



Insidious, incendiary

India's policymakers must address the threat of building fires

The devastating fires, at a gaming centre in Rajkot, Gujarat and a newborn nursing clinic in Delhi within 24 hours of each other, which left over 30 dead, is another grim reminder of one of India's insidious threats: the pervasive nature of the negligence of the fire safety of buildings by a whole range of stakeholders – from builders and proprietors to regulatory authorities. While the Bureau of Indian Standards has set detailed fire safety protocols in its National Building Code of India (NBC) 2016, it is a recommendatory document, as fire services is a State subject, and enforced at the municipality level. The sheer disregard for India's fire safety norms is apparent from the opening lines in the 'About Fire Service – Background' page of the Director General, Fire Services website under the Ministry of Home Affairs. It reads, "The fire services are not well organized in India", adding, "in recent years the requirements for fire safety cover have increased manifold whereas the development of fire service has not made much headway".

The National Disaster Management Authority had recommended to the 13th Finance Commission, an allocation of ₹7,000 crore to revamp India's fire and emergency services. But the Commission sought an allocation of almost ₹90,000 crore at the municipality level, recognising the need for a tailor-made revamping and restructuring of fire and emergency preparedness. A 2019 Home Ministry response to the Rajya Sabha noted that India had only 3,377 fire stations, when a 2012 national report on fire hazards and risk analysis sought more than double that number. The staff shortage is even more appalling. The entire country had only about 55,000 fire servicemen in 2019, when the requirement was about 5,60,000 seven years earlier. The Centre belatedly set aside ₹5,000 crore last July asking States to cough up another ₹1,400 crore to modernise emergency services. This follows the 15th Finance Commission's advice to set aside 12.5% of all allocations towards the National/State Disaster Response Funds. With rising heatwaves and extreme weather events nationwide, it is clear that a synchronisation of the 2016 NBC and the Energy Conservation Building Code is required to attempt a holistic approach to address fires, as standards for construction material, electrical wiring, air-conditioning, and a whole range of cooling materials have to be revamped. More importantly, India's polity, bureaucracy, policymakers and entrepreneurs must urgently address this insidious threat.

In the dock

Trump is facing a legal challenge, but his political fortunes are on a parallel track

Former U.S. President Donald Trump stands on the edge of history as potentially the first American to have held the highest public office in the country to be convicted on a felony charge. Mr. Trump has, in recent weeks, been pursuing his legal defence in the case brought by the U.S. District Attorney's office in New York state involving 34 charges relating to hush-money that Mr. Trump allegedly paid to adult film actor Stormy Daniels, in exchange for her silence over a purported affair between the two of them. After six weeks of tortuous arguments, courtroom drama and political campaigning at the very doorsteps of the courthouse, the jury in the case will now deliberate on the facts laid out before them and possibly return a judgment in the coming weeks. During the trial, the prosecution sought to argue that the testimony of Michael Cohen, formerly Mr. Trump's lawyer, made it clear beyond doubt that in paying off Ms. Daniels to the tune of \$1,30,000 in 2016 over the alleged affair between them in 2006, Mr. Trump was guilty of falsifying business records to hide that expenditure and "orchestrated a scheme to keep unflattering information from voters in what was an early example of election interference". Mr. Trump's defence relied on painting Mr. Cohen a "liar" and seeking to discredit his account of Mr. Trump reimbursing him for the payout to Ms. Daniels.

Even if Mr. Trump is found guilty on any of the charges, he would leave the courthouse a free man as he has been on bail throughout the case thus far. He would seek to remain free at least until he appeals to the Appellate Division in Manhattan, and possibly faces the Court of Appeals. While each charge in the case carries a potential maximum sentence of four years, if there is a sentencing hearing, then the judge may take several factors into account, including Mr Trump's age of 77 years, the lack of a previous conviction and the non-violent nature of the alleged crimes. Even if Mr. Trump successfully evades the full force of the law in the hush-money case, he faces three other felony indictments, including in federal and state cases relating to interference in the 2020 election, and his alleged role in the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, as well as allegations that he mishandled classified documents that were found at his residence in Mar-a-Lago, Florida, after he had demitted office. While these cases are stuck in the appeals process and would be unlikely to reach trial this year, it is safe to say that no matter what the outcome of the jury's deliberations is in the New York case, the political climate will only get further vitiated and polarised as the country lurches forward to the November 5 presidential election.

India, liberalism and its crisis of legitimacy

Amid the heated rhetoric that is already consuming most of the space for ideas in this acrimonious and protracted general election, there seems little space for engaging in a more serious discussion about political values. Just over three decades ago, after the elections of 1991, India embarked on a tryst with liberalism, then regarded as the apex of 'mankind's ideological evolution' and 'the final form of government' (to quote Francis Fukuyama's famous essay "The End of History?"). In the years since, liberalism has faced trenchant criticism from both the left and the right, in India and across the world. The alarming rise of populist and authoritarian strongmen across the globe has reflected a discernible retreat of liberal democracy from its post-Cold-War heyday to just 34 countries (as on 2022).

The appeal of the core liberal idea that democracy, planted in the fertile soil of a free land and watered by capitalistic economic affluence and rule of law, would flourish around the globe, is waning. As the phenomenon of "democratic deconsolidation" attains an unprecedented pace, public dissatisfaction with liberal democracy and liberal values has been plummeting for some time now. Worryingly, support for alternative models is increasing: a Pew survey last year found 85% of respondents in India indicating a preference for authoritarianism or military rule, alongside a decline in those who believed that representative democracy was a good way of governance. Similar trends are apparent even in the West, though at more modest levels, enabling Russia's Vladimir Putin to triumphantly declare "Liberalism is dead".

Attacks by the left and the right

In India, liberalism is facing a crisis of legitimacy, with attacks from both the left and the right. For those on the left, liberalism (and neoliberalism in particular) represents a dangerous elitist doctrine, prioritising the interests of a handful of privileged individuals over the needs of the collective, and promoting an individualism that has resulted in the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, the primacy of corporate interests, and the further marginalisation of the disadvantaged. The left sees an untenable contradiction between a commitment to egalitarian democracy on the one hand and an individualistic market capitalism on the other.

The right sees different dangers in liberalism, particularly its emphasis on individual freedom. Tagore's was an authentically Indian liberal voice of freedom, insisting that every individual be free to pursue his destiny: "Give me the strength never to...bend my knees before insolent might," he prayed in *Gitanjali*. But in today's India, insolent might commands the stage. The right garbs itself in the social values that emphasise the needs of the individual over the ideals of



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If there was ever a time to articulate a reformed and expanded idea of Indian liberalism, it is now

community, identity and tradition. They dismiss liberalism in India as a western colonial import that has no connection with our traditional values and way of living. To both right and left, liberalism today is synonymous with elitism, privilege and an outdated westernised world view.

But if there was ever a time for us to articulate a reformed and expanded idea of Indian liberalism, it is now. The current legitimisation of illiberal alternatives and the erosion of trust in egalitarian democracy, the surrender of individual liberties to the hands of a ruling dispensation that has consistently exceeded its constitutional powers, the rampant undermining of institutions that were meant to check executive overreach, and the mainstreaming of bigoted and chauvinistic narratives that seek to 'otherize' entire communities, all point to an urgent need to offer a reimagined idea of liberalism to counter the systemic rot that plagues our democratic system.

Ingrained in Indian society

Far from being a western import, as thinkers such as Amartya Sen have pointed out, the key values of liberalism – an emphasis on individual liberty, freedom, social justice and societal harmony – have been deeply ingrained in Indian society since ancient times. Liberal values can be found in our civilisational traditions and cultural beliefs, representative ruling institutions of the past and in the articulations produced by an array of makers of modern India, with giants such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, M.G. Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Gurudev Tagore and B.R. Ambedkar situating their critique of colonial rule within a liberal framework. Of course, this in itself did not rid or absolve Indian society from the horrors of discrimination, caste oppression and marginalisation but, as more radical liberal thinkers such as Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar argued, progress could be achieved through better (and more representative) political instruments rooted in liberal ideals.

It is imperative to respond constructively to the charges of elitism and misguided thinking that are levelled at liberalism in India. What is needed is a more syncretic and democratised idea of liberalism, one that is able to remain inclusive and absorptive of ideas from either end, without betraying the core ideals of freedom, dignity and representation that have underpinned it since its conception. We suggest that Indian liberalism will need to undergo four sets of evolutions for it to address the challenges unleashed by its current critics.

First, evangelists for syncretic liberalism will need to engage with the ideas of tradition and identity in a more comprehensive and sustained manner. These are fundamental emotional and cultural concerns that animate the functioning of individuals and communities in our country but

have often been overlooked by liberals who prioritise the individual without engaging with the larger forces that drive the communities they belong to. Populists have enjoyed tremendous success in weaponising the feelings of being marginalised or overlooked that have resulted from the more modernist and cosmopolitan approach of liberals. Engaging with these topics, coupled with a recognition of avenues of systemic oppression and discrimination that have proved resistant to liberalism, is a key first step to take liberal thinking and values from an elite concern to a mass conviction.

Second, liberalism will also need to adopt a reformed approach to economic activity and markets, one that is able to look beyond neoliberal thinking and develop a more inclusive and socially just approach. The magic of the market will not appeal to those who cannot afford to enter the marketplace. Liberals must encourage free enterprise but also commit themselves to distributing the increased revenues that accrue to the state from economic growth. Reformed liberalism will need to be capable of balancing both the unleashing of private enterprise alongside an equally strong commitment to social justice through welfare. The tide of good economic governance, as the United Progressive Alliance era demonstrated, can lift all boats, but some need more help to be able to participate fully in the market economy and to fulfil their aspirations.

Third, for a more democratised and harmonious version of liberalism to succeed, both political reform and a revival of representative institutions will be needed. The centralisation of power in an overweening state, the lack of trust that individual citizens have in our institutions, their inadequate representation in decision-making forums, and the overreach of government through its surveillance of, and interference in, the daily lives of citizens, have all contributed to an overall erosion of public confidence in Indian democracy that must be rectified.

Evolve consensus

Fourth, and finally, though one would normally take this for granted, it is imperative that liberals develop a basic consensus among themselves. Given the divergent views on liberalism as well as the laundry list of criticisms essayed by its detractors, a minimum common understanding is key. Liberals' "circular firing squad" – to borrow Barack Obama's analogy – currently spends too much time contesting each other's political commitments rather than focusing on their vast areas of agreement. In the face of graver threats to our democratic systems, that energy would be more constructively spent in working together.

Indian liberalism is in need of reform and revival. The time to start the process is now.

Dispelling population myths triggered by a working paper

Many media reports and politicians have tended to misinterpret and sensationalise findings from a working paper put out by the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM), titled "Share of Religious Minorities: A Cross-Country Analysis (1950-2015)". These reports have inaccurately tried to create an impression that the Muslim population in India is growing rapidly and that this threatens the Hindu population. Unfortunately, such interpretations fuel a divisive political narrative that is often misinformed about population issues and further obscures the truth from the public.

The working paper states: "the actual reasons for the change in the religious demography of a country is a multivariate phenomenon in a complex system and the depth of analysis required to pinpoint the exact variable responsible for change in religious demography is beyond the scope of the paper." Despite acknowledging its limitations, the paper makes a flawed assertion that the growth in the Muslim population indicates that minorities are thriving in India. There is no evidence to suggest that an increase in fertility alone indicates a flourishing population.

Data and socio-economic development

Interpreting population data within the context of socio-economic development is crucial. The number of children a family chooses to have is influenced more by socio-economic factors such as education and economic conditions than by religion. Communities with better access to education, health care, and economic opportunities tend to have lower fertility rates.

A high population growth rate does not indicate that people are necessarily doing well. It often highlights the shortcomings in levels of human development. The higher growth rate of India's Muslim population compared to the Hindu population is a result of the Muslim



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The working paper put out by the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister makes a flawed assertion about the growth in the Muslim population

community lagging behind on many human development indicators. Conversely, a low growth rate or decline in population does not imply persecution or hostility but can reflect improved socio-economic conditions, lower fertility rates, and higher emigration rates.

The EAC-PM study uses the Religious Characteristics of States-Demographic (RCS-DEM) dataset to conduct a cross-country analysis of 167 countries. The RCS-DEM database provides detailed information on the demographic characteristics of various religious groups across countries. The paper analyses population data from 1950 to 2015.

Explaining the changes

There are three ways in which the changes in the composition of the population of various communities can be explained. One way is to examine the absolute increase in population across religious communities. In that case, between 1950-2015, India's Hindu population grew by 701 million – almost five times more than the increase in the Muslim population of 146 million.

The second way is to look at the changes in the proportion of different religious groups in the population. We find that whereas the proportion of Hindu population fell by 6.64 percentage points from 84.7% in 1950 to 78.06% in 2015, the proportion of Muslim population increased by 4.25 percentage points from 9.84% in 1950 to 14.09% in 2015. Both the marginal decline in the proportion of Hindus in the population or the marginal increase in the proportion of Muslims should not be a cause for concern given that, to start with in 1950, there were 306 million Hindus as against 35.5 million Muslims. Clearly, the increase is relatively small, and there is no threat of Muslims overtaking Hindus in population numbers.

The third way is what the EAC-PM study has done, namely, highlight the rate of change in

individual shares. Between 1950-2015, there was a decline of 7.8% in the share of the Hindu population and an increase by 43.2% in the share of the Muslim population.

This is only to be expected in a statistical sense, given that in 1950, the proportion of Hindus (84.7%) was relatively large compared to the Muslims (9.8%). Examining the rate of change in the shares of other religious communities further underscores the misleading nature of these figures. For instance, the rate of change in share shows an increase of 1519.6% for Buddhists, and 49.2% for Sikhs. This does not imply that Buddhists and Sikhs are conspiring towards re-shaping India's demographic profile. Similarly, the decline in the rate of change for Parsis' share, by 86.7%, does not mean they have been specifically targeted and persecuted in society. These numbers can be misinterpreted easily without proper context.

Need for data

According to a 2021 report published by the Pew Research Center titled "Religious Composition of India", which analysed Census data between 1951 and 2011, the proportion of India's six largest religious groups has remained "relatively stable" since Partition. A study by the distinguished Indian demographers P.N. Mari Bhat and Francis Xavier (2005) projected that the Muslim population's proportion to India's total population would peak at around 18.8% by 2101. As the Population Foundation of India's earlier statement on this issue mentioned, there have been significant declines in Muslim fertility rates recently, as reported in the last few rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). This indicates that the projection of the peak of the proportion of Muslim population might be even smaller if a similar study were conducted now.

The delayed figures of the next Census, when they finally come out, will ultimately confirm these trends.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

At Kanniyakumari

Meditation seems to be the last straw of hold. It is not a surprise that the top leader has decided to meditate in Kanniyakumari in the last phase of the general election (Inside pages, May 29). This is definitely an indirect way of electioneering, which, we are sure, will go deliberately

unnoticed by the body overseeing the election. This body has anyway amply exhibited its partisan attitude in favour of the ruling dispensation. People have woken up to the reality now and are no longer ready to buy such gimmicks.

Tharcis S. Fernando, Chennai

Progressive move

Teaching English in government schools is accepting an absolutely required need, and the decision by Karnataka is welcome ("Students of classes 1 to 10 in government and aided schools to have spoken English classes", May 29). The lack of resources in

government-aided schools to facilitate the learning of English language skills persuades many parents to admit their children in private schools which are expensive. Technology is creating incredible opportunities and an abundance of prospects as almost all the gadgets and inventions are for those

who understand English. English promises upward mobility and jobs.

H.N. Ramakrishna, Bengaluru

The spirit and body

One of the greatest ever tennis stars to grace the game, Rafael Nadal, was a pale shadow of his once formidable self. In Nadal's

case the spirit is more than willing, but with age catching up, the quicksilver reflexes no longer seem to work. Will Nadal follow Roger Federer?

C.V. Aravind, Bengaluru

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address.

Open access is crucial for self-reliance in science

A recent editorial piece in *Nature* lauded India's ascent towards becoming a scientific juggernaut, paralleling its burgeoning economic clout. The Indian science ecosystem is indeed on an impressive trajectory, now ranking third globally in research output, and eleventh in quality, according to the *Nature Index*. However, 'ease of doing science' that can lead to great discoveries and innovation hinges on robust infrastructure and resources – a glaring shortfall in India's research landscape.

From 2014 to 2021, the number of universities in India rose from 760 to 1,113. Yet, many lack essential resources such as instrumental access and sophisticated labs, not to mention access to the literature that underpins research. There has been a pioneering initiative, I-STEM, to bridge this gap by cataloguing all publicly funded research facilities nationwide and making them available to researchers based on need. This demand-supply mapping aims to democratise the availability of advanced research infrastructure.

Similarly, the call for 'One Nation, One Subscription (ONOS)' proposes a centralised model of subscription to scientific journals, making them universally available to all publicly funded institutions. It is costly to get access to these commercial journals. It is estimated that institutions in India annually spend ₹1,500 crore to access journals and databases. But the fruits of this expenditure are reaped by only the top few institutes. What of the rest? ONOS negotiation by the government is currently underway with the five major commercial publishers who dominate the market.

The optimal solution?

But is ONOS the optimal solution for facilitating access to scientific literature? When it was conceptualised around 2019, a significant portion of scholarly articles was behind paywalls. Now,



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With the evolving landscape of academic publishing, investing in an all-encompassing subscription model is not prudent

a much larger fraction of articles is available via Open Access (OA), which means that articles are available freely for everyone online. An analysis of publications indexed in the Web of Science shows that the fraction of OA publications globally increased from 38% in 2018 to 50% in 2022. This shift raises a query about the necessity and efficiency of paying for content that is increasingly available for free. Currently, there is a strong push for OA by the U.S. and European Union. The U.S. released its updated OA policy in 2023 that mandates immediate open accessibility of all publicly funded research articles by 2025. Similarly, major philanthropic funding sources such as the Wellcome Trust have mandated OA to the research they fund.

Considering this trend, it is reasonable to argue that we should be paying less than before. The oligopolistic academic publishing market, dominated by a handful of powerful publishers in the global north, allows these publishers to set stringent terms, making any negotiation on ONOS a challenge. The entrenched reputation and authority of these publishers also stymie any discussion of alternatives.

In any other government procurement, the use of public funds is stringently regulated to ensure maximum cost efficiency and benefit. Why, then, should the procurement of academic journals be any different? If significant portions of research are already accessible without cost, the rationale for a unified, costly subscription becomes less compelling. It is also important to note that ONOS will not help make Indian research globally accessible; rather, it primarily facilitates access for Indian researchers to journals owned by big publishing oligarchs.

Further, even if one pays and subscribes to the journal, there is no guarantee of continued access. Today, most academic journals are only digitally available. Most articles have a digital object

identifier (DOI), but DOI does not ensure long-term preservation. A recent study highlights that "approximately 28% of academic journal articles with DOIs appear entirely unreserved." This finding suggests that millions of research papers risk vanishing from the Internet. For example, over 17,000 research papers from a chemistry journal, distributed by Elsevier globally, except in Japan, disappeared when the journal was discontinued in December 2023.

Green Open Access

Considering commercial publishers have not taken up the responsibility of long-term availability of the content they profit from, it is only logical that every article authored by Indian researchers and funded by taxpayer money should be archived in publicly funded OA repositories. This practice exemplifies what we refer to as Green Open Access. This allows authors to deposit a version of their work in a university repository, making it freely accessible to everyone globally. Indian funding agencies have mandated green OA for a long time, but this has never been enforced. However, the recent troubles should catalyse a stronger push for green OA.

Major publishers such as Elsevier (Netherlands), Thomson Reuters (Canada), Taylor Francis (U.K.), Springer Nature (Germany), and Wiley and SAGE (U.S.) have headquarters in the global north. They are extremely profitable enterprises. Much of this profit is derived from the unpaid labour provided by researchers in the form of peer reviews and editorial works. To become *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant), India needs to make its own journal system better, with no burden of payment to authors or readers. Further, with its capabilities in digital technology, India should also become a pioneer for the global south by creating and sharing digital public infrastructure for low-cost, high-quality scientific publishing.

The BJP cannot bank on 'asmita' alone

It has not campaigned on key issues and has also left brand Naveen unscathed

STATE OF PLAY

Subhankar Nayak

Odisha is voting for both the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections. If elected to power in the State Assembly for the sixth consecutive term, Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik will create history. The fight is primarily between the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main Opposition party in the State. The Congress stands at a distant third.

In this election, neither communalisation nor developmental promises drive the Opposition's campaign, particularly the BJP's campaign, against the BJD government; instead, it is the issue of Odia 'asmita' (self-pride). A bureaucrat-turned politician, V.K. Pandian, the most trusted aide of Mr. Patnaik, has been at the receiving end. Mr. Pandian, who hails from Tamil Nadu, was an IAS officer and rose to become an all-powerful star campaigner for the party, second only to the Chief Minister.

Before *asmita* became the core election issue, the bonhomie between the BJD and the BJP was well-known. Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed Mr. Patnaik as a "dear friend" at a public meeting not too long ago. Both parties were ready to enter into a pre-poll alliance, but for some reason this did not materialise. This led to a direct BJD versus BJP showdown in the State.

Odisha was the first State to be formed on the basis of language. Its unique identity derives from a rich cultural heritage and a significant historical legacy. As per the BJP's narrative, this identity is under at-



tack and the Odia people's self-pride will be further dented if they let the BJD govern the State again, as the reins will be in the hands of a non-Odia, namely, Mr. Pandian.

The BJP's electioneering in Odisha has appeared confused. The party aims to topple a two-decade-old government, yet Home Minister Amit Shah has been asserting at rallies that the BJP doesn't have much of an issue with Mr. Patnaik, but only with "the officer from outside". Integrating the Ram Mandir discussion into the *asmita* narrative in a State where Lord Jagannath holds paramount importance is another example of the saffron party's ill-conceived strategy.

Elections are mostly about the perception of the citizenry. The BJP in Odisha doesn't seem to be winning the perception battle by relying on the *asmita* narrative alone. The term *asmita* is not even commonly used by the Odias. The party was not creative enough to come up with a term that would easily resonate with Odia voters.

Other key political issues, such as rising youth unemployment, the distressing state of health and education, economic migration, and so on have been pushed to the background with the talk of *asmita*. Despite Odisha having the highest youth unemployment rate in the country, as per a recent International Labour Organization report, the

issue found rare mention in the BJP's election campaigns. The party has also missed the opportunity to appeal to the crucial youth demographic. While the BJD made efforts to court this segment just a few months before the election, casting doubts on its genuine commitment, the BJP's youth outreach programmes have remained limited.

The Opposition's campaign, while emphasising *asmita*, have also failed to effectively tackle the BJD's core strength – its support among women. There are at least 70 lakh women self-help group (SHG) members in Odisha who form the backbone of women's political agency in the rural parts. The Opposition lacks serious intent to penetrate the robust structure of women SHG networks that largely favours the BJD.

The strategy of focusing on *asmita* over governance failures may have only appealed to a limited segment of upper-middle class voters who may not hold much electoral significance. The BJP does not appear to have learnt from its poor performance in the Panchayat election held two years ago, where it only won about 5% of the Zilla Parishad seats, a massive decline from its previous performance.

Moreover, by only targeting Mr. Pandian, the BJP has left brand Naveen unscathed. Deflecting attacks on his own image has been Mr. Patnaik's single most successful strategy and the reason for his endurance throughout his more than two-decade term in office. The Opposition's campaign has played into his strengths. Mr. Patnaik could not have hoped for a better scenario.

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Andhra and Telangana have many of India's richest MP candidates

Three regional parties from these two States fielded candidates with some of the highest average assets

DATA POINT

Vignesh Radhakrishnan

The political parties in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have fielded some of the richest politicians in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. These are the two States where the worth of the average assets of candidates in the fray is the highest. This is mainly due to the relatively rich candidates who have been fielded by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS), and the Jana Sena Party (JSP). The TDP features first on the list of the top 10 parties with the highest average assets of candidates; the JSP and BRS feature third and fourth. The Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) is eighth on the list.

Chandra Sekhar Pemmasani of the TDP, who is competing for the Guntur seat, is the richest in the fray with assets worth ₹5,706 crore. The TDP's poorest candidate declared assets worth ₹3 crore. Apart from the regional parties, even the candidates of national parties who were fielded from these States are relatively rich. The second richest in the fray, with assets worth ₹4,568 crore, is the BJP's Konda Vishweshwar Reddy, who is competing from the Chevella seat in Telangana. The Congress candidate from Chevella, Gaddam Ranjith Reddy, with assets worth ₹436 crore, is also among the richest. Many other relatively rich candidates such as the BJP's C.M. Ramesh (₹498 crore); the Congress' Y.S. Sharmila Reddy (₹182 crore); the TDP's Prabhakar Reddy Vemireddy (₹716 crore) and Sriharat Mathukumili (₹299 crore); the BRS' Kasani Gyaneshwar Kasani (₹228 crore), Nama Nageshwara Rao (₹156 crore), and Kyama Mallesh (₹145 crore); and the YSRCP's Chalamalasetty Sumil (₹150 crore) and Simhadri Chandra Sekhar Rao (₹139 crore) are also competing from these two States. **Chart 1** shows the candidate-wise average

assets in ₹ crore.

Chart 2 shows the party-wise average assets of candidates in ₹ crore. In charts 1 and 2, only select parties and their candidates are depicted. They have been chosen based on various parameters such as the number of candidates fielded, geography, and the party's popularity. As noted earlier, the TDP is on top of the list in terms of average assets of candidates (with its candidates having average assets of ₹416 crore) followed by the Janata Dal (Secular) (₹94 crore), the JSP (₹82 crore), and the BRS (₹54 crore). The BJP features seventh on the list with its candidates having average assets of ₹41 crore behind the two parties which split from the Nationalist Congress Party. The parties from Tamil Nadu – the AIADMK and the DMK – feature ninth and tenth, respectively. Congress candidates feature 14th on the list with average assets of ₹25 crore. The Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party headed by Mehabooba Mufti (₹1.4 crore), the CPI(M) (₹1.4 crore), and the BSP (₹2.6 crore) are at the bottom of the list.

Chart 3 shows the State-wise average assets of candidates in ₹ crore. Only major States were considered. However, all the parties and independents were included. Candidates in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have average assets of ₹21 crore and ₹14 crore, respectively – the highest. Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Karnataka were the other States in the top five. Chhattisgarh (₹1.3 crore), J&K U.T. (₹2.3 crore) and Kerala (₹2.3 crore) are at the bottom of the list.

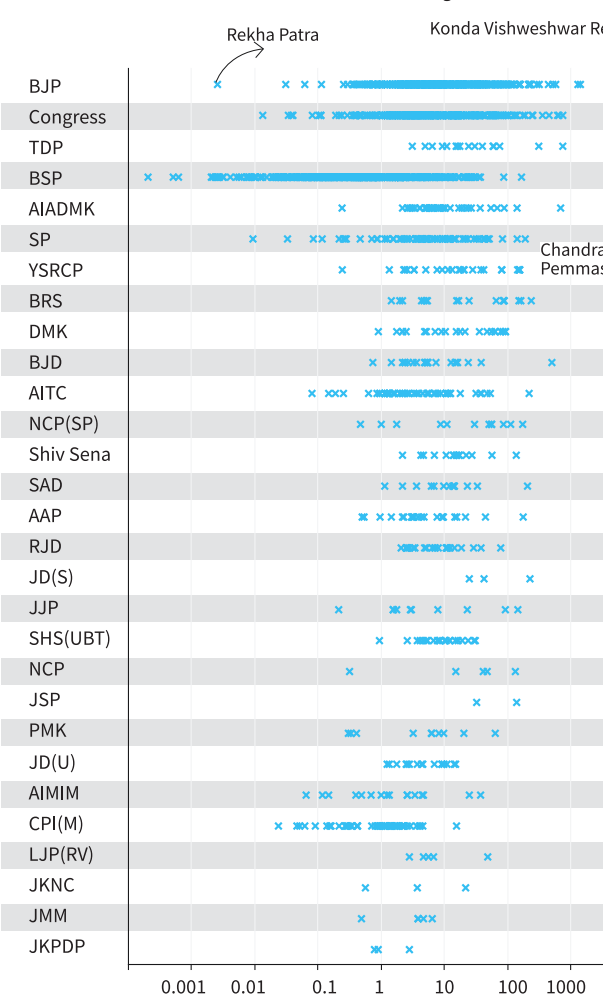
Notably, the BJP's poorest candidate is Rekha Patra. She is one of the women who spearheaded the Sandeshkhali movement against Trinamool leaders. She declared assets worth ₹25,000. While all the parties couldn't be depicted, an analysis including all candidates and independents showed that as many as 46 candidates, mostly independents, declared that they did not have any assets.

Richie rich

The data were sourced from the Association for Democratic Reforms. Parties have been chosen based on various parameters such as the number of candidates fielded, geography, and the party's popularity

Money power: TDP national president Nara Chandrababu Naidu participating in a road show in Tenali city. On his left, the richest candidate, Chandra Sekhar Pemmasani can be seen. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Chart 1: The chart shows the candidate-wise average assets in ₹ crore



TDP: Telugu Desam Party; BRS: Bharat Rashtira Samithi; BJD: Biju Janata Dal; NCP: Nationalist Congress Party; NCP(SP): Nationalist Congress Party – Sharadchandra Pawar; SAD: Shiromani Akali Dal; JD(U): Janata Dal (United); AIMIM: All India Majlis-E-ttehadul Muslimene; LJP(RV): Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas); PMK: Pattali Makkal Katchi; JKPDP: Jammu & Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party; JKN: Jammu & Kashmir National Conference; SHS(UBT): Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) JNJP: Jannayak Janta Party



Chart 2: The chart shows the party-wise average assets of candidates in ₹ crore

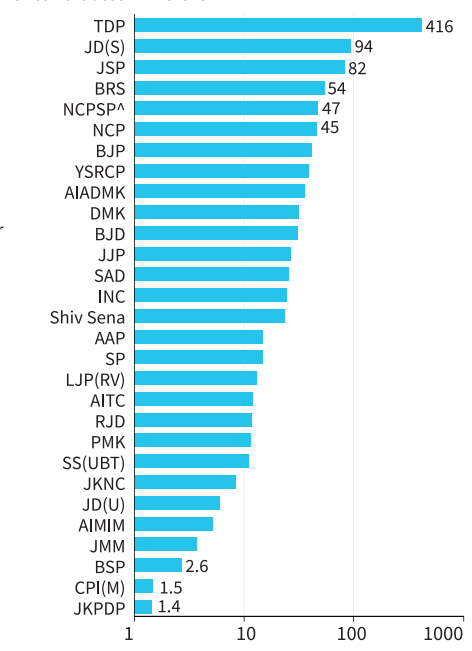
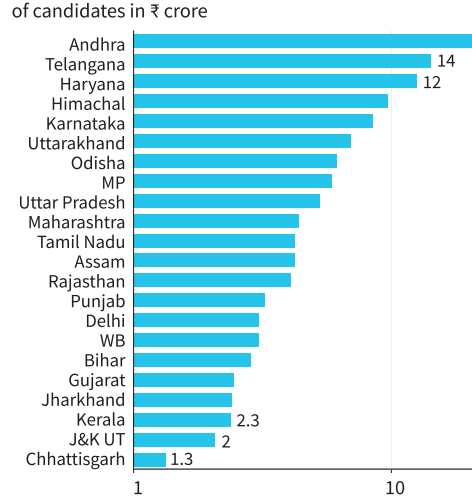


Chart 3: The chart shows the State-wise average assets of candidates in ₹ crore



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 30, 1974

Israel and Syria agree on military disengagement

Washington, May 29: Israel and Syria agreed to-night on a military disengagement on the Golan Heights – a victory for the marathon shuttle diplomacy of the U.S. Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger.

The Israeli-Syrian agreement coming 32 days after Dr. Kissinger began his longest overseas mission terminated the war of October 1973. Dr. Kissinger had brought about earlier disengagement between Israel and Egypt.

President Nixon who announced the accord said that military representatives of the Israel and Syria will sign the agreement in Geneva on Friday.

(Radio Israel said Soviet and American delegates would also sign the accord at Geneva.) The President called it a "major diplomatic achievement" and praised Dr. Kissinger for his tenacity in pressing for an agreement.

Mr. Nixon said the Israeli-Syrian agreement had "removed a significant obstacle to a permanent solution of the West Asia conflict."

He promised persistent American attempts, in co-operation with all Governments in West Asia, to achieve a peaceful solution. He described the chances for such a settlement as "better than ever before in the past 25 years."

Details of the agreement will be announced officially to-morrow when Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir will present the agreement to the Knesset (Parliament).

While President Nixon made the announcement in Washington a statement was broadcast by Damascus Radio. The Israeli Cabinet was meeting to give the final approval to the agreement before making the announcement.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 30, 1924

Radio club in Madras

Mr. A. Conningsby, Engineer for Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company, who was here in connection with the establishment of a Radio Club in Madras was interviewed by the Associated Press of India said that a broadcasting transmitter was installed in the premises of Messrs. Crompton and Co. Mount Road and the supervision of Messrs. Webb and Green and a draped studio on the lines of those in Calcutta and Bombay intended for concert performances.



WORDLY WISE
THE BEST WAY TO EXECUTE FRENCH COOKING IS TO GET GOOD AND LOADED AND WHACK THE HELL OUT OF A CHICKEN. — JULIA CHILD

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

The end of unipolarity

US response in Ukraine, Gaza, exposes cracks in global order, move towards regionalisation of geopolitics



FAISAL DEVJI

NETANYAHU'S WAR

His government's actions flout principles of justice and humanity, apart from isolating Israel

AT THE TIME, it had seemed the March 25 UN Security Council resolution on Gaza would mark a turning point. The demand for a humanitarian ceasefire was not vetoed by the US — it had nixed three such resolutions till then — which signaled that Washington's support for the Benjamin Netanyahu government was not limitless. That perception was strengthened earlier this month when President Joe Biden drew a "red line" around Rafah, saying that a ground offensive against the southernmost city in Gaza would lead to the US stopping its arms supply to Israel. But when the red line was breached, it was moved: Israel bombed a shelter for refugees, killing 45 people, on Sunday and the White House said that this did not constitute a violation. Yet, it would be a mistake for Tel Aviv to confuse this apparently long rope for impunity. The October 7 attacks by Hamas generated global sympathy for it, but the thousands of civilian deaths, and mass displacement that followed, is increasingly isolating it from the global community.

Sunday night's attack was gruesome even in a conflict that has brutalised sensitivities. Netanyahu's claim that the attack was a "mishap" cuts little ice. The hard, maximalist position taken by the Netanyahu government — denying a two-state solution in principle as well as refusing to pause the attacks — is isolating Israel globally. His failure to bring back the remaining hostages, or capture the Hamas leadership, has made him unpopular at home. In fact, before the current conflict, Israel was expanding its ties with moderate states in the region through the Abraham Accords. It was also an important node in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor announced at the G20 summit in New Delhi last year. These multilateral arrangements were the first step in turning the Middle East into a zone of connectivity and trade, not conflict. Netanyahu's actions, the expansion of the conflict to the Red Sea and with Iran, have turned the clock back.

It is important to remember the Netanyahu government was facing a crisis of popularity and legitimacy before October 7, 2023. It had lost allies and there were massive protests over the government's attempted judicial "reforms". The PM himself faces corruption charges. Cynics might well believe that the prolonged conflict is a bid at political self-preservation. This politics through war, however, is hurting Israel's interests internationally. Earlier this week, Spain, Ireland and Norway recognised the Palestinian state; the International Court of Justice has admitted a case accusing Israel of genocide and there has been a request for arrest warrants for war crimes for Netanyahu and others at the International Criminal Court. Protests against the Netanyahu government's actions in universities and beyond — including and especially in the US — mean that there is a domestic political cost to supporting Israel, especially relevant for the US in an election year. The Netanyahu government's attacks on civilians and the refusal to allow a ceasefire for even humanitarian aid is a form of unconscionable collective punishment for October 7. It flies against the principles of justice and humanity, and harms and diminishes Israel.

BEFORE THE NEXT STORM

Rise of multi-hazard disasters calls for disaster resilient infrastructure, empowered disaster management agencies

THE CREATION OF the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) in 2005, prompted by the 1999 Odisha super cyclone and the 2004 tsunami, was a timely decision. Over the years, the NDMA has done commendable work in disaster mitigation, risk assessment and reduction, and post-disaster response, rescue and relief. It has also developed competencies in newer threats like heatwaves. Nearly every state now has a disaster management agency of its own, though some function less effectively than others. But the damage caused by landslides in the Northeast in the aftermath of cyclone Remal that hit the West Bengal coastline on Sunday night is the latest reminder of the urgent need to upgrade and overhaul the disaster management system.

The nature of disasters that the country faces has changed drastically in the last 20 years. Disasters, especially those that are a result of extreme weather events, have become more frequent and intense. Climate change has been playing an important role in exacerbating the impacts. Events that were not looked at as potential disasters earlier, like the summer heat, have emerged as new threats. The most worrying development has been the rise in what are known as multi-hazard disasters, one event triggering another, or a series of other disasters, the cascading impacts of which result in a destruction that is much higher in magnitude. Heavy rainfall leads to breach of glacial lakes and landslides in hilly areas which results in flash floods downstream. Or, extreme heatwave triggers largescale forest fires. The recent episode of landslides in the Northeastern region, which has claimed at least 30 lives, was a similar multi-hazard disaster. Cyclone Remal caused heavy rainfall in the area which triggered landslides at several locations.

Disaster management agencies need to be empowered to play a more pro-active role in dealing with these. More resources and capacity-building needs to flow in. There is little that can be done to prevent natural events, like extreme rainfall or cyclones or heatwaves. But man-made influences like unregulated construction can certainly be minimised. India is in the process of building infrastructure for its future. Resilience to disasters needs to be built into each of these. Old infrastructure also needs to be retrofitted. India has created an international organisation, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), specifically to promote disaster resilient infrastructure worldwide. It would be helpful to create the right templates at home first.

HOLD THE STEAK

The Olympic Village restaurant wants to give French cuisine a vegetarian makeover. Is the land of foie gras prepared?

BROCCOLIS IS NO replacement for beef, but as the Paris Olympics draw closer, the country best known for dishes like steak tartare, boeuf bourguignon and blanquette de veau, is preparing for a vegetarian makeover. The trigger: The Olympics planning committee's goal to cut emissions by 50 per cent, which means that food with a heavy carbon footprint — like beef and veal — will be reduced to 40 per cent of the menu in the restaurant that will serve the over 15,000 athletes arriving in July.

Charles Guillois, the chef in charge, has spoken in interviews of his desire to break the "false stereotype... that French gastronomy is meat, meat and only meat". While it is true that among the classic French dishes are some vegetarian ones — for example, ratatouille or soupe à l'oignon — vegetables, in general, are something of an after-thought. On this matter, France, with the highest per capita consumption of beef and veal in Europe, has fallen behind. Others like Scandinavian countries have been quicker to embrace a less meat-dependent diet. This applies as much to home cooking as it does to fine dining. Currently, there is only one Michelin-starred vegetarian restaurant in all of France and the one vegan restaurant that was awarded a star, closed down a year after winning the honour.

It's not just cultural pride that has fueled a disregard for plant-forward cooking in France. For the last few years, the meat industry has warily watched the plant-based food industry grow and even gone to court to keep these products from using meat-based descriptions like "sausage". Guillois and Tony Estangoet, head of the organising committee for the Games, have both spoken of the responsibility to "educate" the people about planet-friendly eating habits. But this may take more than one sporting event, even if it is the biggest in the world.

CRITICS OF THE Joe Biden administration routinely contrast the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, accusing the US of double standards in condemning Russian, but not Israeli attacks on civilians. But what is striking about these conflicts is not how differently Washington has been handling them but how similarly. In both cases, America opted for war rather than negotiations, leading its Western allies in supplying arms, funding, and diplomatic cover to Ukraine and Israel. Despite the carnage, both wars have reached a stalemate and are unlikely to achieve any of Kyiv's or Tel Aviv's stated military aims of complete victory. What does this double failure say about the changing international order and its possible future?

Taken together, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza show up the radical insufficiency of the political categories we use to understand them. A narrative about the revival of Russian imperialism, for instance, is countered by one about Ukraine collaborating with NATO to diminish Moscow. Claims of Palestinian terrorism aided by Iran's alleged mission to destroy Israel is countered by the latter's politics of apartheid and settler colonialism. And, all sides accuse each other of genocide.

However, none of these storylines can account for the direction in which these wars are going. Nor can they explain why the US has chosen to deal with them in exactly the same way, despite their very different histories and places within American foreign policy.

The US has chosen to globalise these conflicts in the name of restricting their spread. It has done so by mobilising international support for Ukraine and Israel only to divide the world instead. Both Russia's invasion and Hamas's attack appeared to ignore the global contexts of these long-standing conflicts to focus on their regional dimension. Just as the Minsk Agreements do not now frame Russian policy on Ukraine, neither do the Abraham Accords define Arab views on Gaza. And the world's divided response to these wars only consolidates their regional character, since countries refusing to follow American instruction consider neither to be a global threat. Only the West's support of one party over another threatens to turn each into a global conflict.

Astonishing about this refusal, especially from countries in the so-called Global South, is how many of them are US or Western allies and even client states. Also notable is the fact that most do not phrase their choice in terms of siding with one party or another in the style of the Cold War. Turkey can be part of NATO

and sell drones to Ukraine while still refusing to sanction Russia. Similarly, it can oppose Israel's war in Gaza while maintaining diplomatic (and until recently, trade) relations with it. Instead of seeing such behaviour as erratic and hypocritical, we should acknowledge that Turkey is one of many such state actors who seem to have brought neutrality back to geopolitics for the first time since it was banished during the War on Terror.

What is called neutrality in the case of Ukraine is manifested in calls for a ceasefire in the case of Gaza. In either case, the effect is to recognise and reinforce each war's regional character and thus reduce its potential for expansion. But this can only happen at the expense of Ukraine as much as Israel, both of which would be forced to accommodate themselves to a new regional order. The irony of this for the latter, of course, is that the Abraham Accords were also meant to set up a regional order, but one in which Israel would be the linchpin. But such regionalisation would render the unipolar international order in which America conducts itself as a global power irrelevant. This explains why the US insists on re-globalising both conflicts by intervening and further militarising them. Defending Ukraine and Israel might be deeply-felt commitments, but they do not exhaust the meaning of such intervention.

The fact that the US possesses no rival has regionalised geopolitics by removing the possibility of great-power competition from it. While we tend to date economic and cultural forms of globalisation to the end of the Cold War, this event paradoxically led to the collapse of global politics as well. With the world no longer divided into two blocs and a few non-aligned countries, regionalisation has emerged after the last American effort to re-globalise politics in the War on Terror. It has been focussed throughout on heading off all potential rivals and forestalling the emergence of another bipolar or even multipolar international order.

If geopolitics is not working in the way the West expected, it is because the rest of the world is moving in a different direction. The real threat to a unipolar international order comes not from a bipolar or multipolar future in which politics remains global, but from the latter's collapse in the face of regionalisation.

Rather than seeking to replace the Cold War's remaining pole in great-power competition, America's rivals are trying to circumvent it without necessarily reducing it. They are treating it not as a model for their own future but as a remnant from the past. Whether or not any country entertains the ambition of succeeding the US, for the foreseeable future, its politics can only be one of evading the latter's power.

Middle powers like China, Russia, India, and Brazil are all actors in regional political arenas and cannot project military force much beyond them. Most do not even exercise hegemony over their own neighbourhoods. China may be economically integrated in its region, but it only has North Korea, and occasionally, Pakistan as allies. India, similarly, finds itself in a largely hostile neighbourhood in which it lacks even economic integration. To escape the limits of its regional influence, India reaches out to powers outside it. Only Russia appears to enjoy some kind of regional hegemony in Central Asia and parts of the Caucasus and eastern Europe, serving as the poor cousin to US's transatlantic hegemony over the West.

While the US has been focussed on a global threat to its unipolarity, the real danger it faces comes from the loss of global politics. This threat does not arise from isolationism but globalisation itself. It is because economic and technological relations have moved beyond the reach of states, as the failure of sanctions on Iran and Russia demonstrates, that politics can now become regional. The US's response to this is to attempt their re-globalisation, but it can only do so by supporting war in eastern Europe and the Middle East. Its deployment of force to reestablish the *status quo ante*, however, has not succeeded and is doing little more than collapsing US hegemony and its global role in the international order.

The regionalisation of the international order does not mean it will be any more peaceful than the global one built to contain the Cold War. The task before the US today is to do what it has already done twice following each of the World Wars, and create a new international order founded on a balance of power. But this time that balance must be struck not between empires as with the League of Nations, nor between superpowers as with the United Nations, but among the regions and middle powers which now define geopolitics.

The writer is professor of Indian History, University of Oxford

WHAT EC MUST GUARANTEE

Independence of crucial institutions is necessary to safeguard citizens' interests



D RAJA

IN THE LAST 10 years of the BJP's misrule, our constitutional framework has come under unprecedented strain. After targeting our sense of belonging through the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and distorting our shared history, the BJP is now bent on debasing the integrity of our institutions, including constitutional ones. Its assault on the electoral process is multifaceted, meant to undermine its integrity. Coupled with undermining institutions like the Parliament and state assemblies, this serves the purpose of eroding the foundations of our parliamentary democracy.

The BJP tried to corrupt the political arena through the now unconstitutional electoral bonds scheme. Next came "One nation, one election", which dilutes the federal character of our republic and impedes the autonomy of both the voter's franchise and the elected state governments. A more frontal attack on the integrity of elections came in the form of The CEC and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023, which gave the central government a majority vote in the appointments of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and other election commissioners.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) was conceived as a strong, independent and permanent body deriving its authority directly

from the Constitution. ECI holds a vast mandate and power when it comes to the conduct of free and fair elections. The extent of ECI's power is such that it cancelled a by-election to the R K Nagar assembly constituency in Tamil Nadu in 2017 when it saw the electoral process being "seriously vitiated" by the use of money power. It is disheartening to see the same body behaving in the manner it has by neglecting serious violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) by leaders of the BJP. The BJP and PM Narendra Modi started their campaign by repeatedly invoking the Ram Temple issue but the ECI took no note of it. However, to the BJP's great shock, people prioritised issues of livelihood like employment, price rise and the 10 years of BJP misrule etc. Their refusal to be swayed by the Ram Temple issue made the BJP and Modi desperate and they resorted to the only thing they know — polarisation. Overnight, the BJP dropped Modi's guarantees and the Vksit Bharat rhetoric and started fueling hatred and divisions. The PM openly made anti-minority remarks and baselessly claimed that the Opposition alliance will give wealth to Muslims if voted to power. These remarks not only violated the MCC but also the spirit of secularism and equality enshrined in the Constitution.

MAY 30, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

2 BSF JAWANS KILLED

TERRORISTS KILLED SEVEN people, including two Border Security Force jawans, and injured seven persons in extremist activity in Punjab in the last 24 hours. The two BSF jawans and a civilian were killed when terrorists opened fire on a BSF picket in Tarn Taran. Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi expressed her unhappiness to the Punjab Governor B D Pande over the handling of the Punjab situation.

A DIPLOMATIC GAFFE

INDIA HAS CONVEYED to Bangladesh its "profound regret" over the violent incidents

at the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi, in which volunteers of the "Hindu Manch" damaged the mission building. Foreign Secretary M Rasgotra met the Bangladesh High Commissioner Air Marshal A K Khanolkar and conveyed to him that the Indian government regretted the incident. Rasgotra assured him that full protection would be provided to the diplomatic mission.

RIOTS IN J&K

ONE PERSON WAS killed and one seriously injured when the police opened fire in Srinagar to quell violent mobs. Two persons

were injured in the firing. One of them succumbed to his injuries. The police resorted to firing when lathicharge and teargas failed to disperse the mob that set fire to the office of the deputy superintendent of police.

THACKERAY'S CLAIM

SHIV SENA CHIEF Bal Thackeray feels that if he is arrested on some criminal charges, it would only lead to "further chaos". He said that if the government desired to take action, it could have done so immediately after his so-called provocative speech. The delayed action proved that the "government has wilted under communal pressure."



THE IDEAS PAGE

The vacation red herring

Blaming court holidays for pendency distracts from the deeper structural problems that ail the judiciary



MAJA DARUWALA

AS WE BEGIN this summer's court break, the debate about how much time judges actually put in on the Bench has been rekindled by a casual remark from a member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, who said that judges work only for a few hours a day, take long vacations and need to modernise.

The question of whether judges sit for 200 days or 365 is a red herring. It spins court timings and vacations to mean "this is why there are arrears". It creates the impression that if judges stayed longer on their benches, instead of swanning off on holiday, arrears would magically disappear and all would be well. To respond by saying that judges are overburdened and need to blow off steam in fine holiday spots while litigants languish plays into a manufactured imagery of lack of accountability or discipline amongst a pampered privileged elite.

True, a few more weeks of active sittings or even uninterrupted court time is not a bad idea and will go some way towards placating those chafing under delays. But too many other things that have lain unattended at the door of both the judiciary and the executive, are more responsible for the problem of arrears than judges' vacations.

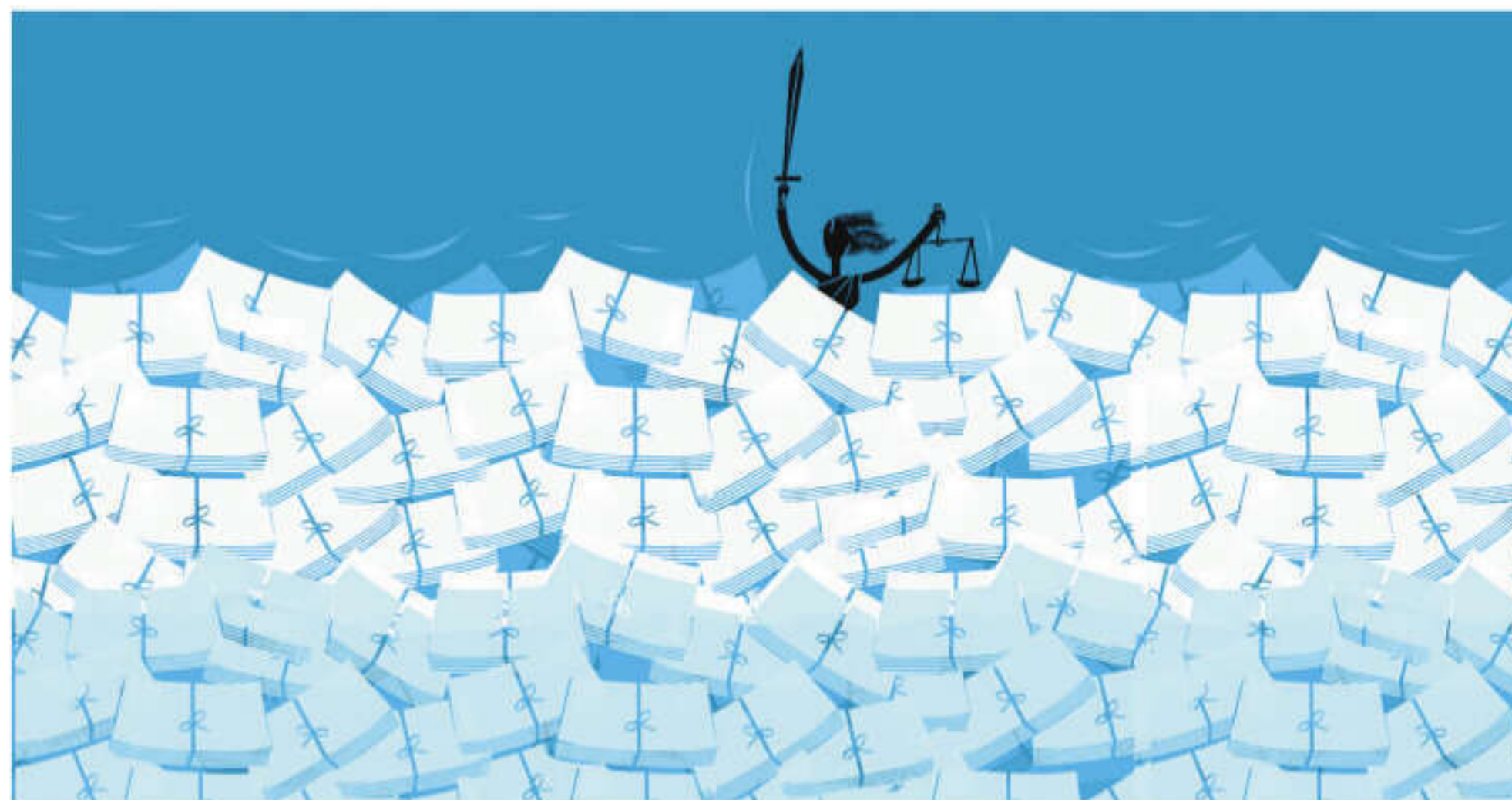
For one, there is the vexed question of too few judges. No state has its full complement of judges: Not in the high courts and not in our many lower courts. High court vacancies average 30 per cent but can touch nearly 50 per cent. Subordinate court vacancies average 22 per cent. But Bihar and Meghalaya clock in vacancies above 30 per cent — ongoing for over three years. According to the India Justice Report, as of June 2020, on average, a case remained pending in the subordinate courts for three years and in high courts, at 2022 figures, for five years.

Litigants want a quick resolution to their issues, but with pendency being what it is they can't hope to get it and overburdened judges can't give it.

Shortfall in judges is measured against "sanctioned" strength — the number designated as necessary, given the workload. However, as long ago as 1987, the 120th report of the Law Commission recommended there should be 50 judges per 10 lakh population. At just 15 judges per 10 lakh population nearly four decades later, even this hugely inadequate figure has not been reached. Meanwhile, each of India's BRIC partners has way more judges to serve their populations.

Several other factors contribute to the problem, including the types and complexity of cases each judge must deal with, and the stratagems used by lawyers to prolong trials for their clients' advantage. Courtrooms are being built, but are still in short supply and too many in use are sub-optimal. Nationally, support staff shortages average 26 per cent. One court clerk or one typist missing anywhere means delay becomes inevitable, however diligent the judge.

Quality deficits amplify structural inadequacies. Uneven acumen in both language and



CR Sasikumar

learning at the bar and the bench leads to endless procedural delays while the mismatch between proficiency of language, clarity of argument and final outcome opens the door to ever more appeals.

A permissive and perhaps collusive culture within the legal fraternity allows unjustified applications, endless adjournments and unmeritorious appeals to proliferate. It is routine for pleadings and paper books to grow into small mountains. So too with judgments, whose length may often be inverse to their learning. In all this, eventually, it is the dispensation of justice that suffers.

Meanwhile, the great hope of technology remains hostage to slow and uneven adoption, erratic electricity, uneven bandwidth and user resistance.

Solutions require state and central governments to come together, to at least attempt to find answers. A few are mentioned here.

Excessive government litigation presently accounts for roughly 50 per cent of the court load. Attempts to trim and rationalise this have been going on for a while. In the absence of comprehensive publicly available data, or cost-benefit analysis, it is hard to know whether they have led to any significant downsizing of the sprawling government docket or what incentives and disincentives would rationalise it.

Every new legislation adds its own slice of litigation. New bills rarely ever assess the additional load that will fall on the courts. The practice of assessing possible financial and time implications and putting this out to the public at the pre-legislative stage would, perhaps, lead to better-drafted laws and early plans being laid for better outcomes. Cleaning out outdated laws and procedures also helps to reduce cases.

Judges are trained to be adjudicators, not administrators. A permanent administrative secretariat headed by a qualified court manager within each court, on whom the senior judge can rely, has proved a winner in many jurisdictions abroad where court management is a specialised career option. Long-term court managers who can free the bench of many tedious tasks and a design for maximum efficiency are solutions worth universalising.

For one, there is the vexed question of too few judges. No state has its full complement of judges: Not in the high courts and not in our many lower courts. High court vacancies average 30 per cent but can touch nearly 50 per cent. Subordinate court vacancies average 22 per cent. Bihar and Meghalaya clock in vacancies above 30 per cent — ongoing for over three years. According to the India Justice Report, as of June 2020, on average a case remained pending in the subordinate courts for three years and in high courts, at 2022 figures, for five years.

On the quality side, there is a strong case to be made for higher standards being set at the entry level before anyone can grace a bench, whether high or low, or before being allowed to practise before a court. The growing number of appeals and admonitions meted out for ignoring procedure, not knowing the law and dressing up opinion as legal rationale says much more about the fault lines embedded in the system than about the individuals who have been allowed to run it.

Spending more money on justice delivery is, of course, a no-brainer but resource-strapped governments do not prioritise ramping up efficiencies in justice delivery. The India Justice Report estimates that the overall per capita spending on judiciary stands at less than Rs 150. It remains to be evaluated whether this subsistence-level budgeting is penny-wise or pound-foolish.

The eye-watering five million-plus cases pending have prompted all sorts of experiments and sudden ad hoc efforts: Compulsory pre-trial mediation, Lok Adalats, specialist courts, the winnowing out of petty cases, ironing out burdensome procedural bottlenecks as the apex court has done recently when it directed the electronic communication of bail orders directly to prisons; prioritising old cases and cases where delay will bring about loss of liberty and irreparable harm to one or other party, and ever more tribunals. Yet, too often, saddled with the same structural shortfalls, starved of money and manpower, heavy workloads and deficient domain knowledge, specialised efforts like consumer and POCOS courts limp along, while their own arrears end up in the same dire straits.

The rising tide of litigation is often cited as one more reason for inescapable delay. In a rule-of-law country, it is everyone's right to have their day in court. Across the world, as incomes and ownership rise and commerce and industry grow, recourse to formal systems of adjudication increases and must be welcomed because it signals trust in a robust system of conflict resolution. This is inevitable, foreseeable and with prudent planning — not finger-pointing — could be manageable.

The writer is editor-in-chief, India Justice Report

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"People of conscience in the East and West must unite to economically and militarily boycott Israel for its shameless spilling of Palestinian blood. If concrete steps are not taken, then we must await the next atrocity." — DAWN, PAKISTAN

Punjab, unlike other states

It has no alliances, no vote banks based on religion and caste. It has been known to resist a national electoral wave



PRAMOD KUMAR

PUNJAB HAS CARVED an electoral path of its own. Here, there are no alliances amongst political parties, no INDIA bloc and no NDA, no exclusive vote banks based on religion or caste, even as there are the same tribes of party-hoppers and footloose voters. The national narrative of *Ram Mandir nirman*, Mandal, OBC reservation or apprehensions of subversion of the Constitution are hardly a part of the mainstream narrative in the state. It has a story of farmers' grievances, sharing of river waters, transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, and Indo-Pak trade apart from issues of infrastructure development, quality education, drug de-addiction, and youth engagement. All these are being garnished with the incumbent AAP's Delhi Model of governance for the state.

Punjab has a rich history of political mergers, alliances and coalitions. The formation of such alliances goes back to colonial Punjab. Uneasy, but many times historically necessary alliances were arrived at. In reorganised Punjab, four post-election coalitions between 1967 and 1980, and three pre-election coalitions during 1997 and 2019 were formed between the BJP and Akali Dal. At the national level, however, the coalition became central to the putting together of the government in the period post-1989, with 1977 an exception.

Unlike many other states, Punjab has had no exclusive vote banks based on religion or caste. These categories are intertwined and enmeshed. For instance, Scheduled Castes constitute more than 33 per cent of the total population and are segmented into Mazhabis, Chamars, Adharmis and Balmikis and are not represented by any caste-based party. The vote share of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has been continuously declining. It has come down from 8 per cent in 2004 to 3.53 per cent in 2012 and 2 per cent in 2019. Data shows that the majority of SC legislators have got elected from parties other than the BSP — around 16 per cent of the SC members between 1967 and 2022 belonged to the BJP, 28 per cent to the Akalis, 23 per cent to Congress.

Punjab does not prop up an exclusive Hindu vote bank. In the 2014 Parliament elections, the BJP could not garner votes of urban Hindus even when the Hindutva wave was sweeping other parts of the country. Reformism within Hindus was guided more by the search for an identity to defend their faith from Christian missionaries, Islam and the Sanatan orthodoxy. This can be attributed to the role played by religious reform movements, particularly Sikhism, Arya Samaj, and Brahma Samaj. Hindus have dominant traits of Sikhism, and a normative behaviour influenced by the Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharma both.

Thus, given that Punjab's electoral politics shows the blurring of religious and caste fault-lines, mobilising the people as part of exclusive categories, like Hindu traders or SCs, may not bring the desired electoral results.

There is a four-cornered contest as the political parties have not entered into alliances. Congress and the AAP decided to go solo after their alliance talks could not

reach fruition as the Punjab unit of Congress opposed it. It argued that an alliance with the AAP would negate the mandate of the people to perform the role of the opposition. In turn, it would help the Akalis to emerge as the main opposition and enmesh the anti-incumbency faced by the AAP government. It was argued by the Congress leadership that it would have been suicidal to barter its support base for a short-term advantage at the national level. In Punjab, Congress is the frontrunner in more than half of the constituencies.

The AAP created a new binary in the 2022 Assembly elections, that is, traditional parties versus the party for change. It clubbed all parties, ranging from Congress and Akalis to BJP, and branded them as corrupt. Now, after two years in power, the AAP in Punjab appears to have lost the plot. However, its performance in the ongoing polls will largely depend on its paternalistic welfareism, whereby freebies have been offered across the population. How far will the implementation of free electricity for all, upto 300 units, give dividends to AAP, is the question.

The Akalis and the BJP could not enter into an alliance as the Akali Dal insisted on conditions, including legal guarantees for MSP for crops and release of Sikh prisoners after completion of their jail terms.

The emergence of the regional space has been largely influenced by the farmers' protests, which acted as one of the filters for the alliance between the BJP and SAD. The BJP has to regionalise its agenda, as the narrative of Ram Mandir and its corporatised approach to agriculture may have implications for election outcomes. The Akalis have a regional agenda, with issues relating to federalism, Indo-Pak trade, crisis of agriculture and increasing youth unemployment. It may also be able to consolidate its panthic constituency.

The BJP does not have a Punjab-specific agenda, particularly for the Punjabi Hindus, who, unlike other minorities, do not suffer any sense of persecution or siege. Merely importing turbaned Sikh leaders may not transform it into a Punjab party. It has the advantage of having Sunil Jakhar as BJP state president, known for his sharp pro-Punjab positioning. But the non-fulfillment of promises of doubling the income of farmers and legalising MSPs has returned to haunt the BJP.

The absence of an alliance between the Akalis and the BJP may have provided fodder to the radicals. In this election, the fringe radicals are getting a notable response from the youth, mainly in Khadoor Sahib and Faridkot constituencies. Their main emphasis is on the denial of justice to the Bandi Sikhs (Sikh prisoners incarcerated in various cases for years), exodus of youth from Punjab and the migration to the state of labour from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

The mainstream political parties have allowed the fringe radicals to appropriate space in the religious or panthic constituency. The negation of the agenda of peace and communal harmony, and one-upmanship in power politics, has weakened the moderate space. This is disquieting.

The four-cornered contest between the Akalis, BJP, Congress and AAP will lead to a division of votes. The Congress appears to be the major beneficiary, followed by the AAP and the Akalis might be able to consolidate their support base. The BJP may, on limited seats, gain from this flux.

The writer is chairperson, Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh



SEEMA MUNDOLI

In heat island, a green oasis

Parks provide respite in the summer. They must be made more accessible

OUR POPULAR IMAGINATION of parks is as spaces for rest and recreation. But in cities such as Bengaluru, they are also important from an ecology and equity perspective. It is, therefore, unfortunate that little attention is paid to these pockets of greenery that contribute to making life bearable in a rapidly concretising city. Equally concerning is that parks are becoming battlegrounds for determining who can access them, for what purposes and at what times of the day.

Cubbon Park and Lal Bagh are historical landmarks in the city. If Bengaluru can still cling to the moniker of "Garden City", it is owing to the continued existence of these parks. But scattered across neighbourhoods are also smaller parks in different shapes and sizes that are tucked away in quieter nooks or flanked by roads, houses, and shops. The tree cover is often a mix of native and exotic species with flowering species adding a splash of colour and canopies providing shade that sometimes extend across almost half an acre. In the better-maintained ones, we can see more footfall — mostly residents who live nearby and frequent the park for walks, the elderly conversing on the benches, pet owners walking their dogs, and children playing. More recently, open-air gyms with a variety of exercise machines have been introduced in these spaces as well.

Whatever the different spatial, ecological, or demographic dimensions, one common feature of most neighbourhood parks in Bengaluru is the timing. They remain

open only for a few hours in the morning and in the evening. For the rest of the day, the gates of these fenced parks remain firmly shut — and locked.

Urban Lab at the Centre for Science and Environment's recent report highlights how rising temperatures together with relative humidity pose a deadly combination in six megacities including Bengaluru. The city has seen of 0.5 degrees C increase in decadal ambient temperature, and relative humidity has marginally contributed to overall heat discomfort. Coupled with this is the urban heat island effect — the result of an increase in built-up areas because of urbanisation.

Temperatures in Bengaluru city have been breaking records this summer — going as high as 41.8 degrees C. While rainfall brought some relief last week, the days continue to be uncomfortably hot making parks scattered across the city appear like refreshing oases. In reality, however, they are more of a mirage because when the sun is at its peak, the parks remain closed denying access to people who desperately need the shade in the day.

These include the *pourakarmikas* who work in the sweltering heat to keep our city clean, the construction workers engaged in endless repair work on the roads, and gig workers who could do with a brief respite while rushing between deliveries. Heat risk and strokes can be debilitating, even fatal. Recognising this, the Labour Department of Kerala in April this year rescheduled work

timings banning any work in the open between 12 pm and 3 pm. But can a gig worker afford the luxury of working fewer hours?

Timing is not the only restriction. A common sight on entering many of these parks is a board prominently displayed with a list of prohibited activities. Some of them are understandable considering the park is a public space such as warnings against alcohol consumption, smoking, throwing plastic and other waste, and damaging trees. Others seem unreasonable such as prohibiting the plucking of flowers, sitting or walking on grass, or bringing in eatables. In some parks, perhaps because of the smaller size, the rules border on bizarre — such as children being prohibited from playing or riding a bicycle! Another issue that especially splits residents is regarding allowing entry to pets, especially dogs.

Parks are public spaces where urban residents from all walks of life can unwind and relax — potential places for social bonding among people. So we should be concerned that they are turning into mini battlegrounds instead.

We need to collectively rethink park use and access in Bengaluru — and reimagine them as multiuse green spaces accessed by different groups at different times of the day. Parks need protection from being converted to other forms of land use and from being increasingly concretised. Should the limited space in the neighbourhood park be retained as green cover to mitigate the impacts of rising temperatures and the urban heat island

effect? Or should the trees and plants be removed to accommodate exercise machines? Parks can be for recreation — walking, exercising or spending an evening with family. They are also ideal from an educational perspective for children, especially from schools in the neighbourhood who can learn about the natural world.

Even a small patch of green in their neighbourhood park is a perfect field site for observing biodiversity from insects to birds to mammals. Parks can be a refuge for urban residents from all walks of life. For office goers, they are a perfect spot to have lunch under the shade of a tree before heading back to a walled office. They provide succour for the city's vulnerable population such as the *pourakarmikas*, construction labour and gig workers giving them a respite, however brief, from the scorching heat while at work.

Getting different groups to agree on the use and maintenance of a park will not be easy. But we need to take the first step, however tiny, in making parks more accessible and inclusive, not to mention ecologically rich. The more people access parks with a sense of ownership, the more eyes on the park there will be which will in turn contribute to making them safer. But we also want these eyes to be kind, and inclusive, allowing different groups to access parks freely throughout the day.

The writer is faculty, Azim Premji University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A DIFFERENT TIME

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Sing a political song' (IE, May 29). The era of the Hindi film songs depicting the nation's popular mood, satirising politicians and taking the powers that be to account is long gone. The writers of songs used to be well-versed in the long tradition of defiant poetry in Urdu and Hindi. Poets like Sahir Ludhianvi, Kaifi Azmi, Shakeel Badauni, Hasrat Jaipuri, Shailendra, Majrooh Sultanpuri and Neeraj were among those who enriched Hindi film songs. Closer to the common man, they translated his aspirations and frustrations well. The early decades of Independence were marked by socialism and patriotism. This is a far cry from today when any criticism of those in power is synonymous to sedition.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

ROSY PICTURE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Elections then and now' (IE, May 29). The article presents a rather rose-tinted view of past elections, implying that they were simpler and more straightforward com-

pared to the complexities of contemporary politics. However, this portrayal conveniently overlooks the significant flaws and challenges that existed during those times. The article downplays the seriousness of defections in current politics by suggesting that they are merely a part of the "winning strategy". In reality, defections undermine the democratic process.

Saurabh Shekhar, New Delhi

THE HEAT IS ON

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The heat stress'. The country has already far exceeded the normal week or two period of heatwaves it experiences, with temperatures breaching the 50 degree Celsius mark. India has national guidelines on heatwaves, explicitly laying out the roles and duties of the central and state government agencies, district administrations, local self-governments, NGOs, civil society organisations and other stakeholders. However, it is the responsibility of the states at the district magistrates' level to take measures to reduce loss of life due to heatwaves and maintain data on deaths.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

Transparent financing

Next govt must address political funding

Voting to elect the 18th Lok Sabha ends this week, and the results will be out on June 4, paving the way for the formation of the next Union government. Irrespective of the political shape and combination of the next government, it will need to quickly get down to business and address the policy and governance challenges. One such issue is related to elections themselves. In February, a Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court struck down the electoral-bond scheme because it violated the right to information under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. The apex court also directed State Bank of India, the authorised bank to issue electoral bonds, to disclose the details of the donations, which have since been thoroughly analysed in the media and elsewhere. The state of electoral funding in India has always been a matter of concern and the apex court's judgment has provided an opportunity to address all issues related to the finances of political parties.

The Union home minister in an interview recently highlighted the possible need for an alternative to the electoral-bond scheme. It is well understood that the use of black money, or money power in general, is a significant concern for Indian politics, and the next government must address this issue urgently. An alternative mechanism must address the basic reasons for scrapping the electoral-bond scheme. In this regard, the next government would do well to constitute a committee with representation from major political parties to study all aspects of political funding and come up with suggestions, which can be debated threadbare in Parliament before implementation.

With the Supreme Court judgment in the backdrop, the starting point for any alternative mechanism should be transparency. An opaque system of financing can have a number of ill effects, including policy capture. Furthermore, since the idea is to eliminate the influence of black money, the new mechanism can do away with cash donations. India is a world leader in payment solutions, and given the general popularity of the Unified Payments Interface, this should not be a problem. The committee may also look at the possibility of strengthening the Election Commission of India, enabling it to strictly monitor the income and expenditure of political parties. It is often suggested that state funding of elections or political parties should be introduced to contain the influence of illicit money, or money power in general, to preserve the level playing field. However, this can only work if there is proper monitoring of political finance and parties are restricted from raising funds from other sources.

Another option could be a national fund where citizens and corporations contribute. The collected funds can be distributed among political parties in a way that maintains a level playing field. This would also take away the fear of retribution, which is often cited as a reason against transparency in political funding. The committee can also be asked to look at the way money is spent. There are expenditure limits for contesting candidates, for example, but not for political parties, which can affect the balance in a competitive democracy. To be fair, the issue of political finance is complicated with no easy solutions. However, with the scrapping of the existing mechanism by a court judgment and the constitution of a new Lok Sabha, India will have an opportunity to set things right as far as possible.

Responsible development

Developments in OpenAI raise concern

There has been growing concern about the quality of governance at OpenAI. In the past few months, 11 key persons have quit but the problem started with the failed attempt to oust Chief Executive Officer Sam Altman in November last year. This was followed by a reconstitution of the board. Even as it released ChatGPT 4, OpenAI was embroiled in a controversy, with actor Scarlett Johansson claiming that her voice was cloned despite her refusing to give permission. The company has also been sued by *The New York Times* for copyright violation. Two former board members have written a widely circulated essay explaining why they think the mission of OpenAI to develop artificial intelligence (AI) responsibly has failed. One of the former board members recently said that Mr Altman withheld information and misrepresented things. Since ChatGPT was publicly released in November 2022, it has turned the field of generative AI upside down. The release sparked fierce competition and several others have released their own versions of Gen AI programmes and a multitude of applications have been developed riding on those platforms. The competition has, however, led to considerations of safety and responsible development being superseded by commercial concerns.

This is contrary to the stated mission of OpenAI, which is to ensure that AI benefits all of humanity. OpenAI itself is a not-for-profit company but it hived off the commercial side of ChatGPT into a for-profit subsidiary, which was valued at above \$80 billion in February 2024. When the move to oust Mr Altman was initiated, one of the cited reasons was that he wasn't being "candid" with the board. But the board itself was reconstituted and Mr Altman's vision of monetising ChatGPT seems to have clearly attained priority since. The exodus of many highly skilled workers — OpenAI cofounder Ilya Sutskever among them — could be for reasons including disagreeing with the direction of OpenAI. Corporate upheavals are normal in Silicon Valley and companies changing tack following boardroom struggles or reformatting of personnel is hardly unusual. But it is the nature of generative AI — OpenAI's core business — that causes concern about the potential harms that could arise from lack of governance.

In the 18 months since ChatGPT first released, some of the potential harms AI can cause are already visible, alongside potential benefits it may bring. At an enterprise level, AI can automate a wide range of functions and create entirely new revenue streams. It can solve intractable scientific problems and develop new materials with exotic properties. AI can also clone voices and avatars that fool face-recognition and voice-recognition security systems. It is already being misused to run scams, and spread false political messages. Authoritarian regimes can misuse the same abilities to target dissidents, even as corporations use this capability to identify pizza-topping preferences. The other concerning trend is GenAI's propensity for throwing up fictional "facts" and fake citations on search prompts. As dependencies on the near-magical capabilities of GenAI increase, the need for more responsible development and deployment also grows. The governance void in OpenAI is therefore more concerning than it would be in a traditional company. Policymakers will have to look for effective ways to rein in the harmful potential of AI without retarding its beneficial aspects.

Unlocking India's decadal growth

Sustained high growth will need hard reforms

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



The political outcomes of the 2024 general election are unlikely to affect the near-term macroeconomic outlook. However, the hard policy choices embedded in alternative policy visions and reform agendas might lead to very different economic profiles over the medium to long term.

While the external environment still seems unsettled and volatile, the large G7 economies appear to be moving towards a "soft landing" to varying degrees. Hence, the policy response will become more conducive to growth, gradually lowering interest rates. This bodes well for emerging markets, with a "risk-on" investor sentiment attracting more capital inflows.

In this context, the domestic macroeconomic environment remains robust, with nowcasting metrics indicating continuing strong demand. Financial year 2023-23 (FY24) growth is expected to print close to 8 per cent, and the Reserve Bank of India's FY25 growth forecast of 7 per cent remains eminently feasible. A large part of investor confidence in India is due to the demonstrated fiscal discipline by the Centre, in coordination with the calibrated monetary policy response, which is perhaps the best executed and most agile in the world.

On domestic consumption, Q4FY24 results of consumer companies point to improving rural demand, further reinforced by the predicted normal rains. While consumption import demand is likely to remain robust, India's current account is unlikely to be adversely impacted, with the deficit increasing to maybe 1.2 per cent of FY25 gross domestic product (GDP) from last year's expected 1 per cent. Inflation, particularly non-food and fuel (i.e. core inflation), is falling and the headline rate might be expected to move towards the 4 per cent target towards the end of FY25, thereby allowing a relaxation of monetary policy. Bank credit flow to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) has remained

strong, growing 20.1 per cent year-on-year (YoY) as of March 24, 2024. Loan disbursements by non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) for the relevant MSME borrowing requirements had slowed marginally over the first nine months of FY24, but still remain healthy.

However, despite the economic success of the past few years, sustaining a 7 per cent-plus growth for 10 years will not be easy and will require multiple enablers operating synchronously. Sequencing and coordination of reforms will be key to designing feedback loops into other processes, mutually reinforcing the overall agenda. A major constraint is resources availability, which will force choices among competing objectives, necessitating difficult economic trade-offs.

An expected private corporate capex upcycle, given falling borrowing costs, deleveraged balance sheets, and expected consumption demand will augment the public sector. Enormous investments will be needed for the ambitious transition to the net-zero carbon goal by 2070, with a need to access global capital pools.

Yet, economic weaknesses remain. Policy and regulatory enablers will need to address structural deficiencies. Unemployment, especially amongst the youth, is the most pressing problem and will only get exacerbated by ongoing technological advances. The quality of jobs is as important as their availability. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data for Q4FY24 shows that even in urban areas, only 47.4 per cent of jobs were salaried or regular wage positions, while 40.2 per cent were self-employed, and 12.5 per cent were casual labour. The share of salaried workers is likely much lower in rural areas.

One channel for mitigating this problem and boosting jobs is to refocus policy attention on the micro and small segments of the MSME sector. The data, especially regarding the size and other metrics of this segment, are woefully outdated. The last economic

census was in 2013; and the Survey of Unincorporated Enterprises was in 2016. Other surveys provide a fragmented look at establishments, employment and economic activity. A combination of increased access to credit, government procurement support, skilling and apprenticeships, comprehensive insurance coverage, marketing support (e.g., via Open Network for Digital Commerce), export opportunities, among other steps, is crucial for a vibrant MSME ecosystem.

Intertwined with MSME growth is the need to boost exports, both merchandise and services. India's ambitious goal of achieving \$1 trillion in merchandise exports by 2030 implies an annual growth rate of 15 per cent (FY24 exports were about \$435 billion) and will need a multi-pronged approach to enhance markets access, including tapping into new, less penetrated markets, boosted by new free-trade and investment agreements. India will also need to integrate even more substantially into the global supply and value chains. Facilitating the scale-up of labour-intensive job-creating enterprises needs equal priority. Services exports, especially attracting more global capability centres (GCCs), provide an opportunity not just to increase integration with the global economy, but also to go up the value chain, e.g., leading edge research and design capabilities.

This ambitious \$1 trillion merchandise export target suggests that imports will exceed \$1.5 trillion. Efficiently transporting goods of this magnitude will require world-class logistics infrastructure designed for multimodality. Port terminal capacities with connectivity to hinterlands will need to be upgraded. While the government has made significant strides in improving transport and logistics systems, key initiatives like Gati Shakti and Bharatmala will need to be scaled up. Of particular importance will be the operations of the two dedicated rail freight corridors currently approaching completion and the implementation of others in high-density freight routes.

In the longer term, the government has to lead multiple structural transformations, which are crucial for the growth in productivity for sustained growth. Globally, productivity growth has largely emanated from urban agglomerations. Urbanisation in India has been one of the weaker stories, with the share of urban population rising from around 31.6 per cent in 2012 to 35.9 per cent in 2022. China's urban population, over this period, had moved up from 53.1 per cent to 64.7 per cent (up from 19.4 per cent in 1980, roughly the same level as India's then). Land availability is a significant constraint on urbanisation in India, but better road, rail and metro connectivity is pushing out the boundaries of peri-urban habitations. An earlier initiative, Providing Urban Amenities in Rural Areas (PURA), merits revisiting.

Finally, the "last mile" is critical for efficiently implementing the reforms needed to sustain the high growth necessary for transitioning to an upper middle-income economy. This will require intense coordination among the Centre, states and local bodies in the true spirit of federalism.

The writer is an economist



SAUGATA BHATTACHARYA

How young India views jobs and work

This election season has seen a lot of heated debate around unemployment, especially how the youth are distressed by the lack of jobs.

An interesting question to ask is: How do the affected parties — the youth themselves — see the job situation through the prism of their life and world view? What do they think and feel about it? Are they angry and incensed? Resigned and defeated? Wary and anxious? Or NOTA on all these feelings?

As with last month's column ("How Young India views the world and polls"), this piece is also based on the findings of the ethnographic study, *Drivers of Destiny*, the details of which were discussed in the previous column. The segment of youth studied was designed to be representative of the "leading edge" of "middle India" — college-educated individuals (from a variety of colleges and courses), residing in urban areas (comprising large and small towns across India), and belonging to the lower middle and middle-income groups. This does not equate to the popular perception of "middle class", which actually denotes the richest 40 per cent of Indian households. Many in this group were first-generation college goers in their families. This segment represents "emerging India", "aspirational India", and using the India 1-2-3 framework of retail entrepreneur Kishore Biyani, not quite India 2 but almost there — that is, not privileged enough to access the networks of India 1, but not poor enough to be unaware or unable to strive for opportunities out there.

The headline is that this "bellwether" swathe of young India is not deeply distraught or feeling angry or hopeless about the lack of jobs. It appears to be a wholly different India compared to the one portrayed by Bachchan's angry young man in the Bollywood movies of the 1970s, or the young people of *Mere Apne* frittering

away their lives waiting for someone to employ them.

First of all, in keeping with the mostly self-employed "own account worker", or gig working population that we have become, the word they use is "kaam" (work) not "naukri" (employment). There is definite awareness that work is hard to find and not easily available without effort. There is a constant striving to look for and find work and this is a big theme of their lives that comes through loud and clear. They also say "we are trying hard, it is difficult (*mushkil*), but working is a must".

However, interestingly, the ethnographers did not hear this phrased as a "problem". There was, typically, a portfolio of work and a constant churn in that portfolio depending on what showed up next (horrific attrition rates in many sectors are probably a result of this).

However, despite this short-term view of work, there is a significant amount of hopefulness that better things will happen for them. This optimism is fuelled by selective perception from the hyperactive information environment they live in, coupled with the flip side of selective

denial. In the last column, we pointed out the narrow, parochial lens of "me, my surroundings, my life" through which they view the world. Through this lens, the view seems to be "I am ok, I can do it". There is a surprising amount of resilience and openness to try. "I will try this, if it doesn't work or I can't succeed, I will try something else".

Their internet- and social media-embraced lives are continuously inundated with information. There are multiple discourses that they are engaged with on how to be successful (YouTube is full of them) and social media plays a huge influencing role in showing role models who have turned their passion into income streams. All this causes a considerable amount of

entropy inside them, and constantly looking for work brings physical and mental tiredness, and fatigue.

While they are not unhappy, what would make them really happy is a government job. It is a symbol to them of stability, predictability, status, standing, and a life that is "set ho gaya". UPSC, RBI, state government competitive exams are all on their radar. These jobs symbolise meritocracy and a real shot at opportunity (though not an easy one). At the other end of the spectrum is a small segment of uber-hustlers who are convinced that they can play the financial markets to great benefit.

Another really interesting finding was that they don't have any particular awareness of the structural mechanisms that deliver jobs (echoing what we said in the last column that they didn't see government as much more than a utility). They don't see it as anybody's responsibility to create jobs for them. They view jobs as a product of "the market", created by an invisible force (our words not theirs). With this "market" view of jobs, it is nobody's fault that it is so hard to find work.

The story is one of tremendous agency ("individual ability to affect the environment") coming up against a hugely unhelpful, inhospitable structure ("conditions in the environment that limit choices"). Their agency may well be our saving grace — for now. It is also a call to think about swiftly providing different kinds of structural support. Perhaps this could be through financial inclusion for middle India, improved marketplaces, and enhanced infrastructure to enable their gig working life to be less fatiguing and difficult.

The writer is a business advisor in the area of customer-based business strategy. Her latest book is titled *Lollipop Land: How Small is Driving India's Mega Consumption Story*. www.ramabijapurkar.com.

1. *The Drivers of Destiny Project* is led by Mathangi Krishnamurthy, associate professor of Anthropology, IIT Madras, and commissioned by this columnist

Catharsis against western media



BOOK REVIEW

TANVIR AEIJAZ

The idea that people cannot represent themselves but need representation is at the root of colonising the "other". The western style of narration — what Denys Hay calls the "idea of Europe" — posits the western-white-world as superior to the culture and politics of the rest of the world. The English philosopher J S Mill, one of the West's foremost liberal-cultural heroes, clarified that the views in his books *On Liberty* and *Representative Government* were meant not for India (he worked in the India Office for years) because he considered Indians civilisationally inferior. For the West, India's otherness is an ontological category to be explored. For India, this western exploration needs to

be critically assessed, perhaps from the lens of Orientalism. In *Western Media Narratives on India* author Umesh Upadhyay makes an effort in this direction.

Mr Upadhyay attempts to deconstruct the cultural significations of western media on Indian ideas, leaders and histories and the consequent development of nuanced configurations of power dynamics. His core argument is that the western media is ideologically and politically driven to maintain the hegemony of the western white world. The book suggests that modern media in the West since its inception trains journalists to colonise minds and institutions of the non-western world.

In the colonial era, explorer-reporters from the West, the author says, worked largely to fulfil the imperial power's evangelical (also proselytising) and explorative agendas. They considered India a "dark" land, much in need of "enlightenment" and "progress" in the western sense, and spread Hinduphobia, as is seen in the writings of American religious scholar Stephen

Prothero that "actual Hinduism is not about mystical union with God but about public prostitution, idol worship, anti-social ascetics, child brides and the caste system".

At the international level, the emergence of global news agencies, such as *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, *Agence France-Presse* and *United Press International*, virtually led to the cartelisation of news in order to secure control of information and news flow across the globe. These agencies, the author contends, are part of the market-driven western ecosystem sustaining the international power equilibrium.

On perceptions built by the western media on India, the author believes that all Indian leaders, from Mahatma Gandhi to Narendra Modi, including Patel, Ambedkar, Nehru, Indira and Vajpayee, were targeted and maligned by the "foreign media". Ambedkar once wrote to Patel and Nehru that "The press [read English press] has never been kind to me. It has always done its best to twist facts and phrases, take them out of their context, and pervert the

sense of anything I have said."

After independence, India's leaders seemed to be at the receiving end of the information war. Western news agencies contrived to create a dominant anti-Indian narrative, usually getting support from debates in rarefied academic circles, NGOs, and international agencies. Mr Upadhyay reminds us of President Nixon and National Security Advisor Kissinger's invective against Indira Gandhi. The western media, instead of condemning the abuse, focused on Kissinger's apology.

The author focuses on two events to substantiate his argument that western media patronises India to secure its global left-liberal agenda. One is the response to Indian space explorations, particularly Mangalyaan and Chandrayaan, and the second is the Covid-19 crisis. The author believes that the western world is threatened by the low-cost-high-output model of Indian space research missions. Isro is, therefore, critiqued by western media not only because it gives western agencies in the global satellite

launch market tough competition but the criticisms reinforce the "poor India" perception. During Covid-19, the author feels that *The Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time* and *BBC News* unabashedly targeted the Modi government and lacked factual and logical consistencies in their attack. He avers that the western media narrative built around India-shaming includes exaggerated numbers of Indian deaths, amplified economic disparity laced with communalised overtones, distorted linkage between the child labour and pandemic, and invisibilised the

missing stories of courage and sacrifice of Indians during the pandemic. In the concluding chapter, Mr Upadhyay laments that the western media narrative on India needlessly bolsters the colonisation of the Indian mind, a new form of cultural imperialism.

Critically speaking, the book appears to be a rhetorical catharsis against the western media. We know that the western

media, or for that matter any media, is not a homogeneous category. To accuse all of them of conspiring against India — especially given the competitive environment in which they operate — amounts to missing the wood for the trees. It is true that globalised media networks impact the formulation of foreign and domestic policies, but it is also true that the media today is constantly under public scrutiny for its veracity and ethics. The mainstream media is under tremendous pressure to distinguish itself from deep fakes and strives to rescue itself from the crisis of credibility at any cost. Being a journalist himself, the author falls prey to what may be termed "sensationalised watchdogism". If Orientalism is the trope of the book, though loosely connected, then the author needs to engage with the mutual ties engendered by the influences of ideas, institutions and initiatives between the West and India. The book, nevertheless, makes for interesting reading for those imbued with ideas of hyper-nationalism and populism.

The reviewer teaches public policy and politics at Ramjas College, University of Delhi, and is honorary vice-chairman at the Centre for Multilevel Federalism, New Delhi

Human Intelligence On Keeping AI in Line

Good intent, but regulation still lacks teeth

The second global summit on AI regulation in Seoul earlier this month made progress in supervision of the technology. Tech companies have again reaffirmed their intent to apply basic safeguards as AI develops. In addition, governments now have institutions to observe the emanating risks, and are in a position to demarcate no-go areas. The next step is to harmonise intergovernmental regulation that can keep AI development within pre-approved limits. All this is, however, intent, and 'regulation' lacks teeth. But the global response to AI has made some progress between Bletchley Park in Britain where the first AI safety summit was held and Seoul. Regulation of AI is moving from companies and academics to governments that are acquiring capacity to oversee and check its evolution.

There are two ways to approach AI regulation. The first would be to apply rules to use cases. Thus, development of AI in medicine would have to conform to existing and some new regulatory conditions for the health industry. These rules can then be adjusted to fit some other industry, for instance, finance. Governments would collaborate in each of these verticals to come up with a broad set of global rules. A scaffolding, thus, emerges to keep AI within legal limits across a range of its uses. A separate set of rules would also similarly emerge on what AI should *not* be doing, such as its use in warfare.

The second, and much more nettlesome, approach is to control AI's development at source. This would be in response to the risk that AI is able to independently outwit some or all use-case regulation—the Armageddon scenario. The approach to regulation here would be to control AI through computing power, over which tech creators and lawmakers differ. Governments are already prevailing by linking transparency and governance with size. Just as thresholds of ethical behaviour are being imposed on the basis of impact scale of AI deployment. All of these now await being converted into a legal harness to guide AI.



Leave Gaming to the Real Mai-Baap

As across the world, gaming is huge business—and pleasure—in India. The country has around 57 mn active gamers, the second-largest globally after China. Children, youngsters and women form a significant chunk of this vast user base. Its popularity has been enabled by increased broadband penetration, widespread smartphone adoption, improved internet connectivity, a vast population of young people, increased awareness and creation of local gaming content. But this booming sector may be facing headwinds from the proverbial nanny state. According to an ET report, GoI is mulling over imposing time and spending limits on online gamers to tackle 'gaming addiction' among children and young adults.

In 2023, MeitY enacted IT rules that mandate the inclusion of educationists, mental health experts and child rights advocates to protect children from the potential harms of online gaming. The concern is valid, and genuine. But the state has no business in literally playing mai-baap regarding how parents should bring up their children. This includes the state putting the equivalent of a 'child lock' for gaming at homes. We aren't China.

Instead of planning to behave like a nanny state, GoI, at best, could make parents and school administrators more aware of the downsides of 'too much' screentime. Cracking down on candy-loving kids and youngsters is hardly the way to tackle the problem of sugar-rushers. In any case, money for real-money gamers comes from parents, not from the child's pocket. Parents can make informed choices. The state should prioritise enforcing the law—including against law-breaking minors—rather than interfering with families who'd rather have genuine minimum government, maximum governance, not lessons in discipline and habits.



JUST IN JEST

Tired of having to correct your name in docs'n'messages if it's not John/Jane?

Down with Autocratic Anglo Autocorrects!

The horror! The horror!—As the great Joseph Conrad, sorry, Conrad, made a character in his 1899 novella, *The Heart of Darkness*, utter. But instead of existential dread lurking along the Congo River, the modern-day horror is the autocorrect. The message or document, its autocorrect activated, makes a mockery of names if they aren't anglophonic enough on the lines of John or Jane. And riding this culturally hegemonic 'bug' comes the standard sender's excuse, 'Sorry, it wasn't me, it was autocorrect!' No can do with this defence any more, bruv. In Britain, the 'I am not a typo' campaign wants, nay, demands that technology becomes more inclusive, more aware of names beyond the 'Enid Blyton' nomenclature. And, no, Vivekananda is neither 'Vivekamanand' nor 'vinaloo'.

All names are created equal, but software doesn't treat them equally, the bias of coders showing. Even non-anglophones tend to buckle under this 'correctional' tyranny. Sita becomes 'sitar', Václav becomes 'valve'. The campaign's research found that almost 5,500 names given to persons in England and Wales in 2021 alone received the wavy red line treatment courtesy of Microsoft's UK English dictionary. So, non-anglophonic name-holders of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your misnomers. Or, send protest emails to Microsoft's Saturday Nutella and Meta's Mark Zookeeper.

India's producing far fewer kids – we need to quickly make the best use of our working-age population



Kiran Karnik

Imagine a country with few children and, hence, few grandparents. That is where nations are headed, and India faster than most.

A March Lancet study indicates a far more rapid decline in India's total fertility rate (TFR) — going down to 1.29 by 2050 — than was assumed in previous studies and projections. Compared to the benchmark of 2.1, below which there is a prospective decrease in the total population, India's TFR is 1.91 (2021).

A UN study predicted a peak population of 1.7 bn, for India in 2065. Now, it seems certain that the peak will be reached much earlier and at a lower level (around 1.6 bn). By 2100, the population will be down to its level a century earlier: around 1 bn.

A low and decreasing TFR has long been a feature of prosperous countries not only in Europe but also in Japan and Singapore (TFR 1.2), and South Korea (0.82). China is not in the same per-capita income league. Yet, it too has witnessed a steep decline in TFR (1.23), partly due to its earlier one-child policy.

Experience shows that fertility declines tend to be sharp and irreversible, resulting in fewer children and, eventually, fewer working-age people. India's growing bulge in the latter gives us a demographic dividend—a far lower proportion of dependents to working-age people—but will, in a couple of decades, translate into more elders.

As better healthcare results in longevity, the ratio of dependents who need to be economically supported by those in the working-age group will increase further, creating a worsening dependency ratio. Even fewer child births (indicated by a decreasing TFR) will not compensate for this.

New figures have several implications for India:

► Adverse dependency ratio caused by the 'demographic decline' will be worse — and earlier — than anticipated, making the demographic dividend bigger, but shorter. Higher healthcare costs and pensions may cause a financial crisis, as many developed countries now fear.

► A lower economic growth, resulting from a stable or decreasing, and age-

HURRY, POP! While We're Still Young!



Let's get the demographics working

ing population, as witnessed in many countries. Even China — not yet prosperous, and though there are other factors — is confronting comparatively low growth.

► With a per-capita income of \$3,000 (a fourth of China's), India desperately needs high growth for many decades.

► So, we need to capitalise vigorously, urgently and fully on the demographic dividend while it lasts. The next few decades present a golden opportunity, which we must grab. This requires immediate skilling to ensure jobs for and productivity of the working-age population.

Having reached this stage of low TFR later than at least a dozen countries gives India the advantage of learning from their experience and leveraging newer technologies. Some steps:

► Continue the demographic dividend for a longer period through a slower glide path in the declining fertility. This should have to include incentives and an ecosystem that encourages

childbirth.

► Reduce the dependency ratio by extending the productive work life of elders, by ensuring good health, reskilling where necessary and productive jobs.

► Ensure a truly lower dependency ratio by upskilling women for traditional work (e.g., caregiving) and new livelihoods, especially in WFH mode.

► Promote upskilling of the disadvantaged to increase their productivity. Tech can play a role here.

► Encourage inward immigration, especially of skilled youngsters and students who can be encouraged to stay on through long-term work-permits. Preference must be given for skills in priority



The global war for talent will soon turn into a competition to attract immigrants. India should build up from now to reach a 2-3% foreign-born population by 2050-60

areas (e.g., AI and robotics). Young immigrants will add to the workforce and, hence, reduce the dependency ratio. Also, the young are more capable of wealth-increasing and job-generating innovations.

► Promote automation and use of robots to minimise, in the long run, the need for more workers.

These steps are contrary — even contradictory — to present thinking. But they are essential safeguards against a demographic disaster. At one time, this seemed remote — both as a possibility and in time. Now, it may loom large much earlier, probably from mid-century. If we don't act in time, India could face social and economic stagnation.

Many countries with low TFR are taking steps to incentivise childbirth, with little success, to accelerate automation. China has moved from one child to two, to three, as the norm. Russia has called on women to have more children 'as a national duty'. Singapore and South Korea are offering cash incentives.

China is also rapidly automating. Last year, 50% of new robots installed globally went into China's factories.

► Inviting immigrants is far more complex. But even a cursory look at figures for Britain and the US is educative. In both, about 15% of the population is foreign-born. Singapore has long offered work visas and permanent residency to highly-skilled immigrants. Even traditionally cloistered Japan is now beginning to encourage immigration.

The now-nascent global war for talent will soon transform into a competition to attract immigrants. India, too, should begin to build up from now to reach at least 2-3% as the proportion of foreign-born population by 2050 or 2060 (i.e., about 30-50 mn).

The first step in this transformation of population policy must be research studies, which define an optimum population size and its age composition a few decades from now. This will be a dynamic figure, changing with time and assumptions about health/fertility, economic factors, immigration and technology.

Debate and dialogue on this must be followed by an action plan as part of a new national population policy. These are essential steps to ensuring fast and continuing economic growth, and a vibrant and even more diverse society. If these proactive steps are not taken, ambitions of being a developed country will remain a pipe dream.

The writer is author of *Decisive Decade: India 2030, Gazetteer or Hippo*



THE SPEAKING TREE

Secret Path To Serenity

DAAJI

Happiness, in its purest form, is not a fleeting emotion dependent on external circumstances but an enduring state of being that stems from inner harmony. True happiness is not found in the fulfilment of desires but in liberation from them.

This doesn't mean one should not have aspirations. Our passions, goals, aspirations and the fulfilment of those are what make us human. Nevertheless, attaching our happiness to the fulfilment of our desires is detrimental to our progress and personal transformation.

The 'yielding heart' is powerful for attracting grace and joy. By cultivating an open and receptive heart, we create a fertile ground for happiness to flourish.

Shri Ram Chandra of Shahjahanpur used to say that the happiest individuals are those who can maintain their happiness under all circumstances. This resilience comes from a deep-rooted understanding that happiness is not contingent upon external factors but is an intrinsic quality that can be cultivated from within.

By embracing a state of contentment and letting go of our excessive attachments and expectations, we liberate ourselves from the cycle of desire. This leads to a profound inner peace and a sense of boundless bliss that surpasses fleeting pleasures. The secret to finding the path of everlasting happiness is to develop a yielding heart that has a cheerful disposition of accepting nature's blessings.

Chat Room

Eat the Poor, Starve the Rich

Appropos 'Don't Eat the Rich, It'll Hurt the Rest' by Govind Bhatta-charjee (May 29), this is a convenient argument forwarded to preserve the pro-rich policies and programmes. In fact, the reality is the other way around. Eating the share of the unprivileged will hurt the rich in the long term. The present trend of abnormal economic inequality and growing unemployment in the background of untamed inflation is like a volcano ready to erupt. So, an additional nominal tax on the wealthy may not change the life of the poor, but is a step in the right direction.

A GRAJMOHAN
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

Advertise to Our Señor Citizens

This refers to 'Silver Linings Playbook' by Shannon Tellis (Brand Equity, May 29-Jun 4). Indian homes treat senior citizens as grandchildren's scouts to school, post office and bank errand-runners, etc. Of course, there are exceptions. Nonetheless, the cul-

prits are the brands that segment class consumerism. Big brands position themselves by the vanity of a certain class. Rather, these

brands ought to universalise their products by focusing on 'frequency value' instead of 'order value'. Such an approach will augment life styles and quality of life, leading to the creation of a brand new Indian.

SULTAN AKHTAR PATEL
By email

Physics Wallah Politician

Appropos 'Why NDA's Seat Tally Relies On 48 Lok Sabha Seats in Maharashtra' by Krishna Kumar (May 29), politicians, like free electrons, are not bound to a nucleus and move around freely, more so during elections. And, like free electrons move from one element to another, politicians move from one party to the other depending upon the force applied (read: incentives) by outside forces. Most of them remain in the outer orbit, and some lucky ones land in Rajya Sabha and are dormant for 5 years till it's time to move freely again. To block this free movement, the politician leaving a party should resign and re-contest for the party she wants to join, so that voters are not cheated.

RAHUL KUMAR
By email

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

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

In a land where gods run the show,
Every politician claims to glow.
With divine intervention,
And promises ascension,
Their godliness sure steals the show!

Global Job Market

Global unemployment is set to fall slightly this year. ILO expects a 4.9% rate for 2024, after originally forecasting unemployment would rise to 5.2% from 5% in 2023. An unemployment rate of 4.9% means that 183 million persons are unemployed. As per another, more broader measure of labour underutilisation, jobs gap* for 2024 is estimated higher at 402 million...

Labour underutilisation indicators, World (millions)

YEAR	JOBS GAP	UNEMPLOYED
2005	413	188
2015	433	202
2019	422	194
2020	482	227
2021	453	212
2022	407	190
2023	399	183
2024*	402	183

*Unemployed (meet 2 technical criteria: available at short notice & actively searching for work) + potential labour force (meet one criteria, but not both) + willing non-jobseekers (meet neither criterion but are willing to work); *Projection
Source: AFP, ILO

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Don't block telemarketers; we too need someone to scream at.

Overheating Electricity



STEP UP TO THE PLATE



Alok Kumar & Balaji Chandramouli

With temperatures reaching record levels in many parts of India, GoI has instructed idling power plants to crank up operations to cope with the impending increase in electricity demand. While this indicates that power generators are not receiving remunerative prices despite high demand, the push has also not resulted in utilities purchasing enough power, as evidenced by shortages.

A glimpse of the country-wide supply situation against generation capacity addition offers insight into possible solutions. This can be broadly broken into two periods: 2011-16, and thereafter. The scenario in 2010-11 was somewhat like this:

► Annual country-wide energy shortfall was as high as 8.5%, while peak shortfall was at 9.8%.

► During 2015-16, this was 2.1% and 3.2% for energy and peak shortfall, respectively, largely on the back of thermal capacity addition, which was as high as close to three-quarters of addition between 2010 and 2015.

► Solar power accounted for 2%, wind 9% of installed capacity. The big green energy contributor was hydropower, at 14%. Tables turned after 2011.

► Thermal addition waned, adding a modest 24% during 2016-23.

► Solar capacity rose to 54% (and continues to rise) and wind registered 14% increase, while hydel capacity addition was at a little less than 4%.

► Solar capacity increased from 2% in 2016 to 16% in 2023, while that of wind power rose marginally from around 9% to a little over 10%.

This rise of RE reflected adversely on the supply situation. During 2023, peak

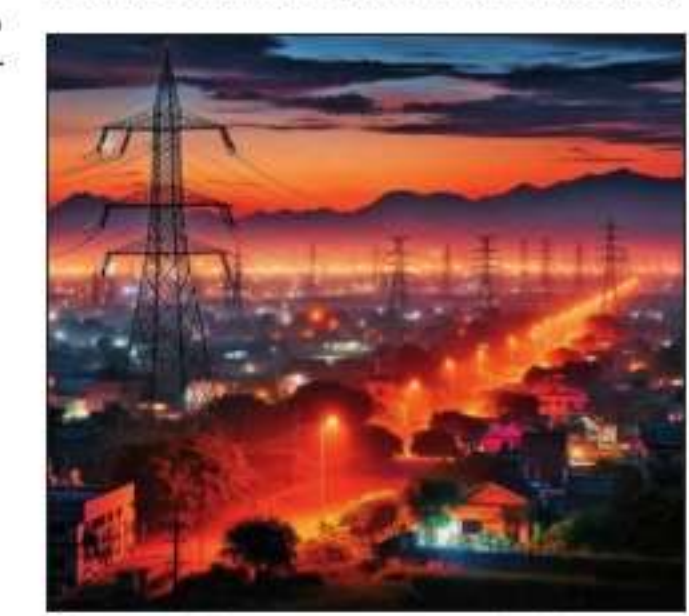
shortfall, which occurs after sunset, rose to 4% from as low as 0.8% during 2018-19 (the taper in coal capacity addition during 2016-19 was lower than the later period and, hence, narrowed the gap). Evidently, the solar and wind business has flourished on the back of strong state stimulus, both fiscal benefits and payment-protection mechanism against defaults by purchasing utilities.

Over the last two years, however, GoI has been correcting this planning imbalance by:

► Promoting large coal-fired capacities, a move that finds itself at odds with climate concerns.

► Promoting RE bundled with battery storage systems to cater to demand profiles set by buyers. That said, the quick remedy to set up 'plain vanilla' battery storage units to complement the existing intermittent supplies is expensive since, fundamentally, they do not generate electricity, and supplies involve a conversion loss. Any large-scale adoption effort would require fiscal and financial support.

This takes us to the demand-side challenge of affordability, one that pivots on utilities' finances and the political economy. On average, utilities charge consumers less than what it costs to serve them. Worse, regulatory scrutiny is, at best, patchy. Underestimation of demand or higher power purchase bills are not recovered from consumers through tariff hikes. This also explains the reason why



Through the power sector darkly

an immediately accessible short-term measure to improve non-solar supplies eludes consumers.

Thermal capacity includes gas-fired plants. These account for a significant 6% of the country's installed capacity and record poor sales since inexpensive domestic gas supply is limited, while imports are expensive. Utilities are either formally or informally dissuaded from purchasing expensive electricity to keep down their power purchaser costs. In effect, the state-level regulatory play supports artificially low tariffs.

Furthermore, in several cases where power deals have been struck, utilities drag their feet over the fuel price. These disputes have landed up at the central regulator's doorstep who sets a normative price that leaves the producer dissatisfied. This explains the generator's reluctance to sell in a deficit market.

Finally, in several cases, a scrutiny of the 'peak' demand to utilities' power purchase contracts reveals poor mapping of 'real-time' demand and consequent purchase, which results in wasted resources.

Over the last two years, wielding the threat of switching off access to interstate transmission systems, the key to power supplies, GoI successfully nudged utilities to settle their ₹1.35 lakh cr dues owed to generation companies.

Also, it's supporting ongoing reform measures in utilities — investments to support supply loss reduction and metering to improve collections and, thereby, revenues.

Such levers need to be directed towards reforming state regulators that have fallen prey to political capture. Given the rising impact of climate change, this is imperative. Utilities need to be nudged to undertake efficient resource adequacy planning. In the short term, higher tariffs to mitigate peaking shortages need to be socialised in India, in effect recognising the true cost of intermittent supplies.

Kumar is former secretary, power ministry, GoI, and Chandramouli writes on energy and sustainability

Opinion

THURSDAY, MAY 30, 2024



● THE PROLIFERATION OF AI
Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella

“It's just great to see the democratisation force that we love to talk about but to witness it has just been something. And this is, quite frankly, the impact of why we are in this industry. And it's what gives us, I would say, that deep meaning in our work

Small consolation

S&P revising outlook on India unlikely to matter much, a full-fledged rating upgrade could take a while

S&P GLOBAL RATINGS' revision in the outlook on India to positive from stable is little more than a signal that the economy is on the right track. While not to be dismissed outright, it is small consolation for a country that is on its way to becoming the world's third-largest economy by 2027. On Wednesday, S&P affirmed India's BBB- long-term and A-3 short-term unsolicited foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings. In June 2020, Moody's had downgraded India's foreign and local-currency long-term issuer ratings to Baa3 from Baa2 with a negative outlook. At this level India's rating is the lowest in the investment-grade or a notch above the junk category.

Clearly, a full-fledged rating upgrade would have made a much bigger difference, whether in terms of foreign investments flowing into the country or in terms of borrowing costs of Indian companies coming down in the overseas markets. An upgrade to the rating, according to S&P, hinges on India's fiscal deficits becoming “meaningfully” smaller. Specifically, S&P would like to see general government debt at below levels of 7% of GDP on a structural basis. Currently the combined deficit of the states and the Centre is a shade under 10%. This could see an improvement in the current year; should the deficit for the states come in at about 2.5-3% and that for the Centre at the budgeted 5.1%, that would take the combined deficit to a little over 8%. Should the government use some of the generous dividend of ₹2.1 trillion that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has given it, to trim the deficit, the 8% number could be smaller. However, pruning the deficit too much could hurt growth.

Economists believe that rating agencies would also keep a watch on the ratio of the public debt to GDP, which is currently at about 83% (FY23) and estimated by S&P at 85% in FY24. By some estimates, this is unlikely to go below 80% in the near term. S&P also wants to be reassured that the RBI is able to tackle inflation on a sustained basis via monetary policy measures. While India's central bank has done a very good job of taming inflation, much of the rise in prices of certain commodities can be attributed to the higher cost of importing them. Indeed, too many supply-side factors impact inflation today making the central bank's job harder.

There is no doubt that India's macro-fundamentals today are far more robust than they were a few years back. The economy has battled both the pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia hostilities remarkably well and continues to grow at a reasonably good pace even if there are some pain points. The rupee has been resilient and with a comfortable stock of forex reserves of about \$650 billion, there is enough of a war chest to support the currency if needed. Moreover, with India's inclusion in a couple of EM bond indices, there's likely to be an inflow of about \$20-25 billion in the bond markets next month. That should lower borrowing costs in the local market; even otherwise, benchmark yields are already below 7% and could drift down further once liquidity conditions ease. Economists say that while the economy is growing at a good pace ratings agencies would also keep in mind the country's per capita income, which is lower than some of India's peer nations. That would require some work.

Why Nvidia, not solar, has a place in the sun

THE SEMICONDUCTOR INDUSTRY is a strange field. Play your cards right, and you can turn \$60 billion or so of annual revenue into a \$2.62-trillion business. Do things differently, and roughly the same volume of sales might translate into \$44 billion of market capitalisation. Such divergent outcomes tell us a lot about the way capitalism in the US and China is producing drastically different outcomes on a planet confronting the wrenching shifts driven by artificial intelligence and climate change.

If you measure technology by the value of the companies that sell it, you would argue — as some in the US have been doing — that AI is the future of industry, while renewable power is a busted flush.

The four biggest solar panel-makers — China's Longi Green Energy Technology Co., JA Solar Technology Co., JinkoSolar Holding Co., and Trina Solar Co. — have lost about two-thirds of their combined market cap over the past two years to hit that miserable combined \$44 billion level. Meanwhile, Nvidia Corp. has ridden a wave of excitement about AI to become the world's most valuable company after Microsoft Corp. and Apple Inc.

Markets aren't wrong to make such a binary assessment. Nvidia really is a fundamentally better business than China's big solar four. The reasons tell you surprising things about both industries, while providing a warning for investors in AI chips and a glimmer of hope for the beaten-down photovoltaics sector.

First, it's worth looking at business models. Nvidia's competitive edge is in designing chips, and it outsources the capital-intensive business of actually making them to foundries such as Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. The solar companies are all physical producers, and as a result they're exposed to a never-ending rollercoaster ride of depreciation and obsolescence. That shows up in Nvidia's 56% return on assets, compared to less than 10% at the panel-makers.

There's also the issue of monopolistic power. While photovoltaic manufacturers are fairly interchangeable and competition is cutthroat, Nvidia's lead in making AI-appropriate processors means it has about 90% of the relevant market — a licence to print money, or at least extract it from cash-rich Silicon Valley tech companies.

That translated into a net income margin of 49% last fiscal year. Solar manufacturers, with their highly commoditised products, perform far worse: an average of 3.7%, with Longi the clear leader on 12.6%.

Investors' beliefs about the sustainability of this advantage provide the final piece of the puzzle. Nvidia's valuation multiple of 36.73 times forward earnings isn't particularly excessive for a red-hot industry darling, but it's far above the solar companies — and equity in US-listed businesses generally enjoys a hefty premium compared to China.

You might see this as a triumph of American free markets over Chinese dirigisme. That's not quite right, though. The panel-makers are struggling precisely because they operate in a wide-open market with very low barriers to entry — a great set-up if you want to grow the industry, but a terrible one for generating sustainable profits.

The lesson is that shelter from the ravages of capitalist competition is great for shareholders, whether it comes as a result of intellectual property laws (as with Nvidia) or protectionism (as with First Solar). It would be a mistake for either side to get either too despondent or too triumphant. Defensive moats like Nvidia's are great until they aren't. That 49% profit margin and 90% market share is an open invitation to the rest of the chip sector to invest heavily to compete. The tech sector is littered with one-time market darlings — Nokia Oyj, Intel Corp., Cisco Systems Inc. — that suddenly found themselves brought down to earth by the resurgence of competition. On the flip side, the possibility of Beijing intervening to halt suicidal rounds of price-cutting has caused Chinese solar stocks to revive in recent days.

The deeper lesson for the battered photovoltaics sector is to look at what Nvidia has done right, and what they're doing wrong. With such an interchangeable product, there's very rarely a good reason to prefer a Longi over a Trina panel. No cell is indispensable the way an Nvidia GPU is. If solar panel-makers can crack that secret, they too might one day join the ranks of trillion-dollar businesses.

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● PROTECTING INVESTORS
SEBI'S STEPS ARE A PARADIGM SHIFT WITH ENHANCED FOCUS ON CLEARING CORPORATIONS

Securing securities

THE SECURITIES AND Exchange Board of India (Sebi), in a recent consultation paper, has proposed to mandate direct payout of securities to clients' demat accounts without any involvement of the stock broker's pool account. Under the current framework for settling a client's buy transaction, the clearing corporation credits the securities to the broker's pool demat account, after which the broker transfers them to the respective client's demat account. While the mechanism of direct payout of securities to clients was established way back in 2001, the consultation paper has now proposed making it mandatory for all transactions with the objective of enhancing operational efficiency and reducing the risk to clients' securities.

The process would involve a clearing corporation or a clearing house reaching out to each clearing member (usually the stock broker) to obtain the beneficiary account details of the clients who are scheduled to receive a payout of securities. Once these details are obtained, the clearing member would send a payout instruction to the depositories, directing the credit of securities directly in the client's demat account without any involvement of a broker's pool account. The consultation paper also proposes that clearing corporations introduce a mechanism for clearing members to identify unpaid securities (i.e. the securities that have not been paid for in full by the clients) or funded stocks under the margin trading facility, to provide clarity to stock brokers regarding the status of securities, ensuring they have up-to-date information on unpaid and funded stocks.

The current process involves multiple entries, tracking, and reconciliation efforts on the part of the stock broker while transferring securities from its

pool account to the client's demat account. With the direct credit of securities to the client's demat account, the intermediary step of transferring from the pool account is eliminated, which significantly reduces the complexity of the brokers' operational workflow. Handling transfers from the pool account to individual client accounts can be prone to discrepancies or potentially fraudulent activities by stock brokers. A number of cases have also been observed where the brokers were involved in the misuse of clients' securities kept in the pool account. Direct credit of securities reduces the touch points and hence the opportunities for errors and fraud, leading to more secure and accurate transactions. Additionally, brokers need robust information technology (IT) systems to manage the complexities of transferring securities from pool accounts to individual client accounts, including handling exceptions and resolving issues. With a more straightforward process, the IT infrastructure can be simplified as well. Systems can be optimised for direct credit operations, reducing the need for complex transfer mechanisms and the associated support and maintenance.

This is not the first time that Sebi

has acted upon protecting an investor's interest from a potential default by a stock broker. Last year, with a view of preventing the misuse of clients' funds, the regulator introduced a process for trading in the secondary market based on blocked funds in a client's bank account. Under this process, funds would remain in the bank account of the client but will be blocked in favour of the clearing corporation, which would only be debited towards obligations arising out of the trading activity of the client. Thus, instead of transferring the funds upfront to the broker, funds are blocked in the bank account of the client itself, ensuring

enhanced protection of cash collateral and preventing the misuse of clients' funds by the broker. Similarly, the application supported by blocked amount (ASBA) method has been provided for retail individual investors for applying in an initial public offering. Under this process, funds are blocked in the bank account of the investor till the finalisation of allotment, after which the amount equivalent to allotted shares would be debited or, in cases of no allotment or partial allotment, the balance amount will be unblocked. A similar block mechanism has also

The direct crediting of securities to clients' demat accounts represents a significant move towards increased market integrity and investor protection

SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing partner, Finsec Law Advisors



been prescribed for undertaking sale of securities where clients' securities lying in the demat account of a client are blocked in favour of the clearing corporation till the time a sell order is executed. If the sale transaction is not executed, securities would continue to remain in the client's demat account and will be unblocked. This mechanism was introduced to do away with the movement of shares from the client's demat account for early pay-in and back to client's demat account if the trade is not executed.

These steps taken by Sebi indicate a paradigm shift with less reliance on the broker for handling the securities and funds of its client, and an enhanced focus on the clearing corporations to ensure smooth and transparent settlement processes. The direct crediting of securities to clients' demat accounts represents a significant move towards increased market integrity and investor protection. Clearing corporations will now take on a more central role in the settlement ecosystem, overseeing the direct transfer of securities, and ensuring that all transactions are accurately and efficiently processed. Clearing corporations will need to develop and implement robust systems to manage and implement this increased responsibility. This includes upgrading technology to support real-time processing and direct crediting of securities, enhancing risk management frameworks to address any new risks associated with direct transfers, and working closely with depositories to ensure seamless integration and synchronisation of data, ensuring the accurate and timely settlement of transactions.

Co-authored with **Manas Dhagat** and **Shivaang Maheshwari**, associates, Finsec Law Advisors, Mumbai

Put food and water on the policy table



NIRVIKAR SINGH

Professor of economics, University of California, Santa Cruz

Redesigning agri policy around ideas of growing food and preserving water resources, and starting with farmers, makes political and economic sense

FOUR YEARS AGO, the central government attempted major reforms in agriculture. These reforms were focused on agricultural markets, with the aim of attracting more investment into the sector. Many farmers looked forward to this possibility, and the promise of more competition and higher returns for their produce. Analysts worried that liberalisation would favour large farmers and especially corporations. But the most vociferous protests came from farmers in Northern India, who were ostensibly not subject to this new regime, since they primarily produced for the national food procurement system which was not part of the reforms. Government procurement of large quantities of wheat and rice at guaranteed prices creates a system that is hard for farmers to give up. It is the opposite in spirit to the driving force of the 2020 reforms. Protesting farmers were worried that the farm bills were the first step in taking away their secure incomes.

In an interesting example of democracy, the government backed down and withdrew the farm bills, not because of the protests, but because of what they signalled for the outcome of looming elections in Uttar Pradesh. Electoral accountability matters, even in an imperfect democracy. We will soon know how democracy is functioning in India, as the general election process reaches its conclusion. Since the failed attempt at agricultural reforms, much of the national policy focus has been on trying, yet again, to

accelerate India's industrialisation process. Ultimately, India has to grow by creating productive jobs in manufacturing and in services.

This does not mean that agriculture is irrelevant. But India's land and water resources are not suited to significant growth in agriculture — population density is high, and per capita water availability is the lowest of any large country in the world. In any case, without development of the capabilities to transport, store, and process agricultural produce, growing

more of anything would be pointless. Indeed, the farm bills were really an attempt to bring in investment for these portions of the agricultural value chain, with the hope that this would stimulate changes in the actual production. Easing restrictions on land markets was directly aimed at production, but the implicit assumption was

that private sector incentives would take care of improving the efficiency of the actual agricultural activities. Not long before the general election process began, the central government actually took a major step toward addressing the core problem of its agricultural policy. It was announced that farmers who switch from growing paddy and sugarcane to maize and certain pulses will be able to sell whatever they produce at attractive minimum support prices. Paddy and sugarcane are

especially water-intensive, and growing them in places like Punjab is leading to environmental disaster. The new policy will also incentivise switching from wheat, which is less water-intensive, but has relied on heavy fertiliser use, resulting in soil pollution and degradation.

Growing more pulses makes tremendous sense for the nutritional needs of India's population. It is less clear whether maize, which is envisaged as boosting ethanol production, makes sense on a large scale. And the

issues of inappropriate use of fertilisers and water will remain for maize — the experience of the United States provides a clear cautionary example. Nevertheless, the announced change is a major step in the right direction. While agriculture will not be a major driver of India's economic growth, prevent-

ing ecological catastrophe is a precondition for any kind of long-run growth. Dealing with agriculture also matters for the politics of economic reform. Until industrialisation actually takes off in India and draws people into urban areas, rural India is where voters take their cues. Apparently, farmers in Northern India have not forgotten about the farm bills, and trust in the current government has not been restored. But the status quo in agriculture is not sustainable, and

adjusting a broken food procurement policy is only the first step. Public sector involvement in educating and training farmers by rejuvenating decaying agricultural extension services, paying attention to equitable and reliable access to seeds and to credit, and strengthening collective action by farmers, all seem to be areas that need careful policy attention.

“Co-operative federalism” has been an overused term in the last few years. It has typically been applied to issues such as devising and implicating the goods and services tax or policies in response to the pandemic. But agricultural policy, already a state subject, is where cooperative federalism can be meaningfully implemented. The Centre has to develop a rational food procurement policy. States must provide knowledge services to farmers, perhaps with central support. And rural local governments and farmer associations have to be able to manage local water resources and collectively represent farmers in dealing with corporate suppliers of inputs and buyers of outputs.

Food and water are central to everyone's imagination, and therefore they are easy to use as motivators. Even in the most industrialised nations, growing food and preserving water resources are culturally important. Redesigning agricultural policy around those ideas, and starting with farmers, rather than focusing on markets and corporations, makes political and economic sense.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

UK-India trade ties

Apropos of “Election delays over FTA”, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's decision to announce the poll earlier than scheduled has surprised many. Since the opposition Labour Party is all set to storm back to power on July 4, there is uncertainty on bilateral relationship front with India. Both sides will have to do some heavy lifting. Since our government would have taken the oath before a new

government comes to London, we will surely have ample time to chalk out a clear cut strategy and call summit-level meetings. —Bal Govind, Noida

Fraying opposition

Election coverage in the media shows that the opposition parties have lost momentum, enthusiasm, and focus in the last phase of elections. The extreme hot weather is primarily to blame while several regional or

national opposition parties who have no stake in the remaining 57 seats are on a hiatus. Fatigue is conspicuous in the political ecosystem. The television debates are repetitive and panelists have been reiterating their stands desperately. The outcome of the elections stands clearly decided, while June 4 will be a significant day. The fragmented approach towards reservation for Other Backward Castes and minorities in the last two phases put the opposition in a

defensive position. The opposition failed in synergising their campaign and diverse manifestos. Mamata Banerjee and the Aam Aadmi Party never appeared to be on the same page within the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance. And the allegations of assault of Swati Malhi weakened their campaign as the episode grabbed headlines. —Vinod Johri, Delhi



{ OUR TAKE }

The politics of regional pride

Politicians should refrain from promoting xenophobic narratives in campaigns

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) leadership has made Odia *ashmita* (pride) the focus of its electoral campaign in Odisha, which is voting also to elect a new legislative assembly. In the party's crosshairs is VK Pandian, chief aide and possible successor of chief minister (CM) Naveen Patnaik. From Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Union home minister Amit Shah to Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma to former MP Baijayant Panda, a clutch of BJP leaders have targeted Pandian's ethnic origins to press the claim that their party wants to uphold Odia pride, which, according to them, will be tarnished if a non-Odia becomes the CM. Some, including Modi, have also hinted darkly at a conspiracy behind Patnaik's ill-health.

It is understandable, even if a tad ironic, that the BJP, which speaks for unitarian politics, has picked Odia pride as a campaign theme, just as it is that conspiracy theories about the power behind the throne do the rounds during a bitter election campaign. Regional pride is a powerful strand in electoral politics, particularly in states formed around linguistic identity. Politics in Odisha has always had a regional element though Odia subnationalism has never been its pivot.

The problem is that the BJP's framing of Odia pride borders on xenophobia, with leaders targeting the Tamil origins of Pandian, an Indian Administrative Service officer who served in Odisha for over two decades before taking voluntary retirement. Speaking at a public meeting on Tuesday, Shah said, "Naveen *babu* is trying to impose a Tamil CM on the people". Earlier, Modi told a rally that a handful of "corrupt persons" had taken control of Patnaik's office and residence and claimed that the missing key of Puri Jagannath temple's treasure trove had been sent to Tamil Nadu. It predictably drew an angry response from politicians in Tamil Nadu.

These dog whistles don't augur well for national integration or help nurture an inclusive national identity. Linguistic subnationalism has coexisted within the rubric of a broader Indian identity. States have been mostly welcoming of talent and labour, with demand regulating the flow rather than notions of ethnicity or regionalism. Tamil Nadu, for instance, has even seen politicians with non-Tamil origins rise to the office of CM by espousing Dravidian identity politics. Here linguistic pride was reimagined to privilege how a person relates to the people or the land she seeks to serve over where she was born. In fact, this is how politics has evolved in modern societies. Our political leaders must refrain from pushing narratives that encourage xenophobia. They may see it as a mere electoral tactic, but such narratives may linger and damage the national fabric.

Cyclone Remal has a warning for Northeast

Cyclone Remal carries a warning about the future. Remal, after its landfall over the West Bengal-Bangladesh coast on Sunday, turned into a cyclonic storm and battered large parts of India's Northeast killing at least 32 persons. The northeastern states are accustomed to heavy rains and floods, but cyclonic storms are rare in the region. However, at a time of major shifts in weather patterns, inevitable in the time of climate crisis, such unexpected events may become more the norm than the exception.

Remal's impact was severe in the Northeast because of its unusual trajectory. It developed over east central Bay of Bengal on Saturday (May 25) evening and intensified into a severe cyclonic storm on Sunday morning over the north Bay of Bengal, with wind speeds clocking over 100 kmph. The bay was unusually warm with some parts recording a temperature of 32 degrees Celsius (warm for water) which contributed to the intensity of the cyclone. A severe cyclone will rapidly weaken after it interacts with land, but Remal maintained its intensity as it moved to the northeast, causing unprecedented heavy rainfall, landslides, mudslides and flooding in that region.

The northeastern states are experiencing long dry spells interspersed by extreme rainfall events. Rainfall over northeast is on a decline while the relatively arid western India is recording higher rainfall due to a shift in monsoon behaviour — all six northeastern states reported 30% to 60% rain deficiency between March 1 and May 28. These states have also lost significant forest cover. Clearly, there is an urgent need to rehaul policies and staunch human interventions that disturb the region's ecology. Improved land-use plans, mapping of landslide-prone regions, and regulating logging and mining can help the region prepare for exceptional weather events.

Why are there fewer Muslim candidates?

Issues of Muslim representation and Muslim exclusion should not be mixed up

The significant decline in the number of Muslim candidates in this Lok Sabha election underlines two interesting trajectories of Indian electoral politics.

First, political parties, it seems, have become truly professional and the idea of winnability has been accepted as an unwritten norm of electoral engagement. The ticket distribution mechanism is no longer guided by any ideological commitment. Instead, caste/religious configuration at the constituency level is taken as a point of reference to identify suitable candidates. It has become practically difficult for any serious regional and national party to give a ticket to a Muslim candidate only for the sake of political correctness. In fact, Muslim candidates are fielded tactically to divide votes in Muslim-majority constituencies to create a winnable balance.

Second, the emergence of Hindutva-driven nationalism as the dominant narrative of politics has forced the non-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) parties to avoid any direct reference to Muslim identity, especially in political terms. The BJP has been successful so far in creating a popular perception that Muslims have been appeased by Opposition parties in the past and that has undermined Hindu interests. Even the question of socio-economic backwardness of Muslims has become a communal issue. Against this backdrop, no party would like to be recognised as "pro-

Muslim".

These practical aspects of electoral politics, however, should not be over-emphasised. Muslim political representation is a multifaceted phenomenon, which cannot merely be understood by "counting numbers". One must pay attention to the sociological diversity of Muslims as well as the legal-constitutional framework to work out a possible explanation for the political marginalisation of Muslims in contemporary India.

The idea of political representation in the Indian context rests on two considerations: The composition of the "community" that claims representation and the institutional architecture where representation is sought. The post-colonial State under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru was clear about this. It was keen to get rid of the communal politics that had led to Partition while recognising and protecting Muslims as a constitutional minority.

An unwritten norm of politics evolved to deal with this seemingly conflicting issue. A secular conception of representation was established to define an imagined political community of citizens as "voters". The Representation of People Act 1951 says religion must be separated from electoral processes. This secular imagination of voters created a possibility, at least theoretically, that Muslim voters are not expected to vote only for Muslim candidates. In other words, the Nehruvian State strongly discouraged any kind of separate Muslim representation in elected legislative bodies.

This does not mean, however, that

collective Muslim interests were ignored. Two important mechanisms were adopted to recognise the Muslim presence in secular India. First, the Rajya Sabha and state legislative councils were recognised as possible avenues to induct Muslim leaders into legislative bodies. This became an accepted practice for the entire political spectrum in later years. In fact, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and BJP also used the Rajya Sabha route to accommodate their Muslim leaders until recently. Second, Muslim presence was appreciated as an inseparable aspect of secular Indian culture. It went well with the provision of minority rights given in the Constitution. The State evoked Muslim culture and heritage to represent the secular ethos of the country.

The equation between a denial of separate Muslim representation in elected bodies and the portrayal of positive Muslim presence in public life was very delicate. Political parties were guided by electoral calculations and it was inevitable they would evoke collective Muslim interests as an electoral issue. This is exactly what happened after the death of Nehru. Indira Gandhi began a new active politics of religion, which completely disregarded the subtle balance between Muslim representation and Muslim presence.

The debate on Muslim representation found a new lease of life after the publication of the Sachar Commission report in 2006. This was a completely different context. Muslim exclusion and backwardness emerged as acceptable policy issues, while the template of social inclusion was the guiding narra-



Muslim political representation is a multifaceted phenomenon

tive of electoral politics. The intermixing of Muslim inclusion and Muslim representation created an impression that constitutional secularism is all about protecting a separate Muslim political identity. This unclear position strengthened the Hindutva critique that any discussion on Muslim backwardness and inclusion would eventually lead to separatism. The BJP's electoral campaign in 2024 is clearly a manifestation of this line of reasoning.

The question arises: How should we talk about Muslim political representation, especially now when Muslim identity has become a political problem even for non-BJP parties?

I propose a different framework to deal with it. First, there is a need to demystify the idea of representation itself. Any discussion on Muslim representation should acknowledge the concerns and issues of Muslim Dalits, Muslim women, and poor Muslims. In other words, Muslim sociological diversity must be accepted as a principled position. The contribution of Pasmada politics is very significant in this regard.

Second, the democratisation of the wider institutional apparatus. We should not only look at Parliament and state assemblies as possible sites to evaluate Muslim representation. Instead, we must pay attention to the internal mak-

ing of political parties to assess their inclusive character. Do they have any set mechanism to include marginalised groups, in this case, Muslims? How do they decide candidates to contest polls? Do they have regular internal party elections? These questions are very crucial because political parties have become highly centralised and there is no discussion on their democratic and secular credentials.

Finally, we must adhere to the constitutional principle of democratic secularisation. India's Constitution envisages a political culture where the pain, suffering, and marginalisation of a group should become serious concerns for the entire society. This is exactly what Mahatma Gandhi argues on the minority-majority question. Our political history shows how non-Muslim leaders have stood for Muslim concerns and anxieties until recently. This healthy tradition should be further strengthened. Common Muslims, we must remember, do not necessarily want to be represented only by Muslim MPs and MLAs. However, they would like to be heard and recognised as dignified citizens as well as Muslims.

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Hilal Ahmed

Elections in Bengal are all but bipolar contests

On June 1, West Bengal will see its last round of electoral jousting, with the conclusion of the last phase of the Lok Sabha polls. Chief minister and Trinamool Congress (TMC) boss Mamata Banerjee set off febrile speculations on May 15 when she reportedly said that she would decisively help the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) form a government, but from outside. She also said her assistance would not extend to the Congress and Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Bengal because they were aligned with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

This seemed to be a restatement of a much-iterated position, especially in the wake of her decision to fly solo in Bengal. Apportioning responsibility for the collapse of negotiations on seat-sharing between the TMC and Congress is futile. It should suffice to note that the corrosively inimical relationship between Banerjee and West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (WBPC) president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury left a meaningful deal dead in the water from the get-go.

Banerjee clarified the very next day that she hadn't meant that she would not be part of INDIA, which, she said, had been created by her. INDIA would form the government after the election, she said, and the TMC would be a part of it. In fact, she said, in a highly polemical vein, the TMC was the INDIA bloc in Bengal, while the Congress and Left weren't since they'd arrived at their own understanding on the sidelines, as it were. Banerjee had just been firing a fresh salvo at her bete noire.

Chowdhury returned fire, saying she could even tie up with the BJP after the elections. The fallout singed the Congress, however. And the blame lies squarely on the shoulders of the party's high command. On May 18, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said Chowdhury would have to toe the party line on the INDIA bloc or leave the party. The TMC, he said, was a part of the INDIA coalition and it was not for Chowdhury to decide on who was part of the coalition of the willing; the high command would. Chowdhury hit back, saying he would not cosy up to anyone "decimating" the party in the state. He repeated his charge that the TMC and BJP were colluding to make the Bengal election bipolar. At the same time, he reminded Kharge that as a member of the All India Congress Committee and Working Committee, he was also a part of the high command. The intra-party spat escalated the next day. Though attempts were made to smoothen the wrinkles, Chowdhury remained unrepentant. Since then the party leadership has spoken in two voices. Kharge himself called Chowdhury a "combative soldier", in a placatory gesture. But general secretary (organisation) KC Venugopal was not impressed, indirectly hinting at

disciplinary measures.

The episode once again underlines the Congress high command's vacillatory approach to conflict resolution, especially when it comes to dealing with regional party bosses, though Chowdhury does not exactly qualify as that. If the high command wanted to accommodate the TMC fully by concluding a seat deal in Bengal, clearly it had to remove Chowdhury from the position of WBPC president. Someone like Pradip Bhattacharya, the congenial party candidate for the Kolkata Uttar constituency, who has a good equation with Banerjee, could have been tasked with the negotiations.

The failure to reach an agreement is likely to hurt both parties in the two seats in Malda district and the TMC in Raiganj (Uttar Dinajpur) and Balurghat (Dakshin Dinajpur). But, on the whole, it's the TMC that has its nose ahead in Bengal. Obviously, Banerjee is more concerned with stopping the BJP in its tracks than devoting a lot of time to Chowdhury and Left leaders.

In the contest between the TMC and the BJP, some things look to be helping the TMC. The BJP seems to be over-reliant on star campaigners from out of state. Conspicuous by their absence outside their patches are leaders of the state BJP. Those who are contesting are tied to their constituencies. Only leader of the Opposition in the Assembly, Suvendu Adhikari, has been seen campaigning statewide.

This tactic came a cropper during the 2021 elections partly because central leaders found it hard to connect with the Bengal electorate, the language barrier being the most obvious point of disconnect. It also gave traction to the TMC charge that the BJP was a party of outsiders.

In a roadshow in Kolkata on May 28, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tried to address the problem of disconnection by making pit stops at three culturally salient destinations — the most important being Swami Vivekananda's house. He targeted the TMC for its "attacks" on the Ramakrishna Mission, Bharat Sevashram Sangha and ISKCON.

But the BJP's nomination process was slow. Additionally, its choice of candidates seems in some cases to be inexplicable, especially when winning candidates have been shuffled around. Moving Dilip Ghosh from Medinipur to Bardhaman-Durgapur and SS Ahluwalia from there to Asansol doesn't exactly sound like a plan. Replacing Ghosh with Asansol South MLA Agnimitra Paul is even less comprehensible. Putting up weak candidates in Diamond Harbour (against de facto TMC number two Abhishek Banerjee) and Jadavpur, a TMC bastion, is not a good look.

Nevertheless, Kharge probably realises something Chowdhury won't admit; the elections in Bengal are all but bipolar, with two relatively well-matched opponents coming toe to toe. The margins are thin in many constituencies and what may decide contests is how Sandeshkhali and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, play out. The latter is most relevant in North Bengal, Nadia and North 24 Parganas.

In the current circumstances, both sides could settle for a situation as it exists now.

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



Suhit K Sen

THE MARGINS ARE THIN IN MANY CONSTITUENCIES IN THE STATE AND WHAT MAY DECIDE KEEN CONTESTS IS HOW SANDESHKHALI AND THE CAA PLAY OUT

{ THABO MBEKI } FORMER PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA

There are too many challenges in South Africa. So, let's go and vote, afterwards to say: What do we do with this South Africa of ours?

On the South African elections held on Wednesday

Chabahar is a metaphor for strategic autonomy

India's declaration of a day-long State mourning and the lowering of the national flag to half-mast to commemorate the unexpected deaths of Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi and foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was a rare gesture. In recent years, such honour was accorded by India when Sultan Qaboos of Oman and Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom passed. The symbolic respect accorded to Raisi was a clear recognition of Iran as a valued partner.

India recently signed a 10-year contract to operate the Chabahar port in Iran and further expand its investments in this strategic outpost on the Gulf of Oman. It was a bold signal from New Delhi that it will forge ahead in pursuit of its long-term national interests despite geopolitical headwinds. Given the extreme tensions flaring up between Iran and its regional rivals, India's move carried risks but demonstrated its firm determination to manage its multiple strategic partnerships and extract the most from all of them.

India decided to double down on its stakes in Chabahar at a time when Iran has been embroiled in a near-warlike confrontation with Israel. Tehran and Tel Aviv have crossed previous red lines and engaged in direct missile and drone attacks against each other's territories, and the two antagonists have upped their proxy wars in the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. Israel has indicated unambiguously that every sensitive critical infrastructure installation belonging to Iran is in its crosshairs.

But even as the gloves have come off in the undeclared Iran-Israel war, India's assets in Chabahar are not likely to be directly imperilled. This is because India has a robust strategic partnership with Israel and Tel Aviv does understand New Delhi's compulsions and motivations for developing Chabahar, which doesn't conflict with Israeli interests. Container bulk cargo shipments to and from Chabahar are helping to reify India's core vision of bypassing Pakistan as a land transit country and creating alternative multi-modal pathways for two-way trade among India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia.

With the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) agreement also having ambitious plans for transit via the Gulf of Oman up to the port of Haifa in Israel, India is co-creating a wide-ranging trans-regional connectivity architecture as it seeks to regain its place as a major commercial power across and beyond the Indian Ocean. Due to regional enmities and sen-

sivities in West Asia, Chabahar is not formally integrated into the IMEC. But pivotal strategic partners of India like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who are integral to IMEC, are not averse to pragmatically engaging with Iran. Jeopardising India's vantage point in Chabahar is in the interests of Pakistan — whose tensions with Iran have been rising — and China, which has built and runs the Gwadar port on Pakistan's southwestern coast close to Chabahar. But Israel and Gulf countries are not inclined to throw a spanner in the works of India's presence in Chabahar.

The other risk factor that India has to reckon with when it comes to deepening its strategic partnership with Iran is the shift in the foreign policy priorities of the United States (US). Due to its opposition to American preferences, Iran has the distinction of being one of the most sanctioned countries in the world. India was forced to scale down its imports of Iranian oil since 2019 due to tough sanctions imposed by Washington DC and the resultant difficulties in arranging shipping, insurance and payments.

Yet, it is noteworthy that India negotiated with the US to secure a carve-out for its Chabahar investments from the "maximum pressure" American sanctions campaign against Iran. As India's "comprehensive global strategic partner", the US has been made to understand that India's rise rests on its expanded footprint across both sides of the Indo-Pacific. For stabilising and moderating Afghanistan and for checking the Chinese juggernaut in West Asia and Eurasia, India must have the freedom to manoeuvre and gain access to strategic locations such as the Gulf of Oman.

Just as India has not buckled under western pressure on the question of sanctions against Russia, insulating itself from western pressures over Iran is a litmus test of its success in juggling its multiple strategic partnerships and proving its indispensability to all sides. Chabahar is more than a metaphor for India's strategic autonomy. It augurs India's rise as a leading power that can persuade or compel other countries to accommodate its national interests. The departures of Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian will not alter the basic alignment of national interests between India and Iran, and New Delhi will look to consolidate this partnership come what may.

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Sreeram Chaulia



OUR VIEW

GUEST VIEW



RBI as a G-Sec retailer: Demystify this avenue

RBI's new Retail Direct app for retail investors to buy government bonds will enlarge the Centre's access to funds. But it should simplify our access to this risk-free investment option

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has launched a mobile app for its Retail Direct facility that lets retail investors buy sovereign bonds directly from the government and trade these online. The app, available for Android devices and iPhones, enables participation in India's primary and secondary bond markets at the touch of a thumb. This is a welcome expansion of its 2021 initiative to throw this asset class open to people at large. On paper, it's a win-win. The Centre could do with a larger pool of creditors beyond the usual banks, mutual funds and other institutional buyers. With retail investors venturing beyond traditional saving avenues like bank deposits, it makes sense to offer government securities (G-Secs) as an alternative. The RBI platform grants access to central paper, treasury bills, state government bonds and sovereign gold bonds. This should attract investors who want a chunk of their long-horizon investment portfolio to be risk-free (as G-Secs are). If G-Sec returns happen to be competitive against the interest earned on fixed deposits and the like, they have all the more reason to use RBI's new app. Savvy investors could even seek capital gains by riding interest-rate cycles.

Unfortunately, this avenue hasn't caught the fancy of investors yet. The online facility was launched back in 2021. As of 27 May 2024, the platform had only 138,819 registrations, with just 124,951 accounts opened. This is puny in comparison with the millions of new demat accounts and mutual fund folios that opened over the same period. Bonds differ from shares in appeal. As safe fixed-income instruments, they can balance the risk borne by share-heavy portfolios. G-Secs, being safer than other debt

options, are ideal components of a retirement plan. So, what holds investors back? Unfamiliarity, for one. Unlike a corporate stock, multiple series of G-Secs are listed on the platform at various prices. The coupon rates of interest they pay annually can differ for the same maturity year. What's relevant is what one expects to earn. The complexity of this is another drawback. Apart from the principal sum, what an investor gets back depends on what the coupon payments amount to—for the bond's remaining tenor—after adjusting for the price paid. This figure, expressed as a percentage, is the bond's 'yield.' As the security's price varies over the length of its tenor by market demand and supply, its yield changes. If its price rises, its yield drops. And vice-versa. The RBI app duly highlights yields across assorted tenors. A G-Sec with a coupon of just over 5.6% that matures in 2026, for example, offers a yield of a bit above 7%, the going rate in this bracket. For a yield above 7.1%, one would need to buy 30-year paper. In general, yields have dipped lately on news of the government possibly needing to borrow less than planned in 2024-25, thanks to the transfer of a ₹2.1 trillion surplus from RBI.

Since all this is harder to grasp than investing in shares, RBI should make a greater effort to demystify the bond market as a new avenue for lay investors. It should redesign its app to serve this purpose. While a standard interface for all market participants is important, what RBI has launched is anything but user-friendly. Although the platform is rich in data, it's also laden with jargon. It would help if its tabulated displays offer us hyperlinks that explain each variable in simple language. To evoke wider interest, this is necessary. Tax incentives for such debt holdings would help too.

Minimum wage: It's likely to hurt the very workers it aims to help

It takes away the only advantage less skilled workers have: Their willingness to work for low pay



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Mahatma Gandhi's quotes have gone out of style these days, but one of his most famous lines is a surprisingly useful tool to help understand why a mandated minimum wage is a bad idea: "Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man you have seen and ask yourself if this step you contemplate is going to be any use to him."

Let's adapt this slightly. Think of the poorest person you or your family employs, earning the least wage. For most people reading this in India, that person will likely be a domestic help, car cleaner or security guard. Let's imagine, just for the purpose of this thought experiment, that you must pay each ₹1 lakh a month. Yes, this is a silly number, but bear with the exercise. It will be useful, pinky promise.

Okay, so would you personally still employ your help at ₹1 lakh a month? Most of us would not, and we understand that almost all maids and security guards (including our own) would be out of a job. Why only "most"? Because workers in the very richest of households—big business families, CEO homes or others in that approximate category—will probably not lose their jobs. Not only are their employers rich, these workers probably also possess skills or advantages—say, being able to cook multiple cuisines or speak fluent English—that make their work more valuable. The advantage may just be as

simple as having earned trust. Film star Salman Khan's bodyguard, as we have heard, already earns above the ₹1 lakh a month threshold and won't worry about losing his job.

Now let's lower the minimum monthly wage to a more 'reasonable' number. Let's say ₹20,000. Many more domestic helps and security guards would keep their jobs. But, as with the ₹1 lakh floor, they will all have some advantage over those who lose their jobs, even if it is as simple as living close to an upper-class neighbourhood. The ones who lose their jobs will all be less skilled and less advantaged.

If you're with me so far, you would have gained an intuitive feel for what any minimum wage can do—it will most hurt the people that it is intended to protect. Those without skills, i.e., and those without advantages. The sole advantage they have is their willingness to work for a low wage and a mandated minimum wage takes that away.

This is true at any threshold, no matter how low. It is as true at ₹20,000 as it is for ₹1 lakh. It's true lower down the scale too. If we mandate wages for interns, the least advantaged interns will have fewer opportunities to pick up skills or experiences in internships. Since they now cost money, people will be more careful, giving internships out only to those with connections or skills that are 'worth it.'

If the theoretical argument doesn't convince you, there is plenty of evidence to back the theory. A 2006 review of minimum wage research concluded: "A sizable majority of studies... give a relatively consistent indication of negative employment effects of minimum wages... [The] studies that focus on the least-skilled groups provide relatively overwhelming evidence of stronger unemployment effects for these groups." A review in 2022 echoes these findings.

If one doesn't trust reviews, there is evidence thrown up by the 'gold standard' of evidence—randomized control

trials (RCT). An RCT set up to study minimum wages also concluded that "a higher minimum wage raised the wages of hired workers; However, there was some reduction in hiring and large reductions in hours-worked... firms hired more productive workers... adversely affecting less productive workers."

We also have non-academic evidence from macro trends. Thirty years into its growth journey, by 2011 China had moved about 35% of its workforce away from agriculture to manufacturing and services. Thirty years after 1991, we had only moved 13%. Our labour laws, which, among other 'protections,' mandate minimum wages higher than market wages, have been a big reason why manufacturing employment didn't increase. This massive difference leaves hundreds of millions of people poorer than they need to be. It leaves women at home or in the fields, instead of employed in factories, securing their economic independence, like they are doing in Bangladesh.

How can we actually help workers? Luckily, we have a strong alternative for worker protection that requires no government intervention, yet works wonderfully well if we allow it to work. It's called 'having a better option.' Imagine telling your household help or security guard that you will cut their salary in half. They will immediately find someone who will pay them the going market rate and start working for them instead.

The best way to protect workers, therefore, is to create as much competition as possible for their time and effort. This doesn't mean we abandon worker protection, but we must focus our policy on maximizing worker choice. Every country that has made the transition from poor to middle income or rich status has realized this. The sooner we also realize that maximizing worker choice is the right policy option, not limiting it, the sooner Indians at large will transition to a standard of living that's at par with the world's best.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The real tragedy of minimum wage laws is that they are supported by well-meaning groups who want to reduce poverty. But the people who are hurt most by higher minimums are the most poverty stricken.

MILTON FRIEDMAN

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Contradictions bedevil Conservatives' tenure in the UK

RAHUL JACOB



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In a country where small talk is usually about the weather, the seemingly South Asian monsoonal downpour that coincided with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's announcement of the UK election scheduled for 4 July still made for a spectacularly awkward statement outside 10 Downing Street. With the opposition Labour Party looking more energized under Keir Starmer than it has been since Tony Blair led it to a huge victory in 1997, there was more bad news to follow. Some 80 Conservative Members of Parliament (MPs) announced they would not seek re-election. This meant the Conservatives were scrambling to line up candidates, while both Labour and the Liberal Democrats had their lists ready.

When Sunak took over in October 2022 after the almost-Maoist political chaos under Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, whose tenure lasted six weeks, he was praised by many for being the only adult in the unruly classroom that the Conservative Party had become. But, the larger challenges faced by the UK

remain. Among them are a decline in public services, the need to allow more greenfield sites for housing—the lack of which makes London among the most unaffordable residential markets in the developed world—and revitalizing trade after the Tories took the calamitous decision to exit the EU.

An out-of-power Conservative party would be more at war with itself because its far-right wing will almost certainly (and incorrectly) blame a poll defeat on Sunak for not being hardline enough. As the late Tory leader Alan Clark observed in his history of the party, when the party is out of office, it "reverts, all too predictably, to cannibalism."

The party's dilemma is that its definition of being Conservative is wrapped in a flag of hypernationalism, which led to Brexit, and a sense of Britain too tied up with its past, rather than making a case for liberalizing the economy. FT columnist Janan Ganesh outlined these contradictions: "A conservative believes in home ownership but not in building houses on greenfield sites; in trade but not in the supranational regulations that smooth it. In each of these intellectual conflicts, this government has tended to prioritise tradition. [These decisions were] made with no awareness of the cost to growth." The most glaring example is Brexit, of

course, but also the Conservatives' utterly hypocritical attitudes towards immigration. Pulling up the drawbridges to keep out Poles and other East Europeans from Britain underpinned the vote in favour of Brexit, even if the rhetoric was about sovereignty and illusory savings in the billions that could then be spent on the National Health Service. Last year, a parliamentary report outlined the trade picture since Brexit took effect. "Looking at longer term trends, the share of UK trade accounted for by the EU has fallen. Between 1999 and 2007, the EU accounted for 50-55% of UK exports. By 2022, this figure had fallen to 42%. The share of UK imports from the EU has also fallen since 1999, although by less than for exports."

While it is true that British exports to non-EU countries picked up in 2022, this was because of precious-metal exports to China, the UAE and Hong Kong. The irony that the country which defined and perverted colonial trade for two centuries saw

an uptick in trade because of commodity exports is rich indeed. Former prime minister Theresa May's first bilateral trip to New Delhi in November 2016, just months after taking over, to kick-start talks over a free trade agreement (FTA) with India always struck me as something out of a P.G. Wodehouse novel. Imagine walking

out of the largest trade grouping in the world with your neighbours and then seeking a deal with a government that's among the most unenthusiastic about free trade. It seemed akin to professing to be afraid of water and then leaping into a surging river.

Leaving Brexit and chasing individual-country FTAs is also myopic in a world of supply chain integration where global buyers

seek efficiencies and adhere to just-in-time inventory. They balk at form filling and delays that bedevil countries outside FTAs. One only has to look at Bangladesh's huge increase in garment exports and contrast this with India's stagnation to understand that this applies even to supposedly less

sophisticated exports. In this respect, we have more in common with our former colonial rulers than just cricket and *Yes Minister*. An inflated sense of our place on the global stage governs our respective world views. It is telling that Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have seen huge increases in trade with China, while trade with India has stagnated, as trade expert Amita Batra observes.

But the greatest contradiction in the UK's Conservative reign of error has been its much-touted 'hardline' on immigration. Soon after the election announcement, the government said its plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda would be delayed yet again. Brexit has had little effect reducing immigration; it has just meant immigrants come in large numbers from all over to help a labour-short economy, not just Europe. This is more equitable and has certainly helped Indians, who account for the largest number of work visas granted in 2023, at 163,500, versus 46,200 for Zimbabweans.

As muddled as Conservative policies have been, this sleight-of-hand liberalization of immigration could prove to be its most enduring positive legacy. The Labour Party is more sensible on immigration. Helped by newcomers from its former colonies, post-Brexit Britain may get a shot in the arm.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Results of India's election could determine its economic future

New Delhi's current emphasis on Chinese-style factory-led development seems incompatible with where the world is headed



RAGHURAM G. RAJAN is a former governor of the Reserve Bank of India and a professor of finance at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

There is a buzz in India today—a sense of limitless possibilities. India has just overtaken its former colonial master, the UK, to become the world's fifth-largest economy. If it maintains its current growth rate of 6-7% per year, it will soon overtake stagnant Japan and Germany to take over third place. But by 2050, India's workforce will start shrinking, owing to demographic ageing. Growth will slow. That means India has only a narrow window in which to grow rich before it grows old: with per capita income of just \$2,500, the economy must grow by 9% per year for the next quarter-century. That is an extremely difficult task, and the current Lok Sabha elections may well determine whether it remains possible at all.

The China model: In pursuit of rapid growth, the Indian government intends to follow a tested road map: the same path that Japan took in the immediate postwar decades and that China took after the death of Mao Zedong. During the first stage of the journey, labour flows out of the traditional agriculture sector as employment increases in low-skilled manufacturing—typically stitching garments or assembling components into electronic goods. This output is then exported to the developed world to capture the benefits of producing at scale. Cheap labour helps compensate for a country's other deficiencies, such as excessive bureaucracy, unreliable power (especially electricity), or poor roads. As firms profit from exports, they invest in equipment to make workers more productive, and as workers are paid more, they can afford better schooling and health care for themselves and their children. Tax revenues also grow, providing the resources to upgrade the country's infrastructure.

The result is a virtuous cycle, because higher-skilled workers and better infrastructure enable firms to make more sophisticated, higher-value-added products. That is how China has moved from assembling components to producing world-leading electric vehicles (EVs) in just four decades. Unfortunately, the same strategy is unlikely to work for India today.

Why China surged ahead: It is no accident that India failed to join China in shifting its economy to export-oriented manufacturing, even though the two countries were similarly poor in the late 1970s, when China started on that road. Even low-skilled factory employment requires a minimum level of education and skills. At the time, many Chinese workers met this standard, whereas most Indian workers did not. Foreign employers found China and its cheap-but-capable workers more attractive.

Moreover, China's factory workers acquired skills on the job and their education allowed them to pick up the basic accounting needed to launch their own small enterprises making products like screws and door handles. This explosion of smaller



firms contributed immensely to Chinese growth. China had other advantages, too. Despite the outward perception of centralized rule by the Communist Party of China, provincial and municipal bosses have wielded a great deal of power. Mayors, hoping to be promoted for generating growth, helped local firms navigate the country's otherwise-stifling regulations, overriding a rule here and overlooking one there in the name of results. By contrast, Indian bureaucracy in the same period was neither decentralized nor incentivized to promote growth, so it instead became an additional burden on Indian business.

Finally, autocratic China could always favour manufacturing in ways that democratic India could not. For example, the Chinese government appropriated land for commercial purposes where necessary; pressured unions to limit wage demands even as labour productivity grew; paid depositors in state-owned banks minimal returns so that the funds could be lent out cheaply to firms; and kept its exchange rate undervalued to support local firms' international competitiveness. In India, attempts to do any of the above would have met fierce democratic resistance.

Wrong way: Nonetheless, the current Indian government wants to board the manufacturing bus. With many others looking to diversify away from producing in China, Indian economic policymakers see an opportunity to make up for lost time. Moreover, Indian infrastructure has improved markedly. Among other things, the country now boasts many world-class airports and ports, increased renewables capacity to bridge

power deficits, and an excellent highway system. But impediments remain. Over the decade that the Narendra Modi administration has been in office, India's garment exports have grown by less than 5%, while Bangladeshi and Vietnamese garment exports have grown by over 70%, such that their exports are now multiples of India's. Recognizing these drawbacks, New Delhi has begun offering subsidies to incentivize production in India as well as raising tariffs on imports (like cellphones) to enhance the profits of manufacturers selling their wares in India's large and now-protected market.

While it is still early days, one should be sceptical of this strategy. Production-linked subsidies might induce manufacturers to assemble in India, but those firms still will need to import most components. Moreover, margins will be small, because Indian workers now compete with modestly paid Bangladeshi and Vietnamese workers, not with well-paid workers in industrialized countries, as in the past. With little profit for firms to reinvest (and with less tax revenue, net of the subsidy) the virtuous circles needed to move India up the value chain will be much harder to achieve. Worse, even if the government were to scale up manufacturing, the world is not ready for another China-size export powerhouse. Given the widespread shift toward factory protectionism and growing concerns about environmental sustainability, the government's emphasis on Chinese-style factory-led development seems incompatible with where the world is headed.

This is the first of a two-part series on India's elections and its economy.

Self-driving vehicles: The UK is ready to join a difficult race

Autonomous cars are behind the ambition curve but still hopeful



PARMY OLSON is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering technology.



London-based Wayve joins a field that has Tesla, Ford, Waymo and others

The market for driverless cars has been through a reckoning. Efforts by Apple, Ford Motor Company and Uber to make AI-driven vehicles have mostly failed, while chronic overhype by Elon Musk and tougher regulatory scrutiny in the US all suggest the industry is stalling. But not all hope is lost. Google's Waymo, General Motors' Cruise and some Chinese firms are still pursuing driverless projects. Now, the UK is racing forward too.

London-based startup Wayve has raised \$1 billion to put its self-driving software into modern cars. The funding mostly came from existing investors including Microsoft, Nvidia and Softbank, and it came just days before the UK also passed a comprehensive law that will let driverless cars onto British roads by 2026. The regulations are the first to address one of the industry's big problems: exaggeration.

The UK's Automated Vehicles Act has a section titled, "Communications likely to confuse as to autonomous capability," which bans companies from creating confusion over whether their cars can drive themselves. It's a sharp but subtle policy that the industry has long needed, given how much puffery has raised expectations that the industry has failed to deliver on. Among his many pronouncements, Musk once tweeted that Tesla cars would self-drive as well as humans by 2021, the same year Ford also predicted it would sell cars without steering wheels. Both were wrong.

"How you set and meet expectations to the customer is really important," says Alex Kendall, Wayve's chief executive officer. Kendall, who's originally from New Zealand, co-founded the company in 2017 while studying at Cambridge University for his PhD in deep learning, an approach to building artificial intelligence.

Cambridge has a legacy of AI breakthroughs from scientists like Alan Turing, but like the rest of the UK, its spin-offs have struggled to commercialize cutting-edge research in the same way Silicon Valley has.

Wayve's mega funding round, which was the biggest-ever for an AI company in Europe—even more than that of French AI hotshot Mistral—suggests Britain's market for deep-tech startups may be starting to get the late-stage financing they need to grow. This raises hope for the likes of Oxa, a driverless car spinout from Oxford University that sells self-driving software to enterprise customers like grocery delivery and mining companies and raised \$140 million last year.

Neither Wayve nor Oxa have disclosed their most recent valuations.

Wayve also focuses on building software rather than making cars and is capitalizing on hardware being built into forthcoming cars. Kendall tells me that many vehicles that were made last year by leading car-makers are already equipped with the necessary equipment to drive autonomously, including powerful computer chips and plenty of cameras facing the vehicles' front and back.

Hence why Wayve "doesn't require expensive retrofits," according to Kendall. While other autonomous driving efforts have relied on expensive lidar sensors and high-definition maps to drive, the startup uses its own large neural network which can "see" through cameras and also take voice commands, to drive. Kendall says Tesla pivoted to this approach late last year, which allows an AI system to drive different types of vehicles, or traverse new cities that it hasn't been driven in before.

Kendall has an animal-kingdom analogy to explain this approach: The mantis shrimp is technically the creature with the best eyes (sensors), but humans capitalize on eyesight best thanks to our superior intelligence (Wayve's AD). To enhance that technology, Wayve takes footage collected from cameras on its test-driven cars and plans to collect more through its licensing deals with car manufacturers. Kendall declined to name the carmakers he's partnering with.

Britain's new law should help his efforts as well as those of Oxa and others in the country. "The regulatory environment, if anything, has accelerated our ability to develop this tech," Kendall says.

The UK is still smarting from the slow demise of its car-making industry since the 1990s and the acquisition of marques like Rolls-Royce, Jaguar and Bentley by foreign companies. Car production in the UK has halved since 2016. Should Wayve's partnerships pan out and its peers capitalize on the new regulations, they could perhaps spark a modern-day revival with autonomous-vehicle technology.

While Chinese companies are closing the gap with America on autonomous cars, a friendly regulatory environment in the UK coupled with AI expertise from some of the world's finest universities means the Brits are emerging as viable contenders in that race too.

MY VIEW | BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN

Behavioural nudges: Overrated or just badly designed?

BIJU DOMINIC



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Last month, an article in *Harvard Business Review (HBR)* "Will Your Nudge Have a Lasting Impact?" by Evan Polman and Sam J. Maglio questioned the effectiveness of nudges used in policymaking and corporate strategy. Ever since the book *Nudge* by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein was published in 2008, behavioural nudges, or interventions designed to subtly steer individuals towards desired behaviours, has become a favourite tool of policymakers around the world. Governments of the UK, US, Canada and even India have created 'nudge units.' Several organizations in a variety of fields, including finance, health, education and sustainability, have created specific teams that deploy nudges to influence the behaviour of target audience.

The core argument of the *HBR* article is that although behavioural nudges make people more likely to pick a targeted option, nudged people use it less often and for less time than those who make that choice without a nudge. For example, it is possible to

increase people's healthy snack choices by strategically placing fruits and vegetables in easy-to-reach spots. However, they may not eat these healthy snacks often enough, with much of it going into trash.

So, do nudges actually work? The simple answer is that in some cases they do not and in some cases they do. Knowing the difference between the two situations is critical to a nudge practitioner's success.

Nudges cannot solve complex human behaviour problems whose roots are spread deep and wide. Black money in an economy is one such complex problem. Many players and factors have surreptitiously interacted over several decades to create this problem, so it was not surprising that an attempt to solve it in 2016 through a singular nudge like demonetization did not work.

A nudge works best when the problem it is trying to solve is singular. Many behaviour problems look singular, but in reality are not. Getting people to eat healthy might look as simple as getting them to pick a fruit as part of their meal. But, on closer inspection, one would realize that getting someone to pick a fruit involves pushing one behaviour, but getting that person to eat that fruit requires working on a different behaviour. Each of these behaviours needs a different

nudge. So I am not surprised by the *HBR* article authors' discovery that many people who picked up a fruit ended up throwing it in a trash can.

The examples that made Nudge Theory famous—like something being made the default option increasing its adoption—have an inherent problem. They give the impression that designing an appropriate nudge is a simple task—as simple as copying a heuristic principle from a famous book on behavioural economics to use as a solution. This type of peripheral approach to nudge creation is what delivers weak nudges, like placing fruit within one's reach that the *HBR* article refers to.

For effective nudges that actually lead to sustained behaviour change, their development needs to be based on a deep understanding of human decision-making processes. But this approach is long-drawn and involves a lot of hard work.

While studying the recent covid vaccine hesitancy problem, one realized that multi-

ple behavioural barriers had to be tackled before inducing a person to take both shots of the vaccine. Countries that managed to tackle each of those barriers specifically had more successful vaccination programmes. So, while tackling such behavioural issues, one should identify single behaviours that often constitute a larger problem. Then specific nudges for each of those separate behaviours should be developed.

Heuristics, or the mental short-cuts that constitute the foundation of effective nudge strategies to modify behaviour, reside at the non-conscious level of the human brain. Over its long story of evolution, the human brain has developed several 'smart heuristics' to take decisions without much information processing.

Incorporating evolutionary constructs into nudges go a long way in improving their effectiveness. But traditional research methods like focus-group discussions that focus on the brain's conscious processes are useless in identifying how brain evolution

guides modern behaviour. To develop truly effective tools, one needs to deploy research methodologies that dive deep into the non-conscious processes of the brain. Emotions, for example, are an integral part of all human decisions. Emotional stimuli are processed the fastest by the human brain. So identifying the emotions at play at the point-of-action and incorporating these into nudges would enhance their effectiveness.

Professor Richard Thaler, who put forward the concept of nudges, is a behavioural economist. But it has not served us well to rely only on knowledge from the field of behavioural economics for the formulation of nudges. Taking into account learnings from several other disciplines—such as Cognitive Neuroscience, Evolutionary biology, Sociology and Design—would go a long way in designing effective nudges.

The problem that the *HBR* article refers to has nothing to do with the inadequacy of Nudge Theory, as explained by Thaler and others. The problem lies with a lackadaisical attitude many of us have towards designing nudges. If a peripheral approach to nudge creation is replaced with a deeper dive into the non-conscious brain processes, it will surely help unearth several effective strategies to nudge better human behaviour.

Not all nudges work. Success depends on whether they are guided by an in-depth grasp of human minds



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Heed caution

All may seem lost in the Israel-Palestine war, but there is still time to save humanity in Gaza

The city of Rafah, which translates into wellbeing or prosperity in Urdu, experienced the trauma of seeing at least 45 people — including children — killed at a refugee camp in its midst following an Israeli airstrike in Gaza. Understandably, the act caused international indignation and further isolated Israel over the war with Palestine, coming only days after the International Court of Justice ordered the Jew nation to cease its operation in Rafah. Although the top UN court ordered Israeli forces last week to stop their operations, they persisted in their assault on the border town, which was long thought to be the last remaining shelter in the territory. Meanwhile, as international solidarity poured in for the Palestinians impacted by the Israeli strikes, the slogan "All Eyes On Rafah" has become popular on social media. The expression alludes to the continuous slaughter occurring in Gaza city, and several famous people have posted condolences along with the hashtag #AllEyesOnRafah. The cry for awareness of the ongoing battle has gained traction with the use of this slogan. Prior to Israel intensifying its military operation on the Gaza side of the border earlier this month and seizing control of the crossing, Rafah served as a primary port of entry for humanitarian aid. Over one million Palestinians have fled the fighting in Rafah; the majority of them were already displaced due to the conflict between Israel and the Hamas. Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden does not seem to be changing his stance on Israel, according to the White House, because the incident "did not cross a red line" that would require adjustments in US support.



This is despite the fact that Israeli tanks have been seen rolling down central Rafah for the first time since the war began on October 7 last year. In another setback to Israel globally and perhaps as part of a larger signal for it to stop bloodying the Gaza Strip with the murder of innocent people — nobody actually minds if only the Hamas terrorists are annihilated — Spain, Norway and Ireland have acknowledged Palestine's independence. The three countries did not recognise the existence of a State; they just acknowledged its potential. As a result of the change, the Palestinian Authority and the three nations will have closer diplomatic ties. Everyone has declared that they will acknowledge Palestine based on its pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem serving as its Capital. Already, 143 of the 193 members of the UN General Assembly have recognised Palestine. The latest acknowledgments are the most compelling proof to date that the concept might be gaining support in the economically and diplomatically powerful western European States. The West Bank, which Israel has occupied, and the Gaza Strip, which is under siege and where Israel is conducting a war that has claimed more than 36,000 lives, make up what is left of ancient Palestine. However, it must be recorded to his credit that Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said the Rafah incident was a "tragic mishap".

PICTALK



Lovebirds at their enclosure on a hot summer day, in New Delhi

PTI

Spiritual institutions under attack in Bengal



PRAFULL GORADIA

The assaults on the Ramakrishna Mission raise serious concerns about the State's political climate and its impact on religious harmony

West Bengal is again in the news and again for the wrong reasons. The premises of the venerable Ramakrishna Mission at Jalpaiguri have been vandalised by the goons of the State's ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC). That hasn't been the only incident of attacking a religious or spiritual centre. The ISKCON temple premises in the State have also been the target of the TMC brigade, as the State's chief minister Mamata Banerjee suspects the organisation's monks of being BJP sympathisers. So too have the premises of the Bharat Sevashram Sangh (BSS) at Beldanga in the district of Murshidabad suffered the ire of the ruling party's rough-necks. One of the BSS monks Kartik Maharaj has drawn Mamata Banerjee's ire as he is thought to be working towards influencing voters in favour of the BJP. Banerjee also believes that the ISKCON is playing a similar role.

The Ramakrishna Mission or RKM, as it is also known, headquartered in Kolkata's Belur Math was founded in 1897, by the great spiritual Ramakrishna Paramahansa's most renowned disciple, Swami Vivekananda. The latter was truly a global icon of modern Hinduism and planted the flag of Sanatana Dharma in the West, beginning with his spiritual conquest in Chicago in 1893 at a conference of the World Parliament of Religions. Though the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was founded in New York, its founder Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada or Srila Prabhupada was born in Calcutta and ventured to the US only in his old age, at 69, to spread the message of Krishna to America and the rest of the world. To vandalise such highly regarded institutions such as the venerable Ramakrishna Ashram and the internationally respected ISKCON, which has over 160 temples across the globe and that too by some citizens of a country that is predominantly Hindu, is unthinkable and unpardonable. It is possible that the perpetrators of these attacks are not



Hindus but people belonging to another religion. Nevertheless, the message that comes out from these recent episodes of temple vandalism is of the Hindus as a people being religious-suicidal. This is all the more unfortunate for two reasons. The Ramakrishna Mission is world famous since it was Swami Vivekananda who single-handedly informed the world of the wonder that Hinduism is. It is ISKCON that enables so many countries, with its magnificent temples, to worship in the Hindu way of "Hare Rama, Hare Krishna". Secondly, it has been only a few years since the image of Hindu India began to shine, after centuries of suppression. We now have the sordid spectacle of temple and ashram premises being attacked by goons with guns, in West Bengal of all places. It was just over a century ago that Congress leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale had said, "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow". It signified the province of Bengal was a leader. Is this what leaders do and that too for winning some seats in four or five constituencies? Just look back at the Renaissance, which in many ways, was comprehensively



ONE COULD GO ON AND ON ABOUT BENGAL'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE COUNTRY. MODERN INDIA'S GREATEST POET WAS RABINDRANATH TAGORE, AGAIN A GIFT OF BENGAL. HIS LYRICS ARE TODAY'S NATIONAL ANTHEM

led by Bengal. But before that, let us not forget Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who is considered by many to have been an avatar of Krishna. Chaitanya saved at least a part of Bengal for Bharat; but for him, the whole of the province would have been swallowed by Pakistan and then ruined. He stood between the conversion of the poorer Bengalis to Islam and saving them so that today they can worship Krishna. Ramakrishna Paramahansa was also a divine gift of Bengal, who himself had a glimpse of the divine. One could go on and on about Bengal's contributions to the country. Modern India's greatest poet was Rabindranath Tagore, again, a gift of Bengal. His lyrics are today are national anthem. One cannot ever forget Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and his stirring song Vande Mataram, which became the freedom anthem of India's national movement and inspired countless revolutionaries to armed action for combating the colonial raj, as well as to embrace the gallows in their supremely inspired quest. Bengal is a virtual encyclopaedia of the 19th and 20th-century, greats of India. It would need an entire volume to describe how and when the

saga began to sour. From the climbing of lofty heights of art, culture, literature and industry, Bengal began to slip towards an existence that wouldn't be envied in the least. The late Nirad Chaudhari, one of the finest writers the English language world has seen, gave vent to this angst by saying that the people of his are the "finest virtuosi of factiousness", not a flattering comment, though this writer, having been raised in Bengal and able to speak fluent Bengali, is wont to take a much more positive view. The sense of being Bengali is of course very pronounced, but the unity a common language can foster cannot stand before the pull of religion, as has been the historical experience throughout most significant parts of the world. That the State that led India's renaissance in the 19th century has fallen into this travesty is a sad tale, but Bengal has been known to come back strongly towards nationalism every time it is felt that the province might have gone astray. Perhaps therein lies the silver lining. (The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TAIWAN STAYS STRONG AMID TENSIONS

Madam — Apropos the news story "Taiwan tracks dozens of Chinese warplanes and navy vessels off its coast on the 2nd day of drills," published on May 24, this is my response. It's concerning to witness the escalation of tensions between Taiwan and China. Taiwan's tracking of Chinese military activity showcases their vigilance in the face of increasing pressure from Beijing. Despite the provocative displays from China's People's Liberation Army, Taiwan remains steadfast, with President Lai Ching-te affirming the nation's commitment to freedom and democracy. The ongoing dispute in Taiwan's parliament underscores the internal challenges they face, yet life continues in Taipei uninterrupted. China's aggressive stance, citing the one-China principle, only adds to the volatility of the situation. The international community must closely monitor these developments to ensure stability in the region and uphold Taiwan's sovereignty.

Avani Singhania | Kolkata

TACKLING E-WASTE THROUGH ACTION

Madam — Apropos the news story "Mitigating the e-waste crisis," published on May 28, this is my response. As technology advances, our reliance on electronic devices deepens, yet the consequences of our digital age loom large. E-waste, a byproduct of our tech obsession, poses a multifaceted threat to both environment and health. The toxic cocktail of substances found in discarded electronics, if not handled properly, can seep into soil, water and air, wreaking havoc on ecosystems and human well-being alike.

The staggering statistics from the Global E-Waste Monitor 2020 paint a grim picture of our unsustainable habits. However, solutions are within reach. Governments must enforce stringent regulations on e-waste management, while manufacturers bear responsibility for the entire lifecycle of their products.

Hospital fire prompts safety overhaul



Apropos the news story "Once burned, Govt orders fire audit of all hospitals," published on May 28, this is my response. Reading about the tragic fire at the neonatal hospital in Delhi, which resulted in the deaths of seven newborns and injuries to five others, is heartbreaking. This incident starkly highlights severe lapses in hospital management and safety protocols. The hospital was operating on an expired license and lacked fire department clearance, which is both shocking and unacceptable.

Investing in innovative recycling technologies and promoting eco-friendly design can mitigate the e-waste crisis. Ultimately, individual action is paramount. From conscientious disposal practices to advocating for systemic change, each of us holds the key to a cleaner, greener future. Let's embrace the challenge of recycling our e-waste and pave the way for a more sustainable tomorrow.

Aryan Malhotra | Chandigarh

SCIENCE ARCHIVES DRIVE PROGRESS

Madam — Apropos the news story "Science Archives Preserve Our Scientific Legacy," published on May 28, this is my response. As an ever-evolving discipline, science continually shapes our understanding of the world and our place within it. Reading the newspaper daily, I'm constantly reminded of how each discovery and innovation contributes to our present and builds the foundation for future generations. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, highlighted the power of scientific advancements in real-

The prompt action by the Delhi Government to mandate a fire audit for all hospitals by June 8 is a necessary step to prevent such tragedies in the future. However, it's deeply concerning that previous directives for fire preparedness and audits were not enforced rigorously. The revelation that the hospital was refilling oxygen without proper authorisation further underscores the negligence. It's encouraging to see the authorities committing to stringent new safety regulations and inspections, but these measures should have been in place long before this tragedy occurred. The bravery of the nurses and locals who risked their lives to save the babies deserves commendation, but such heroism should not be necessary in a properly regulated and safe environment. This tragic event serves as a grim reminder of the critical importance of strict compliance with safety standards in healthcare facilities.

Anaya Patel | Pune

time, transforming our lives and becoming a part of history. Scientific knowledge is inherently cumulative, with each generation of scientists building upon the work of their predecessors. This continuity drives not only intellectual progress but also economic and societal growth. The significance of preserving scientific archives cannot be overstated, as they store invaluable materials—research notes, experimental data and historical correspondence—that offer insights into the development of scientific thought. In India, initiatives like the Archives at NCBS play a crucial role in preserving our scientific heritage. However, with the risk of losing digital data, systematic conservation efforts are vital. Governments should mandate the periodic submission of research documents to ensure the longevity and impact of scientific work, safeguarding it from becoming lost to time.

Devika Menon | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Electric vehicles lead eco-friendly commute

Electric two-wheelers, with their zero tailpipe emissions, are providing an efficient and sustainable transport option for urban mobility

In the 1980s, the introduction of Maruti 800 changed the landscape of the automobile industry in India for decades to come. Cut to 2024 and we are heading towards a similar revolution in the years to come - but with a little twist.

Countries worldwide are addressing climate change by striving to reduce their carbon footprints. The adoption of electric vehicles (EVs), particularly electric two-wheelers (E2Ws), has emerged as a significant step in this effort. Understanding the environmental impact of E2Ws compared to conventional counterparts is crucial. There is compelling evidence supporting their widespread adoption as part of the transition towards sustainable transportation systems.

Traditional internal combustion engine (ICE) motorcycles and scooters contribute to air and noise pollution. E2Ws have zero tailpipe emissions and thus, help in mitigating pollution levels significantly. In urban settings, they help in allevi-



ating noise levels as well. Another advantage is that their powertrain is more efficient when compared to ICE vehicles. Since the conversion of electrical energy into mechanical energy is more effective, E2Ws have minimal energy wastage and a diminished carbon footprint. E2Ws also operate quietly and without vibrations or petrol fumes. There is ongoing innovation to close the performance gap between electric and their conventional fuel-powered counterparts. While ICE engines require warm-up for optimal perfor-

mance in cold weather, E2Ws operate at full capacity instantly. This makes the ride hassle free in any condition. Their advanced features like Android-based instrument clusters and mobile app connectivity further enhance the overall experience. In contrast with conventional ICE vehicles, there is a notable difference in the energy efficiency of E2Ws.

The electric motors are great at converting a larger portion of electrical energy from the grid into power at the wheels. This makes them highly effective in utilising

energy. The heightened efficiency indicates that they require less energy to travel the same distance, thereby reducing their environmental footprint even more. The production and upkeep of electric two-wheelers requires fewer resources and less energy. Their minimal maintenance requirements lead to decreased energy usage and a smaller environmental footprint.

E2Ws are a promising solution for reducing carbon footprints and advancing towards a more sustainable transportation paradigm. There is a need to address certain challenges such as those around infrastructure and accelerating the transition to renewable energy sources. This will help realise the full potential of E2Ws in mitigating environmental impact. With concerted action from policymakers, industry stakeholders and consumers, E2Ws are set to play a significant role in shaping a greener, more sustainable future for transportation.

(The writer is Founder & CEO, Motovolt Mobility; views are personal)



TUSHAR CHAUDHARY



FIRST COLUMN

MICROMANAGEMENT AND UNDERMANAGEMENT

It is crucial to balance these extremes by ensuring employee empowerment



SAKSHI SETHI

In the realm of leadership and management, micromanagement and under management represent two extreme ends of a spectrum posing significant challenges to organisational success. While micromanagement leads to decreased autonomy, innovation and job satisfaction, under management results in a lack of direction, motivation and accountability. By understanding the impacts of these management styles and implementing strategies that balance oversight with empowerment, organisations can foster a productive, innovative and satisfying work environment. Micromanagement involves excessive control and oversight while under management is characterised by a lack of adequate supervision and support.

In the spectrum of management styles, micromanagement and under management represent two extremes, each with distinct characteristics and consequences for the workplace. In an organisation, if one is micromanaging the team and not giving its employees the freedom to work, will eventually drive away great talent while settling for mediocrity resulting in fostering anxiety and ultimately leading to negative impacts on overall organisational productivity and job satisfaction. Along with this, decreased employee morale, reduced creativity and innovation, lower productivity, increased stress and burnout, high turnover, poor performance and accountability are some of the impacts of both micromanagement and undermanagement that can be detrimental even though they manifest differently. Various research studies have shown that micromanagement stifles creativity and innovation.



It is negatively correlated with job satisfaction and positively correlated with stress and burnout. Employees under micromanagement reported lower engagement and higher intentions to leave their jobs. While on the other hand, the effects of under management found that employees lacking adequate supervision and feedback exhibited lower job satisfaction and performance.

It becomes of utmost importance to strike a balance between the two by adopting management practices that provide appropriate oversight while empowering employees. Balancing between micromanagement and under management involves adopting a management style that provides appropriate oversight while empowering employees. By fostering a culture of trust and empowerment; setting clear goals and expectations; and promoting a results-oriented culture can help the organisation create a positive and productive workplace where both managers and employees thrive. There is no denying the fact that balancing micromanagement and undermanagement is crucial for creating a productive, positive and effective workplace. By finding the middle ground, managers can provide the necessary support and oversight while empowering employees to take initiative and innovate.

Remember, be it micromanagement or undermanagement, both can have far-reaching negative effects on both the employees as well as the organisation. By understanding the causes and impacts and then implementing strategies to promote trust, autonomy and effective communication, organisations can create a more positive and productive work environment. Moving away from micromanagement not only enhances employee satisfaction and performance but also contributes to the long-term success and health of the organisation. Micromanagement and undermanagement, as opposite ends of the management spectrum, both present significant challenges to organisational effectiveness and employee well-being. While micromanagement stifles autonomy and innovation through excessive control, under management leaves employees directionless and unsupported. Both styles can lead to significant issues within an organisation, highlighting the need for a balanced approach to effective leadership.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Relevant skill sets can combat unemployment



DINESH SOOD

The rapid digital shift necessitates comprehensive strategies to address skill gaps and ensure inclusive growth. Public-private partnerships are essential



The service sector has undeniably been the primary driver of India's growth since 2000. The exceptional performance of certain modern services has unequivocally contributed to the creation of more productive and decent employment. The reliance on services for economic growth unequivocally demands a fully developed job market, enabling a free flow of the workforce. The absence of such mechanisms will undoubtedly lead to rigidity in the services sector, curtailing growth against the backdrop of the increasingly important position of the services sector. The key focus areas include the pivotal role of technology in shaping the services sector and stimulating job growth in other sectors through multiplier effects.

The momentous transformation of the Indian economy is irrefutably being spearheaded by the service sector, which unequivocally contributes more than 50 per cent of the GDP. The sector's expansion is not happening in isolation but is deeply intertwined with global technological advancements. Technological progress has undeniably been a catalyst for efficiency, customer satisfaction, market expansion and data-driven decision-making within firms. It has also undeniably given rise to new service categories, such as e-commerce and other tech-based services like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT), revolutionising the sector.

The relationship between the service sector's growth and technological innovation is undeniably mutually beneficial. As the service sector expands, it undeniably fuels further innovation in technology-based solutions. New ventures and their technological needs undeniably push for continuous technological advancements to gain the competitiveness needed to maintain their foothold in the dynamic industry. This competition and need for differentiation undeniably lead to increased investments in research and development (R&D) and open innovations, benefiting both the firms involved and the public.

The introduction of 5G and the ongoing development of 6G technologies have significantly enhanced connectivity, service



THE SERVICE SECTOR UNEQUIVOCALLY OFFERS BOTH ABUNDANT OPPORTUNITIES AND FORMIDABLE CHALLENGES. ADDRESSING CHALLENGES DEMANDS A RESOLUTE, COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH WITH ASTUTE POLICIES AND UNWAVERING IMPLEMENTATION

delivery speed and overall efficiency in India. Efforts to improve digital literacy have further accelerated technology adoption, with 70 per cent of businesses identifying as "Digital Businesses" and the country exhibiting the highest fintech adoption rate at 87 per cent. The application of AI in business operations has markedly improved operational efficiency, customer satisfaction and decision-making, positioning India as a global leader in AI adoption. However, the rapid digital transformation necessitates a balance between creating employment and providing the relevant skill sets for technology-demanding jobs for a new generation is a national need.

The service sector unequivocally offers both abundant opportunities and formidable challenges. Addressing challenges demands a resolute, comprehensive approach with astute policies and unwavering implementation. Public-private partnerships and policies aimed at bridging the skill gaps must be executed with unwavering effectiveness. Educational institutions must urgently revamp their curriculum to directly align with the market's skill demands.

Technological advancement, while propelling economic growth, undeniably necessitates relentless skill development. To fully exploit technological progress, educational institutions must steadfastly ensure their curriculum is consistently updated and in sync with the latest innovations.

Skill Gap: In India, the skill gap in the labour force is a significant challenge, with only 51 per cent of the youth deemed employable due to a lack of necessary skills. This issue is exacerbated by the country's diverse socio-economic conditions, particularly affecting those in rural areas and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who lack

access to quality education and training. This situation perpetuates cycles of poverty and aggravates wage inequality. Moreover, inadequate emphasis on developing non-technical skills such as communication, critical thinking and leadership, which are increasingly in demand, further compounds the problem. The absence of these skills from the curriculum of most educational institutes compels employers to choose candidates only from a handful of premier institutes. Additionally, there is a significant mismatch between the skills taught and those required by employers, leading to unemployment even among the formally educated.

Efforts to bridge this gap must include public-private partnerships (PPPs), such as the initiative to upgrade Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) to train 150 million people by 2024. These initiatives are crucial steps toward aligning educational outcomes with market needs, emphasising the vital importance of both technical and non-technical skills development to enhance employability.

Gender Inequality: Female employability in India has consistently exceeded male employability from 2020 to 2023, but there was a drop in 2024. Furthermore, it has been higher for seven out of eleven years of the Wheel India Skills Reports. However, there has been a persistent gap between female and male labour force participation, indicating a clear bias against employing women over men. This bias is diminishing as female labour force participation has risen over the years, but substantial improvement is still necessary.

The Indian Government has implemented various initiatives to foster gender-inclusive employment, aim-

ing to bridge the gender gap in the workplace, making employing female labourers more lucrative while also ensuring it does not come at the cost of pay disparity.

One significant legislation is the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, designed to eliminate the wage gap between genders by ensuring equal pay for equal work. However, the act faces challenges, such as the narrow interpretation of the same work or work of a similar nature and the onus on employees to prove discrimination, which is difficult due to workplace power dynamics and legal complexities.

Additionally, the Government has launched schemes like Mission Shakti and the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojna-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), focusing on women's skill development and employability. These initiatives include exclusive training institutes for women, industry-oriented courses and partnerships with private sector bodies and NGOs. To encourage female participation in skill development, 30 per cent of seats in ITIs and ITCs are reserved for women.

These measures represent a comprehensive and assertive approach to promoting gender equality in employment, highlighting the crucial importance of legislative support, skill development and financial empowerment in achieving a more inclusive workforce. These unwavering steps will guarantee the complete realisation of the Indian economy's potential and the equitable distribution of the benefits of skills development.

(The writer is Co-Founder and MD, of Orane International, a Training Partner with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), Network Member, of India International Skill Centres, an initiative of GoI. Views expressed are personal)

The dawn of AI: Balancing innovation and prudence

As AI advances, it is essential to strike a balance between harnessing its advantages and addressing its challenges to ensure a sustainable future

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the ex-novo computer technology that essentially deals with developing machines capable of imitating human behaviour. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines AI as the "ability of a computer or robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings such as perception, critical thinking and decision-making". As far as the human mind is concerned, first, it processes the information, analyses the processed information from various angles and finally arrives at a logical conclusion. On the contrary, AI is a software programme that solely relies on pre-fed computer data to answer a query. In the entire process, the computer system behaves like



M J WARSI

a human mind. AI is the order of the day and admittedly, holds the potential to bring about revolutionary changes in communications, defence, healthcare and agriculture. In fact, till recently, the task that was considered impossible even for a machine to perform now AI has turned into a reality. AI has considerably brought computers very close to imitating the human mind, thus, diminishing the gap

between man and machine. Today AI has found its application in a variety of fields such as education, finance, defence, agriculture and healthcare. Leading medical research institutions use AI for experiment, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring of deadly diseases. AI facilitates high-quality tissue sample analysis that paves the way for precise prognosis. In this day and age pharmaceutical companies are using AI for drug discovery and chemical analysis. With the help of AI doctors and healthcare professionals can precisely diagnose serious medical conditions such as cancer and stroke. In the education sector too, AI plays an important role. AI has proved to be an extremely handy tool to develop study material, student

evaluation, grading and monitoring. Thus, teachers save their precious time which they can utilise in productive academic pursuits as well as engage in meaningful discussions with students. AI-powered virtual educator robots substantially improve teaching and learning outcomes.

Now let us see some of the imminent dangers of AI. The picture is not as rosy as it appears for the AI. Widespread indignation use of AI in almost every sphere of human activity is bound to raise some serious concerns concerning privacy, data security and transparency. Psychological well-being and social issues warrant our immediate attention. Companies are gradually replacing humans with AI-powered robots to perform

specific tasks at the workplace. This causes anxiety among employees and adversely affects their mental and emotional well-being. The technical dexterity of computers also is a major challenge for humans in the workplace. Of late AI-driven Deepfake videos and online Bots have spread at an alarming pace. Deepfake videos and online Bots are capable of orchestrating a fabricated consensus and manipulating public opinion. Fake news spreads like wildfire disturbing peace and leading to social unrest. Another disadvantage of AI is that it makes it extremely tough to distinguish between the original and the fake. AI-induced human rights violations should be stopped at the earliest. AI-powered changing

technology landscape has jeopardised data security, privacy, dignity, employment, equality, political rights and secrecy. Experts and sociologists have expressed reservations regarding the detrimental impacts of over-reliance on AI and human robots in important sectors like healthcare, law, marketing, accounting, education, management, technology and workplaces. AI's technological diligence, incredible analysis power and the ability to perform repetitive tasks may lead to huge layoffs. Consequently, this gives rise to a disproportionately high unemployment rate. Employees and the labourers may be subjected to discrimination and disparities and their professional and social security may be at stake. To

check the AI misuse a well-defined and comprehensive technological-labour policy is the need of the hour. Some of the measures that help workers survive in the AI-driven landscape are regular up-gradation of employee skills through appropriate training, honing up of technical skills and developing Soft skills. Lo and behold! Let's not lose sight of the fact that AI is completely devoid of human temperament, comprehension and creativity. The human mind is blessed with infinite creative power and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). These supreme attributes propel human beings to an elevated plane and place them on a higher pedestal than machines. On the contrary, AI is data-driven and follows a defined tra-

jectory, thus, fails to capture human emotions, perception and the ability to perform tasks by adapting to a given environment. Since AI is in its nascent stage, therefore, it is too soon to assume that AI can take over humans shortly as humans continue to be the *fons et origo* of originality and innovation.

Another threat that scares us is that if ever in the future technologically advanced machines take Man as their enemy then the entire human race may face existential crises. Pre-empting these dangers the US and the European countries have taken a locus standi to oppose AI and have taken stringent legal measures to curb AI's capricious use.

(The writer is a professor; views are personal)

Dalit factor

With the general election on its last leg, the political landscape is marked by an undercurrent of discontent among Dalit voters. This discontent, emerging starkly in the absence of a concerted opposition campaign, challenges the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s narrative of a "Viksit Bharat" (developed India). Despite the BJP's portrayal of economic progress, many Dalit voters express scepticism and frustration over their economic conditions, revealing significant gaps in the government's development claims. A closer look at the sentiments of Dalit voters in key constituencies in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar reveals a consistent theme of economic hardship. Surveys indicate that less than 10 per cent of Dalit respondents feel their income meets their needs or that their economic situation has improved. Additionally, over 60 per cent believe that economic inequality has worsened, highlighting a critical disconnect between the development narrative and the lived realities of many Dalits. Employment issues underscore the disconnect. With high rates of daily wage labour among Dalit respondents, significant numbers still report being unemployed, particularly among women. This economic strain is compounded by rising prices. Such economic grievances directly challenge the government's claims of inclusive development and question the effectiveness of economic policies. Interestingly, while economic discontent is prevalent, it does not translate into a clear voting preference against the BJP. The concept of "face" or leadership plays a significant role in voter preferences. Many Dalits continue to support Prime Minister Narendra Modi, influenced by his strong national presence and the carefully cultivated image of a decisive, capable leader. This personal appeal of Mr Modi often overshadows broader economic discontent, particularly among Dalit women who are more likely to support him despite facing higher unemployment rates. This paradox highlights a complex electoral dynamic. While economic issues are important, they do not always determine voting behaviour. Mr Modi's leadership persona, bolstered by extensive media coverage, creates a compelling narrative that many voters find appealing. This personal appeal is a crucial factor in the BJP's strategy, enabling Mr Modi to maintain substantial support despite the economic grievances voiced by many Dalits. The role of welfare schemes also adds another layer to this electoral complexity. While access to schemes like free rations and health insurance is notable, it does not uniformly translate into support for the BJP. However, these schemes contribute to the larger narrative of Mr Modi as a benefactor, helping sustain his personal appeal even when economic conditions do not visibly improve. In the context of the election, the discontent among Dalits signifies a significant challenge for the BJP. This dissatisfaction has surfaced organically, without a concerted opposition campaign, pointing to deep-seated economic issues that transcend political narratives. As the election nears its end, it remains to be seen how this discontent will shape the voting behaviour of Dalits and whether the appeal of Mr Modi's leadership can continue to overshadow the pressing economic realities faced by many.

Deficit Dynamics

India's trade data reveals a significant deficit with nine of its top 10 trading partners, including major economies like China, Russia, South Korea, and Hong Kong. While a trade deficit is often viewed through a lens of economic pessimism, it is crucial to understand the complexities behind these numbers before jumping to conclusions about their impact on India's economy. In the fiscal year 2023-24, India's trade deficit with China rose to \$85 billion, with Russia to \$57.2 billion, South Korea to \$14.71 billion, and Hong Kong to \$12.2 billion. Despite these rising deficits, India's overall trade deficit has actually narrowed to \$238.3 billion from \$264.9 billion in the previous year. These figures prompt a closer examination of the underlying factors and the broader economic implications. A trade deficit can be concerning if it signals a lack of competitiveness for India's exports in international markets or an over-reliance on imports. However, not all deficits are created equal. In many cases, especially for a developing economy like India, a trade deficit can reflect a strategic investment in future growth. Importing capital goods, raw materials, and intermediary products can boost domestic manufacturing and export capacity in the long run. For instance, India's deficit with China is partly due to the import of electronic components, machinery, and chemicals, which are critical for India's burgeoning tech and pharmaceutical industries. Similarly, imports from Russia predominantly consist of energy supplies, essential for India's energy security and industrial activity. While these deficits indicate a high volume of imports, they also underscore the integration of the Indian economy into global supply chains, which can enhance productivity and growth. However, there are legitimate concerns regarding sustainability of growing deficits. A large and persistent deficit can exert pressure on the domestic currency, leading to depreciation. This increases the cost of imports, potentially exacerbating the deficit further. Moreover, financing a substantial trade deficit might necessitate borrowing from foreign lenders, raising external debt and depleting foreign exchange reserves. These conditions can signal economic instability to international investors, reducing foreign direct investment and potentially slowing economic growth. To mitigate these risks, India needs a multi-faceted approach. First, boosting exports is essential. This requires improving the competitiveness of Indian goods and services in global markets through innovation, quality enhancement, and better market access. Trade agreements and partnerships can play a pivotal role here. Second, reducing unnecessary imports is crucial. Encouraging the production of high-demand goods domestically can help balance trade. Policies supporting Make in India and similar initiatives are steps in the right direction. Developing domestic industries requires robust infrastructure, ease of doing business, and a favourable regulatory environment. Managing currency and debt levels prudently is vital to avoid the pitfalls of excessive external borrowing. Strategic fiscal and monetary policies can help maintain economic stability while fostering growth. A balanced approach can transform these challenges into drivers of long-term economic resilience and prosperity.

Use of Ethanol

Switching to E100 (100 per cent ethanol) will be faster and easier than switching to both hydrogen-fuelled vehicles and EVs. The main reason is that the current gasoline supply chain and infrastructure can be used for E100. Brazil serves as a good example as the path to making E100 available in India. However, it will not happen on its own. It must be driven by government regulations and enforcement. India needs to make it mandatory that all cars sold from 2030 are capable of running on E100



Today ethanol has found its way into a range of applications from its original application as a beverage (wine and beer). It is used as a fuel, a chemical solvent, a disinfectant (hand sanitizer), in pharmaceuticals, cleaning, production of renewable hydrogen, cosmetics, perfumes, and as a feedstock for the production of chemicals.

The blending of ethanol into gasoline got its foothold in both the United States and Brazil, and both countries are no longer net importers of crude oil. In Brazil E100 sells for a lower price than gasoline and in the United States, both E15 and E85 sell for less than E10 and both have higher-octane numbers than E10. (E10 is the conventional gasoline sold in the United States.)

In the United States, the blending of ethanol into gasoline for use as an automotive fuel began in the 1970s due to high petroleum prices, and growing health and environmental concerns over the use of lead in gasoline created a need for a new source of "octane".

The value of ethanol as a "fuel oxygenate" to control carbon monoxide emissions was recognized, which resulted in increased production in the 1980s and the 1990s.

Ethanol burns cleaner than gasoline and is currently blended into fuel in many countries around the globe, including India. India started blending ethanol in a pilot programme in 2001. In the U.S., the majority of gasoline sold today has a minimum of 10 per cent ethanol.

Today in Brazil all gasoline has a mandatory ethanol blend requirement of 27 per cent (soon to be 30 per cent). Cars in Brazil can switch between any gasoline-ethanol blend up to 100 per cent ethanol.

Blending ethanol into fuel produces a range of benefits. By displacing hydrocarbons like aromatics in gasoline, ethanol reduces toxic air emissions, particulate matter PM2.5, carbon monoxide, nitrous oxides, and exhaust hydrocarbons. In many countries, including India, using domestically produced ethanol will reduce imports of the price volatile crude oil.

In addition producing ethanol from corn produces low-cost protein in the form of DDGS.

In general, the cost per unit of protein in DDGS is only 30 per cent of the cost per unit of protein in the grain itself. Lastly, production of ethanol creates jobs in the agricultural and other sectors of the economy. Ethanol provides the foundation for decarbonization of a large portion of the chemicals industry.

The benefits obtained by blending ethanol in fuel are even greater by using E100, 100 per cent ethanol, as an automotive fuel. All of the previously stated benefits of blending ethanol would be multiplied several times over by using E100.

The history of the use of E100 in Brazil has proven that it is an effective and cost-efficient fuel.

As demonstrated in Brazil, E100 can be used with some design modifications to the engine to account for the higher oxygen content in the fuel and the slightly higher volume of fuel that must be supplied to the engine. An engine that is properly modified to capitalize on the higher octane of E100, can deliver high power and good mileage.

E100 is a clean burning fuel that does not add any net CO2 to the atmosphere as it is effectively recycling the CO2 present in the atmosphere. Use of clean burning E100 will reduce pollution, including OM 2.5 particulates that choke the lungs of children living in India's cities.

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In many area of the world, traditional biomass fuels like

wood, charcoal, dung and crop residues are used for cooking. These fuels generate harmful smoke particles, especially when used indoors.

The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 1.3 million persons annually die prematurely due to health conditions that arise from exposure to indoor air pollutants from traditional fuels.

Ethanol is a proven alternative to these fuels. Ethanol is an effective clean-burning cooking fuel that reduces emissions of carbon monoxide, particulate matter, and other pollutants.

Ethanol is safer and easier to use, store and transport than biomass fuels. It does not produce smoke, sparks, or ash, and does not require chopping or drying of wood or charcoal. Bioethanol is one of the cooking fuels considered to be clean based on the 2014 WHO guidelines.

The aviation sector creates 13.9 per cent of the emissions from transport, making it the second largest source of transport and GHG emissions. Through both government regulations and voluntary commitment, the sector has set ambitious goals to reduce its GHG emissions.

The use of growing proportions of sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) is absolutely required to meet the targets. SAF can be produced from several feedstocks, some of which including used cooking oil are in very limited supply and are insufficient to meet the growing demand for SAF in India and globally.

According to some estimates the global annual demand for SAF is expected to exceed 18 billion liters by 2030. Ethanol-based SAF can meet the growing demand. Using proven technologies, ethanol can be converted to SAF and renewable diesel in a process referred to as ATJ or alcohol-to-jet. In general, it requires 1.7 liters of ethanol to produce 1 liter of SAF.

The production of SAF via the ATJ process will be a driving force in creating new ethanol

demand both in India and globally. Corn-based ethanol provides versatility and flexibility combined with the potential for nearly unlimited feedstocks at a cost-effective price.

When it comes to producing chemicals, ethanol is a foundation chemical for producing a range of renewable chemicals having low carbon intensities. Just as petroleum can be used to produce ethylene from which a range of many important chemicals and polymers are produced, ethanol can be used to produce ethylene world-scale plants. Ethylene is the heart of today's trillion-dollar global petrochemicals market.

Petron Scientech's technology for the conversion of ethanol to ethylene has been in commercial use for over thirty years and provides very efficient energy utilization, low CAPEX, and low OPEX while offering low carbon intensity.

As a general rule-of-thumb, each metric ton of ethylene produced from ethanol saves three metric tons of GHG emissions. The ethylene produced from ethanol is a drop-in replacement for petrochemical ethylene with no changes to the downstream process being required. Renewable ethylene can also be used as a refrigerant and as a ripening agent for fruits and vegetables.

Known to exist for over 10,000 plus years, ethanol is a molecule whose true value and growing versatility has only been demonstrated over past few decades. The versatility of ethanol is similar to that of crude oil except for some significant and important differences. Ethanol is sustainable, renewable, and does not depend on imports from volatile areas of the world.

Ethanol can be used to produce vehicle and jet fuels, along with a range of value-added chemicals and polymers. Unlike sugar cane ethanol, corn ethanol production also produces a valuable cost-effective high protein co-product for use as feed.

Ethanol must be a foundational component of India's drive to reduce its GHG emissions with the need to develop need technologies. Use of E100 would help achieve that goal faster. 'Corn Ethanol' will lead to energy security, food security and decarbonization.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Turnout irrelevant

SIR, This refers to the editorial 'Litmus test' (22May). Given the lower voter turnout compared to the previous elections, one cannot draw the conclusion that the initial enthusiasm that characterized Modi's campaign has waned.

Different surveys have claimed that Modi is still the top choice of 52 per cent people. Kerala where BJP is not anywhere in the primary contest saw a low voter turnout like North and West India. There are numerous explanations for the low voter turnout.

The rapid formation and breaking of coalitions have broken the morale of party workers who had until the last election toiled hard to get voters to the polling booth.

The tickets were given to 'outsiders' without taking them into confidence. The opposition has not been able to forge a working alliance, with the rebel fac-

tions of parties such as those led by Sharad Power and Uddhav Thakery joining NDA, thereby dampening the enthusiasm of the voters who could have voted for the opposition.

Rahul Gandhi's yatra has failed to inspire the passion of the voters who are disappointed to see Congress contesting elections on the shoulders of the regional satraps.

Besides, the skyrocketing corruption of leaders, with huge amounts of cash recovered from a Jharkhand minister's associate, and alleged sexual misconduct by former PM HD Deve Gowda's son HD Revanna have shaken the trust of the common people in democracy.

Incidents such as the last-minute withdrawal of the Congress candidate from Indore have broken the morale of the party workers. The turnout does not determine the outcome of

elections.

Despite a drop in turnout of about 6 per cent Indira Gandhi won the election in 1971 hands down, while a jump in voter turnout by 5 per cent in the next general election in 1977 saw her being routed.

Yours, etc., Sudipta Ghosh, Jangipur, 27 May.

AIR SCARES

SIR, Recently, air travel has created fear such as 39 flamingos dying in an Emirates plane crash, turbulence in the Singapore Airlines flight due to climate change and a fire mishap in an Air India Express plane. Day by day these incidents are increasing. In most cases, the plane makes an emergency landing.

In this context, the Ministry of Civil Aviation should be cautious. Need of the hour is to check the mechanical condition of aircraft thoroughly, application of AI in weather forecast, review bird flying zones, etc.

Yours, etc., Nabbit Panigrahi, Rayagada, 28 May.

INDIA SHINES

SIR, Payal Kapadia, 38, has created history by becoming the first Indian film-maker to win the Grand Prix award at the Cannes film festival for *All We Imagine as Light*. This moment will certainly be inked in cinema history. Kapadia, along with three main women champions of her film, Kani Kusruti, Divya Prabha and Chhaya Kadam, posing with the prize has become the shot of the 77th edition of the festival, definitely for Indians. An Indo-French venture, which throws light on the story of two Malayali nurses working in Mumbai, is a big win for Indian cinema. The last time an Indian film was in the competition section was 30 years ago with Shaji N. Karun's *Swaham* in 1994.

India really shined at Cannes this year, with Kolkata's Anasuya Sengupta winning the Best Actress in the *Un Certain Regard* section for her turn in Konstantin Bojanov's *The Shameless*; British-Indian Karan Kandhari's *Sister Midnight* in the parallel Director's Fortnight selection; FTII student Chidananda S. Naik's short *Sunflowers Were The First Ones To Know* winning the top prize in the LaCinef section, Cannes Classics releasing a renewed *Manthan*, Shyam Benegal's 1976 film, and so on. Kapadia had won the best documentary prize in 2021 and with the Grand Prix prize just three years later, she will inspire young film-makers to come out with their stories, and, hopefully, get the support they deserve.

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



ASIAN VOICES
VN's carbon credit market has significant development potential

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has issued Directive No. 13/CT-TTg, to enhance management of carbon credits in order to implement the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) programme. The carbon market in Viet Nam will have significant developmental potential. Firstly, Viet Nam, as a developing country, has high production demands, resulting in increased greenhouse gas emissions due to environmentally-unfriendly technologies. Thus, there are considerable opportunities when it comes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the country. Additionally, the geographical location plays a crucial role, as Viet Nam, a tropical country, has more potential for diversifying renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power, compared to other nations.

Moreover, Viet Nam has ample opportunities to attract green financial resources, not only focusing on climate change adaptation and extreme weather phenomena resistance, but also in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, the demand and opportunities for establishing a carbon credit market are closely linked to Directive 13/CT-TTg issued by the Prime Minister. However, it is crucial for ministries, sectors, localities and relevant agencies to evaluate the current status of greenhouse gas emissions, allocate greenhouse gas emission quotas and operate the market smoothly and attractively for investors to engage in carbon credit trading. This is an ambitious goal requiring the involvement of various

Việt Nam News

stakeholders, including ministries, sectors, localities, Vietnamese enterprises and support from international organisations, to channel green finance into helping domestic enterprises transition to green. Green capital, with many preferential incentives supporting enterprises, ensures profit recovery and contributes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, moving towards Viet Nam's stated goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

The most significant challenge currently for Viet Nam is to accurately determine the greenhouse gas emissions of major emitting enterprises, because if we fail in this, it will pose a significant obstacle for State management agencies. Allocation of greenhouse gas emission quotas to enterprises needs to be carried out so that enterprises know and can reduce emissions, creating surplus quotas for carbon credit trading. Therefore, the most crucial task in Viet Nam is to determine the allocation of greenhouse gas emission quotas for domestic enterprises currently in operation and production.

For Vietnamese export enterprises, they must deal with several issues related to trade and export barriers, especially after the European Union introduced the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) in 2023. Therefore, goods in some of the sectors regulated by the European Union, such as iron, steel, cement, fertilisers, hydrogen and electricity, exported to the EU, if they are not taxed in the host country, will also be taxed at Europe's borders, equivalent to nearly US\$100 for a tonne of CO2. Vietnamese enterprises within the global supply chain, with customers in Europe, are at risk of this tax. Apart from the European Union, other countries worldwide like the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia have implemented similar mechanisms. This means Vietnamese enterprises need to equip themselves with knowledge and calculations of greenhouse gas emission intensities per product to avoid trade barriers, thereby enhancing competitiveness and brand recognition.





A thought for today

Thousands have lived without love,
not one without water

WH AUDEN

Not A Drop To Waste

Water woes are a recurring Indian urban phenomenon. Reusing treated water is the solution

Delhi residents are experiencing a double whammy of intense heat and water scarcity. Parts of the capital yesterday recorded a maximum temperature of 52.3°C. Along with it came announcements this week of water rationing. It's the second major city, after Bengaluru, to simultaneously experience a heatwave and acute water shortage this summer.

The scariest moment in urban India was Chennai's "Day Zero" in June 2019, when the city's four major water reservoirs dried up. We are very vulnerable to water crises.

Urban mess | Common to all urban water nightmares is that economic growth and consequent building expansion have outpaced the capacity of civic authorities. Private firms have stepped into the breach to support this growth. But the downside is that they lack scale to solve critical problems.



Reality check | India cannot escape the impact of climate change. Extended heatwaves are here to stay and water demand in urban areas will not reduce. Neither can some consequences of haphazard urban expansion, such as building over natural landscapes, be undone. To illustrate, in 2022, the Karnataka govt told the state assembly that 40 lakes in Bengaluru had "disappeared".

Recycle, the best option | On the heels of its "Day Zero", Chennai became the first Indian city to recycle wastewater at scale. Tertiary treatment reverse osmosis plants are used to recycle water for industrial use. Recycling lifts the pressure on freshwater resources and allows urban areas to cushion the impact of poor monsoons. Some states have now mandated industrial zones to use treated water. It's a sensible policy as India's ranked the 13th most water-stressed in the world.

Potential's huge | In 2016, IISc carried out a study of the potential addition to Bengaluru's water supply through treating sewage water. It estimated that of the annual domestic demand of about 20 TMC, treated sewage could provide up to 80% of the requirement. It's consistent with UN's findings that on average, high-income countries treat about 70% of the industrial and municipal wastewater they generate, while the ratio falls to about 28% in lower middle-income countries.

Pushing ahead with recycling doesn't need huge govt projects. Tight implementation of a policy to get both residential and commercial projects to use recycled water will have a significant impact. Who knows, not long after, India may go the Singapore way to use treated water in craft beer.

Choppy Skies

'Clear air turbulence' is the new scare story of flying. And more may be in store

Air travel was never a simple affair for many people. But recent incidents of air turbulence, with stories of passengers being tossed around and literally 'hitting the roof' take it to another level. The most disturbing incident involved a Singapore Airlines flight from London to Singapore, which faced rapid altitude loss, and led to a fatality, besides injuries to dozens of people. Close on its heels came reports of 12 passengers suffering injuries on a Qatar Airways flight from Doha to Dublin.

Underbelly of travel | It doesn't help that this is not your usual problem for which blame can be assigned and the culprit put in the dock. Facing air turbulence is like dealing with a choppy sea, inevitable. While technology has made it possible to foresee pockets of turbulence and for pilots to issue a cabin warning or avoid them, there is still the 'clear air turbulence (CAT)' that can appear, literally, out of nowhere, sometimes causing mayhem in the aircraft.

Climate change | The problem can get worse. Researchers at University of Reading found a 55% increase in severe air turbulence due to CAT in the North Atlantic between 1979 and 2020, attributing it to climate change. University of Chicago researchers have claimed that wind speeds, which are behind CAT, will rise by 2% for every degree Celsius of global warming.

What's the fix? | While avoiding turbulence may not be possible, preventing injuries is. Keeping seat belts fastened, even at cruise altitude, is the best safeguard against the vagaries of weather, at least till technology breaks new ground. As for the anxiety and panic experienced during rapid altitude loss or violent buffeting of the aircraft, passengers can take heart from aircraft being designed to endure significantly higher stress levels. Chances of a commercial plane going down due to turbulence is almost nil.

'And how many deaths

...will it take 'til we know
that too many people have died?'

Bachi Karkaria



The answer (can't keep) 'blowin' in the wind'. Four times in under a fortnight we've been shaken by catastrophic - and totally avoidable - tragedies. 68 lives snuffed out. Parents, siblings, breadwinners, children, even those who'd barely taken a day's breath - all grabbed with death's non-negotiable finality. All leaving an unbridgeable chasm of loss.

Simply because someone was too greedy to follow the rules, or enforce them. That's the bigger tragedy. And after the finger-pointing, blame-shunting, politicising, righteous editorialising, it will happen again - and yet again. That's the biggest tragedy of all.

None of these victims was living recklessly. What's more routine than filling up at a petrol station? As those 17 delivery boys, autorickshawallas, office-goers and visiting couple were doing in Mumbai's Ghatkopar on May 13. Can you imagine their horror when a 120x120 ft hoarding came crashing down on them? Did they even have time to gasp in disbelief?

What's more routine than going to work? Even if it's the choice-less choice of a hazardous industry - or living in its vicinity. As those 11 dead and 70 grievously injured in Mumbai's Dombivli had done last Thursday when the Amudam chemical plant boiler blasted apart, and flames roared through this MIDC hub with the speed and fury of a forest fire.

What's more routine than families flocking to amusement parks during summer holidays? As those 33 people, including several children - plus countless traumatised - had done at Rajkot's sprawling recreational centre last Saturday. Excited shouts turned to ghoulish screams, as they were trapped in an inferno deadlier than the heatwave they'd gone there to escape.

What's more routine than parental joy on first seeing the fruition of a nine-month wait and longer dreams? If heartbreak can have an ascending scale, then surely up there would be the seven tiny lives now charred to lumps of black in the Delhi nursing home last Sunday.

Okay, all the owners have been arrested. But if the buck stops smugly there, the tragedies won't.

Alec Smart said: "In the Pune killer crash, the initial 'justice' was more juvenile."

Dear New Govt, Do Get Real

Message to incoming GOI: in the fastest growing large economy, over 80% of those out-of-work are young. And remember, the largest number of poor in the world live in India

Duvvuri Subbarao



The election campaign is behind us. Ironically, in a country where millions struggle for a daily living, it was dominated by Hindu-Muslim divide and bulldozer politics rather than bread-and-butter issues of jobs and prices. It's imperative, therefore, for the incoming govt to leave campaign rhetoric behind and apply itself to the task of accelerating growth, for all. Here's a summary of the good, the bad and the ugly of the India growth story that should inform the way forward for the new govt.

Bright spot | The highlight of the 'good' part of the story is that with growth averaging 7%, we are the fastest growing large economy in the world today. This is a significant turnaround from 10 years ago when growth was slowing, inflation was high, rupee was volatile and govt's fiscal position was worrying. A bad loan problem had sapped investor confidence and crippled bank balance sheets. The much-dreaded stagnation seemed a distinct possibility.

Ten years on, India's growth story is compelling. It has moved up from being the world's 11th largest to 5th largest economy. By way of GDP, we overtook UK last year and is on course to surpass Japan in 2026 and Germany in 2027. Growth is strong, inflation is approaching target, albeit unevenly, rupee is stable and service exports of nearly 10% of GDP are giving unexpected resilience to the external sector.

The bad loan problem is resolved with bank and corporate balance sheets in robust health.

Economy flexing | Public infra is being built at a frenetic pace. Digital revolution is enhancing productivity, creating jobs and adding to govt revenues. We've birthed many unicorns. Recent estimates suggest extreme poverty is all but eliminated. Amid the pessimism about global growth because of slowing trade, persistent inflation, rising public debt and deteriorating geopolitical tensions, India is gaining global heft as an emerging economic superpower.

Not so rosy | But here's where the 'bad' part of the story chimes in, raising two questions in particular: How

robust is our growth, and can we maintain this momentum? Both defy clearly affirmative answers.

Economists who've dirtied their hands with numbers have questioned India's methodology of growth estimation, which glosses over outsized discrepancies to generate a flattering headline number. If you net out the discrepancies, they argue, the underlying growth

extended period - here our record has been unimpressive. Per IMF data, economy has clocked growth of over 7.6% just seven times since the 1991 reforms. But we could never sustain that pace for more than two consecutive years.

Poor country | Could this time be different? That our current growth is driven just by public investment does not inspire confidence. We need to be firing on all cylinders to have a fighting chance of winning the race.

Further, that we're moving up the global league by way of output may be cause for cheer, but certainly not for celebration. We might be a large economy, mostly by virtue of our large population, but we're still a poor country. With per capita income of \$2,730 in current dollars, we rank 136th in the league of nations. We're the poorest country among Brics, we're the poorest in G20, and we have more poor people than any other country.

The real downer | The 'ugly' part of the story is defined by two interrelated maladies - jobs and inequality. Contrary to Modi's promise in 2014 that jobs will be his top priority, unemployment rate has barely budged in the last 10 years.

Two things make the unemployment problem particularly distressing. First is the size of youth unemployment, mostly by virtue of our large population, but we're still a poor country. With per capita income of \$2,730 in current dollars, we rank 136th in the league of nations. We're the poorest country among Brics, we're the poorest in G20, and we have more poor people than any other country.

Inequality worry | Deepening inequality is in part a corollary to rising unemployment. A recent report by World Inequality Lab, co-authored by Thomas Piketty, says income inequality in India is currently at its highest level since 1922. We know from development experience that reducing inequalities is not just a moral imperative, but a necessary condition for sustained growth.

'It's the economy, stupid' has become a cliché, but it's the message the new govt must take to heart as it gets down to business.

The writer is a former RBI governor



Chad Crowe

Unbridled jubilation on growth sprint is misplaced because much of it is 'catch up' growth...challenge lies in sustaining that pace over an extended period

momentum is much less impressive.

There's also an argument that even as our current growth sprint is grabbing headlines, unbridled jubilation is misplaced because much of it is 'catch up' growth. Poor countries grow faster just as a child grows faster than an adult.

The challenge lies in sustaining that pace over an

Punjab's Power Ride On A Rocky Road

SAD-BJP split, as well as some anti-incumbency against AAP, has Congress eyeing anti-BJP, anti-AAP votes. AAP's still banking on its free power scheme. Support for radicals shows turmoil in Panthic politics

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An outlier among north Indian states to BJP's sweeping victories of 2014 and 2019, Punjab presents ironies this time as well. Two years after a handsome mandate to AAP in assembly polls (92 of 117 seats, 42% vote share), the Sikh-majority state is again in political flux. INDIA partners AAP and Congress are contesting each other. SAD has stayed away from both alliances; its junior partner till 2020, BJP, isn't seen as a threat beyond a handful of seats.

Politics 1984-2024 | The vote on June 1 is when army action on Darbar Sahib began in 1984 - which remains the biggest turning point for Sikhs and Punjab after Partition. In Parliament last Aug, PM called it an "attack on Akal Takht". The mass tragedies, including massacre of Sikhs in 1984 - that Modi called "genocide" while campaigning in Punjab in 2019 and

POLLITICS
Special Series on Elections

this year too - influenced poll outcomes in Parliament and assembly elections in Punjab till 1998. With Sikh votes consolidated, Congress was viewed as an 'anti-Sikh' party. SAD emerged strong.

Forty years on, Punjab is at a political crossroads again. SAD president Sukhbir Singh Badal, desperate to regain lost ground among Sikhs over the handling of sacrilege issues and police firing that killed two during 2015's Sikh protests, at every poll meeting pulls out a picture of damaged Akal Takht from 1984, and talks of RSS taking control of gurdwara bodies outside Punjab. His call is to defeat parties controlled from Delhi.

Parties in position | Punjab Congress claims it'll gain from anti-incumbency against AAP. It convinced party brass in Delhi against an alliance in Punjab. But if indeed Congress makes gains, it'll be more because of

weaknesses of other parties. Congress even lost its strongest seat Jalandhar to AAP in a 2023 bypoll. Most Sikhs remain apprehensive of BJP; Congress, ironically, expects to benefit from this.

AAP had won big from discontent with Congress and SAD-BJP and bragged its *aamaadmi* candidates defeated the CM and three former CMs. But among its 13 candidates this time, AAP has three imports, five ministers, three MLAs, and a Punjabi comic-actor. Known for contesting even local body elections in Kejrival's name, Punjab AAP has been campaigning in Bhagwant Mann's name this time. Their party's 'saviour' is the scheme of 300 units of free power.

This time, perception that BJP will alter the Constitution has seeped into Dalit minds. BJP's been pushing to make Punjab a four-cornered contest, but it can grow only if it decimates Congress. While farmers are protesting against BJP nominees, a counter-consolidation of Hindu votes can't be ruled out.

Protests, anti-incumbency |

Ahead of 2022, AAP cashed in on the political fluidity resulting from the farmers' movement. But within three months it lost its rajdhani, Sangrur, to SAD president Simranjit Singh Mann in a bypoll. Recently, Mann faced shopkeepers and traders' ire in Maur assembly segment during a roadshow. A blast in Maur had killed 7 just four days ahead of the 2017 assembly election. It was traced to Dera Sacha Sauda Sirda - but all parties remained silent as did police brass.

After winning the 2017 assembly election, Congress had won 8 seats (41%

vote share) in 2019 LS polls. But AAP has started facing questions on issues of performance within two years of its assembly win. Farm crisis, unemployment, depleting water table, drugs, youth out-migration, illegal mining, increasing debt - real people's issues are all missing from the political discourse.

Panthic space on edge | No political party can claim to control the narrative. The response to radical Sikh activist Amritpal Singh, who's contesting from Khadoor Sahib constituency, shows resistance can emerge even without a clear political structure.

A turf war between moderate and radical streams is at play. The traction Amritpal has is more a reflection of turmoil within the Sikh political space than any love of a radical agenda. Perception of excessive action against him and the persisting drugs crisis are working to his advantage. Conversions by Pentecostal pastors are also helping radicals. Simranjit Singh Mann is very much in play from Sangrur. Indira Gandhi assassin Beant Singh's son Sarabjit Singh, an Independent, has significant support in Faridkot.

All this is unfolding at a time when the main parties no longer talk of justice for the Bargari sacrilege, or Behal Kalan police firing cases. AAP rode these issues to rock the Congress boat ahead of 2022 assembly polls.

Punjab votes on June 1 (13 seats)

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

He in whom it is the Self-Being that has become all existences that are Becomings, for he has the perfect knowledge, how shall he be deluded, whence shall he have grief who sees everywhere oneness.

Isha Upanishad

Consciousness Is Brain's User-Illusion Of Itself

Pranav Khullar

The Cartesian notion of consciousness and the relation between the body and mind has been at the heart of modern Western thought, with Descartes positing consciousness as the one undeniable and certain fact of existence. Modern scientific propositions of a unified field theory further dissolved the distance between the observer and the observed, proposing an indivisible consciousness running through mind-body, space-time, and energy-matter.

Daniel Dennett challenged this Cartesian concept. He lays down a purely materialistic physical paradigm of consciousness through a dissection of the physical human brain and mental phenomena. In laying down this model of consciousness, *heterophenomenology*, as he calls it, where a scientific methodology alone is applied to

studying consciousness, Dennett argues against a Cartesian central point where conscious experience occurs. Instead, he posits a 'multiple drafts' model of consciousness, in which consciousness arises from the interplay of several physical and cognitive processes in the brain.

Viewing the mind in terms of information processing, Dennett compares consciousness to the user interface of a computer. Dennett's computer-interface model of consciousness sees all states of awareness and emotions as memory imprints brought about by physical processes, just as one brings alive the icons on the computers from its intricate software circuitry. Overturning Descartes' idea of an immaterial soul or mind, Dennett views the human mind and consciousness as a

brain-computer operating a series of algorithmic permutations.

He contends that the human brain's billion neurons are warring with each other for influence over our brain's circuitry, with the 'winner neurons' influencing our perceptions and actions. The contents of our consciousness are an edit of the real world, just the 'winner-neurons' setting the narrative out of countless innumerable possibilities. This conscious experience is just an offshoot of the 'winner-neurons' being imprinted into memory.

He then contends that all humans end up experiencing *user-illusion*: Just as the visual metaphor of a desktop computer creates the illusion of a simplified version of computing but masks the underlying complexity of the computer, our individual conscious

experience, too, is similarly a simplification of the complex reality. While this allows us to act normally in the world, it is 'the brain's user-illusion of itself'. The subject's view is no longer taken as authoritative or accurate since that view only describes things as they seem to the subject.

This notion of consciousness as an illusion arises from his larger philosophical conviction in the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection, which he contended accounts for all dimensions of human existence and behaviour. One does not need a personal God, 'an intelligent designer', or an immaterial soul.

In upholding this Darwinian idea that all creatures, including human beings, were created by a series of undesigned and unintentional mutations, Dennett sees this 'Tree of Life' as an affirmation of the 'magnificence of creation'.



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Dera chiefs' acquittal

CBI must explain why 'open & shut' case fell flat

THE acquittal of Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh and four others in the Ranjit Singh murder case is a major embarrassment to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). Pronouncing its verdict, the Punjab and Haryana High Court observed that the investigating officers carried out a 'tainted and sketchy' probe and collected evidence that was unworthy of credence. Ram Rahim and the others had been convicted in this case by a special CBI court in Panchkula in October 2021, four years after he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for raping two of his disciples.

Ranjit Singh, a former manager and follower of the Sirsa-headquartered sect, was shot dead at Khanpur Kolian village in Kurukshetra in July 2002. The apparent reason behind the killing was his suspected role in the circulation of an anonymous letter, which purportedly said that women were being sexually exploited by Ram Rahim on the dera premises. Sirsa-based journalist Ram Chander Chhatrapati had published the letter in his Hindi-language newspaper, *Poora Sach* (The Whole Truth). He was killed by gunmen months later in 2002. Ram Rahim was convicted for the murder and sentenced to life imprisonment by a special CBI court in January 2019.

Against this backdrop, it is lamentable that the CBI's probe into the Ranjit Singh case failed to withstand the high court's scrutiny. The HC has pointed out multiple lapses: the car allegedly used in the crime was never found; even though three prosecution witnesses stated that all four assailants were armed, no weapon was recovered by CBI sleuths. The court has also flagged the pitfalls of conducting an investigation influenced by the 'glare of media publicity'. Now it's back to the drawing board for the premier probe agency, whose credibility has come under a cloud. The CBI needs to explain why a seemingly open-and-shut case fell flat and also hold erring officers accountable.

Sharif's admission

A chance to reset Indo-Pak relations?

FORMER Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's candid admission that his country violated the 1999 Lahore Declaration marks a significant moment in the history of India-Pakistan relations. Twenty-five years on, Sharif's apparent reference to the Kargil War has turned the spotlight on the controversial saga. Speaking at a meeting of the PML-N general council after being sworn in as its president on Tuesday, he acknowledged Pakistan's role in undermining the peace initiative that he and then Indian PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee had championed. The Lahore Declaration, signed on February 21, 1999, helped foster a vision of peace and stability. However, this hope proved short-lived. The Kargil War, initiated by Pakistani incursion into Indian territory a few months later, shattered the nascent trust.

Sharif's return to political prominence and his willingness to own up to past mistakes offer a glimmer of hope. He is prodding Pakistan to reassess its approach to India, raising a significant question: Can Sharif's leadership turn introspection into a renewed effort for peace?

Sharif's confession is significant in the broader geopolitical context, given the current state of India-Pakistan relations. Since the 2019 Pulwama attack, diplomatic ties have been severely strained, with both nations downgrading their missions. For a region beset with volatility, Sharif's remarks open a window for reflection and reconciliation. This development should spur the two neighbours to rise above historical animosities and revisit their diplomatic strategies. It is imperative that they build on this opportunity, however tenuous, to explore avenues for dialogue. It is a chance to redefine their relationship not by the missteps of the past, but by the possibility of peaceful coexistence in future.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, MAY 30, 1924

Government and Lee Commission's report

IF the Government of India had either logic or the gift of humour among its many accomplishments, it is difficult to see how it could talk grandiloquently of the necessity of immediately "considering the Lee Commission's report". It has been stated again and again, and the statement has never yet been refuted, that the Commission was not appointed by the government but was virtually appointed over its head. But whether this was so or not, it is at least undeniable that things have happened since the appointment of this Commission which have made any report it could possibly submit, and certainly the report it has actually submitted, literally obsolete. The country, through the mouth of its accredited representatives in the Legislature, has asked for an inquiry into the whole question of the Reforms through a Round Table Conference with a view to the early establishment of responsible government. The Government of India, while rejecting the idea of an immediate overhauling of the reformed Constitution, has appointed a Committee to inquire into the working of the Reforms, while the Secretary of State has declared that after this inquiry has been held, "we will go on". In the face of these facts, to insist on the necessity of giving effect to the inadequate, halting and unsatisfactory recommendations of the Lee Commission is to betray at once a lack of the logical understanding and a complete want of all sense of humour. What is the value of the Secretary of State's assurance and the Government of India's own action if for the next 15 years, the question of Indianisation is to be regarded as closed?

India needs action plan to beat the heat

We must have a comprehensive policy response as advisories are not enough

DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

SEVERE heatwave conditions are prevailing in northwest and central India, the western Himalayan region and Maharashtra. The mercury crossed 50°C in Haryana's Sirsa and Rajasthan's Churu on Tuesday. Most parts of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi-NCR are experiencing day-time temperatures above 45°C.

Hospitals are reporting a rise in heat-related illnesses in many states, with some regions also reporting deaths due to heatstroke. Film star Shah Rukh Khan was admitted to an Ahmedabad hospital after he fell ill due to the heat, making it a subject of social media chatter. Besides obvious health impacts, extreme heat is also beginning to hit workforce productivity in many sectors, thus adversely affecting the economy. Therefore, merely issuing advisories asking people to remain indoors and remain hydrated is not enough. We need a comprehensive policy response to heat — which is lacking at present.

To its credit, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has been doing a good job with its heat-related forecasts and warnings. On March 1, it released its outlook for seasonal temperatures from March to May, forecasting above-normal temperatures in most parts of the country. The outlook was updated on April 1, giving greater details of the regions likely to experience above-normal temperatures up to June. It warned that "prolonged periods of extreme heat can lead to dehydration and strain infrastructure such as power grids and transportation systems. To address



SCORCHER: Heat islands develop in cities due to factors such as a lack of vegetation and water bodies. REUTERS

these challenges, it is imperative for the authorities to take proactive measures." Another agency, the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) — which runs the National Programme for Climate Change and Human Health — did its part. It issued an advisory for state health departments on the heatwave.

The NCDC advisory had a section called 'Heat-related illnesses (HRI) — focused mass gathering/sporting event preparedness.' The current summer season has coincided with two major country-wide events — the Indian Premier League (IPL), which started on March 22 and ended on May 26; and the polling for the seven-phase Lok Sabha elections (April 19 to June 1). The voter turnout in regions experiencing extreme heat was lower than expected. In some instances, candidates on the campaign trail fainted due to the extreme heat. While most of the IPL matches were held in the evening, fans usually started gathering in stadia in the afternoon, when the day temperature peaked, and players had their practice sessions during the day. Like the advisories for mass

Looking at extreme heat as something that only the IMD or the health sector needs to handle is not going to help.

gathering events, cities are also supposed to develop and implement heat action plans. Such plans should focus on building awareness of the health risks of heatwaves and heat-related deaths and illnesses, and getting the health system ready to handle heat-related illnesses. All government agencies concerned should coordinate their actions to alert people about predicted extreme temperatures and take measures to reduce heat exposure and promote adaptive measures. Shaded areas and shelters should be developed and the working hours of people engaged in physical labour in the open should be adjusted to avoid exposure to extreme temperatures.

As with the guidelines on mass gatherings, the directive from the central government exists on heat action plans but not many cities and states have developed such plans. This is despite evidence that the action plan implemented in Ahmedabad since 2013 has resulted in a reduction in mortality associated with extreme heat. Telangana and Odisha have also developed heat action plans, but the impact of such plans depends on how effectively they are implemented.

It has also emerged that warming in cities depends on local factors such as the density of population, concentration of concrete structure, tree cover, etc. For several years, scientists have been talking of the 'urban heat island' effect to explain greater warming in a particular region of a city than its surroundings. Such heat islands develop in cities due to many factors — the lack of vegetation and water bodies, local industrial activity, dense infrastructure that traps heat and restricts airflow, and release of hot air from large air conditioning systems. In Delhi, for instance, the night temperature in Sitaram Bazar, Connaught Place and Bhikaji Cama

Place is several notches higher than surrounding areas, turning them into heat islands.

A recent study by researchers from IIT-Bhubaneswar, based on data from 141 Indian cities, has reported that the warming experienced in the city is almost double that experienced across the entire Indian landmass. Cities in the northwestern, northeastern and southern regions have seen a more pronounced increase in the night-time land surface temperature than cities in other parts of the country. Studies at IIT-Gandhinagar had warned that the urban heat island effect, driven by rapid urbanisation, could worsen extreme heat conditions in Indian cities.

There is enough evidence for government agencies to initiate action to combat the effects of heat. Given that night-time heating is more significant during heatwaves, measures like passive cooling (through ventilation, shading, insulation and reflective surfaces) should be used to bring down indoor temperatures. Building codes should promote materials that absorb less heat and are sustainable so that the amount of heating caused by stored heat can be reduced. The presence of water bodies and vegetation is also helpful in reducing additional night-time heating. Heat action plans suggest 'cool roofs' for low-income houses to reduce indoor temperatures.

We need public policies that promote coordinated action to design and implement such heat adaptation methods. These policies have to be developed across sectors — health, urban planning, environment, transport, education, labour, infrastructure, construction, finance and so on. For implementation, technical and financial support should be provided to municipal corporations and local bodies. The involvement of the scientific community, local communities and civil society is also critical. Looking at extreme heat as something that only the IMD or the health sector needs to handle is not going to help.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We are living through climate collapse in real time. — António Guterres

The grand dance of democracy

CV SUKUMARAN

ELECTIONS are called the 'dance of democracy'. Or is it the dance of politicians? Unlike professional dancers who usually have harmonious relations with each other, political 'dancers' don't see eye to eye with their rivals. It is a dog-eat-dog world out there.

My first encounter with the 'dance of democracy' took place decades ago when I had not even attained the voting age. I was then in my early teens. It was the day of our village panchayat elections. A few classrooms in my school had been converted into polling booths. It was a special occasion for the institution as well as its staff and students.

The son of a local official, who happened to be my grandfather's cousin, was among the candidates. He was elected as a panchayat member and later became the head. I saw him coming out of the school gate, overwhelmed by his admirers' tumultuous welcome. He was profusely garlanded by well-wishers and taken out in a procession around the village.

Though the voting day was a holiday, I, along with my schoolmates, set off for the campus early in the morning, much before the start of polling, despite the elders' disapproval. We were overly enthusiastic about going to school that day, unlike other days, when we attended classes virtually under duress.

However, the police didn't allow us to be anywhere near the school. Lathi-wielding cops made sure of that. Besides, they had put up barricades to disallow the entry of non-voters. One of the boys picked up a stone and hurled it at a middle-aged policeman in a fit of anger before running away. But he missed his aim. The cop, who was absolutely seething, chased him. However, the boy was too quick for him. When the cop's rage consumed itself, he gave up the chase and resumed his duty.

A few days ago, as I walked to the nearby school — where my children had studied — to cast my vote, it dawned on me that I had come a long way from the panchayat elections held in my own school to the current Lok Sabha elections. Our democracy, too, has come a long way. Bertrand Russell wrote in an article, 'On Politicians': 'In most democratic countries, to call a man a politician is to say something derisive about him.' Will our politicians be able to give the lie to Russell?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

No room for complacency

Apropos of the editorial 'Bomb threats', a series of bomb threats has rocked India in recent weeks, prompting heightened security measures and emphasising the need for constant vigilance. While the threats turned out to be a case of false alarm, it is imperative that the authorities concerned do not let their guard down. India cannot afford to be complacent, given the evolving security landscape. The hoaxes have thrown the spotlight on the persistent threat of terrorist attacks in the country. Each threat, whether real or not, demands a swift and comprehensive response to safeguard lives and maintain law and order. The advances in technology have made it easier for antisocial elements to send out threats while staying anonymous, necessitating proactive countermeasures like increased surveillance and public awareness campaigns. Collaboration between government agencies, law enforcement bodies and the public is essential for an effective response.

DEVANJANA, BY MAIL

Tackle international cybercrimes

Refer to 'Bomb threats'; the fact that probe agencies have traced the IP address of the threatening emails sent to schools to Hungary is a matter of concern. It is alarming how miscreants and terrorists are misusing technology to cause widespread disruptions in India. Notably, anti-social elements have become increasingly reliant on the Internet to commit a wide range of crimes. The government must come up with effective measures to counter the frequent misuse of technology by criminals. Elaborate cybercrimes often leave the cops groping in the dark. Besides, since probe agencies lack jurisdiction on foreign soil, it is difficult for them to nail those behind such offences. The need of the hour is to develop an international framework to nab cybercriminals.

NISHANT PRASHAR, NURPUR

Lapses that cost lives

The death of several newborn children in a massive fire at a private neonatal hospital in Delhi is shocking. The hospital was operating with an expired licence and had no fire-

fighting arrangements in place. The facility did not even have the necessary clearance from the fire department. Besides, the medical personnel on duty were not qualified to provide care to newborns. Moreover, the hospital had been refilling oxygen from a bigger cylinder into a smaller one, even though it is illegal for a medical facility to have a refilling system since it could cause a fire. All these are huge criminal lapses that call for strict punishment.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Scourge of unexplained extensions

With reference to the article 'Army Chief's one-month extension sends out wrong signal'; the practice of granting such extensions, not just in the defence forces but in every field, needs to end. It has become common for the government to extend the tenure of position-holders or office-bearers for reasons that are never clearly spelt out. The back-to-back extensions granted to then Enforcement Directorate chief SK Mishra had kicked up a row. Such decisions have raised many eyebrows and prompted people to become suspicious. Such unexplained extensions send out the message that the next person in line is not competent enough to take over the reins. Not only do such moves dent the image of the institution, but they also hold off promotions.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

Recognition for Palestine

The decision of three European countries — Norway, Ireland and Spain — to recognise the state of Palestine is welcome. It will help the Palestine cause at this difficult juncture and mount pressure on an adamant Israel — which has shown utter disregard for international laws amid the humanitarian crisis caused by its war against Hamas — to agree to a ceasefire. The years-long efforts of Palestine to gain UN membership have not yet yielded the desired result, thanks to staunch opposition from the US. But the growing support for Palestine from all over the world will surely help amplify the voice of the war-torn country.

DVG SANKARA RAO, VIZIANAGARAM (AP)

No room for Delhi's statehood in a nation-state



ABHIJIT BHATTACHARYYA
SUPREME COURT ADVOCATE

DELHI, the capital of the world's most populous country, should not be made a state within the nation-state mandated by the Constitution. This is for the sake of India's unity, integrity, safety, security, sovereignty and fraternity with its diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Territorially, India has never been so big except during the reign of Emperor Ashoka and Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.

Amid the parliamentary elections, the sudden revival of the promise by politicians that "we will get full statehood for Delhi" is disturbing, to say the least. This is because there is already no dearth of allegations and counter-allegations hurled by political leaders across the country with the sole aim of wooing voters. The statehood demand is obviously aimed at enhancing their electoral prospects. This issue was also raised during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections to attract Delhi residents, who usually

don't have the time or the inclination to assess the adverse implications of such emotive 'non-issues'. It was in 2018 that the Supreme Court had dismissed a plea seeking full statehood for Delhi, saying that it had become infructuous in view of the Constitution Bench verdict which had held that Delhi could not be accorded the status of a state.

The present cacophony appears to echo the words of English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who described life as a "war of all against all". Should the sovereign state of India be pushed into anarchy over Delhi's full statehood?

In fact, no political party or ideologically motivated organisation (left, right or centre) should try to play with fire in the capital (or for that matter any province) of a country which is geographically among the largest in the world. The Constitution needs to be studied closely and its essence grasped, imbibed and implemented in letter and spirit, not in violation thereof.

Article 1(1) of the Constitution stipulates that "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States", while Article 239AA (inserted through the 69th Amendment Act, 1991) lays down that the "Union territory of Delhi shall be called the National Capital



VESTED INTERESTS: No political party should try to play with fire in the national capital. ISTOCK

Territory of Delhi", and the "administrator thereof shall be designated as the Lieutenant Governor". Article 239AA(2a) says: "There shall be a Legislative Assembly for the National Capital Territory". Nevertheless, the point is unambiguous: Delhi is the capital of India. It is a union territory (like other UTs) and not a state, though it has a Legislative Assembly.

Getting down to brass tacks, let's foresee the dangers inherent in raising the demand for Delhi's statehood. First and foremost,

the capital city belongs to India and every citizen thereof. If it's made a full-fledged state, can the next slogan of the "sons of the soil" be far behind? Thereafter, can anyone stop "reservation and quotas" and "Delhi for Delhiwals" movement? Will 'outsiders' then be deported or deprived of their property and jobs? Will entry be restricted and some sort of permit be required for visiting Delhi? Who will gain from such bizarre curbs? Where will Central Government officers and offices go? How will the two Delhis

The Delhi statehood demand is part of a sinister agenda which keeps cropping up during the elections to whip up parochial sentiments.

— the capital of India and the state within the nation-state — be differentiated? How will the police forces organise their roster of duties amid overlapping territorial jurisdiction? What will happen to the 200-plus foreign diplomatic missions operating from Delhi? Won't they end up in troubled waters created by the myopic polity? How will the majority of Indians living outside of Delhi accept the tumultuous transformation? Will India become a unique test case of the 21st century, a "country without a capital" or a partitioned capital of a partitioned nation-state, propped up by the political elites of the biggest democracy in the world?

The US Constitution grants the Congress the authority to admit new states into the Union. Thus, from 13 states in 1776, America today has expanded to 50 states jointly called the United States of America. Article 1(3)(c) of the Indian Constitution has ordained that "India shall comprise" of "such other territories as may be acquired". Thus, the number of states in India expanded with the acquisition of Goa (1961) and Sikkim (1975). It must nevertheless be remembered that unlike the US, where land expansion increased the states' count, it was caused in India by division, contrac-

tion and cutting up of states and UTs owing to a contradictory and divisive agenda and an inherent political inability to follow unity of purpose. In 1956, the country had 14 states and six UTs; today, there are 28 states and eight UTs.

The Delhi statehood demand is part of a sinister agenda which keeps cropping up during the elections to whip up parochial sentiments, leading to potential conflict and breach of peace and harmony.

It's, therefore, time to take the bull by the horns. If the state of Jammu and Kashmir can be bifurcated into two UTs, Delhi's legislature and the office of the Lieutenant Governor can also be abolished. India may revert to the two-tier system for Delhi: one headed by the Chief Commissioner reporting to the President's office through the Cabinet Secretary, and the other by the Mayor — elected every five years — who would be responsible for the maintenance and development of the Capital.

'Land' could come under the Urban Development Ministry, and the Police Commissioner report to the Chief Commissioner-Cabinet Secretary-President. The clamour for turning the UT into a state could lead to a more serious demand for a 'break-up' across India.

Geopolitical churn fails to impede India's trade surge



SUBIR ROY
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

A new Cold War began two years ago between Western powers and Russia when the latter invaded Ukraine, with China being a key player as well. Though India has been caught up in the conflict, it has managed to keep making economic gains despite being unable to distance itself from the global tensions.

Even though there has been a prolonged standoff between India and China in eastern Ladakh, the two countries continue doing a good bit of trading. Imports from China to India crossed over \$100 billion in FY24. It goes without saying that the merchandise that India procured from China made sound economic sense. Electronics, chemicals, machinery and plastics have spurred considerable economic growth.

But since most Indians hold a very negative view of China, the two countries remain as far away from

each other as possible. Since the US, France, Japan and Australia also have a bad perception of China, India has, along with the others, sought to discourage Chinese apps, investments and startups. India has also frowned upon the Dragon's Belt and Road Initiative, even as it has reached an agreement with Iran for developing the Chabahar port.

One of the most important decisions India has taken is to agree with the Western powers to join the 'China Plus One' bandwagon. Leading global companies that have elaborate manufacturing factories in China are being asked to take those units out of the country and into India and Southeast Asia. A global company, Apple, has decided to set up a manufacturing base in India to make iPhone 14, and Foxconn is manufacturing on its behalf.

However, a degree of caution is called for. Even as New Delhi is seeking to continue doing business with Beijing and bringing in huge imports, mostly through intermediaries, it is also attempting to create big manufacturing ventures that are largely self-reliant and able to export across the world. There is now an attempt to make a success of production-



PRIORITIES: Even though there has been a prolonged standoff between India and China in eastern Ladakh, the two countries continue doing a good bit of trading. ISTOCK

linked incentive (PLI) schemes that allow subsidies to go in for large production so that, at the end of the day, major production units become globally competitive.

This is part of the need for India to become self-reliant or *atmanirbhar*. But PLI units have not made much progress over the years. So, the feeling is that such units will not become robust globally. Hence, there is a need to identify industries to boost, not who their pro-

A different kind of Cold War is on. India freely does business with Russia and China, despite being clearly aligned with Western powers.

ducers should be. Manufacturing units, small or large, should be allowed to survive — and if they are not good enough, perish. Manufacturing, thus, will do its own thing instead of trying to find large winners.

Now, we need to take up a key point — the conflicting nature of the actions of the US and India over business with Russia. The US has used sanctions to make it difficult for Russia to trade with much of the rest of the world. But even as India is

aligned with Western diplomatic aims, it continues to heavily import oil from Russia, managing different ways to pay for the oil without using dollars from the main financial centres. Not just India, north European nations also continue to import gas from Russia, notwithstanding the strict sanctions that seek to rein in Russian exports.

India defies the US by continuing to trade with countries like China and Russia. The bilateral trade between India and the US was estimated to be \$118.28 billion in 2023-24. Additionally, Washington was the top trading partner of New Delhi during 2021-22 and 2022-23. Indian IT companies have played a key role in earning dollars from the West. But the US authorities are trying to hike H-1B visa rates so that there are fewer immigrants from India and the locals have more jobs. But Indian IT companies are still sending engineers to the US, despite having to bear the sky-high visa expenses. So, though New Delhi and Washington keep quarrelling, they continue to profit off each other.

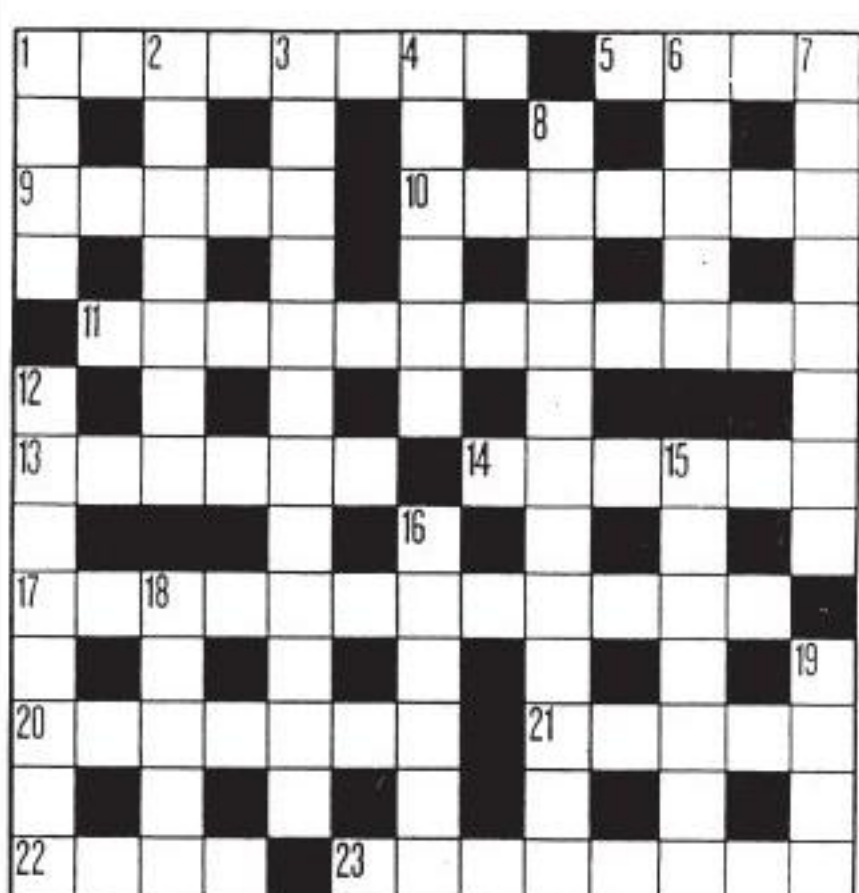
As a Cold War of sorts is sweeping the world, it is impossible not to recall how the original Cold War played out when commu-

nations barely spoke to each other and stopped just short of going to war (not counting some proxy wars). The Cold War lasted over four decades, ending when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. All said and done, that Cold War was marked by a little more integrity. In today's Cold War, economic interests are easily allowed to prevail.

In the post-1945 Cold War, India swore by non-alignment and depended on the Soviet Union to get steel and fertiliser factories. Then PM Jawaharlal Nehru befriended Cuban leader Fidel Castro, who was an open enemy of the US. Indira Gandhi, too, went along with Castro, but eventually had to beg then US President Lyndon Johnson for wheat to stave off a famine.

Today, a different kind of Cold War is on. India freely does business with Russia and China, despite being clearly aligned with Western powers. There is no integrity in politics or geopolitics. And India makes money wherever it can. Just recently, the US read India the riot act over the latter's engagement with Iran with regard to the Chabahar port. But Washington stopped short of slapping sanctions on New Delhi. This reflects India's growing economic heft.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Adventurous prank (8)
- 5 Wild doglike animal (4)
- 9 Serious immediate danger (5)
- 10 Take cover (7)
- 11 Brilliant well-timed act (12)
- 13 Expression of praise (6)
- 14 Spring back (6)
- 17 Dismantle (4,2,6)
- 20 Personal vanity (7)
- 21 Unattached (5)
- 22 Positive clue (4)
- 23 Artificially induced sleep (8)

DOWN

- 1 Catch sight of (4)
- 2 Panacea (4-3)
- 3 Cooperate (4,8)
- 4 Wilderness (6)
- 6 Surpass (5)
- 7 Hitherto (8)
- 8 Put finishing touch to (3,3,4,2)
- 12 Perpendicular (8)
- 15 Oppressive (7)
- 16 Indifference (6)
- 18 East African country (5)
- 19 Smaller amount (4)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Cast about, 8 Horde, 9 Warrior, 10 Toss-up, 11 Strain, 12 Interest, 15 Toboggan, 18 Energy, 20 Outcry, 21 Topical, 22 Chile, 23 Trenchant.

Down: 2 Adapt, 3 Threat, 4 Browning, 5 Throne, 6 Prosper, 7 Keep at bay, 11 Soft touch, 13 Tone down, 14 Abstain, 16 Garret, 17 Zenith, 19 Grain.

SU DO KU

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

HARD

FORECAST

CITY	THURSDAY		19-18 HRS
	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	45	28	
New Delhi	45	30	
Amritsar	47	26	
Bathinda	49	27	
Jalandhar	45	27	
Ludhiana	47	25	
Bhiwani	48	29	
Hisar	48	28	
Sirsa	49	31	
Dharamsala	37	20	
Manali	29	14	
Shimla	31	21	
Srinagar	31	16	
Jammu	44	25	
Kargil	27	06	
Leh	22	06	
Dehradun	39	26	
Mussoorie	29	22	

TEMPERATURE IN °C

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

- MAY 30TH 2024, THURSDAY**
- Shaka Samvat 1946
 - Jyeshtha Shaka 9
 - Jyeshtha Parvishite 17
 - Hijri 1445
 - Krishna Paksha Tithi 7, up to 11.44 am
 - Vaidhriti Yoga up to 8.53 pm
 - Dhanishtha Nakshatra up to 7.31 am
 - Moon in Aquarius sign