressed concern over what it termed as “the apparent suppression of dissent” in India, calling for due process and respect for human rights. However, Indian authorities swiftly responded, asserting that the comments were unwarranted interference in the country’s internal affairs. Germany was the first country to speak against Kejriwal’s arrest. Whenever a politician is put behind bars, there are consequences to it. The Union Government should be doubly sure that it has a watertight case against the accused person, else there are high chances that it will boomerang. Due to the lack of information on the case in public domain, we shall assume that the authorities have a strong case against the Delhi CM and that due process of law would be followed. But if it is an exercise in haste, Kejriwal’s words might prove prophetic as elections are just around the corner. The citizens are discerning enough to read any signs of political vendetta. The outcome of this legal battle and its broader implications remain uncertain, but one thing is clear – the events unfolding around Kejriwal have captured the attention of the nation and the world, highlighting the enduring struggle for transparency, accountability and justice in the corridors of power.

PICTALK



A shepherd with his sheep near a mustard field on the outskirts of Srinagar

PTI

Dandi March: Salt, soul and satyagraha

The Dandi March serves as a reminder that peaceful protest can be a potent weapon against injustice and oppression

The 1980s film ‘Mard’ immortalised a poignant scene that encapsulates the essence of patriotism, rebellion, and sacrifice in Indian cinematic history. In this scene, the protagonist, amidst relentless flogging by the heroine armed with chains, whispers with unyielding spirit, “For this salt, our Mahatma led a revolution.” This homage vividly captures the spirit of the Salt Satyagraha of 1930, a pivotal moment in India’s quest for independence, led by Mahatma Gandhi. The Salt Satyagraha, which took place from March 12 to April 6, 1930, galvanised a nation against British colonial rule. Gandhi’s symbolic act of picking up salt at Dandi defiantly challenged the salt taxes imposed by the British, symbolising defiance and resilience in India’s freedom struggle. Over 90,000 brave souls willingly embraced brutality in their pledge for non-violence, standing as a beacon of hope against tyranny. The genesis of the Dandi March was rooted in the momentum established by the Bardoli Satyagraha in 1928, led by Sardar



Vallabhbhai Patel. This successful movement unified farmers and nationalists against oppressive British taxation, revitalising the spirit of the freedom struggle. By 1930, the Indian National Congress boldly articulated its aspiration for independence, setting the stage for Gandhi’s Salt Satyagraha. Gandhi’s letter to Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, articulated the grievances of millions and announced his intention to lead a nonviolent protest against British atrocities. Despite Gandhi’s emphasis on dialogue and peaceful resolution, the Viceroy’s inadequate response led to the commencement of the Dandi March on March 12, 1930. Accompanied by 78 dedicated followers, Gandhi embarked on a significant march covering nearly 241 miles from Sabarmati

Ashram to Dandi. This symbolic journey aimed at challenging the oppressive salt tax and British monopolistic control over salt production. The disciplined resolve of the satyagrahis exemplified unity amidst diversity, embodying the nation’s aspirations for liberation. On April 6, 1930, Gandhi’s defiance of the Salt Laws at Dandi marked a pivotal moment in India’s struggle for independence. His call to civil disobedience catalysed a mass boycott of British goods, prompting a harsh crackdown from British authorities. Despite brutal repression, the spirit of nonviolent resistance persisted, revealing the resilience of the Indian populace. The Salt Satyagraha showcased resolute collective action, with over 60,000 willingly imprisoned and thou-

sands more participating in peaceful protests. Despite Government reprisals, the ‘satyagrahis’ maintained remarkable restraint and non-violent discipline. This non-violent resistance ultimately led to negotiations with Congress leadership and Gandhi’s release after a year of imprisonment. The Dandi March culminated in the historic breaking of the salt laws, a symbolic act of defiance that reverberated globally. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. drew inspiration from Gandhi’s example, recognising the power of nonviolent resistance in confronting injustice. The Dandi March was not just a chapter in history but a transformative moment in India’s fight for independence, marking Gandhi’s emergence as a spiritual force. Through unwavering dedication to love and nonviolence, Gandhi wielded a potent weapon against oppression, demonstrating the profound impact of spirituality in challenging times. (The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)



RAJDEEP PATHAK

A tribute to the two great saints of India

The lives of Swami Atmasthananda ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji are an indelible example of the motto of Ramakrishna Mission ‘Atmano Mokshaartham Jagaddhitaaya Cha’



NARENDRA MODI

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the grand festival of Lok Sabha elections, the news of the demise of Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj brought my mind to a standstill for a few moments. Srimat Swami Smaranananda Ji Maharaj was a pioneer of India’s spiritual consciousness and his demise is like a personal loss. A few years ago, the demise of Swami Atmasthananda Ji and now the departure of Swami Smaranananda Ji on his eternal journey has left many people bereaved. My heart, like that of crores of devotees, saints and followers of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, is deeply saddened. During my visit to Kolkata earlier this month, I had gone to the hospital to enquire about Swami Smaranananda Ji’s health. Just like Swami Atmasthananda Ji, Swami Smaranananda Ji too dedicated his entire life for spreading the ideas of Acharya Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Mata Sharada Devi and Swami Vivekananda across the world. While writing this article, the memories of meetings and conversations with him are getting refreshed in my mind. In January 2020, during my stay at Belur Math, I meditated in the room of Swami

Vivekananda. During that visit, I had a long conversation about Swami Atmasthananda Ji with Swami Smaranananda Ji. It is widely known that I had a close relationship with Ramakrishna Mission and Belur Math. As a seeker of spirituality, I have met different saints and mahatmas and been to many places over the period of more than five decades. Even in Ramakrishna Math, I got to know about the saints who dedicated their lives to spirituality, among whom personalities like Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji were prominent. Their sacred thoughts and knowledge provided contentment to my mind. In the most important period of my life, such saints taught me the true principle of *Jan Seva hi Prabhu Seva*. The lives of Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji are an indelible example of the motto of Ramakrishna Mission ‘Atmano Mokshaartham Jagaddhitaaya Cha’. We all are inspired by the work being done by Ramakrishna Mission for the promotion of education and

THEIR SACRED THOUGHTS AND KNOWLEDGE PROVIDED CONTENTMENT TO MY MIND. IN THE MOST IMPORTANT PERIOD OF MY LIFE, SUCH SAINTS TAUGHT ME THE TRUE PRINCIPLE OF JAN SEVA HI PRABHU SEVA

rural development. Ramakrishna Mission is working on India’s spiritual enlightenment, educational empowerment and humanitarian service. In 1978, when the disastrous flood struck Bengal, Ramakrishna Mission won the hearts of everyone with its selfless service. I remember, when an earthquake ravaged Kutch in 2001, Swami Atmasthananda Ji was among the first people to call me and offer all possible assistance for disaster management on behalf of the Ramakrishna Mission. Under his direction, Ramakrishna Mission helped many people who were affected by the earthquake. Over the past years, while holding various positions, Swami Atmasthananda Ji and Swami Smaranananda Ji laid great emphasis on social empowerment. Those who know the lives of these great personalities will definitely remember how serious these saints were towards modern education, skilling and women empowerment. Among his many inspiring traits, one thing that impressed me the most was Swami Atmasthananda Ji’s love and respect for every culture and every tradition.

The reason for this was that he used to travel continuously and had spent a long time in different parts of India. He learned to speak Gujarati while living in Gujarat. He used to even speak with me in the language and I loved listening to his Gujarati! At different points in India’s development journey, our motherland has been blessed by many saints and seers like Swami Atmasthananda Ji, Swami Smaranananda Ji who have ignited the spark of societal change. They have motivated us to work with a collective spirit and address all the challenges our society faces. These principles are eternal and will act as our source of strength as we embark on developing a Viksit Bharat during the Amrit Kaal. Once again, on behalf of the entire nation, I pay homage to such saintly souls. I am confident that all the people associated with the Ramakrishna Mission will further move ahead on the path shown by them. Om Shanti. (This is a tribute to Smaranananda ji Maharaj and Swami Atmasthananda Ji by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICIANS HITTING BELOW THE BELT

Madam — Apropos editorial “Political zealotry” published on March 28, this is my response. It pains one to note that exchanges amongst political rivals are getting too personal and downright abusive. Recent examples are Supriya Srinate of the GOP and Dilip Ghose of the BJP. Wish our “netas,” spokespersons and candidates were more accommodating and tolerant, instead of hissing at one another like venomous snakes. I cite here a witty remark by MP Piloo Mody that turned the tables on his opponent. Mody, a big roly-poly man, showed his back to a minister because he felt outraged at some point. The minister took strong objection to Mody’s gesture and interpreted it to be an insult to the House itself. Piloo Mody replied - “Mr. Speaker Sir, I have no front, no back, no flanks. I am round all over. So how could I have shown my back to the minister?” The House exploded in loud laughter. Our (generally) ill-tempered politicians should take a leave from the above incident and shun vituperative language while attacking their political opponents.

Avinash Godbole | Dewas

INEQUALITY RISES IN INDIA

Madam — Apropos news article “Mumbai surpasses Beijing as billionaire hub” published on March 27, this is my response. Paris-based World Inequality Lab has recently published a report titled, ‘Income and Wealth Inequality in India 1992 - 2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj’. As per the report, inequality in India declined till the early 1980s. Thereafter, it started rising sharply. The rise of top-end inequality gained tremendous momentum during the last 10 years. The top 1 per cent of Indians earn 22.6 per cent of the national income and their wealth share has risen to 40.1 per cent. The income share of the top 1 per cent of Indians is among the very highest in the world. The report says that India is now more unequal than during the time of the British Raj. Thanks to rising inequality, the tentacles

Mechanisation is needed



Apropos news article “Mechanisation needed to tackle farm issues,” published on March 28, this is my response. Recurring drought, and scarcity of water for irrigation, combined with a lack of modern farming equipment, have all contributed to a steep fall in productivity and income, forcing our farmers to take huge loans, without being able to repay them. Farmers’ income has not been able to keep pace, such as to cater to increasing production costs, including rising labour wages. Hence, agricultural machinery

becomes the need of the hour to alleviate farmers’ problems. It is also important to note that in farming several activities are highly time-bound and unless executed as per schedule, a farmer will suffer financial loss. Agriculture mechanisation, is, therefore, an appropriate answer to such challenges faced by farmers. Farm mechanisation and crop productivity have a direct correlation as they save time and labour, reduce drudgery, cut down production costs in the long run, reduce post-harvest losses, and boost crop output and farm income. Mechanisation is crucial in the agriculture sector, as it contributes towards improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the inputs used in crop production. Increasing the rate of farm mechanisation is critical for India to sustainably meet production demand and develop value chains and modernised food systems.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

of VIP culture are spreading rapidly with each passing day. My local SBI branch has opened a special counter where customers can withdraw or deposit money with ease avoiding long queues at the general counter. Standing at the end of a serpentine queue at the general counter, an old man leaning on his stick asked if the special counter was for differently-abled persons and senior citizens. Immediately, he was provided enlightenment with the information that the counter was only for the VIPs who would transact a minimum amount of Rs 50 thousand!

Sujit De | Kolkata

INDIA-SINGAPORE TIES

Madam — Apropos news article “India--Singapore to further deepen bilateral ties,” published on March 26, this is my response. The friendship between India and Singapore has stood the test of time for five decades. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had rightly emphasised the fact that Singapore was India’s “gateway” to the east. The phenomenal rise of Singapore from a small nation to a dream country for oth-

ers to emulate is in itself an achievement of sorts. Both India and Singapore have mutually beneficial cultural exchanges, defence relations, economic cooperation and skill building. Defence, sea and space, commerce and infrastructure, too, are areas of bilateral interest. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar’s recent Singapore visit saw him discussing wide-ranging issues with that country’s ministers including his counterpart Vivian Balakrishnan. Singapore is a destination much sought after by tourists. Besides, terror and security — very significant considering the deadlock over the South China Sea — could not escape the attention of the two leaders. India--Singapore have had a long relationship without a tinge of bitterness. That Modi himself has visited Singapore four times after he took over in 2014, underscores the importance attached by New Delhi to the bilateral relations.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

IMPACT AND DUALITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media often promotes formation of echo chambers and spread of false news



SHAINY SHARMA

Social media, a ubiquitous phenomenon in contemporary society, has revolutionised the way people communicate, share information and interact with one another. From its humble beginnings as online forums to the expansive platforms of today like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, Snapchat and many more, the term 'social media' has reshaped human interaction and societal norms to a large extent. Today, it has become an integral part of everyone's life, especially Generation Z and the impact is complex and multifaceted, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. Social media has fundamentally transformed communication dynamics, making it easier for individuals to connect with others globally. It has transcended geographical barriers, enabled real-time interaction and fostered virtual communities based on shared interests, identities and ideologies. Moreover, social media platforms have become instrumental in political discourse, activism and social movements, empowering voices that were previously marginalised and amplifying diverse perspectives. Millennials and Generation Z rely heavily on social media as a primary source of news and information which at times can lead to issues such as the spread of misinformation, echo chambers and filter bubbles, where individuals are only exposed to viewpoints that align with their own beliefs. Various studies have also shown that spending too much time on social media, especially before bedtime, disrupts the sleep pattern. Blue light suppresses the production of melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep, making it more difficult to fall asleep and reducing the overall quality of sleep. Studies also reveal that constant exposure to short-form content and distractions on social media platforms can lead to a decrease in attention span and difficulty concentrating on tasks that require sustained focus. Another major role of social media platforms which is responsible for various disruptions is promoting of unrealistic beauty standards through the use of filters, photo editing tools and the prevalence of influencers with idealised appearances, leading to body dissatisfaction and negative body image among Generation Z.



Such platforms are designed to be addictive, with features such as likes, comments, and notifications triggering dopamine release in the brain and can lead to compulsive use and dependency which is no less like other forms of addiction. Moreover, the constant exposure to carefully curated images and posts can create unrealistic expectations and foster feelings of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) among users. To mitigate the negative effects of FOMO irrespective of the generation gap, it becomes important to promote digital literacy, encourage healthy social media habits and foster offline connections and experiences such as practicing mindfulness, setting boundaries for screen time and cultivating meaningful relationships and activities that are not dependent on social media validation. Additionally, fostering a supportive and inclusive online community can also help alleviate feelings by emphasising authenticity, empathy and acceptance. There is no denying the fact that social media has brought about numerous benefits for Millennials and Generation Z in terms of connectivity, self-expression, and access to information, but at the same time it also poses challenges and risks that require careful consideration and management. Despite its transformative potential, social media presents a myriad of challenges that warrant attention. The addictive nature of social media and its impact on mental health, particularly among young people, raise concerns about excessive screen time, cyberbullying, and negative self-comparison. Balancing the advantages and drawbacks of social media usage is essential to harness its potential while mitigating its negative impacts on their well-being and society as a whole. *(The writer is an educator, views are personal)*

Navigating the legal and ethical implications of AI

In a world increasingly shaped by Artificial Intelligence, the discourse shifts from its capabilities to the imperative question of its ethical boundaries

In an era increasingly defined by Artificial Intelligence (AI), the pivotal question shifts from what AI is capable of to what it should be allowed to do. This reflection critically examines AI's potential to reshape our lives within ethical and legal frameworks. As we explore the vast landscapes carved by AI, we must ensure that our technological advancements are matched with an equally profound commitment to ethical responsibility. The advent of AI is a testament to human ingenuity, offering transformative possibilities in virtually every aspect of our existence. Yet, alongside its potential, AI introduces a spectrum of legal complexities that require careful consideration. The evolution of legal

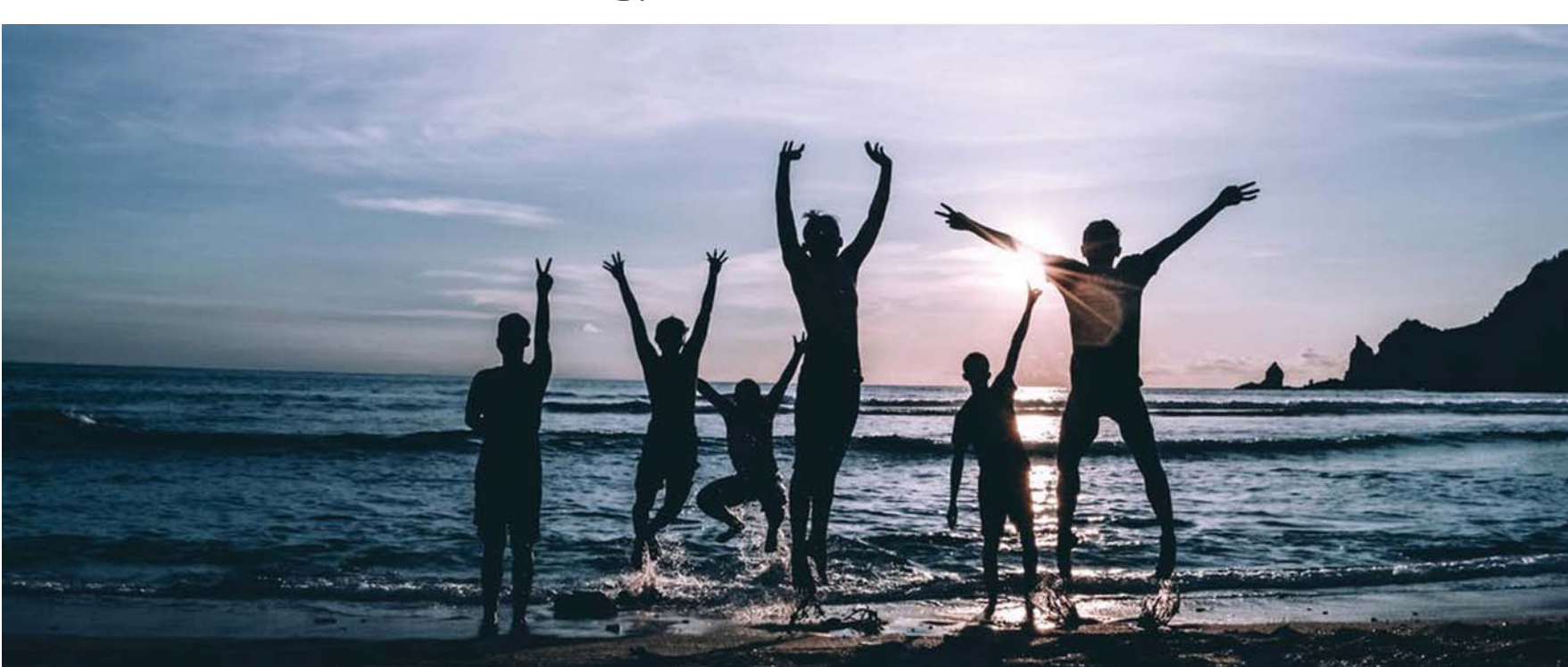


MANEESHA DHIR

jurisprudence in the face of AI's rapid development is a topic of paramount importance, dealing with issues ranging from privacy and data protection to intellectual property and employment. The Indian Government's embrace of AI through initiatives like "Digital India" and a National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence reflects a visionary stance on harnessing technology for societal benefit. However, the journey toward realising AI's full promise is fraught with challenges that demand vigilant oversight and a principled approach to regulation and ethics. On a global scale, AI raises questions that transcend national boundaries, presenting legal and ethical dilemmas that must be addressed comprehensively. The capacity of AI to analyse and utilise vast amounts of personal data has challenged existing privacy laws, sparking a worldwide reassessment of how we protect individual rights in the digital age. Countries are adopting comprehensive data protection regulations, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation and India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, to

Quantifying happiness is perplexing

The World Happiness Report places India at 126th rank, raising legitimate concerns about the methodology and biases inherent in such assessments



Happiness is complex and difficult to define, but this in no way implies that we do not know when we are happy. Happiness cannot be a permanent state of euphoria as the mind constantly changes its contours and shades and, by and large, remains an individual experience. Hence any exercise that seeks to generalise the impressions of a large number of individuals like those living within a country and brand them as happy or unhappy people is bound to be fraught with controversies. It will also inevitably reflect the biases of the measurers. When the definition of a variable cannot be agreed upon, its measurement will raise more controversies, but when such rankings are internationally publicised for branding countries and peoples which may influence the decisions of investors and donors, it is no longer a benign exercise without any accountability. On March 20 every year for the last seven years, which date has been marked by the UN as the International Day of Happiness, a New York-based agency called Sustainable Development Solutions Network has been bringing out an annual World Happiness Report, whose 2024 edition has placed India at 126th rank among 143 countries, much below countries like Saudi Arabia (28), China (60), Russia (72), Venezuela (79), Senegal (99), Iran (100), Palestine (103), Ukraine (105), Pakistan (108) even Myanmar (118). These countries are either strife-torn or war-ravaged, where the basic security of human life is not guaranteed, or ruled by autocrats and dictators who ruthlessly suppress the civil liberties of their people, especially of women, countries which are reeling under relentless crises in their democracy, polity and economy. This raises legitimate questions about the methodology used in the exercise that can produce such weird results. Finland has topped the ranking in each year so far, and the top 10 countries have also remained more or less the same, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Luxemburg, Switzerland and Australia. A common thread runs through all of them - high per capita income. Other higher-capita income countries also rank higher in the list, like New Zealand (21), UK

WE DO NOT NEED TO FEEL DEPRESSED AT OUR 126TH RANKING. INSTEAD, WE SHOULD IGNORE SUCH A PHONEY INDEX AND GO ABOUT OUR LIVES AND BUSINESS AS USUAL

(20), USA (23), Germany (24), or France (27). This is no surprise, because to the materialistic West hung on a culture of conspicuous overconsumption, money remains the primary and often the only source of happiness, unlike in Asian and other continental cultures. The only Asian country to feature in the list is Kuwait at 13th position, and the next one is Saudi Arabia at 28th. While Singapore features in 30th position, Japan, which has the largest concentration of longest-living people in the world, at 51st position, below Uzbekistan (47) and Kazakhstan (49). This raises natural questions about whether the index also reflects the inherent civilizational bias of the West against Asia, most of which used to be their colonies once—to treat them as superior or even equal would be an anathema to the West. Bhutan which reckons happiness as a core responsibility of Government and has adopted its Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index as a development indicator in its 2008 Constitution, was ranked 95th in 2019 and has not been ranked this year. GNH was the first such index and is far broader - having nine parameters, all non-income. Trying to measure the immeasurable will have its inherent contradictions. Happiness is a state of being, rather than a fixed state like a goal to be achieved that can be quantified and measured. Such measures therefore confuse happiness with "well-being" which is produced by the interplay of numerous extraneous factors like income, health, education, liberties, choices, relationships, physical and social security, etc. But even then, it is a subjective sense of well-being, which is neither measurable nor quantifiable. The rankings used in the World Happiness Report are based on six parameters of "subjective well-being": (1) per capita income, (2) healthy life expectancy at birth, (3) social support, (4) freedom to make

life choices, (5) generosity, and (6) perceptions of corruption. The happiness rankings are based on what the authors say are "life evaluations", on which Gallup World Poll (GWP) provides the data by asking respondents to evaluate their current life on a scale of 0 to 10 (happiest), using a typical sample size of 1000 for each country regardless of its population, and using a three-year average. The sample size is too small for a country like India to represent all its diversity and complexity. Data for per capita GDP on purchasing power parity (PPP) are taken from the World Development Indicators (WDI) of the World Bank, and then a natural log that fits the observations better. Data for healthy life expectancy at birth is provided by the WHO Global Health Observatory data repository. Social support is the national average of the binary responses (0=no, 1=yes) to the GWP question: "If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?" Freedom to make life choices is again the national average of binary responses to the GWP question: "Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?" Generosity is the residual of regressing the national average of GWP responses to the question: "Have you donated money to a charity in the past month?" on log GDP per capita, while perceptions of corruption are the average of binary answers to two GWP questions: "Is corruption widespread throughout the Government or not?" and "Is corruption widespread within businesses or not?" It does not require superlative intelligence to divine that all these parameters are derivatives of a single parameter, i.e., income or wealth of a nation, and hence will always favour rich nations over the poorer ones.

So, the richer you are, the happier you are; in other words, income is synonymous with happiness, an assumption not validated by facts, just as happiness cannot be equated with success in material terms. The mind is influenced by social and cultural factors; hence how we perceive happiness also depends on these factors. It also depends on the questions asked and the way they have been framed: Just ask "How much time you spend with your parents every week", or "For how long you have been married to your present spouse", and see how the scales turn against the rich western nations. In collectivist societies in Asia, people reckon happiness more as a shared experience rather than individual satisfaction with life, whereas in individualistic societies, people perceive happiness more in terms of individual satisfaction. Happy people increase the happiness of others around them; hence bonding within social groups and families contributes positively to happiness. Individualistic Western nations would score higher given the way the GWP questions have been framed. As every Indian knows from experience, we are not unhappy people, having been brought up to regard values and relationships as more important than wealth and to be content to live a simple life with few material possessions, with strong bonds with our extended families and the community. Even though perceptions are changing in a growing economy, these basic values have remained intact. We do not need to feel depressed at our 126th ranking. Instead, we should ignore such a phoney index and go about our lives and business as usual. *(The author, an ex-bureaucrat, is currently a Professor at the Arun Jaitley National Institute of Financial Management; views are personal)*

the digital age, ensuring fairness and equity in the application of AI. Internationally, the regulatory approach to AI varies significantly, with entities like the European Union adopting comprehensive frameworks while others pursue more sector-specific guidelines. This diversity reflects the complex interplay of legal, cultural, and societal factors that influence AI governance, emphasising the need for a globally coordinated dialogue on AI ethics and regulation. Integrating AI into the legal profession offers a glimpse into the future, showcasing AI's potential to enhance legal analysis, predict outcomes, and even assist in judicial decision-making. However, these advancements underscore the imperative for stringent ethical standards to uphold the integrity of the legal system. As AI continues to evolve rapidly, it becomes crucial for societies, especially within the diverse context of India, to engage in proactive discourse. We must anticipate future developments and craft legal frameworks that are flexible enough to adapt to the unpredictable technological landscape. This includes ensuring that the benefits of AI extend to all and democratising access to services like healthcare and education. In conclusion, as we chart the course of AI within the legal domain, our focus must steadfastly remain on enacting and refining laws that protect human rights and dignity. Achieving harmony between emerging technology and legal norms requires a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, where laws are designed not just to respond to the challenges posed by AI but to foresee and embrace its vast possibilities. With India at the forefront of AI innovation, buoyed by progressive policies and a wealth of intellectual capital, we stand on the brink of leading the global conversation on ethical AI. As we venture deeper into this new frontier, our collective aim should be a future where technology amplifies the noblest goals of law and justice, and in return, legal frameworks foster the responsible growth of Artificial Intelligence. *(The author is a legal expert. Views expressed are personal)*



The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Hope for J&K

Troop pullback, AFSPA revocation worth a try

UNION Home Minister Amit Shah has said that the Central Government will consider revoking the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Jammu and Kashmir. He has also mentioned the government's plans to pull back troops from the state-turned-UT and leave law and order duties solely to the J&K Police. The announcements leave no room for doubt that there has been a significant improvement in the security situation in J&K in recent years. The frequency of terror incidents and encounters has gone down; the annual death toll of civilians as well as security personnel has also dropped. Stone-pelting incidents, which had once become commonplace, are now a thing of the past.

Troop pullback and AFSPA revocation are a must for the government to achieve its objective of winning the hearts and minds of the UT residents. Recurring allegations of the misuse of the law — which gives the armed forces sweeping powers and immunity against prosecution in disturbed areas — have aggravated the trust deficit between the security forces and the citizens. The dreaded law should no longer be allowed to impede the restoration of normalcy in J&K. The authorities can take a cue from the phased withdrawal of AFSPA from one state after another in the North East, where development has gained momentum after decades of insurgency.

With the Supreme Court validating the constitutionality of the decision to abrogate Article 370, the Centre needs to promptly set into motion a series of confidence-building measures. Shah has stated that the J&K Assembly elections — last held in 2014 — would be conducted before September, as directed by the apex court. It is imperative to resume the electoral exercise so that regional political parties and voters can again become active constituents of a democratic polity. A timeframe for the restoration of statehood, which is at the core of the people's aspirations, should also be spelt out.

Food wastage

Crisis particularly grave in India

IN a world where 78.3 crore people grapple with chronic hunger, the revelation that 19 per cent of the food goes to waste demands urgent attention. The latest UN report underscores a stark reality: despite ample resources, the inability to manage food distribution effectively is not only morally reprehensible but also environmentally unsustainable. This crisis is particularly pronounced in India, where food wastage poses a significant challenge alongside persistent food insecurity. According to the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, one-third of all food in India is wasted or spoiled before consumption. Household food waste alone is estimated to be around 50 kg per person annually. Another UN report had shed light on a disconcerting nutritional trend in India, where a staggering 74.1 per cent of the population cannot afford a healthy diet.

The environmental implications of food waste are equally alarming. Like many other countries, India faces the adverse effects of greenhouse gas emissions associated with food production and waste. Methane emissions from decomposing food waste in landfills contribute to climate change.

The UN's findings should propel the world toward overhauling food systems and prioritising equitable distribution. In India, where millions struggle for adequate nutrition, addressing food wastage is a moral obligation. It requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates policy measures, public awareness campaigns and community-driven initiatives. Government interventions, such as implementing regulations to minimise waste and incentivising sustainable practices, are essential. Collaborative efforts between government agencies, NGOs and private enterprises can facilitate efficient redistribution of surplus food to underprivileged communities. Individual action can help combat food waste through practices like meal planning, utilising leftovers and supporting food banks.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, MARCH 29, 1924

A novel principle

THE Journalists' Association of India did well at a recent meeting in recording its protest against the assertion of Sir Maurice Hayward in the Bombay Legislative Council that it was the duty of newspaper editors to disclose the names of their correspondents when desired by the Government. The principle laid down by this spokesman for the Bombay Government was not only novel, but one which no self-respecting editor, whether Indian or English, would give effect to except in one of three classes of cases. These are: (1) when the editor published the communication on the distinct understanding that the name of the writer was to be given out if and when the occasion for giving it out arose; (2) when the correspondent himself had no objection to his name being disclosed; and (3) when the editor was convinced that the correspondent was actuated by malice or some other evil motive. Except in one or other of these specified cases, and between them they cover only a very small proportion of the cases in which newspapers publish anonymous contributions, no responsible editor of a newspaper would disclose the name of his correspondent, whether it is desired by the Government or by anyone else. The reason is quite clear, and it has nothing whatever to do with the ethical merits or demerits of anonymous journalism. A newspaper editor may refuse to publish an anonymous contribution or may publish it on the understanding that he will disclose the name of the writer if ever he is called upon to do so, but when he does publish the contribution without any such stipulation, there is between him and his correspondent an implied understanding that he will not give out the latter's name without his consent.

Hate rears its head on the campus

Gujarat University incident underscores the need to reconcile cultural differences



TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

SOME foreign students of Gujarat University were thrashed on the campus in Ahmedabad recently. They were offering namaz in an enclosed room allotted to them for the purpose before breaking their fast, as per the Islamic custom during the month of Ramzan.

The two students who had to be hospitalised were from Sri Lanka and Tajikistan. They had enrolled in the university in response to our government's invitation to foreign students.

The Vice-Chancellor, Neerja Gupta, said the offering of namaz was not the only provocation for the attack. She felt that some foreign students were not familiar with the eating habits of the majority of the local students. According to reports, the authorities had earmarked a separate enclosure outside the hostel building for the Ramzan prayers since there was no mosque on the campus. A group of protesters entered the hostel and attacked the students. Their rooms were ransacked. The police arrived when informed about the mayhem. Some arrests were also made. That was the saving grace, but should the disturbance have happened at all? The police can only act after the disturbances. They have to. The law enjoins them to do so.

The communal atmosphere in our beloved land had been a cause for concern even before the BJP-led Central Government was installed in 2014; since then, polarisation has increased perceptibly, what with cattle traders being



RUCKUS: Cops can discipline unruly students, but they are incapable of mending fences. P11

lynched, butchers losing their livelihood, Muslim traders being denied access to Hindu localities and a law to prevent Muslim boys from marrying Hindu girls being enacted by BJP-ruled states.

The divide between Hindus and Muslims, long in existence, has now been clearly defined and reinforced. The reaction to the presence of Muslim students on the campus, their communal prayers and dietary preferences was only to be expected, especially at a time when hate has become a living reality. When policymakers conceived the idea of encouraging foreigners to study in our universities, like developed countries have been doing for decades, and China is emulating them with much success, did they not think of acclimatising our teachers and students to what they would encounter?

An odd student from a developed country may enrol in our colleges, but the bulk of the foreign students will be from countries less developed than ours. Some will also be economically worse off than our

I dare say that many of the young men among the attackers have planned to go to the US, Canada, Australia or the UK for higher studies.

students. Policymakers should have anticipated the happenings in Gujarat. They should have warned the university management about what to expect. They should have pre-conditioned the student body to the differences in cultures and choices, including eating habits, which would need to be addressed. We cannot invite guests to our ancient land and then treat them shabbily. The students who were

thrashed and went through a traumatic experience are not going to forget it in a hurry. Their parents and friends in their countries must have already spread the word. The VC has not helped diminish the fallout by offering excuses for the unacceptable behaviour.

The police have been deployed to discipline unruly students. However, the cops are incapable of mending fences. Their only role will be to arrest and prosecute the errant youth. That process has started. But what is essentially required is friendship and understanding between local and foreign students. If the latter are going to stay on in our country, their need for religious observances and our need for the guests to respect our dietary regimen should be reconciled at a joint meeting presided over by the VC herself.

Before that meeting is called, the government should arrange for a psychologist to brief the VC so that she goes into the meeting with local and foreign students with the required mindset. It appears that she may have

washed her hands of the matter and left it to the police to solve it. That would be a mistake.

The bitterness of the experience will linger. The friction between the two warring parties will adversely affect the atmosphere on the campus. If the guests need an assurance that they will be safe, the VC should use her authority to convince the attackers to make the first move of reconciliation. They should be persuaded to approach the guests and extend the hand of friendship.

The VC will have her work cut out. The guests' need to pray and break the fast at sunset should be explained to our boys. They will have to accept that. A place for prayer in an enclosed room should be officially notified. To begin with, the attackers should be asked to host Iftar, which marks the breaking of the fast.

The guests should be educated about our objection to eating beef. I am sure they will understand the need "to do as the Romans do" as long as they are guests in our country. This is perhaps the main point of disagreement. In fact, cow slaughter is a thing of the past in most states of India. There might be a few other points of difference, but those can be settled by mutual understanding. Cultural differences are bound to arise. Persons of Indian descent have settled in all parts of the globe. Over time, they have melded into those cultures. In many places, there has been cross-pollination, like in the Bali region of Indonesia. The principle of 'live and let live' now reigns in that Muslim-majority nation.

I dare say that many of the young men among the attackers have planned to go to the US, Canada, Australia or the UK for higher studies. The universities there welcome them. They should be reminded of this factor. By resorting to violence, they have let down not only themselves but also their country.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

It is easy to hate and it is difficult to love. This is how the whole scheme of things works. — Confucius

A glimpse of history in Chattogram

HIMMAT SINGH DHILLON

AS the first light announced the end of a well-earned rest, I felt the disorientation that often accompanies travel. Even before the alarm had had a chance to go off, I lurched out of bed. As I opened the heavy drapes, there appeared a spectacular view of the city from the 37th floor of the hotel. The mother-of-pearl hues, filtered and softened by feathery clouds, took away the fatigue of travel.

It was a well-planned layout with neat buildings set amidst green environs and tree-lined roads arranged in a grid. At one end was a majestic stadium. There was also an elegant colonial edifice fronted by a water feature with a statue.

Duty beckoned and I made haste to complete my ablutions. Formally dressed, I hastened to Chittagong Grammar School for the Regional Round Square Conference. Chittagong is now known as Chattogram.

During an interlude, I casually referred to the graceful building that was located just below my hotel room. Little did I know that an assassination had happened in that building, then the Circuit House, in 1981 and that relatives of our host had been occupying a nearby room on the night of the incident. It had since been converted into a museum.

With an hour to spare before departure for the airport, I took a walk to the building. At the entrance was a ticket booth. I had enough local currency to pay for a ticket. My attention was drawn to a board which said that foreigners had to pay a higher price. My attempts to get them to take dollars for the ticket were met with a polite response that only Bangladeshi takas were accepted.

I asked in vain for a currency exchange. Finally, I stood outside and took in the grounds from behind the imposing cast-iron gate. As I took a photograph from between the bars of the gate, a young man came and held out an entry ticket. Grateful for his kindness, I offered money in dollars, but he refused.

The moment I walked up the wooden stairs and into the foyer, it was like taking a trip in a time machine. There were dioramas of the birth of Bangladesh; the Mukti Bahini; patriots in olive green; Major (later Lt Gen) Ziaur Rahman announcing the birth of Bangladesh on the radio. There was a memorable photograph of him in sunglasses and a jaunty peaky cap while he was on an intelligence-gathering mission. Rahman was serving as the President of Bangladesh when he was assassinated.

Returning to the hotel, I collected my luggage. As I checked out, the receptionist was happy to exchange dollars for takas. As I headed out of the hotel, I saw that young man again, along with two of his friends, taking pictures with their SLR cameras. As I offered to repay him for his generosity, he just shook his head. He simply would not accept the money. 'However, we will visit you in India and discuss this matter,' he said with a smile.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Invest in education

Apropos of the editorial 'India's job crisis'; the finding that the youth account for a staggering 83 per cent of jobless Indians is not merely a statistic but a dire call to action. The alarming surge in unemployment among educated youth having at least secondary education, soaring from 35.2 per cent in 2000 to a daunting 65.7 per cent in 2022, unveils a bleak reality. Behind these numbers lie shattered dreams, unrealised potential and a nation at risk of squandering its demographic dividend. The narrative of progress is marred by high dropout rates, skill deficits and widening gender disparities in the labour market. As the nation grapples with this crisis, it is imperative for policymakers to prioritise investment in education, vocational training and job creation initiatives.

GAGANPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Rights of inmates

With reference to the editorial 'Bail & electioneering'; the SC is right to uphold a politician's right to engage in political activities. Bail should be the norm, and jail only an exception. Restraining an individual not only from electioneering but also from exercising his right to vote is an onslaught on a citizen's basic rights. An inmate, whether under trial or convicted, does not cease to be a citizen. The democratic exercise of political engagement must not be curbed through the imposition of restrictive conditions as a prerequisite for the grant of bail.

LALIT BHARADWAJ, PANCHKULA

Bail, not jail

Refer to 'Bail & electioneering'; the Supreme Court ruling striking down bail conditions that restrain individuals from participating in political activities is welcome. It will go a long way toward protecting the democratic principles of our country. However, the reluctance of courts to grant bail to prominent political leaders is telling. It is ironic that the same courts that believe in the principle of 'bail, not jail' often do not grant such relief to jailed politicians. Further, it is imperative that the apex court lay down some uniform guidelines for the grant of bail.

LT COL GS BEDI (RETD), MOHALI

US should mind its words

Apropos of the news report 'Unwarranted: MEA summons US envoy'; India rightly summoned US Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Gloria Berben on Wednesday and took exception to a US State Department spokesperson's unsolicited remarks in Washington on the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. India expects the US to respect its sovereignty and not interfere in its internal affairs. Such remarks set a dangerous precedent and create bitterness in the bilateral relations between two friendly countries. India never expressed its objection to the trial of former US President Donald Trump. Why is the US interfering in our domestic affairs?

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Kejri's arrest an internal matter

At least two countries—Germany and the US—have called into question the integrity of the legal process in our country by commenting on a sub judice matter. It is worth noting that other AAP leaders, such as Kejriwal's former deputy, Manish Sisodia, have also been behind bars. Even the Supreme Court refused to grant bail to Sisodia, who is facing corruption and money laundering charges. Berlin and Washington must not raise a finger at the Indian judicial system. Their remarks on India's domestic affairs are unwarranted and condemnable. India must make it clear to other nations that they have no business interfering in internal matters. Otherwise, it may have a chilling effect on New Delhi's diplomatic relations with them.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

Stem the rot

Refer to the report 'Guava orchard case returns to haunt high-profile officials'; the guava orchard scam in Punjab is not just a case of corruption. It is a blatant mockery of justice and a stain on the integrity of our institutions. The orchestrated deception, involving revenue and horticulture officials, is a disgrace. The perpetrators conspired to exploit loopholes and forge documents to make money. The fact that a staggering Rs 137 crore was claimed wrongfully as compensation points to the deep rot in the system. It calls for swift action and severe punishment for all culprits.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

India-US consonance on Arunachal riles China



ABHIJIT BHATTACHARYYA
AUTHOR AND COLUMNIST

DESPITE 21 rounds of India-China military-to-military talks and 29 rounds of diplomatic meetings, it's a full-throated escalation of the Dragon's pincer assault on India — right from Sela (or Se La) in Arunachal Pradesh to Kalam Island off the coast of Odisha. It's time to talk straight and ask candid questions: What ails Beijing? Is the Communist Party of China (CPC) top brass showing signs of mental fatigue or an irreversible breakdown? Else, how can a foreign power be so ignorantly arrogant as to object to the recent opening of the Sela tunnel by Prime Minister Narendra Modi? Is there any doubt in anyone's mind about Arunachal Pradesh being an integral and inalienable part of sovereign India?

Thus, there is nothing wrong about the US stating the obvious that it "recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory, and strongly opposes any unilateral attempt to advance territo-

rial claims by incursions or encroachments, military or civilian, across the Line of Actual Control (LAC)". China, however, has a knack for causing chaos, confusion and confrontation where none exist, but that doesn't in any way undermine the normal discourse of non-Chinese diplomacy.

The point made by the Chinese is preposterous: "China strongly deplores and firmly opposes (the US stand)... the China-India boundary has never been delimited. Zangnan (the utopian Chinese name for Arunachal) has always been China's territory, a basic fact that's undeniable." This is an amazing hallucination. Can China decipher its own 'undeniable' lie-cum-falsehood? If the China-India boundary has never been 'delimited', how come the so-called Zangnan has always been China's territory?

The Chinese, who pretend to possess 'know-all' wisdom despite having an acute lack of it on the ground, need to be told that Sela is situated at an altitude of over 13,500 ft, about 20 miles south-east of Tawang, south of the McMahon Line — and it indisputably falls in Indian territory. The tunnel-opening by the PM, therefore, is his legal and sovereign right, and also his constitutional duty and responsibility as the head of the government.



MISPLACED OUTRAGE: The recent opening of the Sela tunnel in Arunachal Pradesh by PM Narendra Modi drew a sharp reaction from China. ANI

Coming back to the 'unacceptability' of US views on the India-China bilateral, let us consider Beijing's statement for its counter-applicability. Jammu-Kashmir-Ladakh has been a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan since the invasion of the Kashmir valley in October 1947 — when the People's Republic of China was not even born — by Pakistani forces and tribal militias. Doesn't China know about it? Why then did China get involved and brazenly violate India's territorial sovereignty?

The US has only made a factual statement on the legal position of Arunachal

From the snowy heights of Sela, the Chinese shenanigans have spread to the Indian shoreline.

being part of India. But China had been consistently instigating the Pakistan army and the ISI to resort to a proxy war through terrorists and occupy Indian territory in Gilgit-Baltistan. When will China cease to occupy Indian land before sermonising others?

From the snowy heights of Sela, the Chinese shenanigans have spread to the shoreline, where the CPC's moves are anything but friendly. It's a ceaseless provocation. The island nations around India, being weak and vulnerable, have been penetrated by the Dragon and at least one of them (the Maldives) is being meticulously manip-

ulated to wage a potential proxy war, in line with Beijing's land war against India through Pakistan-sponsored terrorism.

India is scheduled to test-fire another nuclear-capable inter-continental ballistic missile from the eastern coast in April, for which NOTAM (notice to airmen) has been issued about avoiding the 1,600-km stretch across the Bay of Bengal. But China will have none of it. The CPC is determined to scuttle India's sovereign rights in every possible way and in every possible sector because it has identified New Delhi as the biggest stumbling block to Beijing's brand of communist imperialism.

Hence, the CPC deployed four spy ships to gather minute details of India's missile launch from its own land and sea zone. Chinese spy ships have already extensively used the Maldives port as a base to tail the Indian Navy's ships in its own waters. To the CPC leadership, any landmark Indian deed is unbearable and unacceptable. India experienced this pattern of Chinese disruption in December 2022, when it had to cancel long-range missile tests owing to the Chinese spy ship's intelligence-gathering operations around the Indian coastline.

The hostile acts of China have reached a critical stage, notwithstanding successive Indian governments' desire for friendship with China ending in failure and fiasco. New Delhi's flexibility has consistently been countered by the CPC's horrendous intransigence. The tradition goes on.

Contextually, the just-concluded fruitful Bhutan visit by the Indian PM is bound to be raked up soon because of Beijing's intense and sustained efforts to open an embassy in Thimphu. Back in 1939, Mao Zedong had referred to Bhutan as 'lost' territory, which was "part of the empire of the Emperor", whose Amban (representative) in Lhasa wrote in 1904: "Bhutanese are subjects of the Emperor of China, who is the Lord of Heaven, and Bhutan is the gateway on the south."

Indeed, the propensity for make-believe is so deeply ingrained in the CPC psyche that even *The Times* correspondent Neville Maxwell, in his rabidly anti-India and pro-China book *India's China War*, unapologetically mentioned the "Chinese tactic of turning truth on its head" with regard to the 1962 war. That one line from the 'half-truth' manuscript revealed the power of the ultimate truth and nailed the CPC's lies, deception and deceit.

Once on banned list, Sri Lankan party finds favour with India



MAJ GEN ASHOK K MEHTA (RETD)
MILITARY COMMENTATOR

INDIA is now courting a political party from Sri Lanka that was earlier on its banned list and had its name circled in red, denoting its 'enemy' status. Last month, it invited to New Delhi a delegation from that once-dreaded organisation, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or the People's Liberation Front, led by Anura Kumara Dissanayake. He has emerged as a popular leader since the historic people's movement (Aragalaya) in 2022 that dislodged then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa following a catastrophic financial meltdown. The Institute for Health Policy's recent survey showed Dissanayake well ahead of Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa in the ratings of presidential hopefuls.

In New Delhi, Dissanayake met External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. Veterans of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) recall that the JVP was bitterly opposed to India; a JVP sympathiser in

the Naval Honour Guard had hit then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi with a rifle butt before the signing of the India-Sri Lanka Accord in Colombo in 1987.

The JVP delegation also visited Ahmedabad and Thiruvananthapuram. After the meeting in Delhi, Jaishankar said he had a good discussion "on our bilateral relationship and mutual benefit from its further deepening". He also discussed Sri Lanka's economic challenges and the path ahead, adding that India would always be a reliable friend and a trusted partner. JVP MP Vijitha Herath, who was part of the delegation, said after his talks with Doval: "We discussed the India-Sri Lanka relationship and mutual benefit from its further deepening". He also discussed Sri Lanka's economic challenges and the path ahead, adding that India would always be a reliable friend and a trusted partner. JVP MP Vijitha Herath, who was part of the delegation, said after his talks with Doval: "We discussed the India-Sri Lanka relationship and mutual benefit from its further deepening".

Jaishankar had earned his diplomatic spurs in Sri Lanka in the late 1980s when India tried in vain to help Sri Lankan Tamils obtain autonomy, even as around 1,200 Indian soldiers lost their lives. He stated that "the Sri Lankan society has good feelings towards India as we built infrastructure, supplied fuel and power, and made other investments. We gave Colombo \$4.5 billion to tide over the country's first sovereign default". For a long time, the Sinhalese harboured anti-LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam),



DIALOGUE: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar discussed the India-Lanka relationship with Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake (left) in February. PTI

against whom Sri Lanka fought a bloody 30-year-long battle. Eventually, the Tamil Tigers were defeated — which was originally the IPKF's mission.

Jaishankar's sharp comment ("bullies don't give \$4 billion") was a riposte to Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu's allusion to the presence of Indian soldiers in his country.

India's intervention in Sri Lanka at the invitation of then President JR Jayewardene was to help it fight its two-front wars: the LTTE in the north-east and the JVP in the south. Earlier, in 1971, Indian troops helped Sri Lanka crush a JVP-armed revolt that targeted police stations in the south. In its more menacing second avatar in 1987,

India's fading commitment to Tamil autonomy and the 13th Amendment points at the changed geopolitics.

the JVP came close to capturing key installations in and around Colombo. One of the reasons for the revolt was the presence of Indian troops on Sri Lankan soil. In 1970, the communist JVP with the help of North Korea and even China, had been planning to mount a nationwide insurrection against the Sirimavo Bandaranaike government. The mastermind was a Marxist-Leninist, Rohana Wijeweera. On April 5, 1971, the JVP attacked police stations, captured many cops and held towns for several weeks. One of the key missions of the campaign was to free Wijeweera from the Wellawatte jail. An international operation that involved the UK, the erstwhile USSR, Australia and India came to the gov-

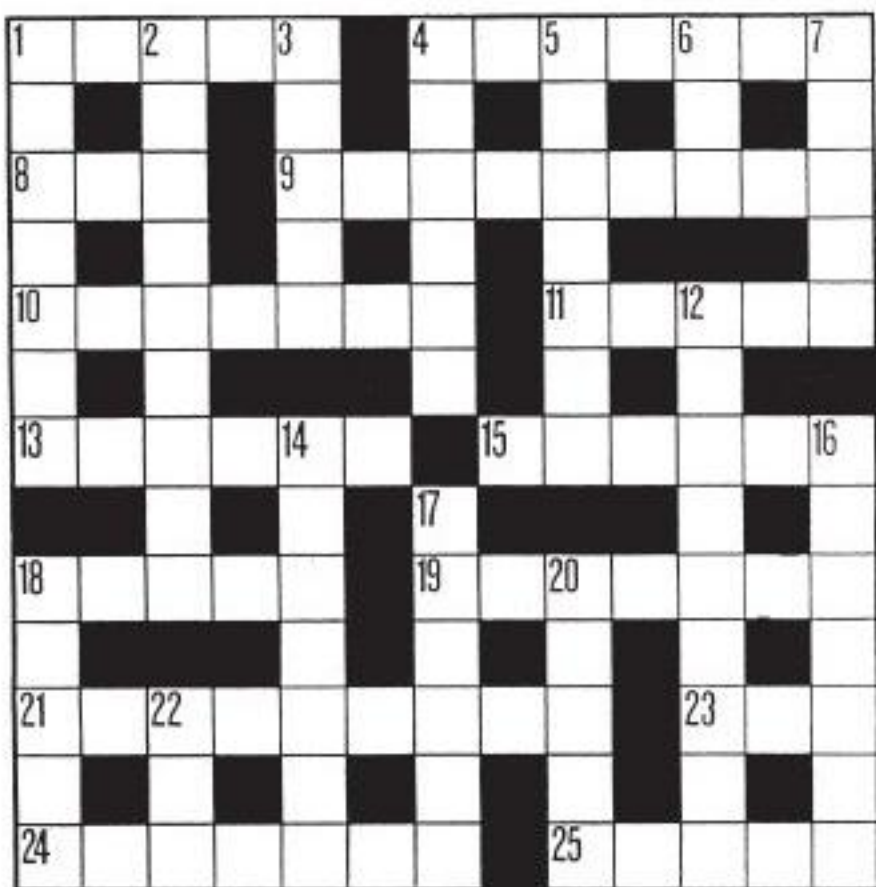
ernment's rescue. Gorkhas were heli-lifted from Bengaluru to Colombo, while three Indian Navy frigates established a cordon sanitaire. The revolt was crushed in six months, but later, Wijeweera was released. He unsuccessfully fought the presidential elections in 1982.

By 1987, Wijeweera had organised a military wing that carried out assassinations and a terror campaign. He was killed in 1989 in an intelligence-based operation. When Wijeweera was taken out, then Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne declared it the greatest success of the security forces. JVP politburo members Athula Jayasinghe, Mahinda Wijesekera, Somawansa Amarasinghe, Victor Ivan and Jayadeva Uyangoda became politicians, ministers and academics. Following its failed revolution, the JVP transformed itself into a democratic political party along with the National People's Power Alliance (NPPA) and a politburo. The NPPA has 21 groups and calls itself a 'collective'. It is anti-India and opposed to the implementation of the 13th Amendment for full Tamil autonomy. Its aim is to build a utopian, classless society. The JVP originally entered electoral politics in the 1980s. It secured sufficient votes in a proportional representation system to have three to four MPs and Central ministers in

coalition governments. In 2020, it won 4 per cent of the national vote. In 2001, the JVP had 16 elected members in Parliament; Dissanayake first visited Delhi as part of then PM Mahinda Rajapaksa's delegation in 2004. Last year, China invited the JVP to Beijing — not for the first time. It was the JVP that opposed 49 per cent stake in the East Container Terminal, Colombo, for Adani Ports.

India is reaching out to the JVP as the mood of the people during the Aragalaya reflected that they were fed up with mainstream parties and corruption in domestic politics. The presidential elections are slated for later this year, and the incumbent Ranil Wickremesinghe has promised to hold them on time. Still, people fear that the polls may be postponed. And if the elections are held, Dissanayake could be a frontrunner. After the Maldives fiasco, India is keeping national interest uppermost following the \$4.5-billion 'good faith' investment in Sri Lanka. India's fading commitment to Tamil autonomy and the 13th Amendment points at the changed geopolitics. Though police powers are reported to have been finally devolved, a private member's Bill is attempting to revoke them. Whether it will be implemented is the question. A JVP President in Sri Lanka is no longer a remote possibility.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 French authors, father and son (5)
- 4 Fundamental principles (7)
- 8 Normal amount (3)
- 9 A long way from home (3,6)
- 10 Comply with (7)
- 11 Characteristic spirit (5)
- 13 In spite of that (4,2)
- 15 Standing (6)
- 18 Subsequent (5)
- 19 Help forward (7)
- 21 Unofficial ballot (5,4)
- 23 Jump on one foot (3)
- 24 Got away (7)
- 25 Scottish river (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

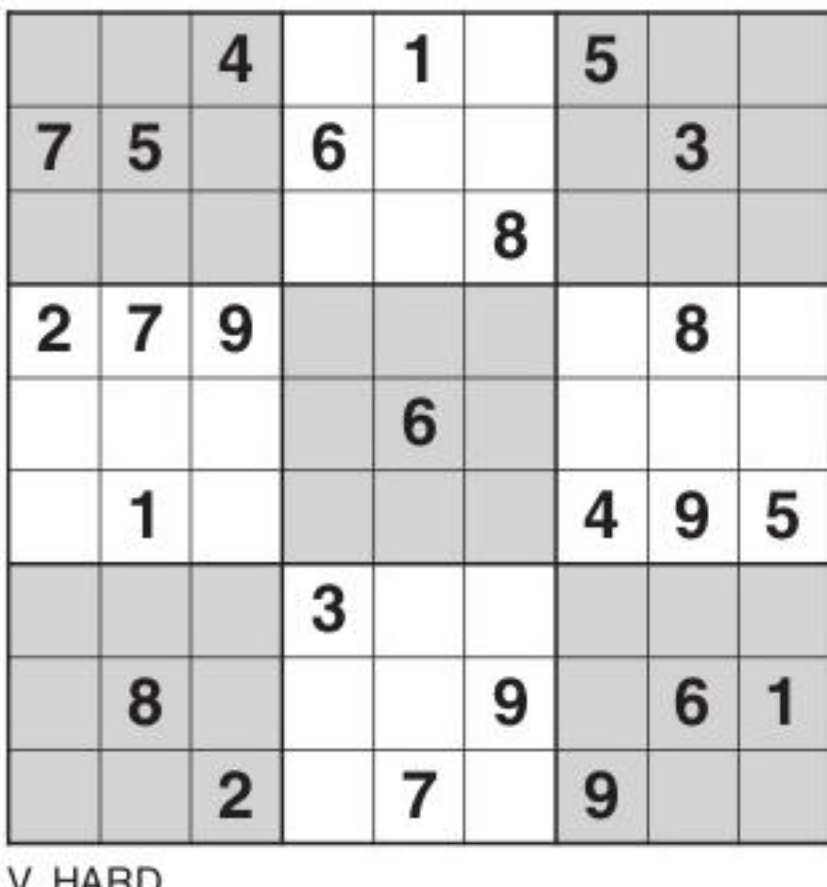
Across: 1 Count heads, 8 Fed up, 9 Version, 10 Gremlin, 11 Dutch, 12 Resume, 14 Bestow, 17 Salon, 19 Antonio, 21 Unkempt, 22 Arose, 23 Numberless.

Down: 2 Oddness, 3 Nepal, 4 Havana, 5 Abridge, 6 Stint, 7 On the whole, 8 Figures out, 13 Minimum, 15 Tenuous, 16 Mantle, 18 Liken, 20 Trail.

DOWN

- 1 Feel strong disapproval of (7)
- 2 Illusory discovery (5,4)
- 3 To this point (2,3)
- 4 Trade by exchange (6)
- 5 Turn aside (7)
- 6 A certain (3)
- 7 Renown (5)
- 12 Go to bed (3,3,3)
- 14 Botch some activity (5,2)
- 16 Compunction (7)
- 17 Have enough money for (6)
- 18 A smooth cotton thread (5)
- 20 A survival from past age (5)
- 22 Huge bird of Eastern legend (3)

SU DO KU



V. HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MARCH 29, 2024, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Chaitra Shaka 9
- Chaitra Parvishite 16
- Hijari 1445
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 4, up to 8.21 pm
- Vajra Yoga up to 11.11 pm
- Vishakha Nakshatra up to 8.36 pm
- Moon enters Scorpio sign 2.09 pm

FORECAST

SUNSET:	FRIDAY	18:39 HRS
SUNRISE:	SATURDAY	06:14 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	33	21
New Delhi	36	21
Amritsar	31	20
Bathinda	30	16
Jalandhar	30	20
Ludhiana	33	16
Bhiwani	33	20
Hisar	33	20
Sirsa	34	20
Dharamsala	26	17
Manali	21	11
Shimla	21	12
Srinagar	16	08
Jammu	28	18
Kargil	13	04
Leh	06	-04
Dehradun	32	16
Mussoorie	22	13

TEMPERATURE IN °C