



Culture and society

Court verdict on citizenship law for Assam helps avoid fresh problems

In upholding Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, a provision introduced in 1985 to give effect to the core feature of the Assam Accord, the Supreme Court of India has helped preserve the existing legal regime for determining citizenship and identification of foreigners in Assam. Striking it down would have had the undesirable consequence of turning the clock back on the process laid down in statutory provisions and rules for the purpose. In its 4:1 decision, the Court has rightly seen the provision in the light of historical developments. While on one hand, Section 6A conferred deemed citizenship on all those who entered Assam from areas in erstwhile East Pakistan before January 1, 1966, it created, on the other, a system of registration for those who immigrated from that day to March 25, 1971, the day Pakistan began Operation Searchlight, a military drive to suppress the Bengali nationalist movement. The latter category of people had to be ordinarily residing in Assam and declared to be a foreigner by a tribunal before they could apply for registration as citizens. However, they would be ineligible to be on the electoral rolls for 10 years from the date of detection. Section 6A, as the Chief Justice of India, D.Y. Chandrachud, says in his concurring opinion, was aimed at finding a middle ground between a humanitarian approach towards the immigrant population in Assam and ensuring that large-scale immigration does not result in the loss of the cultural, economic and political rights of the Assam people.

The majority has rejected the notion that the provision is unconstitutional on the ground that it treats Assam differently from the rest of the country. It has noted that the citizenship provisions in the Constitution referred to 'citizenship at the commencement of the Constitution' and Parliament was not deprived of the power to introduce provisions on citizenship for a different category of people from a different date. In his main opinion, speaking for himself and two other judges, Justice Surya Kant has acknowledged the petitioners' "demographic anxiety", but did not believe that the idea of fraternity in the Constitution was threatened by a mere change in demography. It is not a misplaced fear when he says accepting the argument that demographic change could lead to an erosion of the cultural rights of a section of society may open the floodgates for similar challenges to undermine inter-State migration in the guise of protecting indigenous culture. At a time when the exercise to finalise a National Register of Citizens for Assam is in limbo — 19 lakh people have been identified as non-citizens, but there have been no further developments — any decision invalidating Section 6A would have created fresh complications.

Allow for deliberation

Lack of a legislature, regional autonomy in Ladakh have led to current protests

When decisions are taken for constituents in a province without their explicit consent or their deliberation, there could be a blowback even if the constituents initially welcomed the changes with hope. Such is the case with the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status and its bifurcation into two Union Territories (UT), which includes the erstwhile constituent of Ladakh. While the discontent in the Kashmir Valley with both decisions is well documented, a Lokmit survey points to four-tenths of Jammu residents opposing the abrogation of special status and a larger majority seeking restoration of statehood. When Ladakh was hived off into a UT from the then unified State, the government justified this as reflecting a demand from residents of Ladakh — Leh in particular — who were concerned about the predominance of the Kashmir Valley and Jammu in its erstwhile legislature. Yet, five years on, the protests in Ladakh with the demand for statehood or the province's inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution — which has provisions regarding administration of tribal areas in some North-Eastern States — confirm the unpopularity of the decisions made by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government. While Ladakh is host to two Autonomous Hill Councils in Leh and Kargil, the absence of an empowered legislature in the UT, which has meant little say for local government in comparison to a larger writ for New Delhi, has given rise to these protests. The agitations, the one led by social activist Sonam Wangchuk in particular, with echoes in New Delhi, raise the question whether the Union government could have avoided the Machiavellian route of one-upmanship seen in 2019, which led to the current situation.

A larger question relates to how Ladakh has been viewed by New Delhi ever since 2019. Following Chinese incursions across the Line of Actual Control and recurring tensions in the region, Ladakh has largely been seen through a security lens. Local concerns related to livelihoods, environmental issues such as water scarcity, waste management and pollution and civic issues such as access to land for pastoral communities remain relatively unaddressed in the administrative scheme. The absence of a legislature in the newly formed UT is a key reason why residents seem agitated about the lack of deliberation or avenues to register their concerns. It goes without saying that the Union Government must find a way to meet the legitimate demands of Ladakh and grant it statehood. More importantly, the discontent also highlights the importance of preserving India's polished system of "asymmetric federalism" that has purposefully addressed grievances,

An approaching milestone in constitutional governance

November 26 this year will mark the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of India. It is a milestone that needs to be celebrated by every stakeholder of Indian democracy. Constitutional governance in India is not merely a facet of the laws, rules and regulations that govern the establishment and the evolution of democratic institutions. It is also about permeating a deep sense of constitutional culture that has captured the collective consciousness of Indians across different cultures, faiths and beliefs.

Respect for institutions, power transition
As we move towards celebrating this Constitution Day, it is an opportune time to identify the core constitutional values that have shaped the constitutional culture of India. These five values have also withstood the test of time.

First, people's respect for democratic institutions. The Constitution of India was adopted on November 26, 1949, a time when life expectancy in India was around 32 years. Today, it has progressed to around 70 years. This extraordinary improvement in the standards of living and the quality of life has contributed in a significant manner for the ordinary Indian to respect the role and the contribution of democratic institutions. The social and economic development of India is an example of the progressive implementation of public policy over the last several decades. There is a need for a nuanced understanding on why Indians continue to participate in such large and significant numbers in every election — local, State or national — notwithstanding the fact that they expect a better performance from their representatives. Since the first elections in 1951-52, we have consistently witnessed nearly 60% of Indians participating in elections including in the 2024 general election where there was a 65.79% voter turnout. The respect for democracy and faith in democratic institutions in India is a core constitutional value that has withstood the test of time.

Second, the smooth transition of elected governments. The seven decades have seen numerous elections across States and at the national level. India has seen elected representatives representing different political parties, with varying degrees of strength and presence, within a State and/or at a pan-India level. We have also seen political leaders of different ideological persuasions winning elections and holding positions of power and responsibility in the States and at the Centre. But if there is one thing that is unique and distinctive about India's democratic traditions, it is the deep commitment every political party attaches to the



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idea of smooth transitions of power at the end of elections. While elections are fought with high-voltage campaigns and at times, even divisive narratives, the electoral results are almost always a humbling experience — it is the people of India who win each election without any exception. The Indian electorate has, time and again, demonstrated to the world that its understanding of problems and challenges will shape our decisions relating to elections. The people of India have imbibed this core constitutional value of participating in elections and enabling the smooth transition of power from one government to the other.

Upholding rights

Third, protection of rights and freedoms through courts. The Constitution is very forthright in recognising the highest degree of importance being attached to the fundamental rights and the courts, which are institutions created under the Constitution to protect the rights of people. It is even more remarkable that the framers of the Constitution were people associated with the freedom movement and responsible for building the foundations of the Indian Republic. They struggled to fight against colonialism to help achieve India's freedom. While drafting the provisions relating to fundamental rights, the members of the Constituent Assembly were mindful of the power of the mighty state and its instrumentalities. They could have tilted towards the idea of a benevolent state, especially when almost the entire first Cabinet had people who were part of the freedom movement. However, their deep scepticism of the state apparatus and the fervent commitment towards protecting individual rights and freedoms reflected a far-sighted vision on their part. This vision of recognising the role of the state, while being conscious of the fact that rights and freedoms are paramount, is a core constitutional value that has only been strengthened over the years.

Fourth, federalism as a facet of constitutional governance. The framers of the Constitution were mindful of the extraordinary diversity of the country, including its linguistic diversity and other forms of pluralism deeply embedded in our civic and political culture. The history and the tradition of every State of India also meant that they were conscious of protecting the unique identity, tradition and culture of the States and the people while forging a collective national identity. They created different forms of autonomy and special privileges for different States keeping in mind their unique histories and cultures. To efficaciously ameliorate the disparities that are prevalent among the people in certain regions of the nation, the Indian Constitution delineates a paradigm of special

dispensations, furthering the agenda of equity and inclusivity.

Over the last seven decades, the idea of federalism has further deepened at least at two levels: first, the rise of State-level political parties across India and their own contribution to the development of national political consciousness. This has, on several occasions, led to strong State parties contributing to the development of coalition governments in the States and at the Centre. Second, the idea of federalism has also led to the passing of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which led to the establishment of panchayati raj institutions and *ngarpalikas*.

The part played by media, civil society

Fifth, the role of the media and civil society in instilling faith in democracy. Much has been said and written about the Indian media. The Indian media is a diverse and heterogeneous institution with views and perspectives that are generated across India in different languages. Further, the transition of print media to broadcast and further innovations in media and technology have democratised access to information and indeed the role of media. While there are fundamental challenges relating to the economic model of governance of media institutions, it is fair to say that media and civil society have contributed to the instilling of faith in Indian democracy. While we need to be critical of the challenges of the autonomy and the independence of media, it is equally important to recognise the values of transparency that have been part of the media culture. In the cacophony of an information explosion through various forms of media and the medium of communication, the Indian electorate has been enlightened to develop an informed degree of understanding of the role of the media and civil society.

We have every reason to celebrate 75 years of constitutional governance.

After Independence, the last British commander in chief of the Indian Army, General Claude Auchinleck had observed, "The Sikhs may try to set up a separate region. I think they probably will and that will be only a start of a general decentralization and break-up of the idea that India is a country, whereas it is a subcontinent as varied as Europe. The Punjab is as different from a Madras as a Scot is from an Italian. The British tried to consolidate it but achieved nothing permanent. No one can make a nation out of a continent of many nations."

We proved many people wrong in not only forging a national identity of a nation that is built on constitutional ideals but we have also made the Constitution an instrument of galvanising social conscience and political consciousness.

India has every reason to celebrate 75 years of constitutional governance

The case for a nature restoration law in India

The degradation of natural ecosystems is an urgent global issue, and India, with its vast geographical and ecological diversity, is no exception. With almost 30% of its total geographical area having land degradation, the need for India to adopt a comprehensive nature restoration law is more acute. The Nature Restoration Law (NRL), which was enacted by the European Union (EU), is an inspiring model from which India can draw points to tackle its growing environmental crises.

The NRL, adopted by the EU's Environmental Council on June 17, 2024, is a groundbreaking piece of legislation that aims to restore the health of Europe's ecosystems.

The regulation was endorsed by a majority of EU member-states, representing 66.07% of the EU population, marking a milestone in global environmental governance. The law mandates that at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas must be restored by 2030, with the goal of having all ecosystems in need of restoration fully restored by 2050.

The NRL is part of the EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and the European Green Deal, and it seeks to reverse the alarming trend of biodiversity loss as over 80% of Europe's habitats are in poor condition. It focuses on a broad range of ecosystems, from forests and agricultural lands to rivers and urban spaces, implementing specific measures such as the restoration of 25,000 kilometres of rivers into free-flowing rivers and the planting of three billion additional trees by 2030.

The environmental, economic case for India
India is grappling with similar, if not more severe, environmental challenges. According to the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)'s Desertification and Land Degradation Atlas, nearly 97.85 million hectares (29.7%) of India's total geographical area underwent land



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The law enacted by the European Union recently is a model worth following

degradation in 2018-19, a sharp increase from 94.53 million hectares in 2003-05.

Desertification, in particular, is a growing concern, with 83.69 million hectares affected in 2018-19. The report highlights that land degradation is prevalent in key States such as Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Rajasthan, which together form 23.79% of India's desertified land area.

India has already made considerable strides in addressing these issues through the successful implementation of the Green India Mission, the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana, the Integrated Watershed Management Programme (which is the second-largest watershed programme in the world) and the National Afforestation Programme. However, the scale of the problem demands a more comprehensive approach. Just as the EU's NRL sets legally binding targets for ecosystem restoration, India needs such a nature restoration law that mandates the restoration of its degraded landscapes, ensuring the long-term sustainability of its ecosystems.

What a law in India could look like

A Nature Restoration Law in India, inspired by the EU's model, could include the following.

First in the list is restoration targets. India should aim to restore 20% of its degraded land by 2030, with a goal of restoring all ecosystems by 2050. This includes forests, wetlands, rivers, agricultural lands, and urban green spaces.

Second is wetland restoration. While wetlands are less common in India, critical wetlands such as the Sundarbans and Chilika Lake support biodiversity and carbon sequestration. A law could target restoring 30% of degraded wetlands by 2030.

Third is biodiversity in agriculture. Agriculture dominates India's landscape. Promoting agroforestry and sustainable practices could

restore farmlands. Indicators such as the butterfly or bird index used in the EU, could track progress.

Fourth is river restoration. India could focus on restoring free-flowing rivers, beginning with major rivers such as the Ganga and Yamuna, addressing pollution and obstructions.

Fifth is urban green spaces. To combat urban degradation, India should ensure no net loss of green spaces, promoting urban forests in cities such as Bengaluru and Delhi, which face heat islands and declining air quality.

Economic and social benefits of restoration

The benefits of such a law would extend beyond environmental restoration. According to the World Economic Forum, nature restoration could globally generate economic returns of up to \$10 trillion annually by 2030. In India, restoring degraded lands would enhance agricultural productivity, improve water security, and create millions of jobs, particularly in rural areas. The law could also help India meet its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Goal 15, which calls for the sustainable management of forests and combating desertification.

Restoring ecosystems can also mitigate the effects of climate change, which exacerbates land degradation. Degraded land loses its capacity to absorb carbon dioxide, further contributing to global warming. By restoring its ecosystems, India can enhance its carbon sinks and meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement.

The EU's Nature Restoration Law sets an important precedent for countries worldwide. Given the alarming levels of land degradation and biodiversity loss in India, such a law in India would not only help India restore its degraded ecosystems but also contribute to its socio-economic development and climate resilience. The clock is ticking, and the time to act is now.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India and bipolar world

The contrast pointed out in the Editorial page article (October 21) is factual but the writer has played down the role of other players and their international relationships. India's antiquated foreign policy gives ample room for China to manoeuvre not only in the greater Indo-Pacific but also in international trade. In spite of all the hype about 'making India a global

manufacturing hub' and 'Make in India', nothing material has happened to India's economy. The international multilateral environment is too confused with many minor groupings that endeavour to further relationships in smaller geographic areas. Every small pressure group has its role in both economic and political aspects. Needless to say, India needs to realign its foreign policy

by steering away from trade and economic dependence on any country or pressure group. **Unnikrishnan S. Menon,** Thrissur, Kerala

Constant differences

It is unfortunate that the Government's office in some States is becoming a controversial one, with frequent differences of opinion being aired publicly between the Governor and the Government (Editorial),

October 21). Governors wading into political waters ill behoves the high office that they hold. At the same time, political leaders need to observe decency and decorum as the Governor's cooperation is necessary for the smooth running of the government. **Kosaraju Chandramouli,** Hyderabad

Hypocrisy of the West

The ongoing diplomatic tussle between India,

Canada and the United States has exposed the glaring hypocrisy of the western nations. The West's moral posturing rings hollow when viewed through the lens of its own actions. How can India be accused of breaching U.S. and Canadian sovereignty when these countries violated international norms? The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, justified by fabricated claims of Saddam Hussein's

weapons of mass destruction, is a stark reminder. The chaos and devastation wrought in West Asia are a direct result of this intervention. Yet, when other nations assert their sovereignty, the West suddenly becomes the champion of human rights and democracy. Sovereignty and human rights are not selective ideals, applicable only when convenient. **Harsh Raj,** Ranchi, Jharkhand

AI's Cassandra moment

Nobel laureates are exceptional scientists but Geoffrey Hinton, the co-winner of this year's Nobel Prize for Physics, is particularly so. Few laureates have expressed regret over the consequences of their own prize-winning work; none before they won the coveted prize.



Jacob Koshy

Hinton's regrets

In May 2023, Hinton, a pioneer of deep learning, who has nurtured talented researchers in the computer science and Artificial Intelligence (AI) domain, quit his advisory role at Google. His reasons, according to The New York Times, were to be able to speak more freely about the "dangers" posed by AI. He said that a part of him "regrets his life's work". Developments in the ideas that he pioneered enable today's learning machines to drive cars, write news reports, produce deepfakes, and take aim at professions that seem invulnerable to automation.

From being dormant for decades, neural networks, in his view, had suddenly become "a new and better form of intelligence". He reckons that it would not be too much of a leap to expect AI systems to soon create their own "sub-goals" that prioritised their own expansion. Moreover, AI machines are able to almost instantly "teach" and transmit their entire knowledge to other connected machines — a feat that is slower and error-ridden in the animal brain. He expressed concern that AI could fall into the "wrong hands" and believes that Russian President Vladimir Putin would have little compunction in weaponising AI against Ukraine.

Whether or not experts saw AI as apocalyptic was a matter of being "optimistic or pessimistic," he told MIT Technology Review, but there was near-consensus among those who understood these developments that AI presented a form of learning superior to that in people.

Ilya Sutskever, who completed

his doctoral studies under Hinton, mirrored his mentor's concerns. Sutskever as the Chief Scientist of OpenAI, the developer of ChatGPT, voted to fire Sam Altman as the CEO of the company last November. The coup failed, and ChatGPT lives in Microsoft's stable. OpenAI's foundational goal was to build "safe and responsible AI" and Sutskever, according to media reports, felt that the company was prioritising "profitability" over this original mission. Coincidentally, on the day that the Physics Nobel was announced, Hinton said that he was "particularly proud of the fact that one of my students (Sutskever) fired Sam Altman".

Should Hinton's assessment of the dangers of AI carry greater weight than, say, those of businessman Elon Musk, who has also spoken of AI as being a "risk to humanity"? Can a scientific authority always be trusted upon to do the right thing?

A lesson from history

In August 1939, Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard, his former colleague and friend and a fellow Jewish émigré, wrote one of history's most consequential letters, to U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt. A year prior, Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassman, working in Nazi Germany, had demonstrated nuclear fission, or the breaking up of uranium nuclei. With the spectre of World War II looming in Europe, Szilard and Einstein were concerned that a "large mass of uranium" could "liberate considerable quantities of energy" and create the most powerful bombs ever known, which could prove catastrophic.

The letter was essentially a plea to Roosevelt to fund and thoroughly investigate uranium and atomic bomb research. Einstein, a Nobel laureate already acknowledged as the world's greatest scientist, brought considerable cachet with his words though his only connection to atomic research was in showing that mass and energy were

equivalent. This letter, however, became the impetus for the Manhattan Project, a scientific and military effort by the U.S. to develop atomic bombs. While the scientists had hope that the U.S.'s efforts would prevent Germany from developing and deploying the most lethal weapon, it was finally the U.S. that ended up dropping atomic bombs on Japan, killing at least 2,00,000 people and inflicting inter-generational harm. Germany gave up on its bomb efforts almost mid-way through the war, while the U.S. went on to build and test more destructive hydrogen bombs that prompted Russia to up the stakes with even more powerful ones.

Before the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima, Szilard had appealed to the U.S. to control nuclear technology and prevent a nuclear arms race. The world knows how that has panned out. Today, nine countries together possess at least 12,000 nuclear warheads, with 90% of these distributed between Russia and the U.S. For all its purported potential for good, nuclear power barely accounts for 10% of the world's electricity. Einstein deeply regretted his letter to Roosevelt and later said that it was the "one great mistake" of his life — his fears of German atomic armament proved unfounded and the country he had trusted to do better had instead chartered nuclear energy to the Atomic Age.

AI systems may not be plotting to incinerate humanity, but they are mushrooming at a time when globalisation has withered; and corporations, not countries, are poised to control technological advances and neural networks, and are also killing more jobs than creating new ones.

Hinton has called for the regulation of AI. If this leads to corporations monopolising AI, instead of facilitating an honest reckoning of its adverse consequences, it would be a redux of the Einsteinian mistake.

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A bitter battle for the bypolls

The results will have larger implications for not just parties, but also individual leaders

STATE OF PLAY

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Karnataka is set to witness another bitter electoral battle on November 13 between the ruling Congress and the Opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA), comprising the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Janata Dal (Secular), as by-elections are being held in three constituencies — Channarayana, Sandur, and Shiggaon. These three seats fell vacant following the victories of JDS president H.D. Kumaraswamy, E. Tukaram of the Congress, and former Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommal of the BJP, respectively, in the Lok Sabha elections in June.

The spotlight is particularly on Channarayana, a key part of the Vokkaliga heartland. Given the drubbing that the Congress received in the Old Mysore region during the Lok Sabha elections, Deputy Chief Minister and KPCC president D.K. Shivakumar is paying particular attention to the by-election in this constituency. The defeat of his brother, D.K. Suresh, in the Bengaluru Rural Lok Sabha constituency, of which the Channarayana Assembly constituency is a part, was a personal setback for him. The winner, C.N. Manjunath, a noted cardiologist and son-in-law of former Prime Minister and JDS supremo H.D. Deve Gowda and brother-in-law of Mr. Kumaraswamy, fought on a BJP ticket.

The families of Mr. Shivakumar and Mr. Gowda have been fighting for the leadership role of the community for years. While Mr. Shivakumar gained an upper hand after the Congress performed well in Vokkaliga-dominated constituencies

in the 2023 Assembly elections, the electoral outcomes were reversed to favour Mr. Kumaraswamy in the 2024 parliamentary elections. The clash of egos is turning Channarayana into a high-stakes, high-decibel battle between the two families.

A poor performance at Channarayana could be seen as yet another blow for Mr. Shivakumar, who has initiated a series of development projects in the region ahead of the bypolls. There is speculation that Mr. Suresh could be the Congress candidate. The JDS is expected to put up a strong fight to retain the seat, but is facing trouble after five-time MLA C.P. Yogeshwar quit as BJP M.C.P. There is fear therefore that he might contest as an independent or enter the fray from another party; this could put a spoke in the JDS's wheels and make the contest intriguing. Mr. Yogeshwar has turned down the JDS's offer to enter the fray on the regional party's ticket. The JDS is considering Nikhil Kumaraswamy, son of the Union Minister, as a possible candidate besides two other local leaders.

While the developments in Channarayana masked the electoral intensity in the other two constituencies — Shiggaon, and Sandur — recent developments have made Shiggaon more interesting. To scotch rumours, Mr. Bommal

had maintained that his son, Bharath Bommal, will not contest the seat; yet, just hours after he made this statement, the BJP announced Mr. Bharath as its candidate. This has led to rumblings on dynastic politics in the saffron party, an issue that has dogged the local unit ever since B.Y. Vijayendra, son of former Chief Minister, B.S. Yediyurappa, was elevated as BJP State president.

The Congress seems confident about winning the Sandur constituency though it has not announced a candidate, just like in the other two constituencies. It is expected to announce candidates in the next couple of days. The BJP has nominated its Scheduled Tribe (ST) Morcha president Bangaru Hanumanth for the Sandur (ST reserved) seat.

While ruling parties have tended to perform better in by-elections, these polls are being held at what is perhaps the most difficult phase of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's political career. He faces allegations of corruption as 14 seats were distributed by the Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA) to his wife in Mysuru; and inquiries by the Enforcement Directorate and Lokayukta. (The seats have been returned to MUDA now.) The political sluffage over corruption issues seems to have put the Chief Minister on the backfoot, triggering a churn within the Congress.

The BJP is also under pressure as the ruling dispensation has instituted inquiries into alleged corruption in various transactions during the previous regime, including crores worth of purchases during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also faces criticism for dynastic politics. This time, it is not just a battle of parties; the fortunes of these leaders will be tied to the outcome.

Maharashtra economically better off, but lags behind in social measures

The State is among the top 10 in per capita income; it ranks last among all the States in the share of wasted children

DATA POINT

Samreen Wani

Maharashtra is economically better off than many other States and it weathered the pandemic well. However, its performance on various social indicators, particularly those related to health and education, show a sobering trend.

With a per capita income of ₹2.8 lakh in 2023-24, over 50% more than the national average, Maharashtra is among the top 10 States on this measure. Five years ago, it was not in the top 10 list. The latest numbers therefore show an improvement in the State's economic performance. However, the improvement post-pandemic was not spurred by manufacturing. The contribution of manufacturing to the State's Gross State Value Added (GVA) is on a declining trend, from 15% in 2019-20 to 14.5% in 2023-24, despite the sector employing more workers than before (over 2 per centage points).

The State, which is set to vote in Assembly polls on November 20, spends a relatively small share of its budget on health. Its allocation for education has been reducing over recent years too. The social sector has been receiving lower allocations despite the State's own tax revenues improving and committed expenditures decreasing.

Compared with 2019-20, Maharashtra's per capita income rose by over 46% in 2023-24. The State's rank improved from 10 to 8 out of 25 States with data, in that period (Table 1).

tion — 16.4% in 2024-25 — the share has declined from 18.6% in 2019-20. Consequently, the State's rank also declined from the 5th to 7th position in this measure.

The State features among the bottom ranks across measures related to child health and women empowerment. In 2019-21, Maharashtra was ranked last (30th of 30 States) on the share of wasted children (lower weight-for-height). More than 25.6% children fell under this category in the State (Table 3). In 2005-06, the State had ranked 13th on this indicator, with just 16.5% children being identified as "wasted". In the share of stunted children, it ranked 22nd out of 30 States in 2019-21, again two positions lower than in 2005-06.

In the share of girls who ever attended school, the State ranks 19th of 30 States in 2019-21, with close to 80% of them having attended school. However, the State was among the top 10 States in terms of Infant Mortality Rate and health insurance coverage in 2019-21.

In 2019-20, over 66.7% of Maharashtra's revenue receipts were raised from the State's own tax revenues (GSTR), the highest among the 19 major States compared (Table 4). By 2024-25, the State's OTR share increased to over 68.7%, though Haryana and Karnataka surpassed it in this metric.

Maharashtra also has larger headroom for developmental spends compared to nine other major States. Its ratio of committed expenditures to revenue receipts is expected to decline slightly from 57.2% before the pandemic to 55.2% in 2024-25 (Table 5). Committed expenditures, which are interest payments, salaries, and pensions, are seen relative to revenue receipts to assess the availability of resources for development purposes.

The State is also expected to allocate 12.7% of its total expenditure for creating new infrastructure in 2024-25, considerably higher than the 9.6% it had allocated in 2019-20 (Table 6).

Maharashtra report card

The data was collected from the NFHS, the PLFS' Annual Reports, the PRS & MOSPI. Includes The Hindu's calculations



Table 1: Per capita income (in ₹)

Year	Maharashtra's value*	Maharashtra's rank
2023-24	2,77,603	8/25
2019-20	1,89,843	10/25

* Per Capita NSDP at current prices

Table 2: Maharashtra's spending on education and health as a share of total expenses

Parameter	2019-20	2024-25*
Spending on education	18.6%	16.4%
Rank on education spending	5/20	7/20
Spending on health	4.4%	4.6%
Rank on health spending	18/19	16/19

* Budget estimates

Table 3: Ranking across social indicators

Parameter	Maharashtra's value	Maharashtra's rank
Infant mortality rate		
2005-06	37	8/30
2019-21	23.2	9/30
Children under 5 years who are stunted (height-for-age) (%)		
2005-06	46.3	20/30
2019-21	35.2	22/30
Children under 5 years who are wasted (weight-for-height) (%)		
2005-06	16.5	13/30
2019-21	25.6	30/30
Households with any usual member covered under a health insurance (%)		
2005-06	7.1	23/30
2019-21	20	5/30
Female population aged 6 years and above who ever attended school (%)		
2005-06	70.3	22/30
2019-21	79.6	19/30

Table 4: State's own tax revenue in revenue receipts

Year	Maharashtra's value	Maharashtra's rank
2024-25 (estimates)	68.7%	3/19
2019-20 (Actuals)	66.7%	1/19

Table 5: Ratio of committed expenditure to revenue receipts

Year	Maharashtra's value	Maharashtra's rank
2024-25 (estimates)	55.2%	10/19
2019-20 (Actuals)	57.20%	10/19

Table 6: Capital outlay as a share of total expenditure

Year	Maharashtra's value	Maharashtra's rank
2024-25 (estimates)	12.7%	10/19
2019-20 (Actuals)	9.6%	13/19

Table 7: Manufacturing jobs as a share of total

Parameter	2019-20	2023-24
Manufacturing jobs as a share of total	10.3%	12.7%
Manufacturing's share in total GSDA	15.0%	14.5%

■ In Table 1, Telangana, Karnataka, Haryana, Tamil Nadu and Kerala had better per capita income than Maharashtra in 2023-24, among major States

■ In Tables 4, 5 and 6, the comparison was only carried out among major States. States in the northeast and smaller States such as Goa were not considered for analysis.

■ In Table 3, Union Territories were not considered for comparison

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO OCTOBER 22, 1974

Gold ornaments and silver bars seized

Jodhpur, Oct. 21: Twenty and a half kgs of gold ornaments and 115 kgs of silver bars were seized yesterday by the Central Excise and Income-tax officials in raids at Jalore, Palai and Deshnok.

Six kgs of gold ornaments were seized from the Jalore residence of the alleged smuggler Nainmal Punjaji, detained under the MISA. Five kgs of gold ornaments and 115 kgs of silver bars were seized from the residence of Nainmal Rikhabdas at Palai.

Nine-and-a-half kgs of gold ornaments were seized from the residence of Prakash Chand and Deepchand at Deshnok in Bikaner district. The officials have also seized some incriminating documents.

Bombay: Officers of the Anti-Corruption Bureau seized 144 packages of contraband textiles valued at Rs. 15 lakhs in two instalments in the Juhu area of North Bombay on Sunday, ACB sources reported.

A packet of emeralds, seized from a jeweller at the Bombay airport on August 29 last, has been officially valued at Rs. 13 lakhs, against a dealer's receipt for Rs. 2.50 lakhs shown by the jeweller at that time, according to income-tax authorities here.

The emeralds and Rs. 3.36 lakhs in cash were seized from the jeweller who, according to the tax authorities, told them that the emeralds were meant for a customer at Jaipur.

The authorities said to-day they had not been able to trace the jeweller at the address of a shop given by him.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 22, 1924

Cochin.

Cochin, Oct. 19: The British Cochin Municipality has arranged a series of Health lectures for the benefit of the townsfolk and the first of these was delivered the other day by Dr. P. Krishna Warrier, the subject being "Hookworm". The lecture was illustrated by the magic lantern pictures. Another lecture on "Cholera" was delivered yesterday at the Calvety Moplah School and this was also illustrated by magic lantern slides.

Cholera has broken out in certain parts of the town and some ten deaths are reported so far in Mattancherry. Both the Mattancherry and British Cochin Municipalities are taking preventive measures.

CACHE



GETTY IMAGES

How policies shape high-performance building standards and climate goals

Governments are trying to adopt high-performance buildings through policies and financing mechanisms that promote energy efficiency, resource management, and carbon neutrality. India has made significant progress through initiatives under its National Action Plan on Climate Change

Sandhya Patil

In response to the pressures of climate mitigation as well as adaptation, High-Performance Buildings (HPBs) are emerging as essential solutions in the construction sector. They address both urban and climate challenges since the built environment contributes to these issues and presents opportunities for change. HPBs are designed to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, minimise energy and water use, and cut operational costs using climate-adaptive designs. They also improve their occupants' well-being, making them attractive to both businesses and occupants.

Beyond environmental benefits, HPBs offer financial advantages like enhanced property value, lower utility bills, and access to carbon financing. Governments worldwide are trying to adopt HPBs through progressive policies and financing mechanisms that promote energy efficiency, resource management, and carbon neutrality. India is also beginning to align its policy frameworks and business strategies to support these structures.

Policies supporting energy efficiency
Energy efficiency is central to HPB design and drives sustainable construction practices. Many governments are actively promoting energy-efficient buildings as part of their climate strategies.

The European Union's 'Green Deal', which targets climate neutrality by 2050, mandates energy-efficient building designs and retrofits. Germany's *KfW* Bank offers low-interest loans for energy-efficient projects while Denmark's strict BR18 building codes provide

incentives for sustainable construction practices. In the U.S., programmes like Energy Star and the LEED certification encourage energy efficiency and offer tax credits for green-building initiatives.

The construction industry contributes about 39% of energy-related carbon dioxide emissions worldwide, and these policies suggest reducing energy consumption isn't just technically feasible: it could be financially viable, too, with the right incentives.

How is India supporting HPBs?

India has made significant progress in promoting energy-efficient buildings through initiatives under its National Action Plan on Climate Change. The Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBC), developed by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE), aims to reduce buildings' energy demands by up to 30%. The Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment (GRIHA) lists more than 3,000 registered projects focusing on sustainable practices and lowering carbon emissions. The Indian Green Building Council (IGBC) promotes energy-efficient designs, with more than 14,000 certified projects covering 12.5 billion sq. ft.

Hyderabad, Noida, and Pune also offer higher floor area ratios and other incentives for buildings that meet ECBC standards, leading to a noticeable increase in green registrations and thus significant energy savings. The BEE is targeting 30% of new buildings to achieve net-zero status by 2030, in line with the national commitment.

How do HPBs make financial sense?

As green technologies become more affordable, the initial cost difference between conventional buildings and

high-performance buildings is narrowing. HPBs deliver substantial energy savings and reduce emissions at little or no incremental costs compared to conventional buildings.

For example, Infosys successfully integrated energy-efficient designs into its campuses, using natural lighting, energy-efficient air conditioning, and smart performance verification. This reduced its energy consumption by up to 45%, resulting in significant cost savings. HPBs also improve indoor air quality and thermal comfort, contributing to employee well-being.

HPBs also command higher property values due to lower operating costs, smaller environmental footprint, and growing demand from environmentally conscious buyers and tenants. These properties benefit from enhanced asset valuation, driven by higher net operating incomes, lower vacancy rates, and longer lease durations. The financial benefits of energy efficiency translate to better capitalisation rates, which investors use to assess the value of a property relative to its income potential.

In India, commercial properties with green certifications like IGBC, GRIHA or LEED attract premium rents and have higher occupancy. Examples include ITC's Green Centre in Gurugram, the TCS Siruseri IT Park in Chennai, the Nirlon knowledge Park in Mumbai, and Embassy's commercial developments in Bengaluru.

How are HPBs financed?

Carbon financing supports HPBs by converting their carbon savings into financial value, easing the way for developers to secure funding. Carbon credits – tradable permits allowing

companies to offset their carbon emissions – play a key role in this process. Projects earn these credits by reducing emissions and/or removing carbon from the atmosphere.

In regions with carbon pricing, like the European Union and China, HPBs that improve energy efficiency and lower emissions can generate carbon credits. These carbon credits provide a significant financial incentive for developers to invest in sustainable building practices. However, to maximise the potential of these systems, it's important to strengthen the accounting practices and ensure better transparency in the monitoring, reporting, and verification of the credits.

Green bonds and climate-focused funds also offer ways to finance HPBs. In 2020 alone, green bonds worth \$269.5 billion were issued worldwide. Investors are increasingly interested in projects that align with sustainability goals. Global organisations like the World Bank and the Green Climate Fund also provide financial support for HPBs.

These financing mechanisms help offset the higher upfront costs of building HPBs, making them more affordable and promoting their wider use. By participating in carbon markets, trading energy and carbon savings, and securing green or climate funding, developers can make HPBs more financially viable while also contributing to global efforts to reduce carbon emissions.

Sandhya Patil is a sustainability expert with the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IHHS) and anchors technical assistance for ASSURE. The author does not have any financial interests vested with any company or organisation that would benefit from this article.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmaniam
Uppendran

"... and that should put an end to your problem."

"Temporarily, maybe. But I'm not interested in a band-aid solution."

"Band-aid solution? What does it mean?"

"A band-aid solution is not a permanent, but a temporary solution to a problem. Something that has been put together hastily."

"It's a stop-gap arrangement, you mean?"

"Yes, that's right. Our politicians are only interested in a band-aid solution to the water problem."

"That's understandable, isn't it? If they find a permanent solution to it, then people will stop going to them."

"But that doesn't..."

"Let's not talk about politicians. They have always been accused of being negligible of their duties."

"The word you're looking for is not 'negligible', but 'negligent'. When you say that something is 'negligible', it means that it is so small that it is not worth considering or worrying about. The profit that the company made last year was negligible."

"The errors that Sampras made in the final were negligible. How's that?"

"Very good. 'Negligent', on the other hand, means 'careless'. When you are negligent, you don't give enough attention to what you are doing or should be doing. Many parents accuse their children of being negligent of their duties."

"Can I say, the company collapsed because of the Chairman's negligence?"

"Yes, you can. And remember, in both 'negligible' and 'negligent', the stress is on the first syllable."

"And the 'i' in the second syllable of the two words is pronounced like the 'i' in words like 'fit', 'pit' and 'kit'."

"Right again."

"Now, shall we move on to..."

"Wait. Negligent has another meaning as well. It means 'pleasantly casual', 'careless in a pleasant way'."

"Pleasantly casual? How can a careless person be pleasantly casual?"

"Well, most careless people are very casual about whatever they do. If you say that somebody's way of dressing is negligent, it means he/she is very informally dressed and looks very relaxed. Here, 'negligent' has a good connotation."

"That's the way I dress."

"No, way. Here are some more examples. Ramu sat negligently on the wall smoking a cigarette."

"I didn't know that Ramu smoked."

"I was just giving an example, silly. Here's another one. Srikala conversed with negligent ease in French."

"That's not surprising. She lived in France for ten years."

"Let's discuss about something else."

"How many times do I have to tell you 'discuss' is not followed by the word 'about'."

"Sorry. Let's discuss something else."

"Remember, you can have a discussion about something, but you discuss something."

Published in *The Hindu* on September 28, 1993.

THE DAILY QUIZ

India-Canada relations are going through a difficult period at the moment. A quiz on the Indian diaspora in Canada and their contributions

Venkatraghavan, S

QUESTION 1

Which province in Canada has a deep historical connection with India due to Sikh immigration in the early 20th century? What is the name of the oldest Gurdwara established there by the Sikh community?

QUESTION 2

What was the name of the famous ship that in 1914 was carrying Indian passengers, mainly Sikhs, but was denied entry into Canada under restrictive immigration laws. How has this event been remembered in Canadian history?

QUESTION 3

Which Canadian Prime Minister,

known for his multicultural policies, introduced a system that allowed more immigrants from non-European countries, leading to a significant rise in Indian immigration to Canada during the 1970s?

QUESTION 4

The city of Surrey (BC) is home to a large Indo-Canadian community. The city hosts an annual event celebrating multiculturalism, where Indian food, music, and traditional dances are prominently featured, reflecting the blend of cultures in Canada. What is the name of this unique annual festival that has been going on from 2008?

QUESTION 5

Which Canadian MP, of Indian descent, is known for her role as Minister of National Defence, becoming the first woman and the first South Asian to hold this position in Canadian history?



Visual question: Identify this famous Indo-Canadian filmmaker who was nominated for an Academy Award for her film that depicted Indian cultural struggles. What was the name of the film that was part of her *Elements* trilogy?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. The father of Indian football. **Ans: Nagendra Prasad Sarbadhikari**

2. This club is regarded as the first football club in India. It was originally intended for this sport. **Ans: Calcutta FC; Rugby**

3. The Indian football team set out on its first known official international tour in this year to this country. **Ans: 1924; to Sri Lanka**

4. This is the first official international tournament that India participated in. **Ans: London Olympics in 1948**

5. Name the India footballer who scored one of the quickest goals in international football just 12 seconds after kick-off. **Ans: I.M. Vijayan**

6. This person was the first footballer to win a Padma award. **Ans: Gostha Pal**

Visual: Identify this defender. **Ans: V. P. Sathyan**

Early Birds: Tito Shiladitya/ Piyali Tulji Laksh Mundhra/ Varghese Joseph/ Godfrey Pereira

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

Word of the day

Shriveled: wither, as with a loss of moisture; decrease in size, range, or extent

Synonyms: shrink, wither

Usage: My courage shrivelled when I saw the task before me.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/shriveledpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ʃrɪvəl/

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

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of recipients of the Kerala social security pension

62 lakh. Kerala Finance Minister K. N. Balagopal said that these pensioners would receive ₹1,600 each. 5.88 lakh people receive an average of ₹300 as assistance from the central government. **PH**

Haryana farmers arrested for stubble-burning

14 Stubble-burning in Haryana and neighbouring Punjab is often blamed for the rise in pollution levels in Delhi, especially during the post-harvest season of October and November. **PH**

Online voter registrations rejected in MH's Tuljapur seat

6,090 When the administration scrutinised the applications received in Tuljapur, the applicants were not found residing in the village, an official said. **PH**

New arms package for Ukraine: U.S. defence secretary

400 in \$ million. U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin announced a new arms package for Ukraine during a visit to Kyiv, at a meeting with Volodymyr Zelensky. **AP/REUTERS**

The sales from Jan Aushadhi outlets in the month of October

1,000 in ₹ crore. Notably, it took the Jan Aushadhi outlets until December to reach these figures in 2023. **PH**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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On sanctions and shadow fleets

What are Flags of Convenience? How do corporations with large fleets obscure ownership and origin of cargo? Why has India been accused of hosting a shadow fleet? What are the different ways through which ships make sure they don't lose their insurance?

EXPLAINER

M. Kalyanaraman

The story so far:

While covering the Russia-Ukraine conflict, many western media outlets have used the term 'shadow fleet' to describe the tanker ships that carry Russian crude oil or oil products to other countries. The term conjures up images of pirate-like vessels and phantom owners trading in illegal, contraband substances. India has been painted as a host of a shadow fleet that is 'laundering' Russian crude.

How are sanctions implemented? When the U.S. sanctions a country, as is the case with Russia, it launches investigations into entities, companies and individuals who violate the sanctions. Their assets in the U.S. are seized, bank accounts accessible to the western banking system are frozen and, sometimes, criminal prosecutions are launched against them. U.S. sanctions against Russian oil mandate that Russia can only sell its crude oil at \$60 a barrel. Current market prices are at least \$15 more. This is to ensure Russia doesn't profit much from oil sales and use that to fund its war effort in Ukraine.

What is structure of global shipping?

The global shipping industry is highly diversified. Greeks own 20% of the global merchant shipping fleet with China now crossing Japan to become the second leading nation in terms of merchant shipping fleet ownership. Most ships are built and repaired in China, Japan and South Korea. Yet, marine insurance, ship finance as well as global shipping regulations revolve around the U.K. and rest of Europe. U.S. sanctions are sought to be enforced through these levers.

Each ship is associated with different stakeholders at various nations and locations. Although tracking systems



Full throttle: The crude oil tanker RN Polarisk near the port city of Nakhodka, Russia, in 2022. **REUTERS**

allow authorities to access previous ports of call, some companies do succeed in hiding the original source of their cargo. Ships are registered in particular nations called flag states as they fly that country's flag. Flag states were meant to indicate the origins of the ship.

To beat sanctions, ships often hop between flags. There are Flags of Convenience (FoCs), such as Panama and Liberia, which started out as tax avoidance entities, and to avoid too rigorous a scrutiny or inspection of a ship. FoCs obscure the ownership of ships. Then there are classification societies (class, in shipping parlance) that certify ship structures and machinery for safety of life at sea and marine pollution, facilitating insurance cover for these. An insurance type called Protection and Indemnity (P&I) covers loss of life and damage to property. These P&I insurance

firms form 'clubs' to pool the risk.

How do ships keep their insurance?

Turkey, a member of the NATO, has been found to be extensively trading in Russian oil. A Turkish-owned ship found to be trading in Russian oil at more than \$60 a barrel may lose its P&I club, since clubs are controlled from London and the U.S. has leverage there. However, the owner can divest the management of the vessel and contract with a European manager that has P&I cover. And the ship will be back in business with the same owner but with a new European manager.

Corporations with large fleets often set up shell companies that own just one or two ships. Such complex ownership structures hide the true identity of a ship and its owner. Yet, another phenomenon is registering the ships within jurisdictions that are not compliant with regulatory

agencies such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Eswatini, a country in southern Africa, is not a signatory to the IMO charter. It has therefore emerged as a FoC.

What is the accusation against India?

Soon after sanction enforcements, many Russian ships struck alliances with Indian firms. Many switched their base to Dubai where Indians have a presence in shipping. The Indian Register of Shipping (IRS), a classification society, did see an increase in the ships it was certifying, bolstering charges of Indian involvement in shadow fleets. Noting that it has been linked to Russian shipping entities, the IRS said its primary responsibility is to the safety of a vessel and that it will not be compromised. IRS reported that it has indeed been asked to provide safety-related classification services to a number of vessels by Dubai-based entities. These vessels were registered under the flag administrations of Liberia and Cyprus and none flew the Russian flag, the IRS reported.

In 2015, when Iran was sanctioned, some 160 ships, many with trade links to Iranian oil, switched their classification society to the Korean Register of Shipping - Korea is a U.S. ally. Sometimes renaming a vessel can help to erase association with sanctions.

Can U.S. sanctions be enforced?

Many agencies and shipping experts acknowledge that sanctions on Russian oil cannot be rigorously enforced because of its potential impact on world economy, the complex ways in which the shipping industry is structured, and because ownerships and origins of stakeholders are obscure and often based on voluntary disclosure.

More recently, the BBC reported that the U.K. had taken action only mild action against some 35 U.K. companies found to have violated the price cap set by sanctions. Industry voices there say that taking strong action would be bad for U.K. businesses.

THE GIST

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On Railways decision to shrink advance booking period

Has the Railways shortened the Advance Reservation Period before? How do longer booking windows give rise to frauds? Are these rules extended to foreign passengers as well?

Maitri Porecha

The story so far:

One could book railway tickets four months in advance for long journeys. Now passengers will only be able to book tickets on Indian Railways two months in advance, a circular released by the Railway Board earlier this month stated.

When will the Advance Reservation Period (ARP) be effective?

The circular states that the new ARP rules will kick in from November 1, 2024 onwards, and that the booking window for passengers to reserve their tickets will open 60 days in advance (excluding the actual day of journey). However, if a passenger has booked any tickets up to October 31 (under the earlier 120-day period rule), all those bookings will remain intact, and the passenger also has the facility to cancel those tickets at will. By shortening the reservation period to

60 days, the Railways has reversed its 16-year old policy of reserving tickets 120 days in advance, which had kicked in from May 1, 2008. Before this, from 1995 to 2007, the booking window was restricted to 60 days. Interestingly, between 1988 to 1993, Railways had experimented with shortening the advance booking window to as less as only 45 days. Before this, once between 1981 to 1985, the Railways had opened the ARP for a 90-day window.

Why was such a decision taken?

Railways officials observed that 120 days was too long a period for planning journeys, and that it led to a high amount of ticket cancellations. "Currently, up to 2% passengers who book their tickets end up cancelling them," a senior official stated. While allotting seats/berths, officials also observed that there was a wastage of seats/berths because of passengers who would not turn up for journeys and at the same time would not

bother to cancel their tickets. "4% to 5% passengers don't turn up (which is considered as no show)," the official further said. "Another trend Railways noticed is that between 88% to 90% rail reservations occur in the period of 60 days, hence it was thought prudent to reduce the ARP," another senior official told *The Hindu*.

Do longer booking windows increase frauds?

The rationale given by the officials to reduce ARP is that when passengers do not cancel their tickets and do not turn up for journeys, it opens up possibilities for fraud. "We observed frauds such as impersonation, railway officials taking money illegally to allot empty berths etc. With shortening reservation period this could be prevented," the official said.

Secondly, there is an immense challenge of curtailing touts that operate on the railway network. "When reservation periods are longer, there is a

greater chance that touts end up blocking a substantial tranche of tickets.

Shortening the period of ARP will encourage purchase of more tickets by genuine passengers," the official added.

Parallely, Railway officials state that the decision to either reduce or increase the ARP window is open for debate.

"There are two opposing camps that debate how to fix the ARP window. There is one camp in the Ministry that believes in opening up advance reservation for the entire year, and that passengers should be allowed to book and cancel tickets round the year during the period of 365 days. This camp believes that opening up the reservation window year-long will fetch railways revenues in advance. However this facility is currently only available for foreign tourists, who avail of a certain quota to plan their train journeys across India," the official added.

Which groups of passengers are exempt from ARP rule?

Apart from foreign tourists, the Union Railway Ministry had stated that there is no impact on General class tickets as they are purchased just before the journey. It has also stated that for certain trains like Taj Express and Gomti Express it was noticed that tickets are booked almost immediately by passengers who wish to travel in these sitting trains. "They are exempt from ARP rule as passengers who wish to travel in these trains book tickets almost immediately a day or two in advance," the first official added.

THE GIST

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Black holes in Webb data allay threat to cosmology's standard model

Using data from the Webb telescope, studies found the universe should have had massive galaxies sooner than believed. Their conclusion undermined the standard model of cosmology, which attempts to explain the universe's origins. But a new study may have saved the model

Shreejaya Karantha

Since NASA launched the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) almost three years ago, astronomers have been actively searching for clues about how galaxies grew in the early universe. This universe was a dark place: there is no light from this period to tell us how the first stars and galaxies formed, yet uncovering these processes could help answer key questions like the role of dark matter in the early universe.

So when astronomers recently pored through JWST, they were surprised to find monstrous structures when the universe was only a few hundred million years old, instead of infant galaxies.

The universe began with a Big Bang about 13.8 billion years ago as a hot, dense mixture of gases and subatomic particles. Over time, the universe expanded and cooled, allowing the particles to separate from the mixture and become independent clumps of matter. The gradual and continuous cooling of the universe eventually created larger structures such as stars, galaxies, and galaxy clusters.

According to the standard model of cosmology, which attempts to explain the universe's origins and evolution, the first stars formed around 100-200 million years after the Big Bang and the first galaxies within the first billion years.

But JWST was revealing massive, fully-developed galaxies, that too in greater numbers than expected, only around 400-650 million years after the Big Bang. This mismatch became a source of intrigue among researchers, who had to figure out what was wrong with their standard model.

Now, a study published on August 26 in the *Astrophysical Journal* by an international team led by Katherine Chworowsky and Steven Finkelstein at the University of Texas at Austin offers a promising explanation.

Deep into the universe

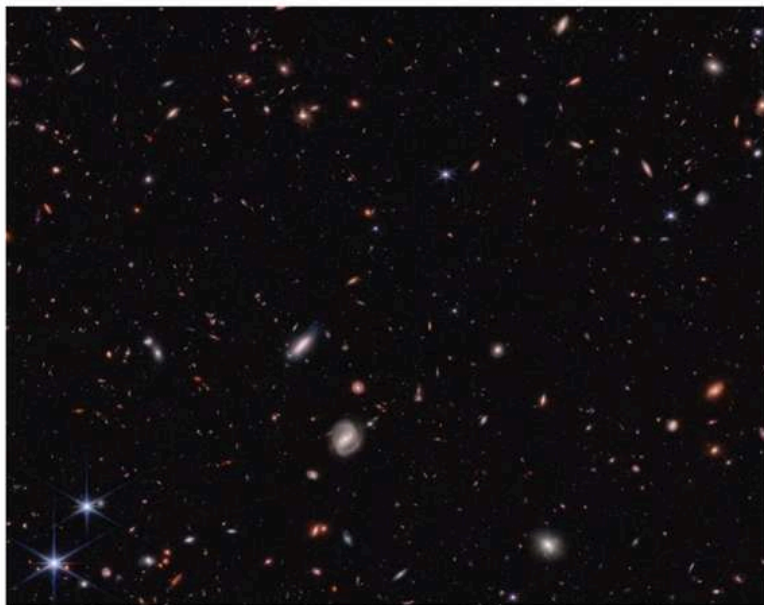
Distant galaxies are faint, and detecting them requires advanced telescopes, Prerana Biswas, a postdoctoral researcher at the Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bengaluru, explained. (She wasn't involved in the new study.)

This means, first, a telescope with a large primary mirror. The Hubble Space Telescope has a 2.4-m-wide primary mirror, while JWST's mirror is 6.5 m wide. Second, the telescope will have to be very sensitive, which relates to its ability to record data at different wavelengths. The Hubble operates in the optical, ultraviolet, and some infrared wavelengths, while JWST is specifically designed for infrared observations with a focus on studying the early universe. This is because visible and ultraviolet light from distant galaxies shifts to the infrared wavelengths as the universe expands.

In the new study, researchers analysed data from the JWST's Cosmic Evolution Early Release Science (CEERS) Survey, which Finkelstein leads. They focused on galaxies that existed when the universe was 650-1,500 million years old.

According to the team, one possible explanation for a larger number of massive galaxies in the early universe is that these galaxies manufactured stars more efficiently than the galaxies of today.

Biman Nath, a professor of astronomy



A small portion of the field observed by the James Webb Space Telescope filled with galaxies. The light from some of them has travelled for over 13 billion years to reach the telescope. JWST/NASA.

and astrophysics at the Raman Research Institute, Bengaluru, said the higher efficiency of star formation "wouldn't affect the large-scale structure" of the universe "because the bulk of these large-scale structures is produced by dark matter, so what happens to a tiny fraction of normal matter (whether or not they produce stars at a faster rate) wouldn't affect it."

He added that the specifics of whether the modified efficiency contradicts the current understanding of galaxy formation need to be worked out. Biswas agreed, saying that if this value is found to have been higher in the early universe, existing models of galaxy growth and evolution may need to be reworked.

A secret ingredient

The researchers also examined the black holes at the centres of these ancient galaxies. These objects are also called "little red dots" because of what the light from their direction looks like. These black holes rapidly consume the galaxies' gas, causing the latter to emit heat and light.

"The fact that massive black holes contribute to the total light emitted by their host galaxies has been known for some time, and there has been research and work done to disentangle light coming from black holes from the light coming from stars to accurately measure" the masses of stars in galaxies, Chworowsky said.

"However, before JWST, we had not seen galaxies that looked specifically like little red dots, therefore it was not known that they often hosted black holes until they had been independently studied," she added.



However, before JWST, we had not seen galaxies that looked specifically like little red dots, therefore it was not known that they often hosted black holes until they had been independently studied

In other words, the star mass of galaxies may have been overstated in previous studies thanks to the additional light emitted by their black holes. When the researchers in the new study removed these little red dots from their data for analysis, they found that the galaxies weren't as massive as previously estimated, thus sparing the standard model of cosmology from revision.

The bottom line

The researchers wrote in their paper that the standard model could explain more efficient star formation in the early universe in the form of the extreme physical conditions and abundant gas. Catastrophic events like supernovae and stellar winds were also less effective at disrupting star formation.

"The standard model of cosmology remains the most successful framework for describing our universe," Biswas said. "There are only a handful of studies that contradict this model. It is not surprising that JWST observations align with its predictions. It would be far more surprising if these observations challenged this model."

Previous JWST observations of massive, well-developed galaxies in the early universe had questioned the standard

model, including the universe's age, the timeline for the formation of the first galaxies, and galaxy formation theories. For example, a recent study used JWST data to say spiral galaxies could have emerged in the universe within 1.5 billion years, much earlier than previously expected. As evidence, the researchers pointed to an exceptional star formation rate and larger galaxy sizes — but these conclusions could be overturned now. The authors of this study declined to comment.

Nath, who wasn't involved with the new study, added that the problem of observations not matching the standard model's predictions "become acute when the JWST observations of even earlier galaxies are considered, going back to when the universe was around 400 million years old."

Chworowsky said the team is working on including more data from JWST in addition to CEERS. "This will give us the ability both to push this analysis to higher redshifts and higher masses, as those galaxies are rarer and we're more likely to be able to find them in larger sets of data."

Expanding the data set will help researchers get a better sense of the current results and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the formation of massive galaxies in the early universe.

"I am happy to see that astronomers are working towards these problems," Nath said. "Maybe it is possible, after all, to find some explanation within the current models."

(Shreejaya Karantha is a freelance science writer and a content writer and research specialist at The Secrets of The Universe. shreejaya.karantha@gmail.com)



Colombian women perform during the opening ceremony of COP16, a United Nations' biodiversity conference, in Cali, Colombia, on Sunday, AP.

World lags on 2030 nature goals as COP16 talks begin

Reuters

The world in 2022 reached its most ambitious deal ever to halt the destruction of nature by decade's end.

Two years later, countries are already behind on meeting their goals.

As nearly 200 nations meet on Monday for a two-week U.N. biodiversity summit, COP16, in Cali, Colombia, they will be under pressure to prove their support for the goals laid out in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework agreement.

A top concern for countries and companies is how to pay for conservation, with the COP16 talks aiming to develop new initiatives that could generate revenues for nature.

"We have a problem here," said Gavin Edwards, director of the nonprofit Nature Positive. "COP16 is an opportunity to re-energise and remind everybody of their commitments two years ago and start to course correct if we're going to get anywhere close to 2030 targets being achieved."

The rate of nature destruction through activities like logging or overfishing has not let up, while governments miss deadlines on their biodiversity action plans and funding for conservation is billions of dollars away from meeting a 2025 goal.

The summit in Colombia, marking the 16th meeting of nations that signed the original 1992 Convention on Biodiversity, is set to be the largest biodiversity summit to date, with some 23,000 delegates registered to participate as well as a large

There has been no let up in destructive activities like logging and overfishing, but governments have missed their deadlines on action plans, and funding is well short of the goal

exhibition area open to the public.

Whether the participation and pressure can push countries towards bolder conservation actions remains to be seen.

The clearest sign of lagging efforts is the fact that most countries have yet to submit national conservation plans, known officially as National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), though they had agreed to do so by the start of COP16.

As of October 18, 31 out of 195 countries had filed a plan with the U.N. biodiversity secretariat.

Richer nations have been quicker to file, including many European nations, Australia, Japan, China, South Korea, and Canada. The United States attends the talks but has never ratified the Convention on Biodiversity, so is not obligated to submit a plan.

Another 73 countries as of October 18 had opted to only file a less ambitious submission that sets out their national targets without details of how they would be achieved.

With so few plans filed, experts will likely struggle to gauge progress in meeting the agreement's hallmark "30 by 30" goal of preserving 30% of the land and sea by 2030.

Colombia's Environment Minister Susana Muhamad, who also serves as COP16's president, said the summit must also address why so many others are late. "It could be that the funds are not enough, for example, to be able to produce the plans," she said.

Poorer countries have had a harder time finding the funding and expertise needed to develop national biodiversity plans. World Wide Fund for Nature advocacy chief Bernadette Fischer Hooper said.

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject: 'Daily page'

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

The great women of mathematics

Siva Shakthi A.

discovered Y.

QUESTION 3

Name the mathematician who used the principles of geometry and Kepler's laws to calculate the trajectories of several NASA missions, including Apollo 11. She later became the first woman in the Flight Research Division despite racial and gender discrimination and inspired the 2016 film *Hidden Figures*.

QUESTION 4

In the early 19th century, French number theorist Sophie Germain laid the foundation for proving certain cases of the Z theorem, which states that if $a^n + b^n = c^n$, where $a, b,$ and c are whole numbers, then n can't be greater than 2. Name Z.

QUESTION 5

In 1858, this nurse and her team treated

soldiers injured during the Crimean War. Using statistics, she studied the mortality dynamics in the hospital and discovered unsanitary conditions were the leading cause of death. Name her.

Answers to October 17 quiz:

1. German astronomer for whom IES 1727-21.4 et. al. is named - **Ans: Johannes Kepler**
2. Common (Greek) name of Serpentarius constellation - **Ans: Ophiuchus**
3. Supernova of 1572 comparable to Kepler's star in brightness - **Ans: Tycho's nova**
4. Supernova type of Tycho's nova - **Ans: Type Ia supernova**
5. German astrologer with whom Kepler corresponded - **Ans: Helisaeus Roelisin Visual: Tycho Brahe, Q3**

First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Abhijith S. Kumar | Ketan Kumar Singh | Anmol Agrawal



Visual: Name this Iranian mathematician who won the 2014 Fields Medal for insights into the structure and dynamics of Riemannian surfaces and their relation to number theory. CREDIT: MARYRAUDS (CC BY-SA 4.0)

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

What is Z Morh tunnel? Why is it strategically important?

BASHARAT MASOOD & MAN AMAN SINGH CHHINA
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENTS, OCTOBER 29, 2024

MILITANTS SHOT DEAD (over page) in Jammu and Kashmir's Ganderbal district on Sunday evening. The attacks opened fire at a station for heading towards the city of Jammu. A construction firm which is building the strategically vital Z-Morh tunnel in the Srinagar-Gulmarg area.

way(National Highway-1) over a 60-km stretch near the town of Ladakh in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The 2.6-km tunnel is a part of the larger Z-Morh tunnel project which will connect the town of Srinagar to Gulmarg. Currently, both NH-1 and NH-2 are closed due to the construction work. The Z-Morh tunnel will help bypass a stretch of about 60 km more than 8,500 feet, and is expected for completion in the winter of 2025.



View from the Z-Morh tunnel project. What is it likely to be used for? The tunnel is being constructed by the Jammu and Kashmir Development Corporation (JKDC) in collaboration with the Chinese firm. The project was originally planned to be completed by August 2023, but was delayed for various reasons. The soft opening of the tunnel is expected in February 2025. At the moment, the tunnel project is almost complete. Its opening will have been delayed due to the winter weather. The project is being completed by the Jammu and Kashmir Development Corporation (JKDC).

What is the Z-Morh tunnel?
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Aspects of the under construction Z-Morh tunnel
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THIS WORD MEANS

C. ELEGANS
Simple microscopic worms, studying which has won scientists four Nobel Prizes so far

EXPLAINED ECONOMICS
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Why has concerns been raised over ageing population in South India? Can people be incentivised to have more babies to impact this trend? What role can internal migration play?

UDY MISRA
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 29

ANDHRA PRADESH Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu has said his government is working to attract young people to the state to boost its population. He said the state is already in deficit. Having less than two children leads to the rapid decline of the young population, he said.

Why has concerns been raised over ageing population in South India? Can people be incentivised to have more babies to impact this trend? What role can internal migration play?

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Four Nobels

The C. elegans nematode has helped scientists understand how healthy cells are protected from damage and how the process of ageing is controlled. It has also helped scientists understand how the brain works and how the immune system responds to help prevent cancer. It has also helped scientists understand how the brain works and how the immune system responds to help prevent cancer.

The worm C. elegans with embryos attached to its body. P. W. W.

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Bonding over worms

Scientists have found that worms can bond over worms. This is a new discovery that shows worms can form social bonds. This is a new discovery that shows worms can form social bonds.

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What is satellite spectrum, why most countries prefer not to hold auctions

SOU-MYRANABANK

UNION COMMUNICATIONS MINISTER Jyotiraj Singh Chaudhary clarified last week that spectrum for satellite communication is not to be auctioned, but rather to be allocated administratively, rather than through an auction of spectrum, which was proposed by the telecom industry.

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Explained POLICY

Size of satcom spectrum
The size of the satellite spectrum is a key factor in determining the capacity of a satellite system. This is a new discovery that shows worms can form social bonds. This is a new discovery that shows worms can form social bonds.

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U.S. ENVOY HOLDS TALKS IN LEBANON; ISRAELI HITS HEZBOLLAH FINANCES

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Blunt leads to arrest talks on new war

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Israel busts spy ring working for Shin Bet

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Fethullah Gulen, 83, accused of 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, dies in Pennsylvania

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What is Z-Morh tunnel? Why is it strategically important?

BASHARAT MASOOD & MAN AMAN SINGH CHHINA
SRINAGAR, CHANDIGARH, OCTOBER 21

MILITANTS SHOT dead seven people in Jammu and Kashmir's Ganderbal district on Sunday evening. The attackers opened fire at a campsite housing workers of APCO Infratech, a construction firm which is building the strategically vital Z-Morh tunnel on the Srinagar-Leh highway.

way (National Highway-1) is one of only two roads that connect Ladakh to the rest of India — the other being the Manali-Leh highway (NH-3). The Z-Morh tunnel is a part of the larger Zojila tunnel project which seeks to provide all-weather connectivity between Srinagar, Drass, Kargil, and Leh on NH-1. Currently, both NH-1 and NH-3 remain shut during winter. The stretch of road, which the Z-Morh tunnel will help bypass, is located at an altitude of more than 8,500 feet, and is closed for months in the winter due to heavy snowfall and the threat of avalanches. This inconveniences tourists who frequent the resort town of Sonmarg, and hampers the movement of troops and supplies to Ladakh. Ladakh is strategically vital for India. Indian forces are deployed against Pakistan in Siachen Glacier and in Turtuk sub sector which abuts Baltistan in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). There is also widespread deployment against China in Eastern Ladakh, more so since the 2020 Galwan clashes. The Zojila tunnel project — including the



14 km-long under-construction tunnel at Zojila which will connect Sonmarg in the Kashmir valley to Drass in Ladakh — will allow the transportation of troops and supply by road all year round. This will make it easier to mobilise forces in times of need, and also cut costs associated with air transportation. Currently, the Army relies on transport aircraft from the Air Force for maintaining its



A photo of the under construction Z-Morh tunnel from September 2021. The tunnel is now almost complete, and is expected to be inaugurated soon. (AP File)

forward locations along the Line of Control. **When did the Z-Morh tunnel project begin? When is it likely to be completed?**

The tunnel project was originally conceived by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) in 2012. The BRO had awarded the construction contract to Tunnelway Ltd. However, the project was later taken over by the National Highways & Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL). The NHIDCL re-tendered the tunnel project, and the contract was bagged by APCO Infratech. The project was originally expected to be completed by August 2023, but was delayed for various reasons. The soft opening of the tunnel was carried out in February this year. At the moment, the tunnel project is almost complete. Its inauguration had been delayed by the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) in place because of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly elections. The Zojila tunnel, being constructed by Megha Engineering, is expected to be completed by December 2026.

What is the Z-Morh tunnel?

EXPLAINED INFRA

The 6.4 km long tunnel connects the town of Kargil to the tourist spot of Sonmarg in central Kashmir's Ganderbal district. The tunnel is being constructed near Gagangir village, which lies roughly 10 km away from Sonmarg. The tunnel's name comes from the Z-shaped stretch of road at the location of its construction. (Map)

What is the importance of the tunnel?

The strategically vital Srinagar-Leh high-

low the transportation of troops and supply by road all year round. This will make it easier to mobilise forces in times of need, and also cut costs associated with air transportation. Currently, the Army relies on transport aircraft from the Air Force for maintaining its

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THIS WORD MEANS

C. ELEGANS

Simple microscopic worms, studying which has won scientists four Nobel Prizes so far

WHILE ACCEPTING the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine this year, molecular biologist Gary Ruvkun spent a few minutes lauding his experimental subject: a tiny worm named *Caenorhabditis elegans*. This is not this worm's first brush with international stardom nor is it the first time *C. elegans* has been thanked for aiding award-winning work. Ruvkun's award was actually the fourth Nobel Prize resulting from *C. elegans* research, cementing the lowly soil worm's outside role in scientific discovery.



The worm *C. elegans* with embryos attached to its body. (The NYT)

Four Nobels

The 1-millimetre nematode has helped scientists understand how healthy cells are instructed to kill themselves and how the process goes awry in AIDS, strokes and degenerative diseases. (That work was the subject of the 2002 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine.) Self-proclaimed "worm people" were recognised by the Nobel committee in 2006 for discovering gene silencing, which became the basis for an entirely new class of drugs. Two years later, the chemistry prize went to scientists who used nematodes to help invent cellular "lanterns" that allowed biologists to see the inner workings of a cell. For each prize, a laureate made sure to thank the worm for its contributions, though perhaps the most famous nod came from Sydney Brenner, who won the first "worm Nobel." "Without doubt, the fourth winner of the Nobel Prize this year is *Caenorhabditis elegans*," he said in his lecture in Stockholm.

'Experimental dream'

One of the *C. elegans*' virtues is its simplicity, which allows scientists to test hypotheses about fundamental biological concepts in a model that is easy to understand. The nematodes have just 300 cells — a remarkably manageable number, compared with our trillions of cells — each of which scientists have named and charted

from fertilisation to death. The destiny of each cell is easy to map, since the worms become translucent under the light of a microscope and cycle through all developmental stages in about three days.

The nematode was the first animal to have its genome entirely deciphered — in 1998, years before scientists were able to do the same for flies and mice. The worm is inexpensive, easy to store and entirely self-sufficient when it comes to reproduction; female *C. elegans* have functional sperm that allow them to inseminate themselves. "It's an experimental dream," said Judith Kimble, a nematode researcher at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Bonding over worms

Kimble attributes much of the research success to the fact that worm-bonded scientists tend to share their resources and cooperate. Ruvkun, of the Harvard Medical School, and his co-winner, Victor Ambros, a professor of molecular medicine at UMMS Chan Medical School, shared their findings with each other, allowing them to piece together the mechanics of microRNA.

The *C. elegans* research community comes together every other year at the International Worm Convention.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

UDIT MISRA
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 21

ANDHRA PRADESH Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu has said his government is working on a law to incentivise residents of the state to have more children. "We are already in deficit. Having less than two children leads to the rapid decline of the young population," he said.

Earlier, when asked by *The Indian Express* about concerns among Southern states that their smaller populations might impact their representation in Parliament after the delimitation of constituencies, Naidu had said: "South India, with a lower fertility rate, is already facing the aging issue, and it will gradually impact North India as well."

On Monday, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin joined about the potential reduction of South India's share in parliamentary seats due to lower population growth rates: "Why not aim for 16 children?"

What do data say on aging and overall population size?

With Census 2021 delayed, the most recent population projections available are in a 2020 report of a technical group within the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. As the chart shows, India's population is projected to age with each passing year. The proportion (percentage) of people in the 60+ age bracket will rise across the board — even though the increase in the Northern states will be smaller than in the South. This is because most Southern states transitioned to a lower fertility rate sooner than the Northern states. For example, Uttar Pradesh is projected to achieve the Replacement Level of Fertility only next year — that is more than two decades after Andhra Pradesh. Here's what else the report projects:

- In the 25 years from 2011 and 2036, India's population will increase by 31.1 crore. Almost half — 17 crore — will be added in five states: Bihar, UP, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh. As much as 19% of the total population increase during 2011-36 is expected to occur in UP.
- The contribution of the five Southern states — AP, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu — to the total increase in population during 2011-2036 is expected to be only 2.9 crore, or 9%.
- With declining fertility and increasing

EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

The population question

Why have concerns been raised over aging populations in South India? Can people be incentivised to have more babies to impact this trend? What role can internal migration play?

POPULATION BY PERCENTAGE IN DIFFERENT AGE BRACKETS				
INDIA	2011	2036 (PROJECTED)		
0-14 years	30.9	20.1		
15-59 years	60.7	64.9		
60+ years	8.4	14.9		

Andhra Pradesh	2011	2036	Uttar Pradesh	2011	2036
0-14 years	25.2	15.7	0-14 years	36	22
15-59 years	64.8	65.3	15-59 years	56.7	66.1
60+ years	10.1	19	60+ years	7.3	11.9

Source: Population Projection by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

life expectancy, the number of older persons in the population is expected to more than double from 10 crore in 2011 to 23 crore in 2036, their share in the population rising from 8.4% to 14.9% during this period.

■ In Kerala, where lower fertility and mortality rates were achieved much sooner than other states, the proportion of persons aged 60 in 2011 and older will increase from 13% in 2011 to 23% in 2036 — or almost 1 in 4 individuals. The population of UP, by contrast, is expected to be comparatively younger — the share of 60+ individuals in the state population is expected to increase from 7% in 2011 to 12% in 2036.

Why is an aging population, and a relatively smaller population, a concern?

An aging population (which Naidu spoke of) and a smaller population (that Stalin referred to) are two separate concerns. Typically, if two-thirds of the total population is in the working-age bracket it implies a "dividend" — because the dependency ratio (that is, the percentage of population that is not earning and is dependent on others) is less than 50%.

Dependency is of two kinds: those below the age of 15, and those above the age of 60. A high percentage of aging population does imply that the state may have to spend more on taking care of this growing population.

The issue of the total population of a state being lower compared to other states is different. This issue has come into sharp focus in public discussions on electoral delimitation — where fears have been expressed that Southern states could end up getting penalised by way of fewer seats in Lok Sabha

for having made the demographic transition before the North (and especially the so-called "BIMARU" states).

So, do government policies to boost fertility, as Naidu mentioned, work?

Naidu referred to some countries — such as Japan, China, and countries in Europe — that are also struggling with aging populations. But there is no real evidence that people who have reached a certain level of prosperity and education can be incentivised to have more babies.

Academics such as social demographer Sonalde Desai, Distinguished University Professor Emerita at the University of Maryland, and P M Kulkarni and Deepak Mishra of JNU, are unanimous that pro-natalist policies have had very little success. "Virtually nowhere in the world — Japan, China, Korea, France etc. — have pro-natalist policies worked. The only place where such policies had some impact to the extent that they did not allow the fertility rate to plummet to very low levels were in Scandinavian countries. Here the policies were more in the shape of family support, childcare support, gender equality, paternity leaves etc.," Desai said.

However, she stressed that even giving financial support doesn't do enough to encourage families to have more babies.

Why do statements like the ones made by Naidu matter?

These statements demonstrate the stark turnaround on the stand taken by politicians, especially from the Southern states, on the population question. Roughly five decades ago, the main con-

cern facing India was rapid population growth, fuelled by high levels of fertility (births per woman). The situation was once deemed so grim that many wondered if India would even have enough food to feed its teeming millions.

Over the decades, however, India has been able to arrest the pace of population growth — an achievement that has been led by several Southern states. Andhra Pradesh achieved the Replacement Level of Fertility — that is, an average of 2.1 children per woman — in 2004, making it the fifth Indian state to do so after Kerala (1988), Tamil Nadu (2000), Himachal Pradesh (2002), and West Bengal (2003). Andhra Pradesh used to have a law that barred people from contesting in local polls if they had more than two children; Naidu has repealed it.

However, while individual states are witnessing considerably lower levels of fertility than in the past, India's inherent population momentum has meant that it is now the most populous country on the planet.

If incentives don't work, what is the way forward to address concerns about population?

"The simplest solution is (internal) migration," Desai said.

There are three contributors to the total population: fertility, mortality, and migration. Both Desai and Kulkarni said migration can even out the imbalance caused by the mismatch in the pace of the demographic transition between North and South India.

Of course, such migration is already underway. "What's more, the Southern states will get people in the working age," Desai said. In other words, destination states don't have to spend on nurturing a young population, their education, etc.; they can straightaway benefit from the working-age migrant population.

This is the model that the United States has employed over the decades — it is immigrants, their economic output and their fertility, that has helped sustain America's economic dominance over the world.

Both Kulkarni and Mishra underscored that rather than having more children, the concern for India should be to boost the economic productivity of its labour force, and to ensure that the benefits of the ongoing demographic dividend are cashed fully.

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What is satellite spectrum, why most countries prefer not to hold auctions

SOUMYARENDRA BARIK
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 21

UNION COMMUNICATIONS Minister Jyotirajita Scindia clarified last week that spectrum for satellite communication (satcom) would be allocated "administratively", rather than through an auction of airwaves, which was proposed by Reliance Jio earlier this month. This was seen as a victory for some of the company's big rivals, especially Elon Musk's Starlink. However, the fact is, given the nature of satellite spectrum, it is not feasible for any one country to auction it. Unlike terrestrial spectrum, which is used for mobile communication, satellite spectrum has no national territorial limits. Due to this international character, satellite spectrum is coordinated and managed by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a specialised agency of the United Nations (UN). Spectrum for satcom is part of the first

schedule of the Telecommunications Act, 2023 ("Assignment of spectrum through administrative process"). Under Section 4(4) of the Act, telecom spectrum shall be assigned through auction "except for entries listed in the First Schedule for which assignment shall be done by administrative process".

"Administrative process" under the Act means assignment of spectrum without holding an auction, and "auction" means a bid process for assignment of spectrum". The Department of Telecommunication (DoT) had asked the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) to come up with a methodology to assign the spectrum. As Trai explored pricing models for the service, Jio submitted to the regulator that administrative allocation may not be able to ensure a level playing field between satellite and terrestrial services.

In response, Musk posted on X on October 14 that an auction process "would be unprecedented, as this spectrum was long designated by the ITU as shared spec-

trum for satellites".

Satcom & its benefits

Satcom services use an array of satellites in orbit to provide connectivity on the ground. They do not require wires to transmit data, and are an alternative to ground-based communication, called terrestrial networks, such as cable, fibre, or digital subscriber line (DSL). For end-users such as homes and businesses, satellite-based communication and broadband services offer two key benefits: wider coverage, and a more resilient network. Even though the latency of satcom services can at times be higher than terrestrial broadband networks, they can cover vast areas without needing to install much physical equipment.

The use of satellites allows communication networks to reach remote locations that mobile telephony cannot access. It is generally understood that when satcom services become more mainstream, low-

lying and rural areas, and areas prone to natural disasters, will benefit from constant connectivity.

Satellite-based Internet is also believed to be more resilient than terrestrial-based services, since they have comparatively fewer components on the ground. The equipment for satellite communication is, therefore, less likely to sustain damage due to extreme weather events.

EXPLAINED POLICY

Size of satcom sector

Consulting firm KPMG in a recent report that the country's satcom sector, which currently stands at \$2.3 billion a year, will reach \$20 billion by 2028.

India is ranked fourth in terms of investments in the sector globally. Investment bank Morgan Stanley has estimated roughly 290.4 million households in India are untapped with broadband, which present a strong market opportunity for satellite operators.

Auction vs allocation

It is important to understand the key differences between spectrum for terrestrial networks and satellite communication, and why the distinction between allocation and auctioning arises in the first place.

For terrestrial mobile services, spectrum is exclusive, and is managed only by a single mobile operator in a given geographical area; therefore, this cannot be shared between or amongst operators. In the case of satellites, the same spectrum is non-exclusive in nature — and can be used by multiple satellite operators to serve the same geographical area.

The general trend, therefore, is to allocate satellite spectrum administratively.

Auction experiment

A few countries such as the United States, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia, have held auctions for frequency spectrum in the past. The US and Brazil conducted an auction of satellite spectrum along with orbital slots. Both countries have since reverted to ad-

ministrative assignment after finding the auction process infeasible.

India recently conducted an auction for satellite spectrum in 2004 for three domestic orbital slots for broadcasting services. The annual regulatory fee for VSAT and equivalent C-band antennas operating in the 12 GHz and 14 GHz frequencies is \$595 per licence or authorisation.

Brazil amended its regulatory framework in 2020 to replace satellite auctions with administrative licensing. Though satellite landing rights are assigned through bidding in the country, the spectrum to be used for satellite services is not auctioned separately.

Saudi Arabia recently conducted a spectrum auction in the S-band, which ranges from 2 GHz to 4 GHz and is used for mobile satellite services (MSS) as well as weather and air traffic control applications. The technical characteristics of the S-band are such that it is assigned on an exclusive basis for MSS; auction can, therefore, be conducted in a manner similar to the spectrum auction for terrestrial mobile services.

The
Hindustan Times
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[OUR TAKE]

Signs of thaw in India-China ties

The agreement on patrolling arrangements is a first step towards disengagement at the border

With the military standoff between India and China on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) well into its fifth year, New Delhi has announced that an agreement has been reached on patrolling arrangements along the disputed border. This is a positive development after years of unproductive talks, especially the stalemate that existed after the disengagement of forward troops at four locations, including the banks of Pangong Lake. The standoff, and especially the death of Indian troops in a brutal skirmish at Galwan Valley in June 2020, took bilateral relations to the lowest point since the border war of 1962. The damage done by those incidents to the overall bilateral relationship has been immense, especially at a time when China's aggressive and assertive actions across the Indo-Pacific region have led to growing concerns and mistrust about the intentions of President Xi Jinping. India is not alone in having worries about China's long-term goals insofar as border disputes are concerned, as developments in the South China Sea, East China Sea and Taiwan Strait have shown.

The latest development in the India-China border face-off should be seen as only the first step in a process, albeit one that logically leads to the next—disengagement and de-escalation. This will involve the pulling back of close to 60,000 troops arrayed on each side in close proximity to the LAC in the Ladakh sector, followed by their withdrawal to peacetime locations at the rear.

There are existing agreements that can guide these processes, and much will also depend on a possible meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Russia. Such a meeting will help add momentum to the process that has been initiated at the LAC, especially if the two leaders agree on specific directions for their militaries.

More importantly, the two sides will now have to reiterate their commitment to agreements on border management or agree on suitably updating them, given the Indian side's consistent position in recent years that it was China that violated these pacts. They will have to do much more work to address the lack of trust and animosity that has largely characterised India-China ties over the past four years, despite the burgeoning economic relations. For starters, this will require Beijing to appreciate and accommodate New Delhi's concerns.

Municipal bonds are key to city finances

Rajkot's oversubscribed municipal bonds issue comes in the context of surging finance needs of city governments and very little own revenues and transfer of funds from the state governments. As per the World Bank, India's urban infrastructure investment needs jumped from \$16 billion per annum in 2018 to over the next 15 years to \$55 billion per annum in 2022. Read against the patchy implementation of the 74th Amendment of the Constitution that formalised the third tier of governance, the need for funding supplements becomes stark. Thus, the city's success offers hope for other cities, more so with the political challenge that boosting local tax poses.

While bonds can be an alternative fund-raising route, the prospect is not without challenges. One, cities must be seen as bankable for bond investors to be interested—as per a report by the non-profit Janaagraha, in 2021, less than half of 226 cities had investment-grade ratings. Two, function overlaps between state government agencies and local governments need to be sorted out. Three, local governments must ensure that clean budgeting and accounting drive ratings and not merely the viability of the projects for which the bonds are being issued—else, project-specific bond issues will be successful while the city government remains strapped for funds elsewhere. Four, citizens will have to be nudged towards a recovery ethic, where they must pay for services, this payment can partially offset the costs.

To the extent that State support is needed, incentives under the Centre's Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation mission should encourage more cities to access such financing. Only 17 Indian cities have tapped into bond issues so far, but financing is central to local self-governance, and Rajkot's success is an opportune moment to have a conversation on how the picture can be changed.

Learning from the GN Saibaba episode

Reforms in law are needed to consider the vulnerability of incarcerated persons with disability and to liberalise bail jurisprudence

A my tribute to academic and activist GN Saibaba is bound to expose the systemic hypocrisy of our judicial system. Saibaba was arrested in May 2014 and remained incarcerated till March 2024. He suffered various ailments and mistreatment throughout his jail term. Though he was initially acquitted by the Bombay high court, in an extraordinary Saturday hearing, the Supreme Court stayed the acquittal and, thereafter, set it aside. The matter went back to the Bombay high court for comprehensive examination. The high court again acquitted Saibaba, which led to his release about seven months ago. Immediately after release, Saibaba, who suffered from 90% disability, disclosed that he suffered an arm injury during his arrest and was subjected to solitary confinement in prison. His statement that the lack of care and medical aid led to the aggravation of hypertension, diabetes, and cardiac complications is on record.

To address the systemic and attitudinal issues, we must first identify

these. The Indian prison system and the laws on prisons, including the prison manuals of the states, are not equipped to ensure humane and fair treatment of physically challenged inmates. India does not have an effective law to curtail the torture of the disabled in prisons. Disabled prisoners, whether undertrial or not, are treated as lesser human beings.

Even proper data on the disabled population in prisons is unavailable, as admitted by then minister of State for Social Justice, Mahan Pal Gargur in Parliament in 2016.

Scholar Edwin M Baum, in a 1984 paper, termed the disabled in American jails "an ignored minority". He wrote that the "crime" of being disabled. But America has since then substantially improved its treatment of disabled prisoners.

The International law on the subject—the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016—contains provisions on the issues faced by the disabled in various walks of life. Yet, on the incarceration of the disabled, the law is practically mute. The 2016 Act, as well as the prison manuals of the states, should be radically amended, incorporating provisions against custodial torture and police atrocities against disabled inmates. Saibaba was a vic-

tim of this glaring lacuna in Indian law. The strict implementation of the laws will also remain a challenge in the Indian context.

Section 5(3) of the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023 talks about designing prisons with the needs of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in mind. The Model Act—only a guideline for the states—contains provisions against the inhuman treatment of prisoners. This, again, remains wishful thinking.

It is time to revisit the method of filing charge sheets in anti-terror law cases. It is necessary to impose a legal restriction on the practice of filing voluminous charges running into thousands of pages in cases under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA). When the time taken for preparation and finalisation of the charges, coupled with the lack of access to the accused, delays the trial and even consideration of the bail application in the UAPA cases, it is essential to revisit the working of this law. The courts should insist that charges should be precise and specific.

In at least four recent judgments, the Supreme Court has reiterated the old expression that "bail is the rule and jail an exception". By the time the apex court, in the case involving former Delhi chief minister (CM) Arvind Kejriwal, said that "personal lib-



Proper data on the disabled population in prisons is unavailable

erty is sacrosanct" and trial courts and the high courts should be alert to this principle, Kejriwal had already spent 176 days in prison. Again, the apex court in the case involving former Delhi deputy CM Manish Sisodia said that trial courts and the high courts have often forgotten the principle that "bail is not to be withheld as a punishment". Sisodia was in prison for more than one year and five months by the time the judgment was delivered in his case.

In *Jalaluddin Khan* (2024), the Supreme Court said that even in UAPA cases "when a case is made out for a grant of bail, the courts should not have any hesitation in granting bail". In *Prem Prakash* (2024), the Court explained the meaning and purpose of Section 45 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) by reminding that under Article 21 of the Constitution, liberty cannot be curtailed by breaching the procedure established by law.

Two issues arise here: One, despite making clear the judicial stance on bail in UAPA and PMLA cases, the reality on the ground has not improved. Two, when there is a denial of bail and a resultant long incarceration,

persons in prison is unavoidable for compensating the victims of State action by making the executive accountable. Saibaba's is an illustrative case.

A judgment of the apex court is the law of the land. According to Article 14 of the Constitution, it is binding on all the courts in the country. It is a tragedy that often, not only the trial courts and the high courts, but even the Supreme Court ignores the pronouncements on the citizen's freedom. The executive also pretends to be ignorant of the law laid down by the apex court.

Therefore, an effective method to liberalise bail jurisprudence will be to promulgate a separate Bill. It should assimilate the principles laid down in the recent apex court judgments and restore bail as a rule by fixing a fair and reasonable maximum period for undertrial detention. It should also provide for compensation for unjust detention. There are significant lessons emanating from the Saibaba case.

Kaleeswaram Raj is a lawyer at the Supreme Court of India. The views expressed are personal



Kaleeswaram Raj

[SIMPLY ECONOMICS]

Pratik Bhattacharyya

Need a clear-eyed trade policy to sustain growth

Four years after it imposed severe restrictions on investments from China, the Union government seems to have accepted the limited efficacy of those measures. The first indication of a rethink came in the finance ministry's Economic Survey. The survey noted that the recent export growth of Southeast Asian economies relied heavily on Chinese investments. It might be better for India to let Chinese firms manufacture in the country rather than import manufactured goods from China, the survey argued.

The commerce minister Piyush Goyal initially played down the survey's arguments, claiming that there was no rethink on India's stance towards China. But the commerce secretary Sunil Barthwal let the cat out of the bag a few weeks later. Barthwal told reporters that the government might review restrictions on China as part of an overall review of its foreign direct investment (FDI) policy. Given that all major economies continue to rely heavily on China, India's inability to decouple from China wasn't unusual, he said.

Since the two Asian giants are now trying to reduce border tensions, it has become politically acceptable to acknowledge China's importance in global supply chains. Despite American efforts to dent Chinese dominance in global manufacturing, China continues to play a pivotal role. American imports from China have indeed fallen. But that fall has been matched by rising imports from countries such as South Korea, Vietnam, and Mexico, which increasingly rely on Chinese capital, Chinese inputs, and Chinese know-how to run their factories.

The so-called China+1 strategy used by American companies to reduce dependence on the Chinese economy has only fuelled Chinese investments in factories around the world. The most striking example is Vietnam, which has raised exports to the United States (US) on the back of Chinese investments. Last year, it rolled out the red carpet for both Chinese President Xi Jinping and American President Joe Biden, upgrading its ties with the US to a comprehensive strategic partnership. The Vietnamese have fought bloody wars against the Americans and against the Chinese. Yet, they are unafraid to do business with either. The Vietnamese government wooed Chinese investors while taking American help to protect its territorial claims in the South China Sea.

India needs similar clarity in negotiating its relationships with the two superpowers. It needs to engage economically with China even as it deepens its strategic ties with the

US. Closer trade links with China and the rest of "Factory Asia" will help Indian firms integrate better with global value chains, raising productivity and growth. Stronger growth will narrow the power differential with China, and deter Chinese aggression over the long run.

In the medium run, India has to take help from the US to tackle Chinese aggression. But that does not mean we define our strategic requirements based on American assessments. India needs to frame its own national security strategy document that identifies sectors and industries critical for India's defence and manufacturing. It should also identify, trade and investment barriers in all other industries should be lowered.

As this column had argued earlier ("A plan to counter China economically", April 18, 2022), the Indian government needs to take the views of all stakeholders—including state governments and Opposition lawmakers—to frame a national consensus on trade and investment strategy document that outlines the sectors in which India shares complementarities with key trading partners. It must provide clarity on the future of trade policy and explain the rationale behind India's past policy changes. Our official trade policy documents focus too much on aspirational targets, and too little on the strategy and tactics needed to achieve them.

Millions of business owners across the country have very little understanding of how and why India's trade policies are shifting. Ad hoc shifts in trade policies—whether it be a rise in input tariffs or investment restrictions—hit them hard, and make it difficult for them to compete in global markets. Only the large politically networked conglomerates are able to detect which way the economic policy winds are blowing in Beijing's Delhi and are able to place their bets accordingly. Greater transparency in formulating strategic and trade policies will help narrow the information gap between big firms and the rest.

Lowering discretion in trade policies will also help. Where discretionary changes are made, the costs and benefits of such policy changes must be analysed, and subjected to public scrutiny. If a rise in steel tariffs raised the profit margins of domestic steel producers but eroded the profitability and export growth of car manufacturers that use steel as an input, the net benefit (or cost) to the economy must be estimated and published. Such estimates will help us understand how a tax on imports can often end up being a tax on exports. Greater awareness about the pitfalls of knee-jerk protectionism might bring about predictable trade policies for firms with cross-national links.

The current geopolitical moment is to India's advantage. But India's economic statecraft needs a serious upgrade if we are to make the most of this opportunity. India cannot become a key node in global supply chains with a timid and inchoate trade policy regime.

Pratik Bhattacharyya is a Chennai-based journalist. The views expressed are personal

[MANOJ SINHA | LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR]

The brutal and savage attack against construction workers will be avenged. I've asked the police and security forces to exact a price that will be remembered by the terrorists



Putting India on the path to meaningful EV adoption

Last month, the Centre announced the Prime Minister Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative Vehicle Enhancement (PM E-DRIVE) scheme, putting an end to speculation about the future of the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid &) Electric Vehicles (FAME) scheme.

Electric vehicles (EVs) play a crucial role in combating the climate crisis and promoting sustainable development. However, for a city like Delhi, which has long struggled with deteriorating air quality, the significance of EVs goes beyond climate action. Transport emissions are one of the largest contributors to the city's pollution. A recent study by the International Council on Clean Transportation highlighted that road world emissions from vehicles in Delhi exceed laboratory limits. This is particularly concerning in a metropolitan where vehicular pollution contributes heavily to particulate matter emissions, leading to adverse health impacts.

With PM E-DRIVE, the government has ushered in a new era of electrification that expands the scope of vehicle categories and strengthens existing policies. Here are the three key takeaways from the scheme.

Initiating new segments: One of the most transformative elements of the PM E-DRIVE scheme is its focus on electrifying new vehicle segments such as ambulances and trucks. Among these, the electrification of trucks holds immense importance. While trucks constitute just 2% of India's total vehicular fleet, they are responsible for a staggering 44% of CO₂ emissions from the road transport sector. In a city like Delhi, for instance, trucks account for nearly 40% of the particulate matter emissions linked to transport. The introduction of electric trucks could address both climate concerns and urban air pollution. However, the transition to trucks poses significant challenges, particularly in terms of high upfront costs. The government's allocation of ₹500 crore (₹60 million) for pilot projects and dedicated funds for developing charging networks is a welcome step in this direction. These pilot programmes will act as proof-of-concept initiatives, demonstrating the viability of trucks in Indian conditions. By tackling the initial roadblocks, this allocation will help lay the foundation for large-scale adoption.

Scaling up charging infrastructure: One of the key barriers to widespread EV adoption in India has been the lack of charging infrastructure. Although the country currently has 12,466 public EV charging stations, this number is insufficient when considering the scale of India's population and the rapid growth in EV sales. A recent report revealed that India's current ratio of public chargers to EVs is 1:135, far below the global ideal

ratio of six to 20 EVs per public charger. To address this issue, the PM E-DRIVE scheme has earmarked ₹2,000 crore (₹241 million) for the development of public charging stations, which will serve both light and heavy-duty vehicles. Scaling up charging stations is essential not only to meet the needs of individual EV owners but also to support the electrification of public transport and commercial fleets, which will significantly reduce urban emissions.

Minimising mass mobility: PM E-DRIVE places a strong emphasis on electrifying public and mass mobility vehicles. The largest allocation of ₹4,391 crore (₹529 million) is dedicated to e-buses, while ₹2,729 crore (₹328 million) is allocated for two-wheelers (e-2Ws), three-wheelers (e-3Ws), and other emerging EVs. This focus on public transportation is crucial, as buses form the backbone of urban mobility, especially for the millions of daily commuters in Indian cities. India's current fleet of around 30,000 buses is grossly inadequate to serve its total population of over 471 million people.

According to the ministry of housing and urban affairs, cities need 60 buses per 100,000 residents to meet public transport demand. However, India currently operates less than one-fifth of the required number of buses. Thus, a significant investment in e-buses will help bridge this gap, providing cleaner and more efficient transportation options in cities.

Moreover, the allocation for two- and three-wheelers is equally significant. Two-wheelers account for nearly 75% of India's motor vehicle sales, and India is the world's largest manufacturer of two-wheelers. Electrifying this segment is not only for reducing emissions but also for securing India's position as a leader in the global EV market. From a mobility perspective, affordable and widely available electric two-wheelers can transform the way people travel, especially in congested urban areas.

Demand incentives play a pivotal role in accelerating the adoption of EVs, especially given the high upfront costs compared to traditional internal combustion engine vehicles. The PM E-DRIVE scheme's focus on providing financial support to both private and commercial EVs is crucial for closing the cost gap. However, to truly scale up EV adoption, demand incentives must be complemented by supply-side policies. The Bureau of Energy Efficiency is currently finalising fuel economy standards, which when integrated with PM E-DRIVE, could further boost India's transition to electric mobility.

Armit Bhatt is managing director (India), International Council on Clean Transportation. The views expressed are personal

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Dastardly strike

As terrorists kill seven people in Central Kashmir, concerns grow over the effectiveness of security measures

A disturbing pattern of targeted violence has resurfaced in Jammu and Kashmir, with seven killed in a cowardly terrorist attack. The people killed were part of the construction team working on the Z-Morh tunnel, which connects Gagangir to Sonamarg in Central Kashmir's Ganderbal district. Yet another bomb blast occurred in the capital though no one was injured, which raises concerns about potential coordination between terrorist groups and the spread of violence beyond the Valley. While there is no direct evidence linking the incidents, the possibility of a broader security threat cannot be ignored. This latest attack is part of a troubling trend of escalating violence against migrant workers in the region, marking the fifth such incident this year. The recent killings underscore a persistent threat to life in Kashmir. This latest tragedy follows a series of deadly incidents in the Valley. The recent wave of terrorist attacks exposes critical vulnerability of security apparatus. While authorities, including J and K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, have condemned these acts and pledged to bring the perpetrators to justice, the recurrent nature of these attacks reveals deeper challenges in counter-terrorism measures and security protocols. The targeted nature of these attacks suggests a deliberate strategy to instill fear among migrant workers and disrupt ongoing development projects. By targeting migrant labourers involved in infrastructure work, terrorists aim to deter economic activities that could stabilise the region. These incidents not only hamper development but also erode the confidence of workers who play a crucial role in key infrastructure projects. Moreover, the attacks signify a broader attempt to undermine the relative peace that has been maintained in recent years. Despite heightened security measures and the presence of the military in sensitive areas, the perpetrators have managed to carry out attacks on civilians, highlighting significant intelligence gaps and the ability of militants to exploit weaknesses in the security grid to target rather easy groups. A comprehensive review of security measures in Jammu and Kashmir is urgently needed. While military action remains essential, it needs to be complemented by robust intelligence gathering, better coordination between different security agencies and community-based approaches to countering extremist elements. The current situation also points to the need for upgrading the security apparatus around camps housing migrant workers and ensuring that projects with a high number of migrant labourers receive adequate protection. Another pressing issue is the socio-political narrative surrounding such incidents. There is a need for a unified political strategy that addresses not only the immediate security concerns but also the long-term socio-economic challenges that contribute to unrest. Investing in local economic opportunities, countering extremist ideologies through educational initiatives and strengthening intelligence network can make a lot of difference.



attempt to undermine the relative peace that has been maintained in recent years. Despite heightened security measures and the presence of the military in sensitive areas, the perpetrators have managed to carry out attacks on civilians, highlighting significant intelligence gaps and the ability of militants to exploit weaknesses in the security grid to target rather easy groups. A comprehensive review of security measures in Jammu and Kashmir is urgently needed. While military action remains essential, it needs to be complemented by robust intelligence gathering, better coordination between different security agencies and community-based approaches to countering extremist elements. The current situation also points to the need for upgrading the security apparatus around camps housing migrant workers and ensuring that projects with a high number of migrant labourers receive adequate protection. Another pressing issue is the socio-political narrative surrounding such incidents. There is a need for a unified political strategy that addresses not only the immediate security concerns but also the long-term socio-economic challenges that contribute to unrest. Investing in local economic opportunities, countering extremist ideologies through educational initiatives and strengthening intelligence network can make a lot of difference.



A potter arranges freshly-made 'diyas' (earthen lamps) ahead of the Diwali festival, in Hyderabad

The quiet struggles and shifting realities of ageing

Having left the traditional joint family behind, we now face loneliness and the stark realities of ageing in a world that moves rather fast

Recently, I sat sipping my cup of tea in quiet contemplation as life moved around me. Unbidden, a strange thought struck me. In my younger days, I often felt that the old were more rigid in their approach. I am in my mid-sixties. I still find it difficult to adjust to a life with rules not set by us. We belong to the generation that has moved out of the age-old joint family milieu to set up unit families. The interaction with even the immediate family is limited to meeting at festivals. One gets to meet the extended family only during family weddings, busy as they are in the daily grind of their units. It is not surprising that we now find ourselves at a crossroads. The young have their own lives and cannot be expected to be available for each



SANJAY CHANDRA

major challenge for the old is loneliness resulting in inadequate communication, which in time may lead to dementia. I would have attributed obsession with self to insecurities of the advancing age, had I not witnessed the same even in the young. A feeling of inadequacy can strike anyone irrespective of age. We are yet to evolve into a society that respects and cares for all. It is the responsibility of each member of the community to help others feel loved and cherished. An American author and motivational speaker, Felice Buscaglia, known as 'Dr Love', said, "It is not enough to have lived. We should be determined to live for something. May I suggest that it is creating joy for others, sharing what we have for the betterment of persons, bringing hope to the lost and love to the lonely." (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)

to be available for each ache and pain. A few years back I met a younger acquaintance over coffee. The seniors within his community encouraged young professionals to join the governing body of the community welfare association extending unconditional support. As things settled, the young lot no longer needed to consult the old for each decision. The seniors felt rebuffed, and relationships soured. I recently flew with a medical professional who established a thriving chain of pathology clinics. Approaching 60, he has sold his business. He is now working towards establishing old age homes for the seniors. I was apprehensive because of the stigma attached to these facilities. The old feel a sense of abandonment; the young feel guilty. To face these challenges, he is starting daycare centres for seniors, to spend a few hours engaged in activities of their choice, with adequate medical facilities available. As my medical friend expounded, the

Global Hunger Index: Misleading metrics

The accuracy and intent behind GHI rankings are suspect. Does the GHI truly reflect India's reality, or is it a motivated attempt to malign India's image?



SANTHOSH MATHEW

The recent Global Hunger Index (GHI) report, which places India at a dismal 105th position out of 127 countries, has raised eyebrows and sparked considerable debate. While hunger and malnutrition remain pressing global issues, the methodology and conclusions of the GHI, co-authored by two non-governmental organisations—Irish-based Concern Worldwide and German Welthungerhilfe—have drawn criticism, particularly from the Indian government and sections of society.

There is a growing concern that such reports may not just reflect statistics but also carry political and geopolitical undertones aimed at tarnishing India's image on the world stage. The GHI is based on four key indicators: the prevalence of undernourishment, child wasting, child stunting, and child mortality. The scores from these factors are compiled to place countries on a scale from zero (no hunger) to 100 (extreme hunger), with countries scoring closer to zero seen as having little or no hunger issues. India's score of 27.3 puts it in the "serious" hunger category, alongside 42 other countries. Critics of the GHI have raised several concerns about the methodology used in calculating India's score.

Firstly, reliance on child mortality and child stunting indicators as primary components of the hunger index is problematic. India is a country with a large population, and while child malnutrition is a valid concern, this issue is not unique to India but rather shared by other developing countries. By focusing heavily on this aspect, the report seems to disproportionately penalise India. Additionally, the GHI report uses outdated data from global sources such as the World Health Organisation and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). India, like many countries, has been undergoing significant improvements in food security through government initiatives such as the National Food Security Act, the Midday Meal Scheme, and public distribution system reforms. However, these efforts do not



seem to be adequately represented in the data used for the GHI. Many believe that the Global Hunger Index is not just about numbers but also about shaping narratives. By positioning India in such a negative light, the report seems to overshadow the country's genuine achievements. India's economy is among the fastest-growing in the world, and its agricultural output has been consistently high. The country's food production is more than sufficient to meet the needs of its population. India has become a net exporter of food grains and has successfully launched programs to improve access to food for its population. (German)—backdrop, how can India be ranked lower than countries facing severe internal strife, economic collapse and war, such as Afghanistan or even smaller nations like Bangladesh and Nepal? It's essential to question the intentions behind these rankings. Are they an honest reflection of hunger, or do they serve other interests? Reports like the Global Hunger Index can have far-reaching consequences, not just for the countries they assess but also for global perceptions. The fact that the organisations behind the GHI—Concern Worldwide (Irish) and Welthungerhilfe (German)—hail from Western countries has not gone unnoticed. It raises the question of whether the



THE RELIANCE ON CHILD MORTALITY AND CHILD STUNTING INDICATORS AS PRIMARY COMPONENTS OF THE HUNGER INDEX IS PROBLEMATIC. INDIA IS A COUNTRY WITH A LARGE POPULATION, AND WHILE CHILD MALNUTRITION IS A VALID CONCERN, THIS ISSUE IS NOT UNIQUE TO INDIA

index is truly impartial or if it subtly reflects geopolitical biases. India has made significant strides in addressing hunger and malnutrition, but it seems that these efforts are often ignored or underplayed by such indices. For instance, the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, which provided free food grains to over 80 crore people during the COVID-19 pandemic, is one of the world's largest food security initiatives. The fact that India could provide this level of support during a global crisis contradicts the narrative of widespread hunger and undernourishment. To deny that hunger exists in India would be dishonest, but the nation is far more complex than a single ranking can capture. Hunger is not a static issue; it is deeply intertwined with poverty, access to education, healthcare, and infrastructure. The Indian government has been tackling these root causes of hunger through a multi-pronged approach that includes social welfare schemes, employment generation programmes like MGN-REGA, and nutrition programs targeted at women and children. Programmes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) aim to provide supplementary nutrition to millions of pregnant and lactating women, along with children under six years of age.

Meanwhile, the Midday Meal Scheme, which serves nutritious meals to school children, has had a significant impact on reducing malnutrition. Despite these efforts, it is undeniable that India still faces challenges. The legacy of poverty, the vast size and population of the country, and regional disparities make it difficult to eliminate hunger overnight. The concerns raised by the Indian government about the Global Hunger Index are not without merit. The index, while claiming to provide an objective measure of hunger, fails to capture the ground realities of individual nations. India, being the second-most populous country in the world, is bound to face issues that smaller nations with more homogeneous populations do not. By painting India as a country where hunger is rampant, the GHI risks creating a false narrative that undermines the substantial progress made by the country. It also risks discouraging the efforts of those working tirelessly on the ground to ensure that no one goes to bed hungry. What is needed is not biased rankings or politically motivated reports but genuine collaboration between nations to tackle the global hunger crisis. As we reflect on the GHI, one thing is clear: statistics alone do not tell the whole story. (The writer is an associate professor; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OMAR ADVOCATES STATEHOOD

Madam — Apropos of We will not give Kashmir (October 20), the demand of the newly elected government of J and K under Omar Abdullah for full statehood is not at divergence with the vow of the Modi government on the floor of the Parliament for granting the statehood to Jammu and Kashmir. The only difference is the time factor looking at the highly volatile and inflammable borders infested with Pakistan-sponsored terrorists and Pakistan's propaganda against India on all international platforms. Omar Abdullah government should not vie to show down with the Centre under the political pressure of those who lost elections and whom people rejected in Assembly elections. The National Conference, while keeping Congress at bay, has a better opportunity of coordination with the Modi government for betterment and all-round growth of the State as Congress has turned itself into a sworn enemy of PM Modi and is prone to confrontation with him. People have elected the National Conference for development, education, health, industry and job creation, not for confrontation with the Centre. Terrorism is the biggest threat to the State for destabilising it, and it comes from across the border. Since the Indian army and paramilitary forces are well equipped to combat terrorism and neutralise the terrorists, the State government should restrict itself to the state administration. Vinod Johri | Delhi

INDIA'S HUNGER CHALLENGE

Madam — The 2024 Global Hunger Index report, in which India ranks 105 among 127 countries, must not be lamented. The nutrition indicators for children under 5 years show that 1 out of 3 children (35.5 per cent) is a victim of stunting. Now, how can a country compete with others when the growth of more than one third of its future workforce has been stunted for not getting enough food to eat? A study says that

Mitigate climate Change



Climate change refers to a long-term shift in temperature and weather conditions. These shifts may be natural but since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change. Burning coal, oil and gas to generate electricity and heat or to make goods like cement, steel and electronics produces carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that pollute the air to

a large extent. As temperature rises, more moisture evaporates, which exacerbates extreme rainfall and flooding causes more destructive storms. Climate change also changes water availability, making it scarcer in more regions. According to the Climate Change Act 2017, local bodies must consider climate change when preparing their municipal health and wellbeing plan. Local bodies must raise awareness about climate change and how to adopt and mitigate its effects. They must encourage electric vehicles within city limits. Establishing minimum energy for housing infrastructure and renewable energy by creating ordinances and bylaws to help the community adopt climate change is the urgent work of the urban local bodies. P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

many gig workers in India have to work for 10 to 14 hours daily for their employers to earn less than Rs 10,000 per month. While overwork damages their health, the poor wage makes their children and family members compromise on food intake. This is nothing but exploitation. The Centre should allocate more funds for introducing breakfast in addition to the midday meal for all government and aided schools from the nursery level. It is highly commendable that some states and union territories provide additional items such as milk, eggs, and fruits to students from their own resources. But why should not the centre itself allocate the funds for the same for giving those nutritious food items to students all over the country? Otherwise, students of all the states in India will not get those additional, nutritious food items. Sujit De | Kolkata

this victory is so special as when they won a test after 36 years to claim 1-0 up in this series at Bengaluru. When Indians were dismissed for a paltry 46 in the first inning, the hope of skipper Rohit Sharma was diminished, but the ray of hope was enlightened by the scintillating 150 by young Sarfaraz Khan along with the swashbuckling knock of 99 from Rishabh Pant in the second inning. Though the Indian scored 462, the latter order failed to capitalise on their placement batting. A target of 107 for the Kiwis to chase became a customary one and Rachin Ravindra's high-powered 134 in the first and an unbeaten 39 in the second innings brought the Kiwis a comfortable win at the end. The gesture from Ravindra's father came by way of his thanksgiving to CSK Academy, where Ravindra took his week-long practice just before this series is worth observing for this young gun's success. A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

KIWIS STUN INDIA

Madam — It's double the joy of winning overseas and certainly for New Zealand,

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FIRST COLUMN
THE FEAR OF LOSS AND THE QUEST FOR INNER PEACE

Accepting life's impermanence may be the key to transcending fear



RAVI VALLURI

Humans are intrinsically fearful of loss. Misplacement can assume several dimensions. Say mislaying of property, wealth, recognition, position, power, peff, health and most importantly, life. John's (changed) steely voice suddenly trembled and quivered as he held the pretentious cell phone. Rachel (name changed), his daughter met with a grievous car crash and was wheeled into the ICU of a prestigious hospital. Death is the action or fact of dying or being the end of life of a person or an organism.

Several years ago, a Japanese warrior was captured by his adversaries and confined to a dungeon. That fateful night he tossed and turned restlessly and was unable to sleep, fearing the following day when he would be interrogated, tortured and eventually executed. He was starved in his face. Then suddenly he remembered the priceless words of a Zen Master, "Tomorrow is not real. It is an illusion. The only real now." Heeding these esoteric words, the warrior overcame the dire condition he was encountering and soon his mind became tranquil and he fell asleep. Suffering and fear arise in our minds when humans are in a state of imminent or impending death. No one wishes to pass from being alive to being dead.

The desire of the human mind is the desire to remain eternally immortal. Immortals of cells in the human body perish and are regenerated. But we are not mindful or wakeful of this reality. Do humans compose dirges like Catullus or Propertius for the dead cells? Or do we carouse in delirium on the birth of new cells and recite "Happy Birthday" to them?



When one wants to die. Even the people who want to go to heaven want to die to get there! And yet death is the destination we all reach. No one has ever escaped it. Be it Rachel or the Japanese warrior. No one has ever attained perpetuity or everlastingness; how a care-knuckled person may be, he remains a glass jaw to the elements.

Children today cannonaded by gizmos and technology become bored and bored of life at the young ages of twenty, thirty and hotfoot off into their lives. Life is indeed holy and hallowed, too valuable to remain a mystery that should not be recklessly given up. Yet there is no covenant or magic potion which guarantees deathlessness. Unraveling and unravelling this mystery has confronted the minds of scientists, religious congregations and those of scientists and technicians alike. A Zen Master was unwell and desired to cast away his life. His pupils implored him that he ought to live longer and disseminate his profound knowledge. It so happened that one disciple remarked, "When it is life or death, let it be." The Master was ecstatic with the response and passed away. "Let it be" is much more than a mere aphorism; it is a state of mind.

The human mind is influenced by place, time, social impressions and associations and the actions of individuals. Footprints bear both efficacious and antipathetic impacts on the human mind. Humans are enslaved by the above-mentioned faculties and habits and, as a result, involuntarily superintendents of our perceptions, attitudes and behaviour.

Over a period of time we are not aware of these negative emotions they engender in us: anxiety, anger, aggression, covetousness, low self-esteem, fear. Knowledge about the impermanence of life and variegated experiences can be gained only through regular practice of pranayama, dharshan, kriya, meditation, or mindful observation of breath. This is the secret and the only truth.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

How India's workforce can benefit from the world's growing demand
Tapping into this opportunity requires a systematic approach to connect Indian talent with international employers

Labour force is one of the most valued assets, with millions of skilled workers across various industries including healthcare, education, information technology and engineering. Despite this abundance, many of these workers struggle to find suitable employment within their home countries. The global labour market on the other hand, is facing shortages in many sectors. Bridging this gap has been a significant challenge. Skill Shortage and Demand for Indian Talent past decade, countries like Europe, the Middle East and parts of Asia have witnessed critical shortages of skilled labour. This is due to an ageing popula-



ADITI BANERJEE

tion of Indian workers with international standards and job requirements, offering thousands secure employment overseas. A Systematic Approach to Global Mobilisation. The workforce mobilisation model should ensure that the process is smooth and transparent for both the workers and the employers. The organisation focuses on several key stages: **Talent and Skill Gaps:** We should conduct thorough assessments of candidates, ensuring they meet international job requirements. By collaborating with top training institutes, they also provide upskilling opportunities to candidates who need it. **Job Matching:** With established relationships with employers in countries such as Germany, Canada, and the UAE, organisations can ensure that candidates are placed in roles that match their qualifications and aspirations. **Navigating Complexities:** Overseas job placement is fraught with regulatory hurdles, but offering complete support with visas, documentation, and legal compliance, ensures candidates can focus on building their careers without administrative delays. **Supporting Worker Welfare:** The organisation provides post-placement assistance, offering support with relocation and helping candidates adjust to new cultural environments. This ensures long-term success for workers abroad. **Shaping the Industry's Future:** Beyond individual place-



ments, the organisation's work is in shaping the broader landscape of international labour migration. There has to be a system for fair recruitment practices and the protection of workers' rights. This is critical in an industry that is often plagued by stories of worker exploitation and unethical recruitment agencies. A transparent process ensures that workers are fully informed of the terms of their

contracts before they travel abroad. This approach not only safeguards the interests of Indian workers but also builds trust with global employers. The global demand for skilled labour is at an all-time high, and India has the talent to meet this need. Many organisations have pitched in to fill this gap. 'Magic Billion' creates dignified, well-paying employment opportunities for Indian workers overseas. Since starting in 2018, it has facilitated over 4,000 Indian workers being placed in global roles. It is just not helping individuals find jobs; we're building sustainable careers that elevate both the worker and their families. **Women Empowerment:** A particularly noteworthy aspect of such an organisation's work is its focus on women and young professionals. The global job market offers unique opportunities for these groups, particularly in industries like healthcare and hospitality. Targeted programs need to aim at empowering women to enter these fields and secure high-paying jobs abroad. This is especially significant in a country like India, where barriers to women's employment are still prevalent in many sectors. The organisation's efforts to provide training and certification for nursing professionals, for example, have opened up opportunities for hundreds of women to work in countries where there is a growing demand for healthcare workers. This not only benefits the individual but also creates ripple effects

for their families and communities. **Economic Benefits:** India's skilled labour force is not only contributing to the economies of the countries where they work but also bringing significant benefits to India itself. Remittances sent home by overseas workers are a major source of foreign exchange and play a crucial role in the economic development. By placing workers in global jobs, we can help alleviate some of the domestic unemployment pressures. This is especially important for sectors like construction where there is a surplus of skilled labour in India. (The writer is CEO & Co-Founder of Magic Billion; views are personal)

Unlocking the full potential of GatiShakti



UTTAM GUPTA

The PM GatiShakti initiative is revolutionising India's infrastructure by integrating digital planning tools to expedite project completion and improve multimodal connectivity

According to the Secretary of the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), Anand Singh Bhatia, as many as 208 big-ticket infrastructure projects including roads (101), railways (73), urban development (12) and oil and gas (4) worth Rs 1539,000 crore have been recommended for approval under the PM GatiShakti initiative so far. These projects have been recommended by an inter-ministerial group known as the Network Planning Group (NPG) constituted under the PM GatiShakti National Master Plan (NMP). Launched in October 2021, the PM Gati Shakti NMP is a transformative Rs 100 lakh crore initiative aimed at revolutionising the infrastructure in India over the next five years. Its vision is to create a world-class integrated infrastructure that improves the ease of living, boosts economic growth and makes Indian businesses more competitive. It does so by expediting project completion, reducing timelines, enhancing multimodal connectivity, boosting efficiency across sectors, benefiting logistics (a jargon for handling, storage and transportation) creating jobs and fostering innovation. How does it work? The PM GatiShakti NMP has been developed as a Digital Master Planning tool. It works on a dynamic Geographic Information System (GIS) platform wherein data on specific action plans of all the 16 Ministries/Departments dealing with infrastructure sectors as well as of the States have been incorporated within a comprehensive database. The NMP portal has over 1,600 layers of geospatial data, showing all physical and social infrastructure of an area viz land, ports, forests, and highways and so on. The NMP revolves around seven primary sectors that are fundamental to economic growth and ensuring seamless connectivity. These sectors are roads, railways, ports, airports, mass transport, waterways and logistics infrastructure.



These are further supported and complemented by sectors like energy (all fuels such as petrol, diesel, ATF, natural gas and power etc) transmission, IT communication, bulk water and sewerage, and social infrastructure. The inter-ministerial NPG has representations from the connectivity infrastructure ministries/departments, involving their heads of network planning division to ensure unified planning and integration of the proposals. The NPG meets every fortnight and appraises infra projects to ensure multi-modality (a term used to connote several different modes of transportation to get cargo from the factory/port/warehouse to a client's front door), synchronisation of efforts, and comprehensive development in and around the project location. All logistics and connectivity infrastructure projects worth over Rs 500 crore are routed through the NPG. The NPG's approval is required even before making a DPR (Detailed Project Report) at the planning stage. Thereafter, the project follows the normal procedure of approval by the Public Investment Board (PIB) or Department of



AS MANY AS 156 GAPS IN INFRASTRUCTURE TO PORTS AND FOR MOVEMENT OF BULK COMMODITIES LIKE COAL, CEMENT, FERTILIZERS AND FOOD GRAINS, HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED FOR INTERVENTION UNDER THE PM GATI SHAKTI INITIATIVE

Expenditure under the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the Cabinet.

Put simply, NMP provides on a centralised portal, a 360-degree view of all the existing projects/initiatives, those under implementation as well as projects under planning stage across all ministries and departments and offers visibility into all critical data relevant to efficient planning and execution. It helps in the identification of critical gaps in infrastructure, helping to select the most efficient routes for transportation, reducing costs, and minimising delays. As many as 156 gaps in infrastructure to ports and for movement of bulk commodities like coal, cement, fertilisers and food grains, have been identified for intervention under the PM GatiShakti initiative.

The plan also helps in prioritising projects more effectively by leveraging cross-sector interactions, ensuring that the ministries work in harmony to align the projects and allocate resources optimally - based on national priorities - avoiding duplication and redundancies. The upfront approval by the NPG even before the ministry prepares the DPR can help it in making the RIGHT choices, prevent delays and avoid colossal wastage of resources that were germane to the earlier dispensations when the ministries and departments were working in silos - in an uncoordinated manner - unaware of the happenings and work in progress in other departments and bereft of the crucial data on KEY parameters. The PM GatiShakti is a robust system working on real-time basis in a dynamic framework to guide project planning and execution (monitoring through satellite imagery ensures that the ministries can track progress and make necessary

adjustments to keep projects on schedule).

The phenomenal increase in the capacity in all crucial areas such as ports, airports, railways, highways, roads and so on is a testament to the success of efforts made under PM GatiShakti. But, we have a long way to go. The target of Rs 100 lakh crore investment for building the infrastructure over five years was set by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her maiden Budget for 2019-20 (out of this, 39 per cent or Rs 3900,000 crore was to come from the Centre and an equal amount from States and the balance Rs 2200,000 crore from the private sector). Against this, the investment covered under PM GatiShakti is Rs 1539,000 crore which is just about 15 per cent. Even when we take this as a proportion of the investment commitment by the Centre (presumably all projects under PM GatiShakti are centrally sponsored), this works out to 40 per cent. As for the States, they are far behind in meeting their overall investment target of Rs 3900,000 crore. And, very few of them such as Uttar Pradesh, and Gujarat have boarded the PM GatiShakti platform.

The platform by ensuring visibility, identification of bottlenecks and better coordination can help expedite approvals but it can't be a substitute. The approvals have to be given by the concerned authorities at the central and State levels. Here, projects face long delays especially when it comes to getting environmental and land clearances. Local protests exacerbate the delays. 'Working in silos' syndrome doesn't go away just because Modi has given a platform to the bureaucrats in various Ministries to sit together and thrash out issues. Sticking to their stance, especial-

ly when it comes to staking their claim to resources (such conflicts are seen more in major projects like roads and railways) often leads to delays. Further, a lack of coordination with the states, as seen in the Sagarmala and Bharatmala projects, has led to slower progress. Outdated or incomplete data is a major bottleneck. For instance, while land records are digitised in 13 states, the rest lag.

This hampers the implementation of projects in states where land records are not digitised as well as roads/highways projects, power transmission lines, and oil and gas pipelines passing through these states. Even as the PM GatiShakti platform allows for real-time tracking, the authorities don't always make project updates regular, which delays completion. This is particularly true of rural road projects in many districts leading to slow progress.

The investment by the private sector is nowhere near the target of Rs 2200,000 crore set by Sitharaman. In the roads/highways sector, even as the government has asked private players to come under public-private partnerships (PPPs) mode, the latter's response isn't encouraging leaving it to the former to take on the load.

The bottlenecks lead to continuing project delays and cost overruns which cause high tariff/service charges across all sectors highways, railways, ports, airports, power transmission, fuel transportation etc. These come in the way of making Indian businesses more competitive and ease of living for the common man. All Stakeholders particularly the States should work to surmount the bottlenecks to enable PM GatiShakti to deliver its full potential.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Opinion

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2024

Trouble in the air

India needs legislative muscle to tackle the spate of hoax bomb threats to airlines

THE RECENT SLEW of hoax bomb threats (the number crossed 100 on Monday) received by Indian airlines is deeply disturbing. It appears that 2024 is the year of bomb hoaxes for India, as back in May, a similar pattern was seen with educational institutions. While such false threats are not new, the problem appears to have been exacerbated with social media — the current thread of threats have originated from now-suspended X accounts, with their IP addresses linked to Europe. Intercepting the culprits is made harder because VPN, which allows users to mask their IP addresses, helps create a series of red herrings for the authorities to follow.

With technological advances, playing this cat-and-mouse game often yields little results — even now, the perpetrators who have been intercepted have been few and far between, the latest being a 17-year-old from Chhattisgarh. The needle then turns to the law of the land, which is where provisions have been lacking. India has no specific law that pertains to providing false information to anyone that may incite mass panic, and thus far, the approach to such incidences has been a piecemeal one. Some are booked under the Indian Penal Code, where imprisonment varies from six months to three years, along with a fine.

Perhaps it is this ambiguity and, for the lack of a better word, leniency, which has led to this problem being what it is today. Seeing how serious these threats are and the panic and psychological distress they create for the passengers, their families, the authorities, and the executor, the punishment seems to be meagre, and the motives even more ridiculous. From those intercepted in past years, their intentions have ranged from prank calls and interpersonal disputes wanting to halt the flight as they were running late. This is a problem of our own creation. Were more stringent punishments in place, such incidents would not be seen as pranks or be taken so lightly by the perpetrators. The fact that authorities are still scrambling to identify the culprits is an embarrassment for the Indian law enforcement machinery, which does not augur well for the fast-growing Indian aviation industry.

It has been reported that the ministry for civil aviation has been studying the guidelines of the International Civil Aviation Organization, as well as from other countries. One can hope they take a page out of France's book, as the nation underwent a very similar scenario last year around the same time. The French law enforcement launched 22 investigations and made 18 arrests, the majority of which were minors. French law also states that such hoaxes are punishable by a three-year imprisonment and a €45,000 fine. Other countries with stringent anti-bomb hoaxes laws include the US (five-year imprisonment with a \$5,000 fine) and the UK (imprisonment up to six months and a £1,000 fine). This is in stark contrast with Union minister of civil aviation K. J. Somaiya's statement on Monday that the hoaxes are "isolated incidents" and that the Centre was attempting to amend the aircraft security rules and put the culprits on a no-fly list for several years. This "strong stance" will hardly be enough. With the advent of technology, the law enforcement of the land must evolve to keep up with cybercriminals. It would be best if India cracks down on such incidents and devises an approach which deters perpetrators.



DELIMITATION JITTERS

Tamil Nadu chief minister MK Stalin
 "That blessing doesn't mean beget 16 children... now a situation has arisen where people think they should now literally raise 16 children and not a small and prosperous family"

TECHPROOF EXPRESS

WHILE DESIGNED TO REVIVE COMPETITION, IT MAY HAVE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES ON USER PRIVACY

Google break-up risks

SIDDHARTH PAI

Technology consultant and venture capitalist
 By invitation



computer market. Though the DOJ never entirely succeeded in breaking up IBM (though it did force it to create a technology services subsidiary with its own management), the long-running antitrust suit contributed to the rise of competitors like Microsoft and Intel, reshaping the computer industry.

Now, it's Google's turn. But there's a key difference: while previous break-ups were primarily about dividing physical assets (like phone lines or computer data centres), Google's power lies in its vast troves of data. Google's dominance is not just a matter of market share; it's a function of the immense data it collects from billions of users. Every search query, YouTube view, Gmail message, and Google Maps direction is part of an enormous data reservoir that fuels its ad targeting algorithms and product improvements. Competitors like Bing or DuckDuckGo simply cannot offer the same level of personalisation or precision because they don't have access to this treasure trove of information.

This creates a vicious cycle: more users choose Google services, generating more data, enhancing the company's products, and attracting even more users. The DOJ is well aware that competitors will continue to struggle to gain a meaningful foothold in search or digital advertising unless Google's data

advantage is curtailed. This is where the idea of forced data-sharing comes in. The DOJ hopes to level the playing field by requiring Google to make its data available to competitors. Smaller search engines, digital advertisers, and other web-based businesses could theoretically use Google's data to build better products, attracting users with little reason to leave Google's ecosystem.

On paper, forced data-sharing may seem a plausible solution to Google's market dominance. However, Google's data is susceptible. It includes detailed information about individual users' search habits, browsing histories, locations, and even voice recordings via services like Google Assistant. While Google itself is far from perfect when protecting this data — having faced multiple fines and lawsuits over privacy violations — it still has a comprehensive infrastructure to manage user data securely.

But what happens when this data is handed over to third-party companies? Even with strict guidelines or oversight, the risks of data breaches, misuse, or even malicious exploitation multiply as more entities gain access to sensitive information. Smaller competitors may not have the same robust security protocols as Google. And once this data is in the hands of additional parties, its potential to be mismanaged increases exponentially.

If the DOJ mandates that Google share its data, it could inadvertently expose millions of users' private information to new threats. Europe's General Data Protection Regulation has provisions that could conflict with forced data-sharing, given its emphasis on limiting data collection and enforcing the principle of data minimisation. Sharing user data with third parties en masse might violate these principles, creating a legal clash between regulatory frameworks in different jurisdictions.

Moreover, users trust Google (however begrudgingly) because they know what to expect. Introducing more players, each with its own privacy policies and security practices, complicates the already murky data privacy landscape. It's easy to imagine a future where attempting to reduce Google's power creates an even bigger privacy problem. Given these concerns, breaking up Google's various business units may seem like a more straightforward remedy than forced data-sharing. Some have proposed that Google's advertising business be separated from its search engine or that YouTube be spun off as a separate entity. These structural changes would limit Google's ability to leverage its data across different products, diminishing its competitive advantage without requiring that data be shared.

However, even a break-up of this magnitude would face numerous hurdles. Google has spent years tightly integrating its services, making it difficult to separate its arms without harming the user experience or the underlying technology infrastructure. As with most major corporate break-ups, significant legal challenges and logistical nightmares would exist.

As the DOJ moves forward, it faces a critical challenge: ensuring its actions truly benefit consumers and not simply replace one monopoly with a new set of problems. It's a tall order, but one that will define the next era of technology.

THE US DEPARTMENT of Justice (DOJ) is again facing down a corporate behemoth with the potential to reshape the competitive landscape of technology — this time it's Google. For several years, the DOJ and various state attorneys general have claimed that Google exerts undue control over online search, digital advertising, and the broader internet ecosystem. Now, as an antitrust judgment against the tech giant looms, one of the potential remedies the government is considering is not only breaking up parts of Google's operations but also forcing it to share its data with third-party competitors (shorturl.at/MrS6o). While designed to revitalize competition, this remedy may have significant unintended consequences for user privacy.

To understand how the DOJ may proceed to weaken Google's market dominance, it's helpful to look back at other landmark antitrust cases and see where Google fits in — and how the delicate balance between market competition and consumer privacy might be upset in ways few anticipate. The DOJ's case against Google harkens back to some of US' most famous antitrust cases. Two cases serve as prime examples: the break-up of AT&T in 1984 and the confrontation with IBM in the 1970s.

AT&T, a government-sanctioned monopoly for much of the 20th century, provided nearly all telephone services across the US. But its stranglehold on the telecommunications market left little room for competition, innovation, and customer choice. After years of legal battles, the DOJ ultimately forced AT&T to divest its local telephone service providers into seven "Baby Bells". This break-up dramatically changed the industry, ushering in an era of competition that spurred innovation in telecommunications and, later, the internet. Similarly, in the 1970s, IBM faced accusations of monopolising the

Breaking up Google's various business units may seem like a more straightforward remedy than forced data-sharing

India's effective sovereign debt overstated

NANDINI VIJAYARAGHAVAN

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THE GOVERNMENT of India's (GoI) reporting of sovereign indebtedness is probably the most conservative among Asian nations. According to the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India on Compliance of the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, 2003 for the year 2021-22, GoI reports debt net of cash. The Philippines government reports two debt metrics — aggregate debt and debt net of intra-government borrowing, which in 2023 were 60.2% and 55.7% of GDP respectively. The Singapore government announced in June 2023 that its income earning assets exceed sovereign debt, which is over 150% of GDP. S&P reports negative net general government debt-to-GDP ratio for Singapore. GoI's conservative reporting of indebtedness is one of the factors that constrain India's sovereign rating at BBB-/Baa3.

GoI's intra-government debt includes loans extended by the Centre to states and government securities the sovereign's wholly-owned arms — EEPFO, NABARD, IFCI, XIM Bank, National Housing Bank, and Saha — hold. After deducting intra-government borrowings, GoI's FY2024 third-party debt-to-GDP is 77.6% vis-à-vis 86.2% debt-to-GDP. A key metric S&P uses to assign sovereign ratings is net government debt-to-GDP. S&P says it deducted Philippines government securities held in the bond sinking fund, intra-sector debt holdings, and the sovereign's liquid assets to derive the 2022 net government debt-to-GDP of 45.2%. S&P estimates liquid assets, which comprise government deposits at the central and commercial banks and cash and financial assets held at the social security

and government service insurance systems, to be 9% of Philippines' GDP. S&P deduced the Indonesian government's liquid assets to arrive at the 2023 net government debt-to-GDP of 35.7%, which is 360 basis points lower than the country's 39.3% debt-to-GDP. The Indonesian government's liquid assets consist of its deposits at the central and commercial banks. S&P observes that India's gross and net government debt are almost identical; GoI's deposits with the RBI is a negligible

GoI should accurately estimate net govt debt-to-GDP by including the market value of EPFO's non-govt investments to secure an optimal sovereign rating

₹5,043 crore as of March. But the market value of GoI stakes in PSU and the EPFO's investments in non-government securities are sizable. If these assets and government deposits with the RBI are deducted from third-party debt, India's March net government debt-to-GDP moderates to 61.5%. There is a caveat to this estimate, though. The EPFO reports the book value of its non-government securities; the market value may be higher and net government debt-to-GDP lower than 61.5%.

Moody's assesses Singapore's government debt-to-GDP to be around 37% in 2023; the credit rating agency excludes special Singapore government securities (SSGS). The government issues SSGS, a non-tradeable debt, to the Central Provident Fund (CPF) Board. The CPF Board mobilises citizens' and permanent residents' mandatory retirement savings and invests them in multiple securities including SSGS. Moody's treats SSGS as the government's claims on itself.

Indian citizens invest in GoI's small savings scheme, which like Singapore's SSGS, are government-issued, unlisted, and non-tradeable investment products. Small savings are pooled in the National Small Savings Fund, from which central and state governments borrow. Outstanding small savings grew 9.1 times from ₹17,953 crore in March 1985 to ₹1.637 lakh crore in March 2023. If small savings are excluded, India's third-party government debt-to-GDP is 71.4%.

Moody's November 2022 sovereign rating methodology provides for a one-notch uplift if a country's financial assets-to-GDP ratio ranges from 10-25%. GoI's stakes in listed PSUs rose from 9.67% of GDP in September 2023 to 11.73% in December and 13.56% this August. Hence a one-notch uplift in India's sovereign rating to Baa2 on the Moody's scale — equal to Fitch's and S&P's BBB — is warranted.

GoI should accurately estimate net government debt-to-GDP by including the market value of EPFO's non-government investments to secure an optimal sovereign rating and lower the costs of borrowing foreign currency-denominated debt for itself and PSUs.

The need to know who was Bitcoin's Satoshi

WHO IS OR was Satoshi Nakamoto, the creator of Bitcoin? A recent Bitcoin documentary names Peter Todd, with the possible assistance of Adam Back. Suffice to say the truth here remains an open question, but it is worth asking: Why does anyone care?

There is in fact a great deal at stake, certainly at the intellectual level and probably financially and politically as well. It's only natural, and even healthy, to be curious about who could have created more than \$1 trillion in market capitalisation.

Presume that Satoshi has passed away, which would explain why we no longer hear from Satoshi. Hal Finney is one-off-cited Satoshi candidate, and he died in 2014. Under this scenario, Satoshi's reputation is likely to remain intact: He or she stays mysterious and cannot do anything to damage Bitcoin. Satoshi's large and valuable "origin block" of Bitcoin is less likely to be sold. It might be frozen forever, with its current value in the tens of billions of dollars.

A deceased Satoshi also means that Satoshi cannot step forward and advocate changes in the rules of Bitcoin, such as enabling the creation of more Bitcoin. That too is likely bullish for the value of Bitcoin. A living Satoshi, in contrast, might exercise considerable sway over Bitcoin users and institutions, if he or she stepped forward and suggested some rule changes.

Aparajith with religion is instructive. Most of the world's major religions are based on the teachings of dead people. That makes them easier to run compared to religions with living charismatic leaders who receive regular press coverage and are vulnerable to mistakes and gaffes. It is probably best for Bitcoin if Satoshi is no longer alive. It also matters if Satoshi was a single person or a small team. If a single person, that might mean future innovations are more likely than generally thought: If Satoshi is a lone individual, then maybe there are more unknown geniuses out there. On the other hand, the Satoshi-as-a-team theory would mean that secrets are easier to keep than people think. If that's the case, then maybe conspiracy theories are true than most of us would care to admit.

According to many speculations, Satoshi came out of a movement obsessed with e-cash and e-gold mechanisms, dating to the 1980s. People from those movements who have been identified as potential Satoshi candidates include Nick Szabo, Hal Finney, Wei Dai, David Chaum, and Douglas Jackson, among others. At the time, those movements were considered failures because their products did not prove sustainable. The lesson here would be that movements do not truly and permanently fail. It is worth experimenting in unusual directions because something useful might come out of these efforts.

If Peter Todd is Satoshi, then it's appropriate to upgrade any estimates of the ability of very young people to get things done. Todd would have been working on Bitcoin and the associated white paper as a student in his early 20s. At the same time, if the more mainstream Adam Back is involved, then maybe the takeaway is that rebellious young people should seek out older mentors on matters of process and marketing. Whoever Satoshi may be, the fact that the origin block has not been moved raises deep questions about human motivation. Do some people just not want to be millionaires? What reasons might there be for not cashing in? Perhaps Satoshi died very suddenly — but even a dying Satoshi might have been expected to allocate the funds in some matter, if only to a relative or to charity. Or did Satoshi destroy the password in a fit of pique or possible self-restraint?

One of the more extreme (and to me less plausible) theories is that the CIA is Satoshi, or at least behind Satoshi. If that's true, then the CIA is far more innovative than I thought. It is widely known for its cryptographic talent, but it is less well-known for being innovative.

Whatever the story, it is a very interesting one. Perhaps Satoshi is still alive, and correctly identifies extreme fame and wealth as something to be avoided. Someday, I am confident, we will learn who Satoshi is or was. And we will have to change our views of the world accordingly.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Change mindset

Apropos of "L&T's free skill training offer for blue-collar workers goes abegging" (FE, October 22), it is sad that youths aren't showing interest in infrastructure giant L&T's offer of free training in construction work. L&T would easily absorb 15,000 people as it faces shortages of labour, as well as engineers. Construction workers will always work on site, whether at

remote locations or in cities, and not in airconditioned offices. One does not get an opportunity to train and work with a company like L&T daily, so youths and their families must change their mindset and be pragmatic. —Bal Govind, Noida

Future of GST cess

The goods and services tax (GST) compensation cess, initially introduced as a temporary measure,

has become a focal point of discussion due to the pandemic's lasting impact on tax revenues. Its primary purpose was to compensate states for revenue losses and repay loans acquired during the crisis. As the repayment deadline approaches, there is a growing need to determine the cess's future. A group of ministers (GoM) is examining the possibility of merging the cess with the highest GST rate to maintain stable revenue

collection. But this raises concerns about greater complexity and potential tax burden on specific goods. To address these, the GoM is exploring a more streamlined GST structure. Coordinating efforts among GoM's essential to ensure changes align with ongoing initiatives to enhance the GST system's efficiency. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

Scare in Skies: Alarming rise in hoax bomb calls

IT is confounding. It is extremely worrisome. Why are the Indian airlines being bombarded with a spate of phone calls these days? It was unerving to watch as many as 25 flights of airlines getting bomb threats on Sunday alone. With the airlines mandated to take any threat call as very serious, flight delays, disruptions and even cancellations are normal, which trigger exasperating troubles for the passengers. Their schedules, be it office appointments, recruitments, business engagements, or medical agencies or family events, get disrupted or even missed entirely. We have been witnessing untold hardships to thousands of passengers. For the airlines, elaborate and detailed procedures kick in as per protocols. The disruption causes enormous financial losses and

loss of repute. They have to desperately scramble to make alternative arrangements, which are hard to come by. Airport authorities immediately swing into action, tow away the threatened flights to isolation bays and carry out elaborate checks under the eyes of technical and explosives experts. Generally, psychologists attribute hoax calls to a variety of motivations, including: Grudge against a former employer, for example, or any person aboard the flight; thrill of executing such a huge prank that gets widespread attention. Prank calls are those who mentally disturbed individuals seeking attention, or those seeking a feeling of power and achievement in seeing the full-blown effect of their hoax threats whose consequences do not matter at all to

these self-centered individuals craving for sheer pleasure. They want to prove to themselves to be worthy of something, derive anonymous pleasure in causing so much discomfort to others. The more the number of victims the greater the amount of their pleasure at getting away with such pranks. The thrill of pulling off such pranks is not limited to adults. Children are also found seeking to fool others. A 17-year-old boy was taken into custody in Mumbai for threats to four flights, including three international flights. Normally, one hears of hoax bomb calls made to business establishments and shopping malls. Railways do receive such calls. A security drill has to be performed and safety would have to be confirmed. The hardships to all those concerned in

the case of such calls landing at airlines are many times greater. Flights if they are airborne would have to be re-routed to nearest airports to carry out safety checks. It is agonising for flyers who have planned their onward journeys or are going on essential engagements. Over the past one week, nearly 100 flights operating in Indian skies have received bomb threats, sending airlines, passengers and security agencies into a tizzy. Think of the havoc in the country, now one of world's fastest-growing aviation markets, with over 28,000 flights a week. The total number of aircraft stands at 771. In this modern age of communications, most advanced cyber and snooping technologies at hand, that the authorities or airlines are not able to zero in on the pranksters in real-time is worrisome.

The spate of calls does make one to suspect if there is any method to such madness. No country in the world has received so many hoax calls as India, of late. As such, it is natural for commoners and security agencies alike to suspect any malicious intent behind these calls. Under Chapter 22 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), hoax calls qualify for categorisation as criminal intimidation which entails fire or jail up to 7 years or both. It is little reassuring to learn that the government is cognisant of the alarming issue. The government has not only to award stringent punishment to pranksters, it has also given public about its capabilities to track any caller. It is time government actions reassure people that they can fly without any fear and, in fact, fly even more.

LETTERS

Tackling plastic pollution

THIS refers to a recent study published in the journal. Nature, stating that India generates the highest plastic pollution in the world. Tackling plastic pollution requires a multifaceted approach. Here are some key strategies. Change in people's attitudes can significantly reduce plastic use and increase recycling, the best way to control pollution. Encourage or compel consumers to switch to reusable alternatives by adopting the habit of our elders who carried cloth bags for shopping. Develop and promote the use of biodegradable and compostable plastics. Completely ban production of single use plastics, the most polluting material. Strictly implement the existing laws that prevent plastic pollution. What is required is action on the ground, not studies and debates.

Dr O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

Ensure safety of healthcare workers

THE headline regarding healthcare workers feeling unsafe in their workplace is deeply concerning. Healthcare professionals are the backbone of our medical system, and the fact that so many feel unsafe in their work environment reflects a crisis in our healthcare infrastructure. These issues not only endanger healthcare workers but also compromise patient care. Addressing these concerns should be a top priority for healthcare institutions and policymakers. If we neglect their safety, we risk the stability of the entire healthcare system and the well-being of patients.

Aditi Nair, Hyderabad

A bitter lesson for Team India

THE one blunder that has costed us the match against New Zealand in the first test when we decided to bat first after winning the toss. Most surprisingly, neither Rohit Sharma nor coach Gautam Gambhir could assess the behaviour of the pitch and New Zealanders annexed victory by 8 wickets. We have lost to them after 36 years and basically it was a rare defeat of India on home soil. The match was in the pocket of Kiwis within two hours when we got out for an unexpected low score of 46. The match could have been fought in a better way if we had scored roughly 600 runs in the second innings. All credit goes to Rourke, Henry and Ravindra for earning a rare victory against India on Indian soil. Nevertheless, the Indians must have learned a lesson from the outcome.

MR Jayanthi, Coimbatore

Suspend permits to cement factory

ASMBUJA Cement factory will be constructed in the surrounding areas of Kommagundam in Ramannapet mandal of Yadadri district. Don't build a cement factory in our area, keeping in mind the conservation of agricultural land, air pollution and human-related issues. Ambuja Cement should withdraw this idea. Similarly, the Telangana government should withhold full permissions for its construction. Positive decisions should be taken keeping in mind the public opinion poll and the future.

Talari Ganesh, Vellanki, Nalgonda

Hoax bomb calls cause grave concern

IT looks as if an international conspiracy to work as airlines in the country are being bombarded with bomb threats which has become a daily phenomenon for the airlines companies. The time has come to take up the challenge more seriously that warrants passing of new laws against such hoax callers with stringent punishment. The angle of conspiracy by the opposition parties must also be looked into. Let us hope the truth will unravel soon, before the airlines endure avoidable losses, along with nuisance to the travelling public to various destinations.

K R Purvathy, Mysuru

What is watching?

"The world is watching," said "and history will judge us by how we respond to this grave injustice. I call upon each and everyone of you to join this fight for the preservation of our shared humanity." —Dr. Khaled Saleh, FAJR Scientific.

Al-Jazeera reports that hospitals, which have repeatedly been bombed by Israel over the last year, were not immune from this latest round.

Three partially functioning hospitals treating severely wounded patients and sheltering thousands of displaced Palestinian civilians in northern Gaza are now out of service after coming under intense Israeli fire, a Gaza health official told Al Jazeera, as the siege on Jabalia enters its third week, with at least 33 more people killed in the northern area.

Israeli forces bombed al-Awda Hospital in Jabalia early on Saturday, and have also shelled Kamal Adwan and the Indonesian hospitals in Beit Lahia over the past few hours, Al Jazeera correspondents have reported.

Saturday's attacks come days after Israel barred at least six medical service NGOs from continuing their life-saving work in Gaza.

The Israeli government filled him with "deep sadness and concern for the current state of our global family, questioning our shared humanity and ethics." Blocked from providing aid to people in dire need, Saleh called on world leaders to push for an end to Israel's blocking of vital medical aid and those seeking to provide it.

"This is a devastating blow to humanity, representing a level of destruction that we have not witnessed since World War II, yet our world leaders turn a blind eye," he said.

"As a member of the global community," Saleh continued, "I implore all of you who value compassion, ethics, and the sanctity of human life to stand with us and raise your voices against this unconscionable decision.

'Devastating Blow to Humanity'

BARRED FROM GAZA BY ISRAEL, HEALTH WORKERS CRY OUT FOR HELP

JON QUEALLEY

AS more Israeli bombing of the Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza killed dozens of people Saturday, health workers from both inside and out of the besieged territory are again pleading with world leaders to bring an end to the indiscriminate attacks and imposed humanitarian crisis that witnesses on the ground increasingly say there are no words to describe.

At Al Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis and elsewhere in Gaza, doctors and other medical staff on Saturday staged protests and held press conferences to call attention to the ongoing attacks in northern areas, including the latest targeting of Jabalia in which reporting indicates anywhere from 33 to over 50 people—including civilian men, women, and children—were killed.

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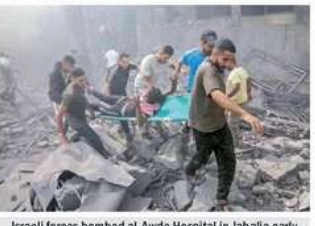
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Together, we must advocate for the voiceless and demand restoration of the fundamental right to access to medical care. Israel's ban on the medical NGOs comes after a string of healthcare professionals who spent time in the Gaza strip have gone public with what they witnessed on the ground, telling tales of unspeakable horror and trying to shake the world out of its complacency on what experts say is a genocide in motion being carried out by Israeli forces.

Earlier this week, the UN humanitarian office, OCHA, said that Israel's continued blocking of food and medical supplies to Jabalia and other areas in the northern was "having life-threatening impacts" for the people there.

OCHA spokesperson Farhan Haq said the OCHA was calling on Israeli authorities "to allowed safe, sustained and unimpeded access to Jabalia and all areas of the north where people are in desperate need of assistance."

In a post on Friday, Oxfam International mourned the killing of Dr. Ahmad Al-Najar and midwife Laila Ineid, both of whom worked with Juzzor, "killed by Israeli airstrikes on Jabalia," the group said. "They were providing lifesaving health care in Gaza. Attacking aid workers is a war crime."

Oxfam repeated its demand for a "cease-fire now" and said healthcare workers should never be a target.

In a dispatch on Friday, Dr. Taghreed Al-Imawi, Juzzor staff and an OBGYN doctor at Kamal Adwan Hospital in northern Gaza, described the untenable situation on the ground.

"The situation is beyond horrific and is very difficult and indescribable," said Al-Imawi. "Dead people, severed body parts and injured people everywhere. We are receiving emergency calls from all the areas of the north. Ambulances are not able to reach the injured. We have seen more than 23 pregnant women among the injured coming to the hospital since last week, wounded either by shrapnel or gunfire, suffering from fractures. Some were in a critical condition. Kamal Adwan Hospital and other semi-operating hospitals have received displacement orders but there is no way to evacuate in any case."

"The pediatric section is closed as it is full of injured people," Al-Imawi added, "the surgery section is full of injured people, even the reception, the hospital has been shelled several times and targeted by snipers, people are terrified to come to the hospital now."

What does China want from next American president?

CHEE MENG TAN

DURING a Taiwan National Day speech on October 10, Taiwanese president Lai Ching-te said that "Taipei" was determined to defend Taiwan's sovereignty against "annexation and encroachment", and emphasised that "China has no right to represent Taiwan".

China's response was swift. Less than a week after Lai's provocative speech, a record 153 Chinese war planes swarmed and surrounded Taiwan during a Chinese military exercise over 24 hours. Beijing's intention was simple: issue Taipei a "stern warning" for what China considers a "separatist act".

Beijing sees the island as a "sacred and inseparable part of China's territory" that must return to the fold. The Taiwanese president sees things differently. Currently, the self-governing island has a different political system, and few Taiwanese are in favour of reunification with China.

Though Washington doesn't have diplomatic relations with Taipei officially, it does have regular communication through back channels and a strong economic relationship. The island is a

key US trading partner and is a major supplier of semiconductors which are critical to the production of computers and other technologies. It also sells arms to Taiwan, although this has reduced significantly under Joe Biden.

China has not ruled out taking Taiwan by force, and if it does, the US might come to the self-ruling island's defence as indicated by Washington in the past.

China holds extensive military exercises around the island of Taiwan in October 2024. But Xi will be hoping the outcome of the 2024 US presidential election might bring a leader that would have a different attitude to Taiwan as well as helping China resolve its economic storm, which has resulted in a rising number of protests, between an outspoken Donald Trump and a seemingly even-tempered Kamala Harris, does Beijing have a favourite? And do either of them offer Xi anything new?

Taiwan and Xi's legitimacy Aside from Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China, Xi is the only sitting Chinese head of state without term limits and whose political ideology



Taiwan, and one that Xi can negotiate with to warm up relations between the two countries

is enshrined in the Chinese constitution. Xi could potentially prove his place in history by resolving China's economic crisis. However, Beijing's increasing isolation from the west due to its support of Russia's Ukraine conquest makes this doubly hard. Like it or not, Xi might have to ramp up whatever agenda Beijing has for Taiwan. If he could make sufficient progress towards unification, he may be hailed as one of the greats of the Chinese Communist Party, which would consolidate his status within the party, and distract from the nation's economic woes.

Unlike Harris, who appears to take alliances and partnerships seriously, Trump questions the benefits of many alliances forged by the US. In fact, the few times that he spoke about Taiwan centres on how the island state has taken America's semiconductor business, and should pay more to the US for its defence.

So, would Trump come to Taiwan's aid? If China does invade Taiwan? Given the importance of semiconductors to electronics and AI, he just might. But Trump also has a reputation as a "dealmaker-in-chief", so he might just cut a deal with Beijing which erodes Taiwan's independence. And that is likely to worry Taipei.

China could halt its aid to Russia to avoid western scrutiny, but that is not likely. Beijing needs a strong Russia to be a viable ally in its battle against a US-led world order, and to avoid being the focus of the west if Russia falters amid its conquest in Ukraine.

While Harris backs Kyiv and sees the war as a strategic and moral issue, Trump has criticised US aid to Ukraine. He also believes that Kyiv should provide concessions to Russia to end the war that Putin started in February 2022. A future Trump administration might strengthen Russia by withdrawing support for Ukraine and lifting sanctions against Russia. And a more robust Russia is good news for Beijing.

US economic hostility So, at first glance, Trump and Harris's approaches towards China are different. Trump's return to the White House could also intensify the trade war that he started in 2018, as tariffs on Chinese goods could go to as high as 60%. This might hasten the economic decoupling between the US and China.

Harris, on the other hand, wishes to "de-risk" China. This approach seeks to maintain US global interest

while engaging with the east Asian economic behemoth. In such a scenario, Beijing might prefer a Harris presidency as it leaves room for negotiation. However, Harris has relatively little foreign policy experience, and is expected to pick up where Joe Biden left off. This means the tariffs and technological restrictions that China faced under a Biden administration could stay under her presidency.

Another factor is Tesla founder Elon Musk who is an ardent supporter of Trump, and may take a top job within a Trump administration.

How much influence the tech multi-billionaire actually has over Trump is uncertain. However, it's worth noting that Musk has substantial business dealings in China, and might seek to lean on Trump if the former president's policies harms Tesla's interests. With many of these factors unclear at the moment, Beijing will be hoping for a US leader who is more interested in economic

wins than protecting Taiwan, and one that Xi can negotiate with to warm up relations between the two countries. (https://hccconversation.com/)

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Forest depart under scanner, investigation ordered

SHIVAMOGGA: Allegations of illegal logging involving forest department personnel have surfaced in the villages of Hosahalli, Hamsagaru, and Giliguru in Sagur taluk. Reports suggest that forest officials may be complicit in the unauthorised cutting and transportation of acacia trees, prompting an investigation by higher authorities.

The Shivamogga Chief Conservator of Forests has responded to these serious allegations by directing the Deputy Conservator of Forests (DCOF) to conduct a thorough inquiry and submit a report within three days. The move comes after concerned villagers brought the matter to the attention of Forest Minister Ishwara Khandre, voicing their concerns over the illegal activities allegedly taking place in government-owned acacia plantations.

DCF Mohan, addressing the issue, confirmed that an investigation has been launched. "Following the complaints from villagers regarding the illegal felling and transport of acacia trees, I visited the affected areas to assess the situation firsthand."

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

THE ASIAN AGE

22 OCTOBER 2024

Terror rearing its head once again in Kashmir

Asking in the glow of the return of democracy and a popular government in place, Kashmir Valley's peace was shattered by a terrorist incident in which seven civilians were targeted and killed. Terror in the Valley is not as old as the Himalayas, but in the last 36 years it has disrupted normalcy while pondering to remain in the hands of a greater Kashmir Valley under Pakistan jurisdiction or an independent state.

The latest incident in which migrant workers were in the crosshairs was as xenophobic as it was based on religious bias. A fact that cannot be ignored however much of a spin is given about the underlying causes of the terror movement.

What such incidents may wreck is not the return of democracy, which is there to stay, but the gains made in the last few years in which FDI started trickling in, dollar and rupee tourism began to surge, and migrant labour came in to help with the infrastructure construction and building activities.

The pros and cons of the removal in 2019 of the historic special status (from 1949) facilitating accession of Maharaja Hari Singh of J&K to India in 1947, can be debated for long. What cannot be denied is a more egalitarian phase in which a measure of peace came with some improvement in the atmosphere and, more significantly, saw the economy just about beginning to tick over with tourism the major mover.

The government of Omar Abdullah will know that the responsibilities only grew with the return of popular rule after six years. Their biggest challenge will remain terrorism of the Pakistan-inspired kind as well as the home-grown variety. Their concern would be to not allow the merchants of terror any leeway in giving even a hint of sympathy for their lost cause. It is not the simplest task in the world to tell the brainwashed and highly indoctrinated terrorist of the futility of their actions. A few things may change with their targeting of outsiders as fear may be planted in the minds of those seeking work in the Valley. But their dreams as well as that of their sponsors of drastically changing the course of Kashmir's 77-year history are not going to change with infliction of collateral damage in the lives of innocent workers.

The symbols of state as in the forces of the Indian Army and the paramilitary have been the main targets in the last four months of about nine incidents, but civilians have also been targeted. A major one was the killing of a pilgrim in Jammu, individuals from outside J&K have also been occasional targets. The armed forces have been coping with one of the toughest tasks of containing the guerrilla tactics of sniper fire and explosives and to let them carry on with their professional duties and responsibilities with the full backing of the state is the only avenue open to offering security to J&K against the designs of sponsored terrorism.

None of the politics or friction of UT-Centre ties should be allowed to come in the way of a free hand given to the police and army to play an important role in intelligence gathering from the ground and the armed and paramilitary forces stationed in J&K in defence of Indian territory and its people.

Gov-CM tit for tat rattles TN

The latest eruption of a needless controversy over 'Hindi Month' celebration at Doodarshan office in Chennai led to sabbat-rattling between Governor R.N. Ravi and Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, both holding constitutional posts. True, Tamil Nadu has been witnessing such showdowns ever since the incumbent for the gubernatorial position took charge three years ago. But the latest drama took an ugly turn with an innuendo referring to an imagined cultural divide, Aryan vs Dravidian, and Ravi spitting racism in it and going to town with that.

While the Hindi Month has been an annual feature in all Union Government establishments, including nationalised banks and insurance companies, it suddenly became a bone of contention last Friday is a mystery. Then, as the celebration began, another controversy descended from the stage as singers assigned to render the Pan anthem, Tamil Thani Vazhthu, missed out line 'Thekkanam Athir Sirantha Dravida Nal Thirunadam' (The Great Dravidian Land in the South) — giving an opportunity to the Chief Minister to revive the Aryan vs Dravidian shibboleth.

Though the debate over who is an Aryan and who is a Dravidian has not been settled, with most people moving ahead in life as Indians, the name-calling of the Governor was misplaced for it was a faux pas by the singers

The Governor had been seen singing the lines of the anthem, *Noeraarum kadavulathu niramandambal...*, on many previous occasions, which he also mentioned in his report. So when he had never been inimical to the State anthem, blaming the govt up on him was just specious. But then, the spat held the mirror to the grim political reality in the State, where the Governor and the Government are at loggerheads perpetually, prompting such squabbles that pose a threat to the democracy it is placed for the Union Government to crack the whip and recall the Governor, who has already lived for five years in Raj Bhavans in Nagaland and Tamil Nadu.

THE ASIAN AGE

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The Asian Age office is located at: New Delhi, Jawahar Nehru National Youth Centre, 210 Dena Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi 110002. Phone: 011 23011574.
Published and Printed on behalf of and for: The Asian Age (P) Ltd., C-6, Sector-03, Noida, 201303.
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ISSN Registration number: 3239094

Subhani



62 yrs after 1962: China hasn't changed one bit



Abhijit Bhattacharyya

The CPC's mala fide intent of forcible grabbing of land or sea has neither any limit nor any end, as it never treats any country as an equal player in normal diplomatic exchanges.

At the United Nations General Assembly session last month, the external affairs minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar made it clear how this country's sovereignty was under a twin attack of naked land grab by the Dragon empire and its South Asian vassal, the military-controlled sham democracy next door, for more than six decades.

At UNGA, the minister criticised both China and Pakistan for undermining the territorial integrity of India as "any connectivity that clouds sovereignty and territorial integrity acquires strategic connotations, especially when it is not a shared endeavour". The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is illegal as it intrudes into Jammu and Kashmir's territory forcibly occupied by China and Pakistan. The worst is that it is not confined to J&K. The territorial violation and occupation, snuffing out of Indian soldiers and citizens alike, are occurring and being endlessly explored in multiple sectors for years.

Has India forgotten its Constitution, making it a "sovereign, socialist, secular democratic republic"? The Constitution does allow India to "acquire foreign territory" but has serious impediments on ending any, except for territorial adjustments subject to an amendment of the Constitution. Yet, India's territorial integrity has been repeatedly violated by the Chinese for several decades, and there's no sign that it will cease anytime soon.

The Chinese presence is visible today all across India's entire land mass. Their penetration continues with the help of several "Chinese lobbies" which

have evolved inside India. From think tank speakers keen on China jants to high-profile media, incrucial importers to money-launderers in exporters, some members of chambers of commerce to warehouse-owning middlemen in third countries, financial and banking sector connomen to cultural festival organisers of Durga Puja events in West Bengal, and intellectual-scholars in Rabindranath Tagore's abode, the Chinese have built up a formidable network in this country and the number are rising.

What can one do if the entire country craves for cheap Chinese products, in a market where the consumer is king. It's another matter that Chinese manufacturers can produce goods that are cheaper than similar Indian products simply due to hefty government subsidies, and of course there are no labour laws to contend with. Interestingly, while China India is under pressure virtually from the entire world, India is acting as a benefactor to Beijing's manufacturers. Both the United States and European Union are imposing stiff tariffs on Chinese-made goods, fearing a divide within the EU; Germany, Spain, Italy and Hungary are unhappy over the steep tariffs on Chinese-made goods, fearing a divide within the EU. The Dragon's enemies crumble from within, Beijing can afford to laugh at their discomfiture.

On the India-China border, after the massacre of 20 Indian soldiers in Ladakh's Galwan Valley in June 2020 and the subsequent intrusions by the People's Liberation Army from

Ladakh to the Northeast, what should India do now?

The answer is simple: India needs to play to its strengths. It must re-vist its entire relationship with China — on territory and sovereignty in face of the chronic border expansionism by the P.L.A. If China is so sure that the entire Sino-Indian border problem is due to a mess-up by the British Raj and its legacy of imperialism, let the Communist Party of China's stands and policy towards Nepal, which was always sovereign and never under British Indian protection in that year after the Gurkha War, but retained links with Tibet and by Nepal/Tibet agreement until 1953 but broken the connection with fall of the Manchu Empire."

"Under British guarantee and with a British resident its independence was respected to such an extent that it could remain virtually a closed country. Mao Tse-tung's view of Nepal as a territory of which China had been robbed by 'unequal treaties' was expressed as early as 1939. It is, therefore, any surprise if China ceaselessly disrupts and dismantles the LAC in the Himalayas? The mala fide intent of forcible grabbing of land or sea has neither any limit nor any end, as it never treats any country as an equal player in normal diplomatic exchanges. Creating disruption is the norm for the CPC."

Mao Zedong and his copycat successor Xi Jinping nurture this aggression and unequal treatment for its neighbours, including India, to inject poison into the body politic. In the eyes of China's Hans, the entire non-Han populace are nothing but barbarians as the former consider themselves as "Sons of Heaven", operating from behind the thick walls of Beijing's Forbidden City. Despite considerable pressure, India refused to accede and join various Chinese projects like the BRI and RCEP. Had it done so, Indian law would have been violated and China would have become a 'legal occupant' inside J&K. Internationally too, China's aggression against India would have found fewer critics, holding India herself responsible for self-created misery.

China regards Jammu and Kashmir, the McMahon Line, Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh as disputed territories. New Delhi might consider paying it back in China's own coin, and openly declare that Taiwan is sovereign, Tibet and Xinjiang are disputed land and South China Sea's Chinese waters. How then would the supreme of the CPC and the mandarins of Beijing react?

It's high time for India to become more pro-active about protecting its self-interest and upholding its sovereignty. Sixty-two years after the war of 1962, the Chinese today play more aggressive game, trying to undermine India from within through its economic leverage exercised by its well-entrenched powerful regional lobbyists. From a massive trade surplus to an industrial blitzkrieg with the help of unscrupulous Indian elements adept in scoring self-goals for their individual benefit, India has been forced to go on the backfoot. These rotten elements are repeating history to make India poorer and the weaker. It's high time to take decisive action to stamp out the Chinese lobbyists in India to deal with the territorial integrity originating from north of the Himalayas.

The writer is an alumnus of the National Defence College, New Delhi. The views expressed here are personal.

LETTERS RAW MAN'S TANGLE

The Indian government may find it very hard to wriggle out of the soup it has landed in after the charges filed against Vikash Yadav in the plot to assassinate separatist leader Gurbatwamt Singh Pannun. India has stoutly denied all charges but doubts will linger as Yadav was a former RAW field operative and often nations will absolve themselves of all responsibility if its agents are caught in covert operations. Possibly official India was enamoured by the Israeli way of dealing with their enemies and tried to emulate their methods of settling issues without having the expertise and training to carry out a successful operation.

Anthony Henriques Mumbai FRAUD DATING APPS

NUMEROUS cases of fraud via dating apps have come to light in cities like Pune, Nagpur and Delhi. Among these, apps like Grindr, which cater to the LGBTQQ community, are prominent. Many of them have been detected via these apps. Initially, friendships are formed on these platforms, followed by the sharing of phone numbers. People are invited to unknown locations under various pretexts. Secret videos are recorded, often in the course of physical relationships, and these videos are then used to blackmail and threaten victims. In some cases, abductions are carried out to extort money. Younger people are increasingly using such dating apps to make friends or simply to pass the time, which has led cyber-criminals to target these platforms. There's a dating app like Grindr installed on your son's or daughter's phone? Dattaprasad Shirodkar Mumbai

THREATS ON POLL EVE

ACTOR SALMAN Khan did commit a crime by shooting a black bull, but that doesn't give anyone the right to threaten his life. Why is some gangster languishing in jail suddenly sending shooters to target Salman, his family and close friends? Is the Maharashtra government shrewd in these threats, which look suspiciously timed with the Assembly elections? Why are Lawrence Bishnoi and his goons not being reined in or is it that they don't give anyone the work assigned to them is over? There will then be no chaos on who masterminded the whole show and the government will once again indulge in chest-thumping, claiming that it acted promptly by eliminating him through an encounter. Syed Abdul Momin Navi Mumbai

Amid US-Canada row, our lack of a national security strategy is telling

Aakar Patel



The international rules-based order is a euphemism for the jungle rule that defines global power politics. The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must — is a line from a famous history text written some 2,400 years ago that is the foundation of international relations theory. This is true even today despite our myriad institutions, including the United Nations and its Security Council. For instance, try telling Palestinians or Lebanese that there is an international order, while their children are being murdered in a one-sided war. Or for that matter, Ukrainians, Iranians, Cubans, Vietnamese or Afghans.

Given this reality, it is natural that nation states will operate only or mostly in their self-interest when it comes to international affairs. This is how it is and that is understandable. India is accused of violating the order by ordering attacks on individuals in foreign nations that it is supposedly friendly with. The reality is that India lacks a threat emanating from across its borders, and it senses it is strong enough to get away with an action, it will act. This is also understandable. Several questions arise, but let us examine one in particular. What is the nature of the threat that we are allegedly having acted against and how grave a threat is it? The data on fatalities will tell us something meaningful. The South Asia Terrorism Portal says vio-

lence in Punjab seriously began in 1984, when 596 people were killed. This was of course the year Operation Bluebird and the assassination of a Prime Minister. Fatalities peaked three decades ago, in 1991. In that year, over 5,000 people were killed. The next year it dropped, but was still almost 4,000. After that it collapsed. From 1996 to 2014, the number of annual fatalities has most often been zero (in 12 years). In the past six years, it has not gone above single digits and no security official has been killed. If the government and the security establishment think it is still a serious enough threat to national security to merit the sort of actions that it has been accused of taking, this thinking must surely be reflected somewhere. Disliking what someone says is not the same thing as feeling a national security threat from them. So, where do we find what our government says regarding threats to our national security? The answer appears to be: Nowhere. In January 2021, a think tank put out a paper by a retired general. He wrote that the changes introduced in the military gave an opportunity for the pioneering incumbent (it was then Gen. Bipin Rawat) to display his strategic and military acumen. Unfortunately, the report concluded that the Chief of Defence Staff was "yet to articulate a defence strategy". One reason for this perhaps was that the government is yet to determine what the nature of the

problem is. Six years ago, the Defence Planning Committee was set up in 2018. This was to be headed by A.J.H. Drona and include the foreign secretary, defence secretary, the chief of defence staff, the three service chiefs and the secretaries of the finance ministry. It had the enormous task, according to a piece in the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, of looking after "national defence and security priorities, foreign policy imperatives, operational directives and associated requirements, relevant strategic and security-related doctrines, defence acquisition and infrastructure development plans, national security strategy, strategic defence review and doctrines, international defence engagement strategy". It met once, on May 2, 2018, and doesn't appear to have met after that. This is surprising for a government and a party that puts, or says it puts, a great deal of pride on national security. In May this year, a newspaper published a report on this aspect under the headline, "Absence of written national security strategy doesn't mean India doesn't have one: CDS". Former general Prakash Menon noted that, for several decades, India's political guidance to the military was oriented towards Pakistan as the immediate threat. But now that the Chinese threat was at the doorstep, this had to change. The political objectives expected to be achieved by the military resided in a document called the "Raksha Mantri's Operational Directive", written by then defence

minister A.K. Antony in 2006. All it says is that the armed forces "should be prepared to fight on both fronts simultaneously a war at 30 days (intense) and 90 days (normal) rates". This is a reference to ammunition and spares, and not really a doctrine. Even this directive, Gen. Menon said, "continues to lack paragraph for the lack of a coherent National Security Strategy". The Defence Planning Committee, headed by the NSA, was assigned this task two years ago. Nothing has emerged so far. This is what happens to complex enterprises are run on the top but with no interest in detail. The national security strategy of an aspiring great power is unworkable because there is no ownership of the intellectual aspects of the work, little application, little enthusiasm for the hard but boring tasks and too much focus and emphasis on meaningless and marginal spectacle. Our contrasting responses to the United States and Canada on the same issue have been highlighted. However, that is the nature of the international order and the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. However, what must also be highlighted is the issue of rationale. Have we thought through the nature of our national security problems before we begin working on solutions? The answer to that is no. The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakarpatel

Boost for arbitral process

Court reaffirms need for limited judicial intervention

Juraj Singh Bindra
Bhavna Lakshina



INTERIM ORDERS. Court to step in only in rare cases

The Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996, shaped significantly by the UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration, seeks to curtail unnecessary court involvement in arbitration proceedings. In *Law International Ltd vs Mintellectuals LLP*, the Delhi High Court reaffirmed the importance of limited judicial intervention regarding interim orders issued by arbitral tribunals under Section 17 of the Act.

The decision arose from an appeal under Section 37 of the Act against an interim order, wherein the tribunal had, among other things, reduced the quantum of security originally granted in respect of royalty payments due under the contract, and directed for a robust form of security, such as property or bank guarantee.

The single-judge bench scrutinised the scope of appellate jurisdiction under Section 37(2)(b) of the Act and emphasised that court interference should be minimal when an appeal is made against an interim order issued by an arbitral tribunal. A discretionary interim order from an arbitral tribunal should only be overturned if it is found to be perverse or manifestly arbitrary.

As such, the court will only step in to interfere with the order of the tribunal where the order suffers from patent illegality or perversity.

PATENT ILLEGALITY

The term "patent illegality" is understood in the context of public policy of the country. The Supreme Court, in an earlier decision in *Swangwing Engineering & Construction Co. Ltd vs National Highways Authority of India*, interpreted "patent illegality" and observed that an arbitral award can be set aside on this ground if it is either contrary to the fundamental policy of Indian law or is against basic notions of justice or morality. This means that if an award is based on no evidence or ignores crucial evidence, it can be deemed "perverse" and is set aside for being patently illegal.

The single-judge bench further examined the application of Orders XXXVIII and XXXIX of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 while granting interim relief. The courts have broad powers to grant interim measures of protection under Section 9 of the Act. To ensure that such broad

powers are not exercised arbitrarily, the courts are guided by established principles which the civil courts routinely employ for granting interim relief, particularly under Order XXXIX Rules 1 and 2 and Order XXXVIII Rule 5, CPC.

The single-judge bench observed that the court while exercising powers under Section 9 of the Act is not strictly bound by the text of these provisions but have to adhere to their underlying principles, which act as a safeguard against any damage to the suit property during the pendency of the suit by requiring the furnishing of security.

The single-judge bench reiterated that interim orders for furnishing security must be passed where it *prima facie* appears that without such security, the claimant may not be able to benefit from a favourable award. Accordingly, the interim orders had been passed by the tribunal after a detailed examination of the evidence to determine the quantum of security.

Furthermore, the tribunal ordered for a robust security to be provided on the basis that there had been a diminution in the liquidity of the appellant and a cheque may not, in these circumstances, continue to provide adequate security. The single-judge bench concluded that the interim order passed by the arbitral tribunal was well-reasoned and was neither perverse nor arbitrary. Therefore, it did not warrant interference by the court under Section 37.

Through this interpretation, the bench has given primacy to the overarching principles of party autonomy and minimal curial intervention in arbitration matters, bolstering the integrity of the arbitration process. It has reinforced the principle that an unfettered scope of intervention in the arbitral process would undermine the spirit and purpose of the Act.

Bindra is Partner, and Lakshina is Associate, Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas



SUBRAMANI RA MANCOMBU

A controversy over irregularities in the export of organic rice has brought into focus the role of the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) as the nodal agency of the National Programme of Organic Products (NPOP).

To hoodwink authorities, some unscrupulous exporters shipped out white rice as organic rice during the period when it was banned between July 2023 and September 2024. The issue came to light following *businessline's* report based on data showing quite a few anomalies, including shipments to nations that cannot afford to buy organic rice.

The issue has now become homogenous with other exporters affected by authorities' action of detaining two ships, for over two months now, going to the courts. In two cases that have come up for hearing, the Gujarat High Court has ordered the arrest of merchant vessel SW South Wind 1. Two exporting firms — MEIR Commodities India and Farmart — are seeking compensation totalling \$1.8 million (₹15.15 crore).

The shipping firm will likely be heard in these cases soon and its argument is awaited. Experts wonder what would APEDA or the government argue if the shipping firm points fingers at them. The exporting firms have argued that their consignments were cleared by the authorities and have been held up due to other suspicious cargo(es).

What if the court orders APEDA to compensate the exporters since certification of organic exports is under its control? Experts point to a similar case in which over 500 grape growers from Maharashtra sought ₹273 crore from APEDA.

In this 2010 case — pending before the Supreme Court now — the growers argued that their shipments were rejected by the European Union after authorities cleared them. They argued that their consignments were sent as APEDA had approved them. Arguing in the Mumbai High Court, the Centre said it could only offer ₹9.63 crore. The court, however, asked the government to compensate the farmers fairly. If 8 per cent interest is added to the claim in the apex court, it could be ₹60 crore now.

These issues highlight that it is not well with the NPOP. One of the problems is lack of strong measures to penalise willful defaulters. Penalties should be a deterrent and not a token measure.

The revised guidelines under NPOP propose to impose a penalty of ₹5 lakh

Organic rice exports: sift grain from chaff

STERN ACTION. Steep hike in penalties for fraud under the National Programme of Organic Products and blacklisting erring firms are the need of the hour



for the first willful default. This will not prevent unscrupulous elements from resorting to fraud such as shipping out white rice as organic rice.

HEAVY FINES IN US

Experts say fraud in the organic food chain will affect humans and the NPOP fails to consider this. The demand is for heavier fines than "pecuniary" ones. For example, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provisions to imprison those violating organic products norms and levy fines running into millions of dollars. In 2019, the USDA charged four persons with fraud in selling organic food.

The main accused got over 10 years of imprisonment. In a 2020 case, an individual was sentenced to 51 months

Experts are of the view that as an agency promoting exports, APEDA's role clashes with that of being a nodal agency for NPOP. Also, APEDA is short on manpower

imprisonment besides being asked to pay \$15 million (₹126 crore).

Currently, penalties are low and a minuscule portion of the crores of rupees defaulters earn. There is also no provision to prevent a defaulter from launching another firm if the functioning company is suspended. We are witnessing this in organic rice exports.

Certification bodies must also be prosecuted if they are found conniving with the defaulter. APEDA or NAB (National Accreditation Body) can refer the issue to higher officials to go ahead with the prosecution.

Experts argue that NPOP has been notified under the Foreign Trade (Development and Regulation) Act (FTDR), which has provisions for criminal prosecution besides penalty. Under the FTDR Act, the penalty for any willful default is five times the value of the cargo. For example, if the value of a cargo is ₹100 crore, a penalty of ₹500 crore can be imposed.

While increasing the penalty or including provisions to invoke the FTDR Act, the NPOP needs to blacklist persons whose companies commit such fraud. On October 10, APEDA Chairman Abhishek Dev said the agency is in the process of finalising the revised NPOP

guidelines. He said the revised guidelines will try to ensure clarity and eliminate ambiguity, besides focusing on transparency. However, they must deter those trying to hoodwink the system through heavy penalties and criminal prosecution.

The NAB is the apex decision-making body for NPOP with APEDA providing the supporting secretariat for NAB. One of the lacunae of NAB is that its approach is based on process rather than product.

Experts say the NAB should be structured like the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). The other issue with NPOP is while APEDA carries out investigations on complaints of irregularities, it also has a role in NAB's decision against those who are at fault. This is like a police personnel turning judge. Experts are of the view that as an agency promoting exports, APEDA's role clashes with that of being a nodal agency for NPOP. Also, APEDA is short on manpower.

The Centre should not opt for just a cosmetic change of NPOP. Rather, it needs to strengthen the organic farming and export system. It needs to bring in measures that will encourage genuine producers and exporters rather than fly-by-night operators.

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

October 22, 2004

Govt mulls 5 pc equity offer in PowerGrid, PFC

The Power Ministry is mulling a 5 per cent equity offering of fresh shares in Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd (PGCIL) and Power Finance Corporation (PFC). In the case of PGCIL, there are several business concerns. However, there is no particular issue in the case of PFC, according to officials.

Bajaj Auto plans to axe 2,500 jobs over 3 years

Bajaj Auto Ltd said it plans to reduce about 2,500 jobs over the next three years, trimming its workforce by 24 per cent to cut costs and bolster its earnings. Bajaj Auto plans to pay cash for workers to leave their jobs, in a voluntary retirement scheme. The plan will leave Bajaj Auto with about 8,000 workers in three years, from 10,500 workers now.

Foreign airlines offer 1,639 extra flights in open sky period

The limited open-sky policy is proving to be a major draw, with the government receiving 1,639 requests for "slots" allocation from various international airlines to operate flights during the winter season. What this means is the government has received requests for more than 1,600 additional flights to be operated during the five-month limited open sky period.

Bhawari Lal Chandak

The idea that a society's well-being is influenced by its economic institutions dates back to Adam Smith. This year, the Economics Nobel was awarded to Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson (AJR) for their research demonstrating the link between economic and social institutions and the level of prosperity. By institutions, the laureates refer to the broad set of rules and norms that govern the economic behaviour of businesses and society or a nation.

An example of the impact of institutional differences can be seen in the high income disparity between Nogales, Arizona, US, and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, despite sharing the same geography, climate, and culture across the US-Mexico border. A similar contrast exists between South Korea and North Korea. These obvious intra-community inequality is explained by AJR

Marwaris and the 2024 Nobel

in terms of differences in their political and economic institutional framework. An example of a successful social institution is the Marwari community. Despite operating within the same geographical area with common economic and political institutions as other Indian communities, the Marwaris have achieved remarkable economic prosperity.

TRUST-BASED CREDIT

A key factor for this lies in their informal institutional framework, which enabled them to leverage trade credit effectively. Trust is the cornerstone of trade credit. Intra-community extension of trade credit relied on extended family ties and relationship, acquaintances, and referrals by respected and distinguished business and community figures.

This trust-based credit network helped them in establishing and expanding their businesses when banking



LEVERAGING. Trade credit network

was absent or inaccessible. Such familial business relationships not only provide credit but extend advice and strategic partnerships. It minimises credit risks and maximise opportunities.

Historically, trust in B2B credit relationships was reinforced by a strong social and business stigma against default and bankruptcy. Within tightly-knit communities, the fear of reputational damages and social boycotts — such as avoiding marriage alliances with bankrupt families — created strong pressure

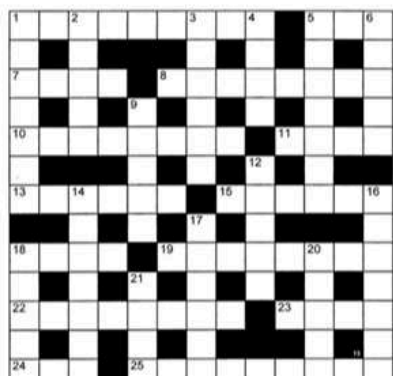
to honour financial commitments. These factors acted as powerful deterrents to defaults.

With changing social values and weakened societal bonds, and events like demonetisation and the Covid-19 pandemic, the trade credit ecosystem has been disrupted, eroding the willingness to honour financial commitments. Intense competition and the loosening of close-knit social ties have diminished the effectiveness of fear of reputational damages leading to widespread delays and defaults. These undermine payment culture - once key to business prosperity.

Businesses thrive on reputation, which is deeply tied to credit discipline. To operationalise this, real-time tracking of payment defaults and delays, along with the digital dissemination of this information to stakeholders, can foster a trade credit ecosystem.

The writer is former DGM, SIDBI

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2552 EASY



ACROSS

1. It prevents power of motion (9)
5. Measure of brickwork (3)
7. Dramatic part (4)
8. Eater of flesh of own species (8)
10. 5 Down. Extortionate dealing (8,7)
11. Resist, flout (4)
13. Discourteous disregard; slender (6)
15. Coloured drawing medium (6)
18. The military (4)
19. Offered for acceptance (8)
22. Thinness in the atmosphere; scarce quality (8)
23. Cloth covering coffin (4)
24. Marry (3)
25. Catches up with and passes (9)

DOWN

1. Leads about and shows (7)
2. Pull together; revise (5)
3. Cover in bandages (6)
4. Utter tunnel sounds (4)
5. see 10 Across
6. In an insipid manner (5)
9. Ability to see (5)
12. Takes firm hold of (5)
14. Walled in (7)
16. Rounded lumps; swellings (7)
17. Bony fish (6)
18. Missile, pointer (5)
20. Not strict; remiss (5)
21. Open (parce) (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Paris lays all anyhow when none of the traffic moves (9)
5. Aaron's mule in the hands of an angel (3)
7. Baker produces it soundly as a part one can play (4)
8. One who feeds on his own, kind of (8)
10. 5 Down. Glaring extortion not carried out by thief in the night (8,7)
11. Resist authority to make one a god, but lose heart (4)
13. It is an affront to be an old shilling short in paying (6)
15. Colouring medium, or any variation in it used with carbon (6)
18. Are almost there, and may lose heart to the host (4)
19. Support does waver if offered for consideration (8)
22. Infrequency of finding it as earner turn south (8)
23. Lose flavour for everything after 2nd April (4)
24. Starts with earnest desire to get married (3)
25. One is so greedy, one steps on it and passes (9)

DOWN

1. Beginning of pomp as a Red turns out for military shows (7)
2. Gather round the flag for a motoring event (5)
3. Wrap it up, so what's wrong with being in the Southeast? (6)
4. Sound like a canary and be an informer (4)
5. see 10 Across
6. Of the French lily one had left in an uninspired way (5)
9. A ridiculous object to be found on top of a barrel (5)
12. Takes a firm hold of travelling-cases (5)
14. Got bricked in with me and drum I used for it (7)
16. Lumps, unless shortened, do get in knots (7)
17. Fish wars about half the seas are engaged in (6)
18. Indicator of war, or different form of it (5)
20. Is not soundly taught to fire about fifty (5)
21. Open it up for the international statesman's party (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2551

ACROSS 1. Burden 4. Ascend 9. Opacity 10. Dross 11. Drip 12. Snow 13. Ear 15. Yawn 16. Hymn 19. Tar 21. Norm 22. Stun 24. Extol 25. Distant 26. Shoddy 27. Depend
DOWN 1. Blood-brothers 2. Realty 3. Epic 5. Sideways 6. Emote 7. Discriminated 8. Lying 14. Twinkled 17. Nitrate 18. Bride 20. Ratio 23. Jle

Tax truths

Direct tax base should be widened

Recently released data on direct tax collections trends over two decades do have some important lessons to offer. For one, there has been a notable improvement in the tax base on account of a number of factors, for which the income tax authorities must be given some credit. The tax base has expanded from 5.26 crore in AY14 to 10.41 crore in AY24, a growth of 98 per cent in a decade or a CAGR of about 7 per cent.



The rise in digital footprint as well as a raft of confidence-building measures — such as consolidated and transparent income statements, pre-filing of returns for individuals, speedy refunds, among others — have aided bonafide taxpayers. The gains of compliance exceed the risks of flying below the radar in a digital age. However, the growth of the population and workforce would per se have boosted taxpayer numbers. There is also no getting away from the strange fact that just about 7 per cent of the population pays taxes in the world's fastest growing economy. There are at least three categories of income earners who can be tapped to improve the base: agriculturists, small and medium enterprises, and expatriates. Incomes from farming above a threshold can be tapped; small farmers covered under schemes such as PM Kisan Sannidhi Yojana can be excluded. There are a number of digital touchpoints now, besides land records, even in the case of rural transactions to arrive at a database. It is simpler to do so in the case of small enterprises, as the GST network can work as a rich data base for income tax authorities. A presumptive taxation model can be tried here. It is not known whether expatriates are paying their share of taxes on the Indian component of their salary, which falls outside the ambit of any double taxation avoidance treaty.

There are many interesting facets to India's direct tax experience. A tax buoyancy of 2.12 in FY24 marks the only seventh year since FY2001 when the ratio has exceeded two. What's more, direct taxes as a percentage of total taxes has risen from 36.3 per cent in FY2001 to 56.72 per cent today, a progressive shift by any yardstick, as there can be no two views about indirect taxes pinching the poor. But what is less equitable is that the buoyancy has been led by individual income tax payers rather than corporation taxes.

This reversal occurred abruptly in FY20, coinciding with tax concessions to corporates, and has stayed that way since then. For FY25 till October, net direct tax collections have risen 18.35 per cent, with personal income tax surging ahead. Within the personal income tax space, the number of individuals filing returns has grown at a slower pace between FY20 and FY23, implying that the tax growth has probably been led by a smaller section of individuals. Individuals surely deserve a better deal, after reposing faith in tax reforms introduced over the last decade or more.

POCKET



"They are into some kind of AI hardware!"



ABHIJIT DAS

Recent media reports suggest that the Department of Commerce has decided to go slow on many FTA negotiations and is in the process of revising its FTA strategy. This opportunity must be utilised to take a hard look at issues of concern in FTAs, particularly government procurement.

What is the common thread running through the following two recent events: government celebrating 10 years of Make In India; and the ninth round of India-EU negotiations for a free trade agreement in the last week of September?

An important policy instrument — government procurement — links these seemingly unconnected events. Is it possible that the government developed second thoughts on its FTA strategy in view of the role of government procurement in domestic policy?

With the WTO rules having considerably restricted the elbow room of governments to bend in favour of their domestic producers and service suppliers, government procurement remains an important exception. Governments in most countries are allowed to favour their domestic producers and service suppliers in the procurement of goods and services by them for their own use and not for commercial purposes.

GOVT PROCUREMENT

What do FTA negotiations have to do with government procurement? In most of the recent FTAs of the developed countries, each party has agreed to treat suppliers from the other party at par with its domestic suppliers in government purchases. Effectively, this curtails the flexibility available to governments to use government procurement as a policy instrument for boosting the commercial prospects of their domestic suppliers.

How has the Centre used government procurement to boost the domestic economy? Rule 153 of the General Financial Rules allows the Central Government to provide for mandatory procurement of any goods or services from any category of bidders, or provide for preference to bidders on the grounds of promotion of locally manufactured goods or locally provided services.

Further, the Public Procurement Policy for Micro and Small Enterprises (MSE) mandates 25 per cent annual procurement from MSEs by Central Ministries/Departments/Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPE).

The effectiveness of this policy can be assessed from the fact that the total procurement by Central Ministries/Departments/CPEs from



Welcome rethink on FTAs

CAUTION NEEDED. Ceding ground on government procurement would impair the use of this instrument for boosting local economic capacity

MSEs during the financial year 2023-24 was ₹2,630.38 crore.

Another initiative, the Public Procurement (Preference to Make in India) Order, 2017, (PPO 2017) aims to create an assured domestic market for manufacturers, who are genuinely 'Make in India', thereby encouraging utilisation of Indian material resources for the provision of goods required for public procurements.

How has government procurement figured in India's FTAs? While some of its initial FTAs have provisions on information exchange in respect of government procurement, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with Japan requires a party to enter into negotiations with the other party if the former provides non-discriminatory market access in government procurement to a third country.

In the FTA between India and the UAE, both parties have agreed to

provide non-discriminatory treatment to goods, services and services suppliers of the other party in government procurement contracts. However, India has excluded procurements conducted under PPO 2017 from the non-discriminatory market access.

It is reasonable to assume that in their FTA negotiations with India, the UK and the EU would be seeking to expand market access for their entities in India's government procurement beyond what India has provided to the UAE.

TIME TO PAUSE

In particular, demands could be made on India not to exclude procurements under PPO 2017 from the non-discriminatory market access. If India is unable to resist this pressure, it would considerably undermine the ability of the government to use public procurement as an instrument for promoting Make in India. The recently announced pause provides scope for a rethink.

Government procurement measures have been used by other countries to bolster domestic production, protect vulnerable groups and also support environment and labour concerns.

Many studies have highlighted how the US has used the instrument of government procurement to provide an assured market to its business entities who create products based on frontier technologies.

Many developed countries have made effective use of this policy instrument. To illustrate, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, implemented in the wake of the global financial crisis, sought to save existing jobs and create new ones. It imposed a general requirement that any public building or public works project funded by the new

stimulus package must use only iron, steel and other manufactured goods produced in the US.

Further, many studies have highlighted how the US has used the instrument of government procurement to provide an assured market to its business entities who create products based on frontier technologies. This has enabled local entrepreneurs to scale up their production and become commercially viable.

Will India not gain from having non-discriminatory access to government procurement markets in the EU and the UK? No doubt the value of government procurement in these markets that may be subject to non-discriminatory treatment are impressive — €473 billion in the EU in 2022 and £110 billion in the UK in 2021.

However, it is a harsh reality that a minuscule value of the procurement is awarded to suppliers from outside the EU. Some studies have concluded that in many years less than 0.5 per cent of the EU's procurement was awarded to non-EU sources. India's negotiators must not imagine that a big commercial opportunity awaits India's exporters in the public procurement markets in the EU and the UK.

In conclusion, India needs to tread extremely cautiously while negotiating rules on government procurement in its FTAs. And, that holds true for FTA provisions in general.

The writer is an international trade expert. Views expressed are personal

Improving credit penetration in Bihar

RBI's priority sector lending guidelines have a key role to play in providing credit to small farmers, artisans and micro firms

Dharmender Jhamb

Bihar, one of India's most populous, has a predominantly agrarian economy. Per Census 2011 at least 88 per cent of the State's population reside in rural areas. Per Period Labour Force Data, close to 50 per cent of the workers are employed in agriculture even today. Despite recent strides in infrastructure and economic development, Bihar continues to face challenges in accessing formal credit, particularly in rural areas.

As per NABARD's State Focus Paper 2024-25, over the last five years (2018-19 to 2022-23), Bihar has seen a notable 101% increase in Ground Level Credit (GLC), rising from ₹1,09,582 crore to ₹2,20,520 crore.

This growth includes a 91 per cent surge in priority sector advances, which went from ₹75,894 crore in 2017-18 to ₹1,44,961 crore in 2022-23. Despite this progress, certain sectors show areas of concern.

For instance, while GLC for agriculture and allied activities grew by 62.77 per cent, crop loan disbursements declined from ₹19,446 crore in 2018-19 to ₹15,395 crore in 2022-23. Additionally, the proportion of priority sector lending within overall GLC has

decreased, from 69 per cent to 66 per cent over the same period.

As of March 2023, Bihar's Credit Deposit (CD) Ratio stands at 53.01%, significantly lower than the national average of 75.80%, according to data from the State Level Bankers' Committee (SLBC), a reflection of how a significant portion of Bihar's population remains underserved by formal financial systems.

Per RBI master directions on Priority Sector Lending (PSL), 22 out of 38 districts have a per capita PSL flow of less than ₹9,000, impacting small farmers, artisans, and MSMEs.

Despite an increase in ground-level credit flow in the state, these figures highlight a substantial untapped credit potential. NABARD projected that there is ₹2,43,093 crore credit potential for Bihar in 2024-25.

RBI PUSH

RBI's Master Directions can significantly help Bihar by ensuring that underserved sectors of the economy receive adequate financial support.

Under PSL incentive framework, fresh priority sector loans in districts with lower credit flow (per capita PSL less than ₹9,000) will be assigned a higher weight of 125 per cent. This incentivises banks to allocate more



CREDIT. Making it accessible

resources to underserved regions, including Bihar's 22 low-credit districts.

Banks are required to allocate a portion of their lending to critical sectors, with 18 per cent of Adjusted Net Bank Credit (ANBC) directed toward agriculture, including a 10 per cent target specifically for Small and Marginal Farmers (SMFs). Additionally, 7.5 per cent of ANBC must be allocated to micro-enterprises.

The Bihar government can play a proactive role in deepening credit penetration by leveraging the Business Correspondent (BC) ecosystem as a periodic monitoring mechanism. A mission-mode approach can be adopted to drive loan penetration through district-wise campaigns, such as loan melas, financial inclusion awareness drives, and mass outreach programs, particularly in the 22 districts with low

per capita PSL. A targeted goal to double credit penetration over the next five years can be achieved through a robust expansion of the BC network, particularly increasing the presence of bank sakhis (women-led BCs) across rural areas. This will not only deepen financial inclusion but also empower women by making them integral to the credit delivery process.

The adoption of digital platforms for loan disbursement, mobile banking apps, and online credit assessments can significantly reduce the time and cost of accessing credit. Bihar government can also enhance the role of its BC network by equipping them with digital tools, enabling seamless onboarding, real-time monitoring, and better financial literacy for borrowers.

The updated PSL guidelines provide a critical opportunity for Bihar to address its regional disparities in credit access, particularly in underserved districts. Targeted interventions, like loan melas and a focus on expanding the BC network with a special emphasis on women-led 'bank sakhis', will be key to doubling credit penetration over the next few years. With a coordinated, mission-mode approach, Bihar can unlock its economic potential.

The writer is Partner, Grant Thornton Bharat

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

Need for collaboration

This refers to the article "Trade union 'recognition' and the law" (October 20). It is not a desirable management policy to resist formation of trade unions or their recognition because they can serve as a useful platform to communicate workers' grievances and concerns to the management. Managements oppose unions because they treat the former as an adversary and hinder even worker-friendly decisions suspecting conspiracy there. If management and unions develop a collaborative relationship balancing the expectations of both sides, it will create a work culture

that will benefit the entire organisation.

YG Chakraverty
Pune

Eco accountability

With reference to the Editorial "Green truths" (October 21), the guidelines introduced by the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) to combat greenwashing are a welcome step toward promoting transparency and accountability. By requiring verifiable evidence, third-party certification, and clear distinctions between product components (such as packaging, manufacturing, or disposal), the

guidelines can help prevent misleading practices. But a robust complaint mechanism is necessary to report greenwashing practices effectively. Additionally, the introduction of penalties or fines for violators would add legal weight to these regulations and serve as a deterrent.

Amareet Kumar
Hazaribagh (Jharkhand)

Green disclosures

The Kyoto protocol in 1997, vowed to limit greenhouse gas emissions to 6-8 per cent below 1990 by 2012. In 2010, it had planned to fund the effort at \$100 billion a year, in the Green

Climate Fund. By 2010, just \$10.2 billion had accrued to the fund. This proved a major issue of conflict in the last COP 28 too. And yet that conference resolved to triple renewable energy production within this decade, sitting on an empty war chest. Beyond leveraging the carbon slogan, nations do not grapple with the core issue, that of collective omus.

R Narayanan
New Mumbai

Agenda for J&K Govt

Apropos of the Article

for the new Government in J&K (October 21), the economic growth of the state and aspirations of the people are directly proportional to the mainstreaming and aligning with the Union Government for un-hindered infrastructural investments and development. The abandonment of separatist and secessionist agenda of some political outfits and activists is desirable for the State's growth and development. Omar Abdullah has taken over as CM in an entirely new environment and has a lot of opportunities. A stern signal must go from the CM to Pakistan to shun the terrorism and targeted killings in the State.

Vinod Jhri
New Delhi



OUR VIEW



Quick commerce should explain its pricing game

Are quick delivery services using predatory prices? While it's for India's antitrust authority to decide on a probe, Zepto, Blinkit and Instamart can use transparency against suspicions

A few years ago, retailers had protested the ways of private online platforms. Small shops claimed to be victims of a power imbalance, one that India's 2022-launched ONDC was expected to help redress. If last week's complaint by product distributors evokes a sense of déjà vu, it's because a charge of predatory pricing has been levelled again, this time against quick-commerce firms. The All India Consumer Products Distributors Federation (AICPDF), which represents some 400,000 entities that distribute fast-selling stuff made by major companies, wants the Competition Commission of India to probe quick-delivery players like Zepto, Zomato's Blinkit and Swiggy's Instamart for their alleged violation of rivalry rules by selling wares at unfairly low prices to lure customers through pricing policies that could drive other channels out of business. The AICPDF's letter to India's antitrust authority not only states that quick-commerce firms have begun dealing directly with many manufacturers, putting the survival of regular retailers at threat, but also alleges that significant control of inventory at dark stores amounts to a violation of law.

Networks of dark store-houses have enabled quick-commerce leaders to home-deliver groceries within spans as short as 15 minutes and the rapid adoption of these zippy services may have been at the cost of neighbourhood shops to a significant extent. The legal status of these stores may need a look-in. But if this format finds itself under an antitrust lens, its legitimate factors of success must not get mixed up with muscles flexed to bully the market. Speed of delivery, this format's edge, is the principal innovation that has attracted customers. This is

just a mark of the retail sector's evolution. The unfair part, as alleged, is how quick deliveries are priced. Is it harming other retailers? This cannot be determined without a look at details. As with the appeal of swiftness, we can't fault tech-driven cost efficiencies that let these startups operate on thin margins. As for bulk deals with suppliers to strike bargains and reduce price tags, this practice only captures a transition from small- to large-format retailing. Economies of scale can spell big discounts that are not harmful. Since shoppers save money, all this is pro-market, even if corner shops lose footfalls. Yet, heavily funded startups are often suspected of 'burning cash' to buy market share by selling products far below cost in an attempt to attain market dominance. If rich startups are deploying their coffers on a strategy of signing up people for habituation by paying their grocery bills (even partly), then the scrutiny of fair-play rules must apply. The brute force of big money shouldn't get to reshape retail dynamics in a manner that would let only a few players survive, depriving us of a well-contested sector.

In general, only evidence of competition rules being flouted can justify intervention in a market that should otherwise be free to evolve as guided by forces of demand and supply. It is true that antitrust cases often take too long to resolve. Even the need of an investigation is yet to be decided. However, it is in the interest of quick-commerce businesses to have this controversy settled at the earliest. To that end, they could make disclosures in their defence that go beyond the usual regulatory requirements of transparency. If their margins and account books reveal explainable and fair pricing, then the threat they're perceived to pose may well be within the limits of fair competition.

THEIR VIEW

Indian philanthropy should take a new approach to mental health

Let's frame mental health as a human right and then focus on accessibility and non-discrimination



HARSH MARIWALA
is founder of Mariwala Health Initiative and chairman of Marico.

The gap in access to mental healthcare in India should perhaps more appropriately be called a chasm. The space is overdue for increased philanthropic interest. However, while we try to bridge the distance, we should ensure we do it right—with long-term, systemic and structural change rather than short-term interventions.

The pandemic brought us a silver lining with the mainstreaming of the mental-health conversation. There has been an increase in funding for the cause from private philanthropists and foundations, many of whom traditionally supported education, healthcare and poverty alleviation.

However, my experience at Mariwala Health Initiative (MHI) tells me that we have barely scratched the surface. Mental health is an urgent, widespread and systemic challenge. Piecemeal and inequitable interventions are grossly insufficient to address it. To make a meaningful dent, we need to revisit and fine-tune our approach and priorities.

For one, most funding is currently directed to mental healthcare institutions in urban areas. This care does not reach remote and marginalized communities such as indigenous or rural groups, Dalit communities, women, the LGBTQIA+ community, and people with disabilities. These groups face

unique stressors, higher rates of mental health distress and greater barriers to accessing care. What exacerbates the issue is our current approach of seeing mental healthcare as a top-down service, focusing on diagnosis, and institutional as well as clinical solutions.

While we do need to address the gap between the demand and supply of mental health professionals, we tend to overlook the role that peer support networks and community-driven interventions can play.

MHI has partnered with almost 70 non-profit organizations that work on mental health at the grassroots with marginalized communities. Their programmes are designed within the local, cultural and social context. Philanthropists can spend efficiently by funding development and capacity-building for such peer and community programmes, which are tailored to the unique needs of the community. India has found proven success in training community members to respond to common mental distress in villages.

Another way to make mental healthcare more accessible to underserved communities is to invest in its integration with primary healthcare systems. As part of an ongoing collaboration with the Chhattisgarh State Health Resource Centre, MHI designed a curriculum on mental health and suicide prevention and shared it with 120 master trainers across Chhattisgarh.

The trainers pass on these skills and tools to front-line healthcare workers. Similar work is being done in Kerala with the Kerala State Health Resource Centre for mental healthcare and suicide prevention with the LGBTQIA+ community. This approach can ensure that mental healthcare is seen as part of general healthcare and stigmatization is reduced.

However, while building capacity, it is crucial to build it right. Mental healthcare should be framed as a human right, focusing on accessibility and non-discrimination. Practitioners

and social workers should be trained to incorporate a psycho-social and intersectional lens. They should be equipped to acknowledge that a person's identity—gender, race, caste, religion, sexuality, disability, class and age—results in unique experiences and hence mental health outcomes. For example, MHI's Queer Affirmative Counselling Practice (QACP) is designed to help mental health practitioners incorporate a queer-affirmative lens to their counselling, thereby ensuring that their practice becomes a safe space for people who have lived experiences that vary from the 'norm'.

Community or peer interventions based on identity or geography are often small-scale grassroots efforts. Scaling a single such model is not effective because mental healthcare cannot afford a one-size-fits-all approach.

Secondly, mental health interventions often lack the immediate and measurable outcomes that philanthropists have come to expect from education or healthcare. We must be open to investing in approaches beyond impact numbers.

Creating comprehensive and integrated programmes that address present-sized and localized needs calls for large-scale collaboration. Philanthropists need to work not just with one another, but also with governments, corporations, non-profits, academic institutions and community leaders.

It is crucial to pool our resources and expertise and create knowledge-sharing platforms that help different stakeholders—practitioners, researchers, policymakers and philanthropists—share their insights, learnings and best practices.

We need to pull together to push for policy and cultural shifts that embrace a rights-based approach and an inclusive framework that encourages multiple voices, perspectives and narratives. Simply spreading awareness about mental health is not going to cut it. We need to change its narrative.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

THEIR VIEW

The advances of SpaceX have effected a paradigm shift

AMIT KAPOOR & MEENAKSHI AJITH



are, respectively, chair and development policy lead at Institute for Competitiveness.

In 1969, Neil Armstrong took his historic step onto the lunar surface and declared, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." This profound moment not only marked humanity's first journey to another celestial body, but a new era of space exploration that inspired generations. A few days ago, when SpaceX in an unprecedented 'chopsticks' manoeuvre caught a rocket's massive booster stage as it descended back to Earth, CEO Elon Musk tweeted: "Big step towards making life multiplanetary was made today."

Just as Armstrong's Moon landing signified a huge leap for mankind, SpaceX's advances symbolize humanity's re-defined relationship with the cosmos. Each successful launch and recovery brings us closer to making space travel a routine affair. The feat of catching a booster for re-use not only exemplifies SpaceX's cutting-edge engineering, but also raises a provocative question: Are we as a species going to conquer the heavens?

SpaceX was born from Musk's vision of a human settlement on Mars, a "positive, constructive, inspirational goal" to unite humanity in challenging times. To that end, he proposed \$20 million for a 'Mars Oasis' project, an initiative aimed at sending a robotic lander to Mars by 2005 and creating a mini-greenhouse. Unfortunately, the plan did not materialize, largely due to the exorbitant costs of launching rockets into space.

This obstacle prompted the birth of SpaceX. In the following years, through cutting-edge research, the company went about trying to revolutionize the rocket-launch industry, lowering costs. Frequent launches of rockets built in larger quantities helped SpaceX achieve economies of scale, leading to reduced per-unit costs. It was an innovative business model, with re-usable rockets a key aim and synergies maximized with allied projects, like Starlink—SpaceX's 'satcom' business aimed at offering internet access across the globe through a constellation of satellites. The very scale of the company's ventures into space qualify for what Thomas Kuhn would call a 'paradigm shift.'

For decades, space travel was characterized by expensive, one-time-use rockets that necessitated extensive resources for each launch and limited orbital access. SpaceX

disrupted this model with its development of reusable rocket technology, allowing a single vehicle to undertake multiple flights, significantly reducing costs.

At the heart of these achievements lies a commitment to investment in research and development (R&D). It proves that the relevance of R&D extends beyond innovation; it cultivates a culture of curiosity and experimentation. SpaceX's iterative approach—testing, learning and adapting—has been at the forefront of all its successes and failures.

SpaceX's use of failure as a learning tool is especially commendable. From the Armo-6 incident in 2016 to the Starship SNI and Starship SNI3 in 2020, it has faced its fair share of mishaps. But by embracing the philosophy of "fail fast, learn faster," it was able to quickly identify and address failures, and is now capable of doing back-to-back launches within 24 hours.

The company's efforts also shine a light on how rigorous scientific inquiry can yield

practical solutions beyond aerospace. The Starlink project, for instance, not only aims to democratize internet access but expand the broader telecommunication revolution to all parts of the world. Its beneficiaries include business operations, emergency responses, remote education projects and other endeavours.

The company's breakthroughs go beyond cost-effective reusable rockets for space launches

Starlink's advanced satellite technologies provide critical data on deforestation, urbanization, weather extremes and natural disasters. From an economic perspective as well, the ripple effects of SpaceX's technological advancements have stimulated developments in related sectors, such as aerospace engineering, robotics and materials science.

An emphasis on sustainable practices in rocket development can inspire innovations in green technology. Techniques developed for energy efficiency and waste reduction in space travel can be applied to industries such as manufacturing, transportation and energy, promoting sustainable practices across multiple sectors.

Advancements in data analytics and satellite technology can be utilized to track the spread of diseases. Satellites can monitor environmental factors that contribute to disease outbreaks, aiding researchers and public health officials in responding proactively.

Disruptive innovation, as done by SpaceX, therefore, offers solutions not just for humanity's future, but also for the present. With challenges such as climate change and resource depletion looming over planet Earth, the need for humanity to adapt has never been more pressing.

With great power, however, comes great responsibility. SpaceX's ambitions offer a glimpse into a future where humanity can thrive beyond our planet, seeking out new resources and opportunities. As we stand at the threshold of this new era, it is crucial to recognize the impact that R&D has on our prospects. The lessons learnt from this journey highlight the importance of a robust scientific framework that not only drives technological advancements, but also prepares us for ethical dilemmas that lie ahead.

The exploration of space is not just about conquering new frontiers. It is about understanding our place in the universe and the responsibility we hold as stewards of our planet and explorers of the great beyond.



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Billionaire power: There may be a way to escape a new gilded age

Pursue stronger institutional means of limiting the influence of the privileged and reconsider policies that create disparities



DARON ACEMOGLU

is a 2024 Nobel laureate, institute professor of economics at MIT and co-author of *Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity*.



Tech billionaires such as Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk are not just among the richest people in human history. They also are exceptionally powerful—socially, culturally, and politically. While this is partly a reflection of the social status that society attaches to wealth, that is not the whole story. What matters even more than simple wealth is that these billionaires are viewed as entrepreneurial geniuses who exhibit unique levels of creativity, daring, foresight and expertise on a wide range of topics. Add the fact that some of them control major means of communication—namely, key social-media platforms—and you have something almost unparalleled in recent history.

The image of the rich, brave businessman who transforms the world can be traced back at least to the robber barons of the Gilded Age. But one of the main sources of its contemporary popular appeal is Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*, whose protagonist, John Galt, strives to re-create capitalism through the sheer force of his idealism and will. While Rand's novel has long held canonical status with Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and libertarian-leaning politicians, the influence of its central archetype is hardly confined to those circles. From Bruce Wayne (Batman) to Tony Stark (Iron Man), rich, tech-savvy innovators who save the world from disaster are a staple of popular culture.

Power of the purse: Some will always have more power than others, but how much is too much? Once upon a time, power was linked to physical strength or military prowess, whereas now its perquisites usually stem from what Simon Johnson and I call "persuasion power," which, as we explain in our book *Power and Progress*, is rooted in status or prestige. The greater your status, the more easily you can persuade others.

The sources of status vary across societies, as does the extent to which it is unequally distributed. In the US, status became firmly linked to money and wealth during the Industrial Revolution, and income and wealth inequality skyrocketed as a result.

While there have been periods in which government intervention sought to reverse the trend, US society has always had a steep status hierarchy.

This structure is problematic for several reasons. Constant competition for status is largely a zero-sum affair, because status is a "positional good." More status for you means less status for your neighbour and a steep hierarchy implies that some people will be happy while many others are unhappy. Moreover, investments in zero-sum activities tend to be inefficient and excessive compared to those in non-zero-sum activities. Is it better to spend on Rolex watches or learning new skills? Both may have intrinsic value, but the

former merely signals wealth. The latter, by contrast, ups your human capital and may also contribute to society. The first is largely zero-sum, and the second is largely non-zero-sum.

The dictatorship of dilettantism: There are both evolutionary and social bases for linking persuasion power to status and prestige. After all, it is individually rational to learn from people who have expertise and reasonable to link expertise with success. This form of learning is good for communities as it facilitates coordination and a convergence towards best practices. But when status is linked to wealth, and wealth inequality grows large, the foundation that underpins expertise starts to crumble.

Consider a thought experiment. Who has greater expertise on carpentry—a professional master carpenter or a hedge-fund billionaire? It seems natural to pick the former; but the more that wealth confers status, the greater the weight attached to hedge-fund billionaires' views, even on carpentry. Or consider a more relevant example. Whose views on freedom of speech carry more weight today, a tech billionaire or a philosopher who has long grappled with the issue and whose evidence and arguments have been subjected to scrutiny by other qualified experts? Millions of people on X have implicitly chosen the former.

The deeper we are drawn into the "wealth-is-status" equilibrium, the more we may come to accept the supremacy of tech billionaires. Yet it is difficult to believe that wealth could be a perfect measure of merit or wisdom, let alone a useful proxy for authority on carpentry or freedom of speech. Moreover, wealth is always somewhat arbitrary.

If the tech sector had not become so central to the economy, and if it was not driven by such strong winner-take-all dynamics (which is partly a matter of choice about how we organize certain markets), today's tech tycoons would not have become so rich. The fact that Gates and Musk have been taxed less does not make them any wiser, but it certainly has made them wealthier, and thus more influential.

Power corrupts: Such figures also benefit from an even more pernicious dynamic that Johnson and I explore in *Power and Progress*, using the example of Ferdinand de Lesseps. He gained enormous status in late 19th-century France for his completion of the Suez Canal in the face of British opposition to the project. He had foresight and skillfully con-

vinced politicians in Egypt and France that maritime trade would become important. But he was also lucky; the hoped-for technologies that he needed to build the canal without locks were developed just in time for the project.

With his Suez victory, Lesseps gained great prestige. But what he did with his new status is instructive. He became reckless, unheeded and cocky, pushing the Panama Canal project in an unworkable direction that ultimately led to the deaths of more than 20,000 people and the financial ruin of many more, including his own family. Like all forms of power, persuasion power can make one hubristic, unrestrained and socially obnoxious.

Lesseps's story remains relevant because it has echoes in the behaviour of many billionaires today. While some of America's wealthiest do not use their status to influence critical public debates (think Warren Buffett), many do. Gates, Musk, George Soros and others do not hesitate to weigh in on politics, and while it is easy to welcome words we agree with, we should resist this temptation. It makes sense to tap the knowledge and wisdom of those with expertise on a given topic, but counterproductive to amplify the status of those who already have it.

Another way: Of course, it is not entirely the fault of billionaires that US policy is causing inequality (though they certainly lobby for policies that have this effect). They should, however, bear responsibility if they misuse their status. That is especially true when they leverage their status to advance their own economic interest at the expense of others', or to polarize society.

If unaccountable billionaires already wield too much undue influence, the last thing we should want is to give them even bigger public forums (like Musk's X). Instead, we should pursue stronger institutional means of limiting the power and influence of the privileged, as well as reconsider the policies that created such massive disparities. But the most important step will be the most difficult. We need a serious conversation on what we should value and how we can recognize and reward the contributions of those who do not have vast fortunes. While most would agree that there are many ways to contribute and that excelling in one's chosen vocation ought to be a source of individual satisfaction and the esteem of others, we are at risk of forgetting this principle. That's also a symptom of the problem. ©2024/PROJECT SYNDICATE

Marijuana legalization: Do we understand its health effects?

Shockingly little is known about THC's impact on human health



LISA JARVIS

writes about biotech, health care and the pharmaceutical industry for Bloomberg Opinion.



Kamala Harris is in favour of legalizing cannabis across America.

US Vice-President Kamala Harris has confirmed she supports the legalization of marijuana. It's a change of heart that acknowledges the decades of injustice wrought by the criminalization of small amounts of weed and follows a broader shift in sentiment about cannabis in the US. It makes sense—if accompanied by an effort to understand how pot affects public health.

Young adults are increasingly taking to cannabis. Recent data from the annual Monitoring the Future survey shows that weed has never been this popular. Another analysis found that among all adults, daily or near-daily cannabis use in 2022 for the first time surpassed regular alcohol consumption. These trends would intensify if federal restrictions were lifted. That means it's crucial to ground any policy shift in science. We've racked up decades of evidence showing how smoking and alcohol hurt our health, yet data on cannabis's effects is shockingly thin. That leaves consumers, medical providers and policymakers at guess as to what consumption to consider harmless and what to worry about.

I sat down with Nora Volkow, director of the US National Institute on Drug Abuse, the arm of the National Institutes of Health responsible for setting the research agenda on illicit substances and addiction. Part of our discussion centred on knowledge gaps on the health effects of cannabis—a legacy of policies that made it difficult to study it, as well as a shifting landscape of products boasting a potency that is wildly different from what boomers, Gen Xers and even millennials may have taken as teens.

The open questions are many. What is the prevalence of cannabis use disorder and who is most vulnerable to it? What's the best way to treat it? How does cannabis use intersect with mental illness? How do various dosages of cannabis influence patterns of consumption and how are those patterns shaped by whether THC is inhaled or eaten? What are the near- and long-term health consequences of regular consumption of highly potent THC products?

Basically, what's "safe" when it comes to cannabis consumption? As Volkow points out, health officials have clear guidelines on alcohol—doctors have a chart from the CDC outlining just how many drinks per week is considered safe. And those thresholds have been lowered as data clarifies differences between men and women—or shows, for example, a connection between alcohol consumption and certain cancers.

But THC? We have next to nothing. And the evidence we do have, like the recent

spate of studies linking frequent cannabis use to poorer heart health, tends to rely on electronic health records or older survey data. Not the gold standard of research—it's just what's available.

And then there's cannabis and kids. In 2022, nearly a third of high school seniors had used pot in the last year, and 6% said that in the last month they had consumed it daily. Cannabis-related emergency room visits among kids, teens and college-age young adults have been on the rise, particularly among girls.

THC hijacks parts of the endogenous cannabinoid system, the network of receptors spanning our brain and body that are involved with learning, memory and processing—a network directly involved in the formation of the human brain. That's reason to be cautious about use in adolescents, Volkow says. The same message holds true for use during pregnancy. And cannabis usage among adolescents has been linked to many negative outcomes. One recent analysis of more than 60 studies concluded the evidence was reasonably certain that pot use among teens is associated with missing more school, lower grades and a lower likelihood to graduate from high school or go to college.

The counterargument has long been that kids who gravitate toward weed have underlying vulnerabilities that would have led to those same outcomes, Volkow says. For an answer, NIH has been running a huge study following more than 10,000 kids from the age of 9 or 10 over the course of their adolescence. Geared at understanding how childhood experiences and biology influence brain development, one of the trial's main goals is to learn how cannabis exposure affects everything from cognitive performance to social interactions and academic outcomes.

In an era where cannabis can be purchased legally in so many American states and, under Harris's plan, could be available nationwide, the US public deserves to know when their use could be putting their health at risk.

As the political tide around cannabis shifts, support for science needs to come along with it. Otherwise, we're all just guessing the long-term health implications of pot. That doesn't seem like a good public health strategy. ©BLOOMBERG

GUEST VIEW

Mitigate the impact of global shocks on Indian finance

ANOOP SINGH



is distinguished fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress and former member of the 15th Finance Commission.

India's financial sector has encountered various domestic and global challenges over recent decades. As the economy grows, maintaining a resilient financial system is critical. However, global shocks are now testing financial stability, with lessons for India. As the European Central Bank's (ECB) President Christine Lagarde highlighted, "The effectiveness of monetary policy is intrinsically tied to the evolving structure of the economy," which has faced unprecedented global disruptions: the worst pandemic since the 1930s, the biggest conflict in Europe since the 1940s, and the worst energy crisis since the 1970s. These shocks have reshaped the global economy, affecting monetary policy and financial system resilience.

There are additional shocks to deal with. High and growing global debt amid slower growth has deepened the sovereign-bank nexus and heightened vulnerabilities, so debt markets are challenging for broker-dealers to navigate. Rising private leverage has created credit quality and rollover risks.

Financial innovations like cryptocurrency and electronic banking are also reshaping financial landscapes, while banks face shrinking balance sheet space for market intermediation.

With advanced countries dropping interest rates, central banks face the potential for powerful new inflationary forces that would exacerbate trade-offs with growth. A surge in global liquidity following recent moves by the US Federal Reserve, ECB and China could further complicate these dynamics.

Basel standards and regulatory reform: The adoption of Basel III has strengthened global risk management frameworks. In India, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has mandated compliance, including stress testing and counterparty risk assessments. However, oversight gaps persist in the sector of non-banking financial intermediaries, which often show weak risk compliance.

Recent financial crises in the US and Switzerland underscored vulnerabilities due to oversight failures, an unwillingness to escalate supervisory concerns and the risk of regulators being co-opted by banks. Moreover, a trend of "gold-plating" Basel standards for large banks, but not for smaller lenders, as seen in recent US bank failures, has created systemic risks.

While India has made strides in regulating banks, gaps likely remain in the oversight of non-banks—which includes a mix of asset management firms, mutual funds and fintech entities. And regulators face challenges in gathering comprehensive data on this sector's complex interconnections through securities lending. Cryptocurrency and private credit require a more comprehensive regulatory approach to manage emerging risks.

Stress testing: India's crisis management framework has evolved significantly with the Financial Stability and Development Council playing a key role. RBI has expanded its stress-testing capabilities, including liquidity stress tests for major banks. However, the Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) crisis in the US emphasized the need for adaptive stress tests that account for rapidly changing market conditions.

Mark-to-market practices for unrealized losses, as seen in SVB's collapse, underscore why global liquidity standards must be

updated. For systemic resilience, these should cover a broader range of institutions.

Treasury market vulnerabilities: This market is vital for monetary policy transmission. The rise in US debt, for instance, highlights vulnerabilities in liquidity provisioning during market stress. India's government securities market is also central to policy transmission, but relatively less liquid and vulnerable to shocks. Reforms could include enhanced transparency, expanding primary dealer roles and improving market infrastructure to support liquidity.

Cybersecurity: With rising digital transactions, this increasingly vital. However, implementing global cybersecurity standards is hindered by a lack of harmonization across jurisdictions and high costs for smaller entities. India's cybersecurity framework, led by CERT-In and supplemented by the National Cyber Security Strategy, is adapting to new threats. Yet, greater coordination and stronger frameworks are essential. International coopera-

tion is needed on this issue, but conflicting data privacy laws and geopolitical differences are complicating efforts to establish a unified global cybersecurity framework.

Credit allocation and misallocation: Credit flows to less productive firms remain a concern. India's public sector banks (PSBs) dominate credit provision, but this often leads to capital misallocation. Evidence suggests that firms reliant on PSB credit have weaker productivity growth.

Reforms have addressed PSB bad loans. Going forward, further bank privatization, enhanced governance and stronger RBI supervisory powers—like its ability to replace PSB managements in cases of severe mismanagement—could reduce credit misallocation and enhance its efficiency. Strengthening private bank capitalization and governance are also crucial steps.

India's financial sector is exposed to global shocks, rapid innovation and systemic vulnerabilities. To strengthen its financial system, India must bolster regulatory frameworks, crisis management and cybersecurity, and also address credit misallocation. This will build resilience and help India navigate an increasingly complex global financial landscape, ensuring stability and sustained economic growth.

Improve crisis management, regulatory frameworks and cybersecurity; reduce credit misallocation

Each Trade Date's Special, But SOP Helps

Set out rules-of-origin thresholds upfront

Govt is seeking to put in place a standardised approach to negotiating FTAs to address rules of origin (ROOs) and non-tariff barriers. It's a good idea. ROOs have assumed importance due to India's pivot away from regional trade blocs in favour of bilaterals. Since the rest of the world doesn't share India's circumspection about trade blocs, it has to erect its own fences in supply chains centred around China. Although each bilateral treaty negotiation is unique, the country will benefit from it. This saves time spent in negotiation and avoids time-consuming reviews after a treaty is signed.

Evolving non-tariff barriers such as sustainability also merit a pre-assessed strategy that sets a template for individual negotiations. Since India is in talks with both advanced and developing economies for trade facilitation, it will, in the first instance, aid negotiation with the former. Small developing countries are likely to abide by terms set out by the West, and if India has its treaties in place, it would find it easier to deal with emerging economies. India has been leading the 'global south' on sustainability, and its views would be more convincing if they are ratified in treaties with advanced economies.

There is a growing sense of urgency for India to stitch together a patchwork of bilateral trade agreements that allows it to capitalise on the 'China plus one' trend in global manufacturing. It doesn't have the comfort of operating in regional trade blocs and must seek to neutralise this disadvantage through bilateral pacts. The trick—of the trade, as it were—is to improve market access while upholding strict ROOs. India's negotiating power is amplified by the size of its market. This advantage can be used to speed up trade negotiations and insist on benchmarks that offer adequate protection. A standardised approach brings more certainty into discussions. Easier accompanying operating guidelines should also contribute to desired outcomes.

BRICSmanship for a Rules-Based Order

The expanded BRICS meets for the first time in Kazan, Russia, a potential inflexion point for a group that has so far failed to have an unifying narrative. India has been the bulwark against the attempt to give an ideological 'anti-West' slant. India could continue to play that role or, better still, leverage the expanded membership—each new member was on its wish list—to define India's neutral pathway. Kazan is not just another BRICS summit. It's a critical moment in India's self-fashioning journey on the global stage. From the moment Russia invaded Ukraine, India has argued its choices in terms of multipolarity, historical ties, defence needs, strategic alliances and partnerships, and economic needs.

Kazan offers India an opportunity to emerge not as the act tightrope walker balancing West and 'anti-and-not-so-pro-West' interests, but as a proactive neutral voice committed to a rules-based world order. Kazan should provide the occasion when it can emerge as the 'Switzerland' of our times.

A low middle-income country with a rapidly growing economy and home to a sixth of the world's population makes India's CV impressive enough for it to be the ideal candidate to play the honest broker. Its commitment to peace is not merely ideological but rooted in pragmatism, indeed, hard-boiled geopolitics. Peace, multipolarity and multilateralism are critical for not just its well-being and development but also for most parts of the world, developing and developed. Take India's purchase of discounted Russian crude, then refining and selling it to the rest of the world, thereby serving as an economic safety valve globally. This is not about a reactive non-alignment but proactive even-handedness in helping clear obstacles to global progress.

JUST IN JEST
When Britain's king is reminded of a 'normalised' grand theft

Australia's Long Tail Of (Post-)Colonialism

It's strange how for most people living in these times of heightened valuation of sovereignty and concerns about immigrants landing up on their shores, it's not mighty odd that countries in the past have come to a foreign land, driven by their earlier inhabitants into pockets or worse, and taken it over as their own. While Israel-Palestine, Russia-Ukraine make for grown-up dinner conversation, near-liquidation and takeover of North America and Australia are strangely viewed as 'let bygones be bygones'. Mega-level double standards have become so normalised that historic theft of land is seen as a tut-tut cliché. Which is why a nice little reminder from Australian senator from Victoria, Lidia Thorpe, is not just refreshing, but points us to the long tail of 'post-colonial'.

Thorpe heckled Charles Windsor, Britain's king, who turns out to be Australia's as well. As a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy, Aussies could have made, say, Dennis Lillee or Nicole Kidman their monarch. But it's Charles from London town. Thorpe, in the presence of the VIP Brian visiting Parliament House in Canberra, called for a treaty and accused the crown of stealing aboriginal land, repeating, 'You are not my king.' She deemed Charles, a representative of British imperialism and beneficiary of colonialism, of being a 'genocidalist'. Hear, hear, we say literally.

STATE OF PLAY (I) Deep state actors on both sides are jeopardising big picture India-US ties Waking Up Sleeping Dogs



Pranab Dhal Samanta

India and the US need to tread cautiously. Issues not central to the relationship have come to dominate, threaten, even possibly derail, the larger agenda. They refuse to go away because they emerge from a nasty battle in the shadows, involving deep state actors and beneficiaries on both sides who, until now, haven't had a dominant say in determining the trajectory of this strategic partnership.

Two questions loom large. One, why rake up Sikh separatism? Two, why decide on doing anything on American soil? Both point to a strain of thought that's not in sync with the present. So, it's important that India examines every bit of evidence shared by the US to plug holes in its security system. The US, on its part, should look at ways to address the issue legally, insulating it from having the overall relationship. But it appears the US has chosen to escalate matters over the past few days. It's not Vikas Yadav's indictment but the easy connections drawn by the US Justice Department in a legal document with top echelons of Govt that's of concern. They relate a potentially damaging, hostile political intent that injures the bigger picture.

This document has come within weeks of the summons issued against NSA Ajit Doval. While the summons is yet to be formally served, not enough comfort could be provided by US authorities for Doval to travel on the PM's delegation to New York last month.

Now, this indictment has specifically mentioned PMO, almost as a direct provocation to invite a strong response from India. New Delhi has so far desisted. It continues to draw a distinction in its approach towards the US, as opposed to the strident US stand on Canada. But the indictment calls Hardeep Singh Nijjar a Sikh separatist leader and an 'associate of the victim' Gurpreet Singh Panu in the Yadav case, joining dots in a way that sends a very different political message to India.

Why? Because if the intent is to get India to act on errand officials and revisit intelligence activities, then a mutually productive pathway could be opened—as has happened with other sensitive spheres of the India-US conversation. But if the attempt to resurrect the Khalistan card in a way that presents itself as an effective leverage against India, then serious security questions will be raised, like in the case of Canada.

The first question will be on a possible 1980s-90s-like realignment with Pakistan guided by deep state interests on both sides. After all, while the US was against Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh for quelling democratic dissent, it's quite comfortable with Imran Khan being in prison at the behest of the Pakistani army, despite his party's strong electoral performance.



We spy with our little eye...

At present, the political tenor of the indictment is bound to sow seeds of doubt, especially when other aspects of the relationship are moving smoothly. If this pattern were to continue, it will arraign both sides on a difficult axis over this issue. Sections of Govt will see this as an extension of America's anti-India policy in Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan. This will narrow prospects of finding a mutually respectable way forward. What is mostly on both sides, so far, have navigated difficult issues and reconciled old differences.

On the Indian side, the way the Vikas Yadav saga is unfolding, it conveys an urgent need to look at a better command-and-control structure.

This institutional reform is necessary, regardless of what the GoI-form inquiry committee reveals. Professionally, those gathering intelligence

are different from those collating and analysing them. And both sets are far removed from those carrying out operations based on intelligence. More importantly, decisions to execute any operation based on intelligence inputs ought to be made through a structured command authority. Yadav's case seems to suggest that whatever happened resulted in his exit from government service, which doesn't convey much confidence in the intelligence system. Plus, revelations of extortion cases don't augur well for the health of any institution.

Every now and then, episodes have occurred that convey a need to relook at how intelligence agencies operate in India. The current case only shows that as India gains prominence, its actions will be monitored more carefully. Especially since it's not drafted ally in any camp, or even a Five Eyes member.

On a broader plane, it looks rather disappointing that when India and US are talking about being long-term partners in building trusted supply chains, hi-tech networks and semiconductor, the respective intelligence and investigative agencies are playing checkers on an issue like Sikh separatism. If this continues to escalate,

New Delhi, so far, continues to distinguish its approach towards the US from the strident US stand on Canada

Kashmir—which has just emerged from one of its most successful elections—could well be next on the 'target list'. This trend needs to stop. It's counterproductive to both sides seeking to build a new agenda on trust. And that's exactly what's getting eroded. On some stage, politics will take over and move things forward. But the way this case has now been enshrined within the US system, it would take considerable repair work and political will to put matters back in order.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Sometimes, I Wish...

HARSH GOENKA
Sometimes, I wish I could go back in time...
Not to change the past, but to relive those little moments I overlooked.
Sometimes, I wish I could be a child again...
Not to escape life's duties, but to feel my mother's hand guiding mine as we walked.
Sometimes, I wish I could revisit my school days...
Not to re-examine, but to cherish the simple joy of laughing and playing with friends during lunch breaks.
Sometimes, I wish I could be in control to challenge the world, but to treasure the late-night conversations about dreams and ambitions.
Sometimes, I wish I could return to the early days of my career...
Not for the excitement of new opportunities, but to truly appreciate the mentors who shaped my journey.
Sometimes, I wish I could hold my children when they were small...
Not because they've grown too fast, but to relive the magic in their eyes when they learnt something new.
Sometimes, I wish I could pause life in moments with loved ones...
Not because I fear ageing, but to give them my undivided attention, before time slips away.

Chat Room

Real Trade, Not BRICS-a-Brac

Apropos 'Not Another BRICS in the Wall' by Ashok Malik (Oct 21), the economic base within BRICS remains varied. Brazil, Russia and South Africa are highly dependent on raw material and energy exports, while China and India are largely manufacturing and service-centred. This sets up a closed loop for progressive trade within its members. BRICS thus far has placed trade and economic issues in the foreground, eschewing any semblance of politics within and without. Absence of a power-bloc ethos encourages more nations to belong to it. Members may be bringing in new problems but newer possibilities too. BRICS can gather enough clout in its trade equities with the US and eurozone.

RNARAYAN
Navi Mumbai

Progressive GST Still Luxury Item

This refers to the Edit, 'Make the GST List Shorter, Not Longer' (Oct 21). It is generally seen that a higher GST rate at 28% on luxury items runs inimical to resultant tax collections, making it regressive. A robust GST architecture is in place in a linear manner with the economy by shortening the list of items that are in the 28% bracket. We also need to rethink taxation of petroleum products. While the Centre status quo conundrum, it is easier to build on such small gains. It would be worthwhile to uniformly address the issue of tax rates on direct taxes (progressive) and indirect taxes (regressive) as an important step towards their simplification and rationalisation.

GURPREET SINGH
Chief Commissioner, I.T. (Retd) Mohali

The Big Fat Indian Movie Festival

Apropos 'The First, Parks Later' by Y G Choudhry (Oct 20), irrespective of the 'inherent failures of Indian cinema', we wouldn't mind Shah Bhat Khan's sculpture waiting with his arms wide open at the entrance of a Hollywood theme park. Or the cafeteria serving in Stanley Ka Dabba. Or Geet's iconic outfits. In fact, we'd set on sale at one of the souvenir stalls. Less than Disneyland but bigger than NMAC. Foreigners should get a chance to experience the issue of tax rates on direct taxes (progressive) and indirect taxes (regressive) as an important step towards their simplification and rationalisation.

JANHAVI RAO
Mumbai

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editor@timesofindia.com

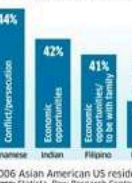
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

Twits with no brains or cure,
Are calling airlines on cheap fares.
They say, 'There's a bomb!'
Until they hang up when it's their turn,
Calling, 'I'm flying tomorrow, check the airfare.'

*7,006 Asian American US residents (18+) surveyed July 2022 - Jan 2023
Source: Statista, Pew Research Center

US Lure

Asian immigrants have different motivations for coming to the US, according to a Pew Research survey. Around 28% say they immigrated to be with family, 27% immigrated for economic opportunities, 26% immigrated for educational opportunities, and 7% came due to conflict/persecution in their origin country, while 4% came for other reasons.



Bell Curves

Asians 74%
Vietnamese 83%
Filipino 79%
Korean 76%
Chinese 76%
Indian 67%

Heads you keep the coin, tails you toss it back.

Is It Time to Dump ₹?



Ateesh Tankha & Ganga Narayana Rath

Every enterprise depends on luck for its success. And luck, as Seneca put it, is a matter of preparation meeting opportunity. But what if preparation is caught unaware and opportunity is not forthcoming?

This may be the case with central bank digital currency (CBDC). Announced in Nirmala Sitharaman's 322nd budget speech to bolster the longstanding belief that private virtual currencies (PVCs) like bitcoin, upon which an unpopular tax was levied, posed a threat that only a CBDC could counter, RBI was forced to railroad this project into the list of commercial bank priorities, and public consciousness.

According to RBI deputy governor T Rabi Sankar in 2021, CBDC-W could facilitate a real-time and cost-effective international settlement system by which settlement risk would disappear, along with the need for interbank settlement. Then, after launch, e₹W focused on delivering domestic cost-effective secondary market transactions in G-Secs. But these were both over-engineered artifacts, which took no cognisance, in the first instance, of settlement fees that are

part and parcel of bank earnings and, in the second, of existing digital reserves, which made e₹W superfluous.

Unsurprisingly, there were few takers. Offered by 16 participating banks, total holding of e₹ stood at a mere ₹1 lakh on March 31.

Separately, e₹R was meant to provide a frictionless way to spread benefits of a formal economy nationwide by authenticating income and spending patterns; by curtailing misallocation and misappropriation of funds by criminals; and by making sure that payments and subsidies could be programmed for appropriate use.

This April, IndusInd Bank announced the first successful execution of RBI's programmable e₹ pilot. New use-case categories quickly followed that included fuel, grocery education, restaurants, medical expenses and travel, allowing individuals to programme the digital rupee for a specific purpose, location and duration.

in a bank account to compete with, and confuse, users of a successful interbank payment net (UPI), which has already accomplished digitalisation at scale!

On Aug 30, at the Global Fintech Fest, Shaktikanta Das admitted that there should be 'no rush to roll out system-wide CBDC' because there is a comprehensive understanding. Then, on Oct 14, he produced the old cryptocurrency bogey while extolling CBDC's ability to facilitate efficient cross-border payments.

This ambivalence is confusing. Many central banks—such as in Sweden, Australia and Canada—have suspended their CBDC pilots, citing lack of a clear public interest case. Even IMF confirms that, once launched, digital currency is unlikely to be adopted at scale. Furthermore, 'CBDC presents a potential threat to the traditional business models of existing financial institutions, particularly in deposits and loans' that could 'make intermediaries reluctant to engage with and support CBDC activities'.

These same central banks have now decided to protect their sovereign currencies by promoting currency notes, going so far as to overturn earlier efforts to create digital societies, or by threatening new bank regulations to ensure that consumers and businesses can access and accept cash.

The Blue Umbrella

Binya seldom closed the blue umbrella. Even when she had it in the house, she left it lying open in a corner of the room. Sometimes Bijju snapped it shut, complaining that it got in the way. She would open it again a little later. It wasn't beautiful when it was closed. Whenever Binya went out, she took the umbrella with her. That patch of sky-blue silk could always be seen on the hillside.

Old Ram Bharosa kept the blue umbrella in his shop on the Theri road...
"What have you there, Binya?" he asked.
Binya gave the umbrella a twist and smiled at Ram Bharosa.
"That's only for Mem-Sahibs. Where did you get it?"
"Someone gave it to me—for my necktie."
"You exchanged it for your lucky claw?"
Binya nodded.
"But what do you need it for? The sun isn't hot enough—and it isn't meant for the rain. It's just a pretty thing for rich ladies to play with!"
Binya nodded and smiled again. Ram Bharosa was quite right; it was just a beautiful playing thing. And that was exactly why she had fallen in love with it.

Tankha is founder-CEO, ALSOWRITE Content Solutions, and Rath is former chief GM, RBI