



OPINION

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[OUR TAKE]

Spotlight on the centre at DNC

At the Democratic National Convention, the focus was on burnishing the party's and Kamala Harris's centrist credentials

The Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Chicago was really about telling the United States (US) that its centre must hold for it to progress, and convincing it that the centre is where the party and, by extension, Kamala Harris are — a reminiscence of President Joe Biden's 2020 campaign. Two former presidents, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, offered a staunch defence of the liberalism that underpins the pluralistic nature of the country in their speeches, in stark contrast to the so-called woke politics of identity and culture that some in the party see as the future (and which is magnified by opponents). Obama outlined it in terms of treasured "American values" rather than any political doctrine. He talked about how, while the Trump campaign believed that "one group's gain is another group's loss" and that freedom was the powerful being free to do whatever they pleased, "true freedom" was the principle that gave a group the right to make decisions about their lives while recognising the same right extended to others, even if the latter's decisions were very different. Clinton did it by contrasting the campaigns of Harris and Donald Trump, the Republican candidate. Harris's, he said, was about ensuring that "every American, however, they vote, has a chance to chase their dreams," while Trump's was about "dividing, blaming, and belittling other people."

For its part, the core-left element of the party didn't push very hard to pit its ideological compass against Harris's or the party's and instead focused on what needed to be done to address its concerns.

The Republican National Convention, coming as it did on the heels of the attempt on Trump's life, became another stage to valorise Trump. The DNC, in contrast, presented a microcosm representative of the US and its embrace of liberalism and diversity to showcase the Harris campaign. This nudge towards the centre, though, was as much about countering Trump's attack on Harris as representing the "loony Left", a caricature of Democrats espousing radical politics, as it was about "healing America". To that end, visuals of a packed venue and loud cheers for speakers of all political shades suggest a good start to the job.

That said, November, when the polls will be held, is a long way from now, and the challenge for Harris's team would be to keep up the momentum and add to it. After Biden's disastrous re-election bid, the party has rallied around Harris, the sitting vice-president. Despite the Biden administration's successes, Harris is up against several challenges, not the least of which is Trump's unshakable popularity with a segment of the population. The Biden administration's failure to stop Israel in Gaza has outraged younger Democrats, and Harris has to work hard to win them over. Despite endorsement of her stand on Gaza by a prominent Left-leaning Democrat, there is distrust, with the US approving a \$20 billion military aid package for Israel about 10 days ago. Then, there is the tricky inflation front. Harris did recently speak of measures that she would take as president, but these include price controls which not only drew Republican flak but were also rejected by one of the US's prominent liberal newspapers that said "it was hard to exaggerate" how bad her proposals were. Against this backdrop, sustaining the momentum of what some see as a honeymoon period will need Harris to pivot to an economic middle as well, one that doesn't draw comparisons with more radical philosophies.

How should India persevere in this multi-crises world?

Preparation for dealing with existential crises requires unity at home. India can ill afford to continue fractious politics over every issue, and all the time

Race riots in the United Kingdom, the toppling of a democratically-elected government by mobs in Dhaka, a new chapter of the war in Ukraine — that is now a war inside

Russia — the continuing bloodshed in Gaza, and the looming threat of an Iran-Israel war breaking out, all point to an ominous future. Unrest, disruption, and violence, or threats of these, dominate headlines. How should we, as citizens of the world, react?

History is, no doubt, continually peppered with similar occurrences that have sometimes been loosely called mere "aberrations" in periods of tranquillity. More often, a "one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter" view adopted by many in the West has woefully diminished the discourse on a subject that deserves the utmost seriousness and objectivity. The current unrest both in the West and East is dangerously widespread, with political debates everywhere getting more shrill and divisive.

Lamentably, none of the hotspots of the world seem to have cooled down. The fires that have been burning underneath the surface are now breaking through with ferocity. On top of these, the climate crisis continues to play havoc all over the world. The atrocious flash floods and landslides that occurred this year in Kerala seem to be becoming common occurrences. Severe flash flooding has been seen in many European countries. Wildfires have ripped through communities in Canada, Greece, Cali-

fornia and Utah, and they are no longer forest fires, but uncontrollable firestorms. And now, a global public health emergency, Mpox, has us all hurrying to prevent it from graduating into a pandemic.

With these natural disasters and dangers threatening to impact large sections of humanity, tragically, the sum of all human progress is now deployed to wars or fighting disasters. Most concerning is the fraught discussions on the internet, social media, and TV channels that are sowing fear and hatred, thus creating fertile ground for even more violence.

In the East, tensions are at all-time highs across the Korean Demilitarised Zone. North Korea continues to test missiles and rockets that can strike Japan and South Korea in a matter of minutes. Meanwhile, the United States' (US) deployments in the region have long threatened the North. Chinese tensions in the South China Sea and with Taiwan threaten to break out at any time. There are also inter-factors that could calm the tensions.

Closer home, Pakistan has ramped up cross-border terror strikes in the Jammu region. Just a few months after its last general election, violence engulfed the streets of Dhaka. Attacks against minority Hindus were reported from across the country. This could have unpredictable consequences. India can't just stand by and watch in 1970-71, but it is hard to surmise what course of action it can take today.

The conflict in Gaza that has levelled the enclave and killed close to 40,000 persons so far shows no signs of abating. A bigger war might break out any minute in Israel's North, between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia, which is a proxy of Iran in the region. A direct conflict between Israel and Iran, too, isn't taken off the board just yet. The US has moved two aircraft carrier strike forces, both nuclear-capable, to the East Mediterranean and



RK Raghavan



Ajay Goyal



Unrest, disruption, and violence, or threats of these, dominate headlines. How should we, as citizens of the world, react?

Persian Gulf. Reinforcements have been pouring into the region. Again, much like other hotspots, while there are many on both sides baying for blood, there are fewer and fewer voices for calm and sanity.

Meanwhile, Ukraine has taken the war right into Russia, and Ukrainian troops have occupied large tracts of Russian land. They are also said to be moving toward control of Kurchatov nuclear power plant. What Ukraine plans is not clear just yet, but this marks the first time since World War II that foreign troops are on Russian soil. Instead of seeking calm, the US and European powers are egging Ukraine on.

While these crises are sprinkled across the world, they pose very pertinent threats to India. Energy supply-chain disruptions would cause oil prices to skyrocket. That would have disastrous consequences for the Indian economy. Closing of marine and air routes in West Asia, which are already at choking points because of wars, will impact exports and travel. While India has made great and essential strides toward self-reliance, in this very inter-connected world of technology and commerce, English author John Donne's words come to

mind: "No man is an island." In this world, we all rely on each other — on neighbours, nations, and continents.

How did we, in the past get over, crises to move forward and give most of us a meaningful and enjoyable life? It is introspection of this kind that gives us a measure of optimism that we will somehow tide over the current crises resulting from senseless killings in various regions of the world.

One must inevitably come to the conclusion that if we wish for peace, we must prepare for war. Preparation for dealing with existential crises requires that there is unity at home. India can ill afford to continue fractious politics over every issue, and all the time. Wishing for these crises to go away would be preposterously naive. What is needed is sharp preparedness to predict and prepare for consequences on this wild chessboard. How many of us are able to connect the dots is a matter of speculation.

RK Raghavan is a former Indian high commissioner to Cyprus and Ajay Goyal is a security analyst based in Europe. The views expressed are personal

A new footing in South Asia for India-Russia friendship

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's July visit to Moscow and this week's trip to Russia has revived the debate on what role Russia plays in India's evolving strategic balance. Some argue that Russia needs more, not less attention, while others question the utility of the relationship, especially since the Russia-Ukraine war. Common to most analyses, however, is the restrictive tendency to focus on only three pillars: Arms, energy, and China. But a closer look shows that — except for Pakistan — Russia is also playing a rising role in South Asia, aligned with India's neighbourhood First policy from Afghanistan to Myanmar and from Bangladesh to Sri Lanka.

Like Ukraine or Georgia who are part of Moscow's "near abroad" sphere of influence, South Asia is crucial to India's security. At the inauguration of his third term in June, PM Modi reaffirmed the centrality of the neighbourhood as his top strategic priority. Yet China's growing influence has threatened India's pre-dominant position in the region. To combat this, India must present alternative development solutions for South Asian countries.

So far, India has attempted this through partnerships with extra-regional powers, including the United States, Japan, and Australia. However, bringing in the Quad countries presents its own complications, explaining why India has also been keen to engage with France and

other European countries in the Indian Ocean region.

Russia is also playing a growing role in the Indian subcontinent. Moscow is determined to look East, with a renewed focus on economic partnerships in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. First, it brings a long history of development cooperation in South Asia dating back to the early Cold War, including the Purnea Hydro-power Station in Nepal, Ghorehah and Siddhirganj power plants in Bangladesh, or the Ceylon Steel, Tyre and Sugar Corporations in Sri Lanka. Second, in contrast to western values-based interventionism, Russia defaults to non-interference, as evident from issues such as the 2021 Myanmar coup or, more recently, the regime crisis in Bangladesh, where Moscow and New Delhi's positions broadly overlap.

Two recent examples help explain why New Delhi sees the growing utility in partnering with Moscow in the region. The first relates to supporting nuclear as a source of clean energy for the climate transition requirements of two billion people in the region. Russia and India have developed a growing collaboration on the Rooper Nuclear Power Plant (RNPP) in Bangladesh. Under a 2018 tripartite agreement, Russia provides financing and core construction, while Indian experts and firms are subcontracted to work on-site, with the plant expected to finish construction in 2024. A second example comes in the context of



Constantino Xavier



Lucas Daley



Joint ventures in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka show that New Delhi sees the growing utility in partnering with Moscow in the region

bitter experiences with China-financed "white elephants" infrastructure projects in South Asia. Moscow and New Delhi are now exploring joint ventures to manage these sustainably. One notable example is Sri Lanka's Maitala Rajapaksa International Airport. Built on a \$150-million high-interest loan from China's Exim Bank, it was soon dubbed the world's emptiest airport, sustained heavy losses and shut down. In July 2024, the Sri Lankan cabinet announced that it would transfer the airport's management for 30 years to an Indo-Russian joint venture.

Such examples demonstrate the potential for partnership, though collaboration with Russia

is not without risks for India. First, Beijing's growing leverage over Moscow could render Russia's utility as an alternative to China obsolete. Second, Russia may be tempted to use South Asia as a staging ground to undermine American interests, which could complicate India's more recent relationship with the US. Finally, western sanctions have complicated Russia's ability to conduct international business, limiting what Indian public and private capital can achieve together with Moscow in third countries.

For India, the more actors in the South Asian neighbourhood, the better. No single country is willing or able to single-handedly offer significant alternatives to China's expanding footprint and New Delhi has been roping in Russia to deliver more, better and faster solutions to its neighbour countries. Future joint ventures could include the takeover of other Chinese-owned projects or the co-development of Nepal's vast hydropower potential. India and Russia are also likely to explore joint production of military hardware, as well as the softer dimensions of training and defence diplomacy to engage countries in the Indian Ocean region and Southeast Asia — as already exemplified in the co-production and export of the Brahmos missiles to Vietnam and the Philippines. As Modi stated on his recent visit to Moscow, "the friendship between India and Russia has stood the test of time" and there are growing indications that it is now also finding a new footing in South Asia. The relationship between New Delhi and Moscow is still taking shape, but the regional cases of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka show why India sees Russia as a strategic partner beyond just weapons, oil and global balancing.

Constantino Xavier is senior fellow, and Lucas Daley is former intern, The Centre for Social and Economic Progress. The views expressed are personal

India Inc must play a role in mainstreaming disability

The spotlight remains on sportspersons, with the upcoming Paralympic Games. The Indian sporting ecosystem has evolved greatly in the past few years. But, there's still some way to go in achieving a truly inclusive society. The Games are more than just a sporting event, providing a platform to highlight sport and disability, inspire individuals, drive social change, and promote opportunities for people with disabilities (PwDs). However, beyond sports, sustainable progress and inclusivity remain vital to an enhanced quality of living for PwDs.



Deepa Malik

Corporate India can play a pivotal role, not only in terms of social responsibility but also in fostering innovation and inclusivity, inspired by the unique experiences and perspectives that PwDs bring to the table. Skilling has become a CSR focus as companies recognise the importance of empowering PwDs with the skills and training. Organisations should move beyond checkbox approaches to skilling and focus on creating sustainable economic growth with measurable employability out-

comes. For instance, ITC Mangaldeep's Sixth Sense Panel has created opportunities for the visually impaired by leveraging their unique abilities in fragrance evaluation. The initiative has threatened India's once predominant mindset. A powerful reminder that opportunities, not pity, are the keys to empowerment. Such Indian companies are leading the way in championing inclusivity, demonstrating that it is possible to create a disability-inclusive culture while driving business success. Have had the privilege to hold the baton for several organisations that have a commitment to the cause such as Hyundai's Samarth Initiative, which is setting a benchmark, by supporting 20 para-athletes and related ecosystems for the Paralympic Games.

Digital tools are enhancing connectivity and accessibility. PwDs no longer have to face barriers to education, training, and employment. Businesses can tap into this by proactively integrating PwDs into their workforce. The goal should be to equip them with tools and confidence to access new opportunities. Banks play an integral role in supporting skilling programmes and enabling financial inclusion by empowering PwD communities with employment opportunities through tech-

nology. HDFC Bank's Parivartan is an excellent example of working with PwDs across Varanasi, Chennai, Pune, Guwahati, Coimbatore, and Kochi, providing skills training in IT, hospitality, and retail. With a well-structured curriculum focusing on basic English, computer skills, and soft skills, these programmes are based on assessments that revealed high unemployment among PwDs in these cities. The aim is to upskill them, assist in securing jobs, and foster economic independence. As an ambassador of the Vistat Bharat campaign, I envision an economy that is strong, inclusive, and full of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for PwDs. However, this can only happen if we redefine inclusivity. Organisations must foster deeper connections between employers and PwDs. By increasing the employment of PwDs, organisations benefit from diverse perspectives and unique skill sets. Creating an inclusive workplace is a strategic and social imperative. India Inc. must lead in mainstreaming disability.

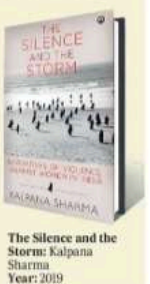
Deepa Malik is India's first woman paralympic medalist and South Asian sub-regional representative on the Asian Paralympic Committee. The views expressed are personal

[EDITOR'S PICK]

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

THE MANY FACES OF GENDER VIOLENCE

The gruesome Kollata and Uttarakhand rape-murder cases and the Badliapur sexual assault on minors in a school have left the nation shaken and outraged. But these are cases that made it to mainstream attention. Violence, sexual and other forms, permeates our society, across economic strata, caste, and age-groups and cases go unreported. The present instances have drawn people to the streets, alongside doctors and the parents and guardians in the Badliapur case, to protest for a change. This week, we recommend journalist Kalpana Sharma's *The Silence and the Storm: Narratives of Violence Against Women in India*, which examines violence against women in India. Sharma delves into the systemic and societal issues that perpetuate gender-based violence, highlighting the often-overlooked stories of survivors and the cultural silences that enable such atrocities. Through meticulously researched case studies, the author discusses the failures of law enforcement, the judiciary, and society in addressing these crimes. *The Silence and the Storm* serves as a tool for demanding justice and accountability.



The Silence and the Storm: Kalpana Sharma Year: 2019

E-comm bogey, again

Clarity on regulatory, policy environment needed

Commerce and Industries Minister Piyush Goyal has revived an old debate on the impact of e-commerce by alleging “predatory pricing” practices by online retail giant, Amazon. The Minister later clarified that the government was not opposed to online retail as such but only concerned about preserving “fair play” for Indian businesses and consumers. While there is no disputing this view, it merely echoes fears voiced about 15 years ago — when the consequences of opening up foreign direct investment to retail were fiercely debated.



Since then, the retail scene has changed dramatically with the growth of not just ‘organised retail’ (MNCs and Indian owned) but much more so, online retail or e-commerce. Online shopping has exploded with the expansion of internet use, smartphones and digital payments, more so during the Covid period. Even in the absence of a large dataset, it can be said that this change has not driven ‘mom and pop stores’ out of existence, as was feared. The retail space today caters to diverse consumer preferences.

E-commerce’s attractiveness lies in its customer convenience, aggregation efficiencies, generous discounts and market access to vendors. The issue here is to assess the gains and losses objectively. It cannot, for example, be readily said whether the jobs lost in offline retail are compensated by e-commerce, or whether the latter is a bigger job creator. The eighth Economic Census, expected to be launched next year, should include the online space. A separate study can be considered. A Pahlke India Foundation study observes that e-commerce accounts for 7-8 per cent of the retail pie, with a market of over \$70 billion. The online seller base is probably in the region of 1.5 million (1.3 million in 2020), while the shopper base is well over 300 million. By 2025, retail employment is expected to rise to 45.5 million, with e-commerce jobs at 3.4 million. The report makes the point that jobs generated in e-commerce (in logistics, warehousing and technology) are not at the expense of offline jobs. Its negative impact on offline retail is concentrated in electronics (particularly smartphones), fashion, shoes, books and games, but less so in food, household products, jewellery and beauty products.

But the biggest issue here is the absence of a regulatory and institutional set-up to oversee a large market. For instance, it is hard to move on predatory pricing, if the competition regulator fails to act in this regard. Anti-competitive actions, such as e-commerce sites pushing their own products instead of sticking to their role as platforms, need to be investigated. Data protection needs to be resolved with the early implementation of data protection laws. The draft policy on e-commerce, prepared about four years ago, seems to have been left forgotten. It may be a better idea to dust it out, discuss and frame a coherent policy than to put out statements that unsettle the stakeholders.

OTHER VOICES.

The Washington Post

Convention in poetry, campaign in prose?

In the enduring struggle between democracy and tyranny, I know where I stand, and I know where the United States belongs. Vice President Kamala Harris declared Thursday night in a muscular speech proclaiming American greatness and defending its global leadership. Addressing the Democratic National Convention, Ms. Harris called on Americans to “fight for the ideals that we cherish and to uphold the awesome responsibility that comes with the greatest privilege on Earth — the privilege and pride of being an American.” For the large number of Americans still wondering who Ms. Harris really is, she and her party offered this week a stark contrast with the Republican ticket’s negativity — about the state of the country and its indispensable role in the world. [WASHINGTONPOST.COM](https://www.washingtonpost.com), AUGUST 23

The Japan Times

BOJ rate hike spooked markets, but it's not the sole culprit

Global stock markets experienced historic levels of volatility this week, unraveling governments, finance officials and investors around the world. Much of the blame has been directed toward the Bank of Japan, where officials appeared to signal a shift in policy, one that would upset long-held expectations and undermine investing strategies based upon them. That is too simple a telling, however. Developments in Japan are not sufficient to have triggered all of last week’s ructions. A confluence of factors was responsible, several of which originated in the United States, with an impact that benefits that of the world’s largest economy. [TOKYO](https://www.japantimes.com), AUGUST 23

Money as history and nostalgia

TIME KEEPERS. Currency notes, apart from their obvious uses, have played a key role in documenting history and culture



RUKMINI DAHANUKAR

Money. We see it, use it and exchange it daily but do we really notice this medium of exchange and the imagery that it bears?

It is the one human invention that has played a continuous and pivotal role in shaping the fabric of our existences — our history, our traditions, our culture, our interactions. The economic aspect of money, wealth and power have been greatly spoken off, written about, discussed abundantly and debated highly richly. However, the daily banknote, the actual artifact at the heart of it all has not really been noticed or even researched, despite of the fact that banknotes offer an extremely rare window across time and geography, in documenting our histories and perhaps, even shaping our futures.

Today the banknote stands at the crossroads along with digital payment gateways and though most debate that it will follow the path of the dodo, I disagree.

It still holds a value that can be touched, seen and felt close to our hearts and deep in our pockets offering a sense of security, familiarity and trust. It is still very much the real thing exchanged across the world as acceptable legal tender.

To know if it survives, only time will

tell but until then it's worth its value to trace the banknote story.

THE BEGINNINGS

The story of money begins when our ancestors learned that they could trade for things they wanted rather than produce themselves. The first primitive populations resorted to a simple form of barter.

However, the absence of a standard of value and diversity of products made exchanges difficult. One man grew rice, another implements, and still another collected animal furs. The need for money as a common medium of exchange, was felt even more acutely in the first agricultural civilizations with settlements and specialisation.

Added to that the storage and movement of large as well as perishable commodities made way to metallic money — precious and semiprecious. Whatever be its form, for money to be effective it has to fulfil three criteria: serve as a common medium of exchange, be a unit of account or measurement and an accepted store of value.

Historians believe that the first metal

The first written accounts of ancient paper money were issues by the Chinese Imperial Treasury in 1374.

It was during this time that Marco Polo reported their use introducing this idea to the West

coins were minted in the Lydian kingdom now western Turkey, in the second half of 7th C. These first coins, shaped like large beans, bore a primitive stamp, probably one of the early examples of branding on money. Coins are thus credited to be the first forms of money used for documenting information and history. Of course, the modern banknote that followed changed the entire narrative as it was produced in colour with mind-boggling printing rendering the banknote as a canvas of communicating shared identities.

Did you know that paper banknotes from around the world are not really paper but are made from cotton fibre and linen rendering greater durability and strength? The first written accounts of ancient paper money were issues by the Chinese Imperial Treasury in 1374. It was during this time that Marco Polo reported their use introducing this idea to the west. The invention of the movable type printing press by Johannes Gutenberg combined with advances in trade, mercantile banking, legal contracts and bills of exchange, devaluation and shortage of precious and semi-precious metals, the paper banknote seemed like the best fit for modern money.

The idea was not foreign. In fact, it borrowed from the existing bills of exchange and promissory. Traders left their coins with the merchants and used handwritten receipts that they gave them instead, all in good faith and great convenience. Although the banknote completely fit the criteria of money, it was its first form that lacked an inherent value as compared to its predecessors like coins, livestock, crops, etc. It relied

on trust, the philosophical premise on which modern money rests. The imagery and words that it carries have thus been entrusted to communicate confidence for its effective exchange.

BASIS OF TRUST

First introduced by the Bank of England, the clause “Promise to pay the bearer” remains as a statement of confidence and authority. It can also be seen on all of India’s banknotes.

One of the earliest modern banknotes was introduced in Sweden in 1666 almost 350 years ago. Since then, the banknotes are here to stay. However, the real surge of paper money flooded our world in the 20th century with the two world wars, the end of colonialism and the rise of new nations and the shortage of metallic reserves. The paper banknote fit the bill.

Even the British replaced the circulating 1-Rupee silver coin with a banknote in 1917. Although, they retained the image of the coin featured both on the obverse and reverse to instil confidence and contribute towards instant recognition through the printed imagery.

All credit must be given to the banknote for widening the template of money and the idea of showcasing people, monuments, achievements, significant occasions and events has changed its narrative by metamorphosing money from being merely a medium of exchange to a medium of communication.

The writer, proprietor of Money Talks, is an independent scholar researching the art, design and symbolism of banknote imagery from around the world



We need a robust landslide mitigation policy

An improved database on landslides is welcome. Curbs on human activity in landslide-prone regions are important

Yashobanta Parida
Ravikiran Naik
Joyita Roy Chowdhury

The recent landslides tragedy in the Wayanad district of Kerala claimed over 400 lives, and 150 people are still missing. In addition, 310 hectares of farmland have been severely affected. This is not the first time Kerala has experienced such a devastating landslide.

Kerala’s geographical location, erratic rainfall pattern, and human activities leading to deforestation and converting forests into agricultural lands, as well as increasing construction and mining activities, have led to the increasing frequency of landslides.

Thirteen out of Kerala’s 14 districts are prone to landslides in varying degrees. Kerala also accounts for close to 60 per cent of the landslides that have occurred in various States of the country between 2015 and 2022 (Ministry of Earth Sciences, Loksabha, September 23 2020, and July 27, 2022). The Himalayan States, too, are very landslide-prone.

Apart from the rising frequency, landslides have also caused large-scale damage to public transport and private properties and threatened human life and livelihood. India lost around 22,497 human lives due to landslides from 1980 to 2019.

In the same period, 8,438 people were killed in Maharashtra which is the highest death toll among the states, followed by Uttar Pradesh (2,124), Gujarat (1,813), Madhya Pradesh (1,367), Himachal Pradesh (1,233), Rajasthan (933), Kerala (893) and Chhattisgarh (62) with the lowest landslide fatalities (Minister of Home Affairs).

Not only India but other developing countries are adversely impacted by landslides. According to the EM-DAT database, around 51 per cent of landslides have occurred in seven developing countries — China, Indonesia, Colombia, India, the Philippines, Nepal, and Peru, affecting 12 million people.

In sum, the available evidence indicates that the frequency of landslides has risen due to extreme weather events, environmental degradation from human interference, and other human activities.

The human and economic costs are often neglected by policymakers, government officials, academia, and the media. The reason is that landslides are considered localised natural events in India and, hence, do not attract large-scale media attention.

GOVT MEASURES

In the past couple of years, the government has taken several measures



WAYANAD LANDSLIDE. Picking up the pieces

to minimise the impact of landslides. First, the Geological Survey of India (GSI) under the Ministry of Mines implemented the National Landslide Susceptibility Mapping (NLSM) Programme to prepare landslide susceptibility mapping in different states and developed the Landslide Early Warning System (LEWS) in 2014-15.

Second, using satellite data, the Department of Space prepared the “Landslide Atlas of India” to identify vulnerable districts due to landslides and assess the overall damage due to landslides.

As we consider the case of the Wayanad landslides, the current policy measures seem inadequate to minimise the adverse effects of disasters. In such a

scenario, the government has devised additional measures to mitigate the future impact of landslides.

First, the government has started maintaining a national disaster database at the district and Taluk levels, which includes information on human fatalities, damage to private and public properties, and the frequency and severity of disasters. These data can help policymakers to implement policies to mitigate disaster impact.

Second, it is crucial to create a massive awareness programme related to the adverse effects of landslides with the help of local administration, NGOs, and civil society.

A third and most important measure is to improve the early warning system for predicting landslides and for accurate rainfall prediction, particularly in landslide-prone areas, with the help of advanced technology.

Fourth, strict laws should be implemented to protect ecologically sensitive areas and prevent human activities in landslide-prone areas.

Finally, better coordination, regardless of political differences, between Centre, State, and Local administration is essential to mitigate the adverse impact of natural disasters in the future.

The writers are on the Economics Faculty of FLAME University. Views expressed are personal

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

Cautious stance

Appropos to the article ‘RBI’s caution is justified’, the author has brought the government and RBI’s dilemma with respect to project financing needs for large funds.

But the author hasn’t fully taken into account the past problems of huge NPAs in the PSBs in the last decade or two, that happened mainly due to excessive lending to infra projects. It was the bad debt pile up that led to the forming of the NARCL and now the need for an infrastructure lending institution like NAFIIF!

Project financing expertise in IDBI and SBI, can also be put to better use for

resolving the issues of project lending.

A Palvannan
Chennai

Time for revisiting the law

This refers to the editorial “IBC defeated” (August 23). In India even an effective commercial law aimed at curbing malpractices in the corporate world is tinkered steadily by the vested interests till it loses its avowed objective. Insolvency & Bankruptcy Code is meeting the same fate. Long delays take place during corporate insolvency resolution plan (CIRP) also. The data published by the IBCI showed that as of September

2023, 67 per cent of the ongoing CIRP cases had already crossed the mandated timeline.

It may be time now to review the IBC including provision for imposition of penalty on defaulters for exceeding the prescribed time limits keeping in mind the loss in the value of the assets at stake due to the delay.

YG Chouksey
Mumbai

China’s dilemma

Apropos, Chinese economists advise Beijing to borrow more to spur growth! (August 23). China’s economy, once lauded for its rapid

growth, is now at a critical juncture, struggling to maintain momentum. Short-term fixes should not lead to long-term financial instability. China’s focus on boosting consumption as a means to revitalise its economy is both timely and necessary. But, a comprehensive approach that includes measures to stabilise the property market, restore consumer confidence, and ensure sustainable growth is crucial.

N Sadasivua Reddy
Bangalore

Industrial policy imperative

With reference to the article ‘The case

for a new industrial policy’, the case for a deliberate and market-oriented industrial policy has never been stronger. The article talks about Germany and Japan’s success in applying industrial strategy to support technology transfer and skill development. Including the agriculture sector more firmly within the framework of national industrial policy offers one bright path for reform. This will bring in the much needed structural change in the economy and ensure food security and boost farmers’ income.

Raghav Punj
Kunluke

KERALA

Sinking hopes: boat clubs left adrift

With the iconic Nehru Trophy Boat Race put off and the Champions Boat League called off in the wake of the devastating landslides in Wayanad, the boat clubs of Alappuzha and Kottayam are staring at an irrecoverable loss. They had spent a fortune in preparation of the season's races when a cloud of uncertainty overshadowed their plans, write **Hiran Unnikrishnan and Sam Paul A.**

Under a partly cloudy sky, preparations were in full swing on the canal banks of Kumarakom in the final days of July. A group of 15 onlookers gathered under the shade of a large tree, their eyes locked on the black beast that was the Nadubhagam Chundan (snakeboat). Its long, sleek body gleamed with power; the towering 15-ft stern dared anyone to question its dominance. The Kumarakom Town Boat Club (KTBC) had poured weeks of sweat and sacrifice to arrive at this moment, preparing for the ultimate showdown—the Nehru Trophy Boat Race (NTBR).

At 3 p.m., the calm shattered. A rush of vloggers and reel-makers swarmed the scene, snapping selfies, their lenses fixed on the 120-metre-long boat behind them. Then, like a knife through the buzz, a sharp whistle pierced the air. The show was about to begin.

The canal bank exploded with action. Onlookers poured in from the market and hospital as the whistle grew louder, signalling the arrival of the KTBC rowers. These men were built for battle—broad shoulders and abs carved like stone. They stormed the banks, lining up in two perfect rows as their intense warm-up drills kicked into overdrive. Sweat dripped, muscles flexed; every movement screamed determination.

Then, with one final whistle the drills stopped, and Monappan Ashan, a stocky man in his 60s with a presence that demanded respect, handed them their weapons—wooden paddles. After a brief, silent prayer, the rowers took their places on the boat. "Swamiye Saranamayappa!" Ashan roared. Oars shot into the air in perfect unison before slicing the water with raw power. The boat surged forward, propelled by the strength of its crew, as the crowd erupted in wild cheers. This wasn't just a practice run—it was a battle cry, a promise of victory.

Landslides scupper dreams

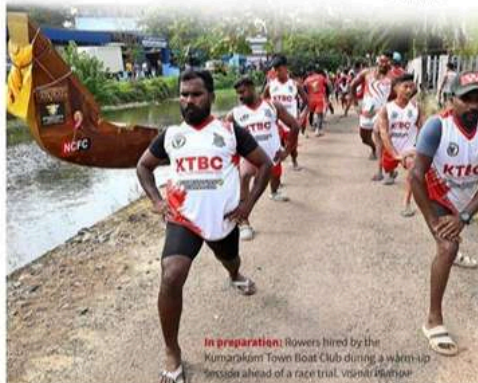
But dreams can crash as quickly as they rise. On August 1, just days after the devastating landslides struck Wayanad, the State government pulled the plug on the 70th edition of the NTBR, scheduled to be held on Punnamada Lake in Alappuzha on August 10, and cancelled the entire Champions Boat League (CBL) for good measure. For the KTBC and dozens of other clubs, it was a punch to the gut. Weeks of gruelling preparation, endless expenses, and hope were washed away in an instant.

In Kerala, snakeboat racing is more than a sport—it's an identity, a tradition soaked in pride. But it's also a costly affair. For clubs like the KTBC, every season means navigating treacherous financial waters. A single snakeboat can cost up to ₹75 lakh. Race participation demands tight coordination among boat owners, captains, and the club, with contributions ranging from ₹10 to ₹40 lakh.



We commenced training for the NTBR and the CBL by the end of June on a budget of ₹1.25 crore. By the time we decided to suspend training the club had already spent ₹80 lakh.

SUNEER A., secretary, Pallathuruthy Boat Club



In preparation: Rowers hired by the Kumarakom Town Boat Club during a warm-up session ahead of a race trial, Vembanad.



All action: The Kumarakom Town Boat Club during a training session at Kumarakom, Kottayam. **VISHNU PRATHAP**

"All it takes is one season down the drain, and this postponement, it's the final nail in the coffin," says K. Mithun, president of the KTBC. The club had sunk ₹58 lakh into training and preparation, but with the NTBR now in limbo, the numbers simply don't add up. The financial strain is suffocating.

Running the camp alone cost a whopping ₹1.75 lakh a day. While some of it was covered by sponsorships and donations, the majority came from the club's already stretched pockets. Even its strategy of recruiting wealthy NRIs like team captain Suneesh Nandikannan from Australia crumbled with the postponement. Recovery seems like a distant hope. A chunk of the funds needed for a season's race comes from the captains.

Matter of survival for many

For clubs such as the KTBC, the NTBR is more than just an event—it is survival. The short racing season is their lifeline, helping offset the sky-high costs of training camps, which could hit ₹55 lakh. Teams of 85 rowers, including 25 highly paid professionals from the Army or the Uttar Pradesh Police, do not come cheap. And now, with the race off the table, the future looks bleak.

The postponement has hit everyone hard, but for the rowers, it is devastating. The blood, sweat, and tears they poured into their training will never see the waters of Punnamada Lake. The dreams of victory, the deafening roar of the crowd, all gone. What remains is the bitter taste of uncertainty.

"The team has been finalised, and the rowers had found their rhythm," says Pradeep, the KTBC coach. Pradeep, originally from Alappuzha and a professional rowing trainer at the Artillery Water Sports Association in Hyderabad, had taken a month-long leave to lead the training camp and oversee the race trials. To strengthen the team, he brought with him 18 players from the Indian Army, all on leave for the season, to join the KTBC.

The history of snakeboat racing stretches back hundreds of years, steeped in legend and tradition. It is believed that these majestic vessels were first employed in fierce battles by kings in and around Alappuzha, long before they dazzled spectators as part of the thrilling sporting spectacle. Today, when it comes to boat races in the State, the NTBR holds a place of pride.

Jawaharlal Nehru and NTBR history

The NTBR's history is intertwined with the 1952 visit of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, along with his daughter Indira Gandhi and grandson Rajiv Gandhi, to Alappuzha. An exhibition race was conducted in his honour on Vembanad Lake. Enthralled by the event, an ex-

cited Nehru hopped onto Nadubhagam Chundan, the winning snakeboat, which then ferried him and others to the Alappuzha boat jetty.

Upon returning to New Delhi, Nehru gifted a silver trophy, a replica of a snakeboat, with the inscription, "To the winners of the boat race which is a unique feature of community life in Travancore Cochin." The trophy was initially named the Prime Minister's Trophy but later came to be known as Nehru Trophy. For this year's race, as many as 74 boats, including 19 snakeboats, had registered under nine categories before the postponement was announced.

Nowadays, an eerie silence has settled over the banks of Punnamada Lake (part of Vembanad Lake). Just a few weeks ago, the place was filled with ecstatic cheers and thunderous shouts of joy as boat race buffs gathered in large numbers to witness their favourite clubs and snakeboats, powered by oarsmen, darting over the water in preparation for the regatta.

In 2023, the Pallathuruthy Boat Club (PBC) from Alappuzha, also known as Tropical Titans, rowing viveyapuram Chundan, achieved remarkable success by winning both the Nehru Trophy and the CBL title. Despite facing financial challenges, the club eagerly began preparations to defend the titles they won last season. Just as they completed more than a month's training, the government postponed the NTBR and cancelled the CBL.

Unlike some other clubs, the PBC continued their training even after the postponement, anticipating that the government and the Nehru Trophy Boat Race Society will soon announce a revised date. However, as the authorities delayed the announcement of the new schedule, the club was eventually forced to discontinue its training camp on August 13.

Majority of budget spent

"We commenced training for the NTBR and the CBL by the end of June on a budget of ₹1.25 crore. By the time we decided to suspend training, which was attended by 135 people, mostly oarsmen, the club had already spent ₹80 lakh. Now, if the government announces a new date for the NTBR, we will have to spend significant amounts again to rebuild the team. It is going to be a Herculean task to find the money," says Suneer A., secretary, Pallathuruthy Boat Club.

While participating in the NTBR is a matter of pride, the decision to cancel the CBL is a serious setback for those boat clubs and *valla samities* (boat owners) who were aiming to compete in the event and recoup some of the money spent. "The club winning the NTBR is entitled to receive around ₹6 lakh. However, teams participating in the CBL will earn significantly more in bonuses and prize money. The government should reconsider its decision on the CBL. Not conducting the

CBL will be disastrous for clubs like ours that have spent huge amounts on building a team to compete in the event," adds Suneer.

The CBL 2023 offered a cash prize of ₹5.9 crore cumulatively. It was in 2019 that the Kerala Tourism department kickstarted the CBL, infusing fresh excitement into the storied tradition of snakeboat racing and significantly boosting the State's tourism industry. The league, organised on the lines of Indian Premier League cricket, has been held every year since then, except in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In previous seasons, nine teams competed in races across 12 venues—six in Alappuzha district, two each in Kollam and Ernakulam, and one each in Thrissur and Kottayam districts—starting with the NTBR.

Long before the decision not to conduct the CBL this year, the event's future had fallen into uncertainty. In the 2024-25 State Budget, ₹9.96 crore was set apart for the event, which is less compared to previous years. In the 2023-24 and 2022-23 Budgets, the government had allocated ₹12 crore and ₹15 crore respectively for the event. Further, the boat clubs that competed in last year's CBL found themselves in a financial predicament due to delays in receiving the full bonus and prize money.

Recently, the government disbursed the outstanding bonus of ₹3 lakh for each race to the nine clubs, as well as the prize money of ₹5 lakh, ₹3 lakh, and ₹1 lakh to the top three finishers of each match. Nevertheless, the title winner, who is supposed to receive ₹25 lakh, along with the runner-up (₹15 lakh) and third-place finisher (₹10 lakh) are yet to receive their payments.

No rethink on cards

A Tourism department official, meanwhile, says the decision on the CBL has been made considering the human tragedy of enormous scale and a rethink is not on the cards at present.

A joint meeting of the Snakeboat Owners Association, Kerala Boat Club Association, and the Kerala Race Boat Owners Association held in Alappuzha earlier this week urged the government to conduct the NTBR in September and reconsider its decision to cancel the CBL. As August is increasingly prone to inclement weather, the meeting proposed rescheduling the NTBR from the second Saturday of August to the second Saturday of September from next year.

"We stood in solidarity with the government's decision to postpone the NTBR in view of the Wayanad tragedy. Now the government should announce a new schedule for the event. We will soon meet with Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. If the government is averse to our demands, we will conduct a parallel boat race on Punnamada Lake in October," says a member of a boat club who attended the meeting.

EXPLAINED ENVIRONMENT

HEAVY RAIN IN TRIPURA, BUT NO ROLE OF DAM IN BANGLA FLOOD

DEBRAJ DEB
AGARTALA, AUGUST 23

THE MINISTRY of External Affairs on Thursday clarified that the floods that have hit several districts in eastern Bangladesh were not triggered by release of water from Dumbur dam in Tripura, as has been claimed by some social media accounts.

Nearly 18 lakh people belonging to 19 lakh families were affected in 43 upazilas of the districts of Comilla, Feni, Chittagong, Khagrachari, Noakhali, and Moulvibazar, according to the Department of Disaster Management and Relief of Bangladesh, *The Daily Star* reported. Five of these districts share borders with Tripura.

Rumour and denial

Following heavy rain in Tripura from August 19 onward, unsubstantiated claims appeared on social media about the opening of the Gumti hydro-electric project floodgates. Some Bangladeshi handles alleged without evidence an Indian "conspiracy" to "punish" the country's post-Khiana rule.

Tripura Power Minister Ran Lal Nath clarified on Wednesday that no flood gates had been opened; instead, excess water from the Gumti reservoir had automatically escaped through the spillway after crossing the 94-m mark, which is the reservoir's full capacity.

On Thursday, the MEA reiterated that claims about the "opening of the Dumbur dam upstream of the Gumti River in Tripura" were "factually not correct". The statement explained that "the catchment areas of Gumti river that flows through India and Bangladesh have witnessed heaviest rains of this year over the last few days" and "the flood in Bangladesh is primarily due to waters from these large catchments downstream of the dam".

The MEA also explained that Dumbur is a low dam (about 30 m) that is located more than 120 km upstream of the border, and generates power that feeds into a grid from which Bangladesh draws 40 MW. Also on Thursday, India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh called on the Chief Adviser to the Interim Government Dr Muhammad Yunus, and



reiterated New Delhi's commitment to work with Dhaka.

Rivers and the dam

Rivers like Manu in Dhalai district; Deo at Kumarghat; Kaleri and Juri in North Tripura; Feni, which is spanned by the Indo-Bangla Maitri Setu in South Tripura; Muhuri, Lawang, and Khowai; Gomati in Udaipur of Gomati district; Howrah in Agartala, all rose unnaturally following heavy rain earlier this week. The Gomati continues to flow above the danger mark. The Gumti project, which was commissioned in 1979 and has an installed capacity of 15 MW, is the only hydro-electric power project in the state. The river on which the Dumbur dam stands is formed at the confluence of the smaller Raima and Sarma rivers, and is Tripura's most significant river. After flowing into Bangladesh, the river merges with the Meghna.

Rainfall in Tripura

On August 19, South Tripura district received 288.8 mm of rain in a single day. The capital, Agartala city, recorded 233 mm of rainfall in the 24 hours from Wednesday morning to Thursday morning. The heavy rain, among the highest the state has ever received, has had the worst impact in Khowai, West Tripura, Sepahjalia, Gomati, and South Tripura.

At least 24 people are feared dead in the rain and floods. Some 1.28 lakh people have been sheltered in 558 relief camps since August 19.

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EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

Signals from US Fed chief

At the annual Jackson Hole symposium, Jerome Powell said the 'time has come' to lower interest rates. While he did not furnish further details, the impacts of Powell's observations will be felt the world over

UDIT MISRA
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 23

JEROME POWELL, the head of the US central bank, on Friday said that "the time has come for [monetary] policy to adjust", setting the stage for interest rate cuts in the near future. In his keynote address at the annual Economic Policy Symposium in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Powell said "the direction of travel is clear... timing and pace of rate cuts will depend on incoming data, the evolving outlook, and the balance of risks". The Federal Reserve does not "seek or welcome further cooling in labour market conditions", he said.

Despite Powell not furnishing further details, these are significant observations. Almost immediately, bond yields of all tenures — 2-year, 10-year and 30-year — fell sharply, even as the US dollar weakened and stock market indices — S&P 500, Nasdaq 100, Russell 2000 — registered sharp gains.

The impacts of Powell's observation will not be limited to the US alone, and it can be expected that stock markets around the world will jump when they open next.

What is the Jackson Hole symposium?

Every year since 1978, the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City has sponsored a symposium to discuss a particular issue faced by the US and world economies. Central bankers, finance ministers, academics, and financial market participants from around the world participate in the symposium to discuss the economic issues, implications, and policy options pertaining to the theme of that year. Symposium proceedings include papers, commentary, and discussions.

Since 1982, the symposium has been hosted at the Jackson Lake Lodge at Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming.

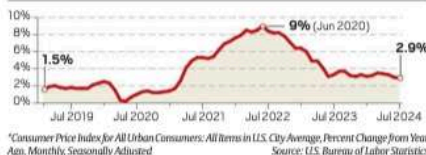
Why does the symposium matter?

The symposium, and especially the comment by the head of the Federal Reserve, are watched by policymakers and market participants globally because they provide clues to what is happening in the world economy, and where things may go.

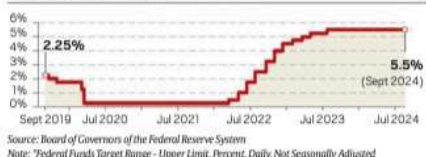
For instance, in 2007, just before the world plunged into the Global Financial Crisis, after the US housing market unravelled, the theme at Jackson Hole was "Housing, Housing Finance, and Monetary Policy". In 2021, as the world had started to make sense of the effects of the global pandemic that had literally shut down all economies, the theme was "Macroeconomic Policy in an Uneven Economy".

This year's theme is "Reassessing the Elasticity and Sensitivity of Monetary Policy". According to the official website: "This year's theme will explore lessons learned from the response of monetary policy to both the pandemic and the subsequent surge in inflation."

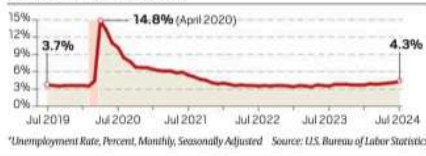
US INFLATION RATE DATA



US FEDERAL FUNDS RATE*



US UNEMPLOYMENT DATA



What does monetary policy refer to?

Why is it important?

At the heart of the discussions in Jackson Hole is monetary policy, which is essentially about tweaking the availability of money for loans and the price at which these loans are given in any economy (the "interest rate"). Typically, the main responsibility of all central banks is to maintain price stability in the economy. This means ensuring that money maintains its value over time — or the same quantity of money buys roughly the same amount of goods and services tomorrow as it does today.

Often, like in the US, there is a dual mandate — the central bank has to ensure price stability while maintaining low levels of unemployment.

The key challenge before a central bank is inflation, or the rate at which prices rise from one year to another. When inflation rises, central banks raise interest rates so as to depress economic activity, and thus bring down prices of goods and services. But as soon as they suc-

ceeded in this goal, they are faced with the problem of slower growth and rising unemployment as a result of economic activity faltering. A central bank is judged for the timing of its policy actions — both in containing rising inflation as well as preventing a sharp rise in unemployment or a sharp fall in economic growth. Timing of monetary policy action is a tricky subject because it often takes time for the monetary policy decisions of the central bank to affect the economy. This is the "transmission" that this year's theme refers to.

The theme also refers to "effectiveness" — whether or how far monetary policy is successful in containing inflation. If inflation has spiked purely because of sudden supply constraints — for instance, lower levels of food items being produced because of deficient rainfall — then higher interest rates may not be effective in bringing down prices.

Over the past five years, central banks have been buffeted by macroeconomic shocks that have pulled policy in different directions. The pandemic lockdowns de-

stroyed economic activity and led to a sharp rise in unemployment. In response, all central banks resorted to easy monetary policy — even as the governments resorted to expansive fiscal policies (pumping money into the economy). The net result of these two factors as well as supply disruptions was a rise in inflation. This happened all over the world but more so in the US. The Russia-Ukraine war made matters worse, and sent inflation rates skyrocketing to historic highs.

As a result, central banks around the world had to sharply raise interest rates. As things stand now, most developed economies have lost momentum as a result of the "tight" monetary policies of central banks. These are perpetual worries about recession.

Why is Powell's statement significant?

For some time now, stock markets and global investors have been waiting for a clear signal about the Fed's policy cycle. Powell saying that "the time has come for policy to adjust" essentially means that the Fed is now more bothered about containing the unemployment rate than the inflation rate. Put differently, it means there will be no more hikes of interest rates — in fact, signals are that a rate-cutting cycle is about to start.

Lower interest rates imply a boost to economic activity because it will become cheaper to borrow money, whether it is to buy a car or invest in building a new factory. That is why stock markets are rising — market participants see a period of economic activity sustained by progressively lower interest rates.

Does the statement find an echo in RBI?

There are several points of divergence between the US Fed and RBI. First, the target inflation rate is 2% for the US and 4% for India. Second, in the last few years, the quantum of increase in the policy interest rate in the US has been almost double that of India, partly because US interest rates were close to zero before the rate cycle. Third, in terms of percentage points, inflation has fallen more in the US than in India.

Powell's signal towards the start of the interest rate-cutting cycle is something that finds resonance in many countries. The European Central Bank has already cut its deposit rate once (by 25 basis points) in June.

The RBI hasn't cut rates yet but as the minutes of the latest Monetary Policy Committee show, there is a growing sense among members that interest rates may be too high. At least two out of the six members of the MPC voted for a cut. The dominant RBI view, however, is still to be watchful of inflation.

RBI's reluctance to cut also has to do with the fact that, unlike the US (where recession fears abound), India is clocking world-leading GDP growth rates at the moment. As such, there is less pressure on RBI to cut rates and more pressure to ensure inflation doesn't resurge again.

Assessing Ukraine's deep incursion in Russia: why, what happens now

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 23

PRESIDENT VOLODYMYR Zelenskyy on Thursday said Ukrainian troops continue to capture territory and Russian soldiers in Russia's Kursk Oblast since the launch of Ukraine's latest incursion into the region more than two weeks ago.

Russia on its part said that it had foiled a Ukrainian attempt to seize land in the neighbouring Bryansk Oblast, about 240 km away from the site of the incursion into Kursk.

Ukraine's attack in Kursk, which began early on August 6, came after months of steady gains by Russia on the battlefield. Ukrainian President Zelenskyy has not explained their reasons for going deep inside Russia. However, observers have listed three probable objectives of the incursion.

A BARGAINING CHIP: Ukraine wants to use the captured territory as a bargaining chip for any future negotiation with Russia, if Donald Trump returns to the White House early next year, he could force Kyiv to negotiate by withdrawing American military-technical assistance.

"The Ukrainian government wants to make sure that if it has to enter that process, it has things that Russia wants to trade for concessions," Jack Watling, a senior research fellow for Land Warfare at the Royal United Services Institute, London, wrote in *The Guardian*.

TO BOOST MORALE: It has been suggested that Ukraine wanted to boost the morale of its people and troops after failing to stop the



Where the Ukrainian incursion has taken place in the Kursk Oblast.

Russian advance in the east. The operation was intended to signal that even with its dwindling resources, the Ukrainian military can carry out a successful offensive. Ukraine also wanted to display to the West that helping it with arms and funds is not yet a lost cause.

BATTLEFIELD TACTIC: The incursion could be a tactic to force Russia to divert its forces from the hottest battlefields in eastern Ukraine, where they are coming close to fulfilling their goal of capturing all of the Donetsk region.

Michael Kofman, a senior fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told *Foreign Policy*, "Ukraine likely holds that, at a bare minimum, this operation will force the Russian military to deploy a much larger force to counter their offensive, thereby sapping their operations in Donetsk."

Status of the incursion

The attack, which has resulted in one of the biggest exchanges of territory since the first month of the war in 2022, caught President Vladimir Putin off-guard. On August 20, Col Gen Strykly claimed that Ukraine has taken control of almost 1,300 sq km of Russian territory. If accurate, this would mean Ukraine has already captured more land since the begin-

ning of the attack on August 6 than Russia has captured in Ukraine over the last eight months.

The operation has forced Russia to evacuate nearly 200,000 people from the region. Ukraine has reportedly captured hundreds of Russian conscripts, and has destroyed several bridges over the Seym river, cutting off a key Russian logistics base in Glushkovo from the front-line forces.

It Gen Ben Hodges, who led US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, told Britain's *Times* *Azido* that Ukraine's ability to "neutralise Russian drones by creating... some sort of a counter-drone bubble" had helped.

What happens now

It is too early to predict if Ukraine will be able to hold on to its gains. The Ukrainian army is suffering from a shortage of manpower, and it pulled reserve troops from other battle frontlines such as in Donetsk and Kharkiv to commit them to the new axis. In the coming weeks, its troops in Kursk could find themselves overextended, and be forced to retreat.

Also, Russia has not so far diverted its forces from the Donetsk region. On August 19, Russian forces captured nearly all of the town of Niu-York, entered nearby Toretsk, and encroached on the logistics hub of Pokrovsk, according to a report by the *Financial Times*.

Konrad Muzyka, director of Rochar Consulting, a Poland-based group that tracks the war, told the *Financial Times* that with most of its reserve forces committed to Kursk, Ukraine would struggle to fill defensive gaps and conduct various Russian threats.

An Indian strategic affairs expert on Russia told *The Indian Express* that Ukraine may have made a mistake in going deep into Kursk. If Russia does not come to the negotiation table soon, and if Western allies fail to supply more arms and ammunition to Ukraine, the incursion could turn out to be "military suicide", the expert said.

RISHIKA SINGH
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 23

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi arrived in Ukraine's capital Kyiv from neighbouring Poland by train on Friday, an unusual mode of transport for a head of government, but one that has been used earlier by other global leaders as well.

Foreign dignitaries visiting Kyiv have been taking the train ever since Ukraine's airspace was closed following the Russian invasion of February 2022. After Joe Biden rolled into Kyiv last year instead of flying in on Air Force One, the US President's iconic Boeing 747 aircraft, the train was dubbed "Rail Force One".

The train to Kyiv

The train, which is run by the state-owned Ukrainian Railways or Ukrzaliznytsya, is painted blue and yellow, the colours of Ukraine's flag.

The train has several luxury compartments, one of which was likely built just before Russia was annexed Crimea in 2014, and was previously used to ferry wealthy tourists to the peninsula on the Black Sea, according to a report by the US government-funded *Radio Free Europe*.

Pictures from trips taken by foreign dignitaries show wooden panels, cream and blue curtains, leather sofas, king-size beds, wall-mounted flat-screen TVs and other modern amenities on the train.

The train's 10-hour, 700-odd-km journey begins at Przemysl Główny station in Poland, located around 400 km south of Warsaw, close to the country's border with Ukraine, and ends at Kyiv.

Famous passengers

The first foreign dignitaries to travel to Kyiv by the train were the prime ministers of Poland, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic, who visited in 2022.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Kyiv Central Railway Station on Friday. ANI



Thereafter, the train was used by the former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, French President Emmanuel Macron, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada, besides Biden and now Modi.

Kyiv's 'iron diplomacy'

Alexander Kamynshin, Ukraine's Strategic Industries Minister who is in charge of Ukrzaliznytsya, has often used the hashtag #IronDiplomacy to refer to the world leaders' train trips.

In 2023, Kamynshin posted on X about President Biden's 20 hours on the train and just four in Kyiv, and apologised to the public when Biden's travel led to some other trains on the network being delayed.

"We had to delay some of our trains to give a way to #RailForceOne. It was painful for me and my team, but I had to do that. So only 90% of our trains arrived on time yesterday. I apologise," he wrote.

Crucial for Ukraine

This train, and other trains in the Ukrainian railway network, have played an important role in the war effort, including helping transport aid across the country, and providing a lifeline for the population by ensuring the importance of the railways to his country.

As the war broke out, many Ukrainians rushed to train stations in an attempt to escape to safer places, or to leave the country. Ukraine's widespread railway network has always been popular, and domestic travellers often favour trains over planes. Ukrzaliznytsya is the sixth-largest railway passenger transporter in the world, and seventh for freight, according to a CNN report.

MAHARASHTRA

Dharavikars:
from home into the unknown

Dharavi, in the heart of Mumbai, where a square foot of land costs about ₹30,000, will soon undergo redevelopment by the Adani Group. People who have lived here for generations, albeit on government land, want clarity on their future—how, where, and how, finds **Purnima Sah**



An aerial view of Dharavi, considered Asia's largest slum, in Mumbai, Maharashtra. EMMANUEL YOGINI

In Dharavi's Kumbharwada (potters' colony), where the lanes are as narrow as an arm span, a group of teenagers is glued to the screen of a single mobile phone, an anachronistic scene if there ever was one. They are watching a Marathi YouTube channel that talks about the rehabilitation of Dharavikars, people who live in the Mumbai slum that is known for its economic resilience, entrepreneurial grit, and community living, amid the lack of basic sanitation in a city that is India's economic hub.

Gini Ben, 76, a potter, asks what the anchor is saying. "They are saying we will be given houses elsewhere, so the redevelopment work here can begin," one of the boys tells her.

Dharavi, spread across 555 acres, is in the northernmost part of what was once Parel island, one of the seven islands that made up the city's land mass, before the sea was reclaimed. Satellite images throw up a sea of flat grey roofs dotted with some blue; asbestos sheets punctuated with plastic. On the ground, lanes form community spaces, where the boys sit.

Here, people engage in political discussions, and mothers ask neighbours to care for babies as they dash out to run an errand. Homes in the area run one into the other, and single-room workshops of micro industries—recycling, leather, dyeing, garment manufacturing, among others—thrive. To people living in what is touted as 'Asia's largest slum', this is home.

The area has a population density of 3.5 lakh people per sq. km as per various estimates (India's is about 473.4 as per the World Bank; Mumbai's 26,453 as per its civic body in 2018-19). It was declared a slum in 1971. There are various amenities provided by the government such as taps, toilets, electricity, schools, and dispensaries.

In 2022, Adani Properties, a company under the Adani Group, won a bid worth ₹5,069 crore for the Dharavi Redevelopment Project Private Limited (DRPPL), a joint venture with the Maharashtra government. The aim is for the company to develop a township on government land, with apartment blocks, business spaces, schools, hospitals, and other features of community living. The current tender document calls this a "vital public project" situated less than 10 km from the city's international airport. Political parties in opposition to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) claim the deal benefits the Adani Group.

The homes in Dharavi, often featured in movies and across social media as 'poverty porn', will be razed. The boys with the phone sit on a cement bench in front of a hutment. Behind them is a woman's larger-than-life face, painted bright in green, yellow, and red. Her hands are folded, with the words 'Shubh labh' (auspicious wishes and prosperity). That is not how the people in Dharavi feel their future will pan out though.

"What will happen to our workshops and the homes we built? What will we eat if we lose our livelihood?" Gini Ben asks. "The boys have no answer. "My ancestors moved here from Gujarat when there was no *basti* (slum). It was an empty piece of land with grasses that grew to my height during the rains," she remembers, of the 1950s.

Dharavi was a *koliwada* (fisherfolk colony) before people from across the country began to move here in the late 1800s, setting up shop under temporary structures. Gini Ben says potters need an open space to bake clay products and a workshop to craft them in. Her family expanded when her two sons got married. Now they have two homes here, next to each other, both three-storied, with a single room on each floor, in which 12 family members live.

What will happen to our workshops and the homes we built? What will we eat if we lose our livelihood? My ancestors moved here from Gujarat when there was no *basti* (slum)

GINI BEN
Dharavi resident

Dharavi residents worry about various aspects of their lives once the project plans are finalised: Will they get new homes in lieu of existing ones? Where will the homes be? Will these be temporary or permanent houses? What happens to their businesses? Will children drop out of school?

Land surveys and the future

S.V.R. Srinivas, chief executive officer and officer on special duty, Dharavi Rehabilitation Project (DRP), which comes under the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA), says, "It is the brownest of brownfield projects. To be able to implement this plan, we need to conduct a proper survey, and need people to cooperate," he says. He adds that DRP is working on a plan that will take Dharavikars "directly from their present home to their final home".

The Dharavi notified area under DRPPL is approximately 600 acres, which includes 45 acres of railway land located in Kamala Ramay Nagar, Matunga, a couple of kilometres away. Of the 600 acres, approximately 300 acres will undergo redevelopment. The rest of the area is occupied by the Mahim Nature Park, Tata Power Dharavi Receiving Station, two suburban railway lines, and an upcoming sewage water treatment plant.

A reply from DRP to a query filed under the Right to Information (RTI) Act by advocate and social activist Sagar Devre reveals that an additional 41.6 acres, now a dumping ground reclamation site, will be given to the project after June 2025.

There are 63,983 tenements in the area, as per a biometric and socio-economic survey that was conducted in 2007-08 by Maharashtra Social Housing and Action League, a Pune-based NGO.

In March this year, the Adani Group began another survey to find out the number of residential and commercial establishments in the area, and how many people live and work here. The survey of around 10,000 tenements on the railway land is complete, with houses being physically marked. This is the fourth survey since 2004, when the first government resolution was passed for the redevelopment of Dharavi.

Sources say the DRPPL team is in the process of preparing the master plan for the project. Devre says until the master plan is prepared, there will be no certainty about "the number of eligible citizens, the amount of land required, and the location of the rehabilitation".

In Kumbharwada, Ranchod Tank, 57, says his family owns 2,000 sq. ft of land that includes his

pottery workshop and home. He wants a better living space for the next generation. "We have all the documents of ownership; we pay the government tax and electricity charges. Until now no one has discussed the master plan with us," he says.

Srinivas explains the rehabilitation plan. There are three categories of eligibility: people with documentary proof (voter identity card, electricity bill) who have been living on the ground floor and before January 1, 2000. They are slated to get 350 sq. ft homes within Dharavi free of cost. The second category is people who established homes in Dharavi from January 1, 2000 until January 1, 2011. They will get 300 sq. ft homes outside Dharavi under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana at ₹2.5 lakh. The third category consists of residents whose structures have been in existence from January 1, 2011 until the cut-off date to be declared by the Maharashtra government. They will be given homes on rent or hire purchase.

Resettlement plans

Potters like Hasmukh Narayan Chawla, 40, wonder what this will do to the family structure. "Most houses have at least seven members who live on building stacks over the hutments. If only ground floor occupants get homes, the rest of the family will scatter," he says.

Those left out of the net include people without documentation, those living on rent here for many generations, and those in the first category living in spaces above the ground floor. Residents have other worries too.

Many parts of Dharavi fall in Mumbai's international airport's funnel zone (parts along the runway and paths planes follow while landing and taking off). So there are height restrictions on buildings, as per the tender document. Which is why, add Adani Group officials, it is not feasible to accommodate all Dharavikars within Dharavi.

People from Dharavi often make the 16-km journey to Srinivas's office to ask about various aspects of the project. A group of seven people, of which five are women, wants to know what their future will be. "My house collapsed during the monsoon. I was promised a MHADA house (a complex being developed by the government within Dharavi that is still not up). This was five years ago," says Roshan Shaikh, in her 40s. She wonders whether she makes the cut to get housing within the locality.

All eligible people with commercial tenements that are non-polluting will get space within Dharavi, says Srinivas, adding that there are some terms and conditions based on the size of the establishment, with some getting it for free and others having to pay an additional sum.

In Dharavi's Chandra Bazar (leather market), considered a polluting industry, Shabbir Shaikh, 36, runs his family's leather factory, where products are manufactured and exported. "We are not against development, but it should not be at the cost of losing our livelihood and homes. Dharavi alone generates a revenue of \$100 billion every year because of the small and micro industries here. If we are rehabilitated to another area, the workers and our workshops will suffer a loss." He is worried about being pushed into poverty.

The first tannery was set up in Dharavi in 1887, when people migrated from Tamil Nadu, according to Re-Dharavi, a collaboration that suggested guidelines for redevelopment of slums.

Before the unsettling feeling overtook Dharavi, florist Perumal Kumar, 50, sold his ancestral home here. His family of five now lives in a rented hutment in Dharavi as their new one in a slum in Sion, 500 metres away, is under construction. "Generations ago, my family moved here from Tiruvanna-

malai (in Tamil Nadu) to sell flowers in Dadar. Since the talk began on the project, not a single official has come to explain it to us. That's why we decided to move out," he says. Other residents say it is the lack of communication from a 'higher entity' that is making them nervous.

Citizen movements

To get people on board, DRPPL has tried the 'soft' approach: they have organised a job fair and cricket tournaments with prize money up to ₹1 lakh. Advocate Rajendra Kordle is the office secretary of the Peasants and Workers Party of India and founder-coordinator of Dharavi Bachao Andolan, a residents' group formed in 2004. In his office, an ageing Edwardian-period building, he says this is all just a ploy to deceive people.

He says as per the Slum Rehabilitation Authority rules, rehabilitation should happen within Dharavi. "The larger plan is to remove the slum dwellers from Dharavi to different locations and turn Dharavi's land into an extended BKC (Bandra-Kurla Complex) and make it a business hub. This is a sophisticated land grab plan of the government to hand over the entire real estate market of Mumbai to Gautam Adani (chairman of Adani Group)." He remembers that in 2006, the State government's Department of Housing had added a portion of BKC to the Dharavi redevelopment plan.

A reply to one of Devre's RTI queries on land allocated for townships to rehabilitate people revealed that DRPPL has asked for at least 1,500 acres outside Dharavi in different locations in Mumbai: two in Mulund, and one each in Dahisar, Mankhurd, Vikhroli and Kurla; some are salt pans, others dumping grounds. Adani Group spokespersons claim the required land for rehabilitation is 1,000 acres, of which 540 have been identified.

In May, Watchdog Foundation, a citizens' group from Mumbai, wrote to Chief Minister Eknath Shinde and the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai raising concerns over temporary rehabilitation for Dharavi residents on salt pans. Advocate Godfrey Pimenta, representing the citizens' group, highlights the environmental concerns. "The proposed rehabilitation on salt-pan land poses significant risks and could be detrimental to the safety and well-being of Mumbaiers due to ill-planned development," he says.

Devre says two major rehabilitation projects of project-affected people (PAP) are coming up in Mulund East. An RTI response shows that 118.1 acres will be allotted here and many will be moved into the 7,439 tenements in the area, he says. "These projects will add pressure on civic and other amenities in Mulund East," he says.

In July, residents of Mulund, Kurla, and Dharavi formed a group to demand clarity on the project. The same month, hundreds from Mulund staged a protest against shifting of project-affected families to the area, with placards that read, "Dismiss PAP project", "Save Mulund", "No PAP in Dharavi". Sayed Sajid Ali, 44, owns a factory that produces garments for export to African countries. "Our entire life is centred around Bandra and Mahim. If we are displaced, we will have to start from scratch. Children might drop out of school."

A DRPPL spokesperson says after the project secures clearance from all government departments, rehabilitation and reconstruction will take seven years. However, the tender document says this will take 17 years.

Abdul Hakeem, 65, another garment producer, says, "My home and factory that I built with my savings will be demolished. It will take years to redevelop Dharavi. By that time many of us will die; we will never move back home."



The recycling micro industry is prominent in Dharavi, taking in all of Mumbai's waste. EMMANUEL YOGINI



Not taking sides

Narendra Modi's visit to Ukraine was more a balancing act than a peace effort

Six weeks after his visit to Moscow, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip to Kyiv and meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday was largely seen as an exercise in balancing India's position on the Russia-Ukraine war. Since Russia first invaded Ukraine in February 2022, India has maintained a uniquely distant position from the war: abstaining from all resolutions at the United Nations that dealt with the conflict and were critical of Russia. India also ignored western sanctions, particularly on payments for oil imports and defence hardware from Russia, and did not accept Mr. Zelenskyy's requests to include Ukraine in the G-20 summit last year or to send a high-level political participation to the Swiss peace summit in June this year. India's disapproval of Russia's actions was instead couched in the language of peace, all of cold comfort for Ukraine, which was seeking a clear alignment with its cause, and deeply critical of Mr. Modi's Moscow visit. That Mr. Modi made the visit at all, the first by any Indian Prime Minister since Ukraine's independence in 1991, is significant, and is being watched for signals of any major change in India's policy on the war. During his short visit, the two leaders discussed the conflict, and later visited a memorial for children killed in the war. Unlike other international leaders visiting Kyiv since 2022, Mr. Modi did not meet with any war casualties or injured soldiers and civilians. The two sides signed agreements on cooperation in agriculture, culture, medical products and assistance for community development projects. The leaders did not, however, speak of progress on other overlooked issues, including a strategic partnership, or supplies of telecom and medical infrastructure, and construction equipment that Ukraine has requested.

The broader question around the visit was whether India would now play a larger role in resolving the conflict which includes an idea propounded by Kyiv for another summit in November. Mr. Modi has also become one of a handful of world leaders, from Indonesia, Türkiye, South Africa and Hungary, to have visited Kyiv and Moscow, and, hence, in a position to reach out to both by peace initiatives. As a leader of the Global South, India has a stake in ensuring that the impact of the war in Europe and sanctions do not continue to imperil the developing and underdeveloped nations. However, New Delhi has thus far not shown an interest in more than passing messages when required, sending officials to Doha and Bürgenstock when invited to attend peace dialogues, and encouraging the two parties to deal directly with each other. Unless that understanding of India's interest changes, it would seem Mr. Modi's visit followed form, but did not fundamentally move the needle on the global peace effort. Nor did the substance greatly outweigh the symbolism of the much-awaited visit.

Soren vs Soren

Champai Soren seems keen on defeating Hemant than on winning

Former Jharkhand Chief Minister Champai Soren's exit from the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) follows a familiar pattern. He was the trusted lieutenant who was hand-picked by party supremo Hemant Soren to be his placeholder in his absence. That act of high trust, or political gamble, soon deteriorated into a mismatch of expectations of loyalty and rewards from both sides. Champai has been a veteran of tribal mobilisation in Jharkhand and has played second fiddle to Shibu Soren and his son Hemant Soren, the former and current Chief Ministers of the State, respectively, all his life. When Hemant resigned as the Chief Minister on January 31, 2024, minutes before he was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate on charges of corruption, Champai took over the reins. It was a bold and decent move on the part of Hemant to choose a party veteran instead of a family member, as it usually happens in such situations, but, perhaps, it was too good to last. As soon as he was released on bail in June by the High Court, after spending nearly five months in jail, Hemant wanted to be back in the saddle. Champai's removal turned out to be abrupt, and he found it humiliating. He had wielded power as the chief executive for the first time and expected to be treated more respectfully by his leader.

The JMM, like most parties in India, is controlled by one leader or family, and there is little room for the separate ambitions of individual leaders. Champai himself has played that game for a long time, but after being the Chief Minister, he thought a tipping point had been reached. External factors too may have played a role in his decision. While Champai cried of "bitter humiliation" by Hemant, Hemant insinuated that Champai was being lured by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP is pushing hard for a political return in Jharkhand where elections are due soon. Its strategy is to fragment the tribal vote and consolidate the non-tribal vote in its favour while inciting resentment among the tribal communities against Muslims. To this end, the BJP is arguing that in its absence, the State has undergone unchecked changes in its demography. And, as a counter, the JMM has questioned the BJP's intent in delaying the 2021 Census, further putting the onus of checking "infiltrators" squarely on the Centre. Champai has not completely revealed his plans — he might float a party of his own or join the BJP. Either way, his role in the Assembly polls will likely work to the advantage of the BJP.

The annual accusation of board exam mark inflation

School boards in India are often accused of inflating the marks of students in classes 10 and 12 in the board examinations. The usual evidence provided for this accusation that is levelled is the high pass percentages in the board examinations. There are nearly 42 boards conducting board examinations for classes 10 and 12. The combined pass percentage of students in class 10 was 85% while the pass percentage in class 12 was 82% in 2023. Besides, the percentage of students securing more than 60% marks was around 61% in class 10, and 56% for class 12. Most of the marks clustering at the high level is known as mark compression, the twin sister of mark inflation. Mark inflation and mark compression not only undermine the credibility of our education system but also hamper the prospects of students, as they are not adequately prepared for higher education or the job market. The clamour for entrance examinations for higher education emanates from this perceived mark inflation and mark compression.

Variations across boards

In 2023, 1.55 crore students appeared for the class 12 examination, while 1.85 crore students appeared for the class 10 examination. The variation in pass percentages across boards is not high. At the same time, the variation in the percentage of students scoring more than 60% is wide across school boards. In both the secondary and higher secondary examinations, proportions of students securing more than 60% marks were lower than the national average in Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, the other north-eastern States, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal. Does this mean, on a comparable scale, that students in other States performed better than students in these States? Of course not. This is because there is no comparable scale to measure the relative academic credentials of students certified by different boards. However, questions remain. Do the boards indulge in the practice of inflating marks to varying degrees?

Mark/grade inflation in the school board examinations is a universal phenomenon. In every country, academics and public intellectuals point out the mark/grade inflation in schools and argue for corrective measures. Marks are supposed to reflect a student's academic knowledge and skills. Usually, the school board examination marks are compared with those of some standardised tests conducted at the national level to prove mark inflation in the board examinations. We have a few national-level tests such as the National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test, Joint Entrance Examination and the Common University Entrance Test that class 12 students appear for. Such tests are not conducted



R. Srinivasan
Member, State Planning Commission, Tamil Nadu



S. Raja Sethu Durai
Professor, Management Studies, Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani (BITS Pilani), Dubai

The examination ecosystem is in need of transparency and accountability as well as a good audit system

to evaluate a student's knowledge in a subject as it was taught in the prescribed curriculum by the school boards. Instead, it is an elimination process to select students with high scores in that test for admission in specific higher educational programmes. Not all students who appear for these class 12 board examinations appear for these national-level entrance tests. Students undergo special coaching classes to secure high scores in these competitive examinations. These tests fall as benchmarks for any comparison of educational standards across States.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) conducts a standardised test for most of the classes every year including class 10 class but not for classes 11 and 12. The tests are conducted as a part of National Achievement Survey (NAS) for a sample of a few thousand students in every district in the country. This is a standard test, and the NCERT uses 'Item Response Theory' to statistically estimate the scores of each student in five subjects, i.e., English, math, science, social science and a regional language. Though it is a scientifically designed study, its academic character is overwhelming to deduce any policy suggestion.

There is little scope to connect the estimated scores of students with the curriculum design of different boards and efficiency of schools among other factors that influence teaching and learning in schools. The NAS also fails to serve as a benchmark for studying the possible mark inflation offered by school boards. Continuous annual exercises such as NAS with continuous improvements in assessment instruments and marking systems should help in understanding the differences in teaching and learning across States and possibly amending the educational processes in States.

Though comparable and independent assessment tests are not available, the high pass percentages and high proportions of students securing more than 60% marks in the board examinations are enough to make one believe that mark inflation and mark compression are in vogue and that this warrants improvements to make the examination system credible.

Standardise assessment systems

The high stakes in the board examinations for both society and students cannot be dismissed. Therefore the boards should be accountable to society and to every student. The opaque board examination system is the root cause of all the problems. The cover of secrecy should not give scope for wrongdoings.

The processes, right from question paper setting to marking systems and the publication of results, should be transparent. Question paper setting should be automated with clear guidelines

that specify question formats and expected answers. Students' guidebooks should be published on how learning outcomes are tested and marks awarded in an examination. There should be examples. The process of standardising question papers by teachers should be done in confidence. The entire process of question paper setting, printing and distribution should be codified, and standard operating procedures should be published.

The process of the printing of answer books, distribution and collection should also be codified, and a self-correcting audit process should be followed. Partial automation of the valuation of answer scripts — that is, scanning and online evaluation of answer scripts — should be ensured so that errors (other than judgmental errors) in evaluation are completely avoided in the awarding of marks. Every student should have free access to answer scripts after the publication of results and have a chance to apply for revaluation for a nominal fee. A transparent and credible examination system should reduce the scope for revaluation.

Need for transparency

There should be a transparent process of awarding marks for difficult/irrelevant/wrong questions. Along with the publication of results, the minutes of the meeting of the board of examiners should be published. The board of examiners should explain the adequacy of the question paper in terms of measuring learning outcomes, the level of difficulty of questions, and the decisions on awarding moderation marks.

The publication of the marksheet should be in two formats. The first format should have only the actual mark awarded out of the maximum mark for each subject and the aggregate mark. The second format should have the standardised scores in each subject and the aggregate of the standardised scores. The standardised scores are statistical estimates of marks in each subject, based on the distribution of marks (average and standard deviation), and the levels of difficulty of the questions based on the students' aggregate ability to answer such questions. There are several statistical techniques, and the board may decide on a technique and publish this before the commencement of the examination. Standardised scores will remove mark inflation and such scores are comparable to the scores of students in other boards as well over different years.

The perception that school boards indulge in the practice of mark inflation and mark compression is not without strong evidence. Transparency and accountability that are backed by a good audit system should make our school board examination systems credible and devoid of mark inflation and mark compression.

The road to 2047 for Indian agriculture

India's centennial year of independence is still away, in 2047, but the goal of becoming a developed nation looms large. Achieving this requires a significant increase in per capita Gross National Income (GNI) to about six times the current level. This necessitates a comprehensive development approach, especially in agriculture.

Transforming Indian agriculture depends on adopting sustainable practices that ensure long-term productivity and environmental health. Precision farming, genetically modified crops, and advanced irrigation techniques such as drip and sprinkler systems are leading this transformation. For instance, the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY) has covered 78 lakh hectares, promoting water-use efficiency through micro-irrigation. The scheme's ₹93,068 crore allocation for 2021-26 underscores the government's commitment to sustainable water management.

India's agricultural sector faces challenges, including climate change, land degradation, and market access issues. The Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY), introduced in 2016, provides financial assistance for crop losses. With 49.5 crore farmers enrolled and claims totalling over ₹1.45 lakh crore, the scheme is a cornerstone of agricultural risk management.

The Electronic National Agriculture Market (eNAM), launched in 2016, integrates existing markets through an electronic platform. By September 2023, 1,361 mandis had been integrated, benefiting 1.76 million farmers and recording trade worth ₹2.88 lakh crore. This initiative improves market access and ensures better price realisation for farmers.

An imbalance

Despite agriculture engaging nearly 46% of the workforce, agriculture's contribution to GDP is about 18%, highlighting a stark imbalance. If current growth trends continue, this disparity will worsen: while overall GDP has grown at 6.1% annually since 1991-92, agricultural GDP lags at 3.3%. Under the Narendra Modi administration, overall GDP growth was 5.9%, and agriculture grew at 3.6%. However, this is insufficient for a sector so critical to the nation's socio-economic fabric.



Souryabrata Mohapatra
with the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi



Sanjib Pohit
with the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi

There are several challenges but also opportunities

By 2047, agriculture's share in GDP might shrink to 7%-8%, yet, it could still employ over 30% of the workforce if significant structural changes are not implemented. This indicates that merely maintaining the current growth trajectory will not suffice.

The expected 7.6% overall GDP growth for 2023-24 is promising. However, the agri-GDP's anaemic growth of 0.7%, primarily due to unseasonal rains, is alarming.

Further, according to United Nations projections, India's population is expected to reach 1.5 billion by 2030 and 1.59 billion by 2040. Following the agricultural challenges, meeting the food requirements of this burgeoning population will be imperative. With an estimated expenditure elasticity of food at 0.45, the demand for food is expected to grow by approximately 2.85% annually, considering the population growth rate of 0.85%.

India's real per capita income increased by 41% from 2011-12 to 2021-22 and is projected to accelerate further. However, the expenditure elasticity post-2023 is anticipated to be lower, correlating a 5% rise in per capita expenditure to a 2% growth in demand. The anticipated food demand will vary among commodities, with meat demand growing by 5.42% and rice demand by a mere 0.34%.

To address these challenges, rationalising food and fertilizer subsidies and redirecting savings towards agricultural research and development innovation and extension services are crucial.

Some initiatives

Several initiatives have been rolled out to bolster farmer prosperity and sustainable agricultural growth. The Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN), launched in 2019, disburses ₹6,000 annually to farmers in three instalments. This scheme has already benefited over 11.8 crore farmers, offering much-needed financial support. Another critical initiative, the Soil Health Card (SHC) scheme, aims to optimise soil nutrient use, thereby enhancing agricultural productivity. Over 23 crore SHCs have been distributed, providing farmers with crucial insights into soil health and nutrient management.

The government also championed the

International Year of Millets in 2023, promoting nutritious coarse grains, both domestically and internationally.

The Agriculture Infrastructure Fund, with a ₹1 lakh crore financing facility, supports the development and modernisation of post-harvest management infrastructure. Within three years, over 38,326 projects have been sanctioned, mobilising ₹30,030 crore in the agricultural infrastructure sector. These projects have created employment for more than 5.8 lakh individuals and improved farmer incomes by 20%-25% through better price realisation.

Moreover, the Survey of Villages and Mapping with Improved Technology in Village Areas (SVAMITVA) initiative aims to ensure transparent property ownership in rural areas. As of September 2023, over 1.6 crore property cards have been generated, enhancing land security and facilitating credit access for farmers.

Strategic planning

The government's strategic planning for agriculture, leading up to 2047, focuses on several key areas: anticipated future demand for agricultural products, insights from past growth catalysts, existing challenges, and potential opportunities in the agricultural landscape. Projections indicate that the total demand for food grains in 2047-48 will range from 402 million tonnes to 437 million tonnes, with production anticipated to exceed demand by 10%-13% under the Business-As-Usual (BAU) scenario.

However, to meet this demand sustainably, significant investments in agricultural research, infrastructure, and policy support are required. The Budget for 2024-25, with an allocation of ₹20 lakh crore for targeted agricultural credit and the launch of the Agriculture Accelerator Fund, highlights the government's proactive approach to fostering agricultural innovation and growth.

The road to 2047 presents both challenges and opportunities for Indian agriculture. By embracing sustainable practices, leveraging technological innovations, and implementing strategic initiatives, India can enhance farmer incomes, meet the food demands of its growing population, and achieve inclusive, sustainable development.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The khadi revolution
I write this letter as the Chairman, Khadi and Village Industries Commission, Government of India. Once symbolic under Congress rule, khadi has been revitalised under Prime

Minister Narendra Modi. The article, "The 'livery of India's freedom' is under threat" (Editorial page, August 20), has criticised its resurgence. It has levelled falsehoods. Under Mr. Modi, khadi sales have soared five-fold,

reaching ₹1.55 lakh crore in 2023-24. Artisan wages have increased by 150%, and employment in the sector has grown by 43.65%. The "Har Ghar Tiranga Abhiyan" boosted khadi flag sales by over 1,100%. It is false to

say that khadi artisans are underpaid and that government procurement has declined. The global success of khadi now rivals major brands. Mr. Modi's promotion of khadi, from wearing it himself to

advocating it globally, contrasts with the Congress party's earlier neglect. The article only attacks the hard work of khadi artisans and their role in India's self-reliance movement. The khadi revolution will

continue under Mr. Modi's leadership.
Manoj Kumar,
New Delhi
Letters to the editor@thehindu.co.in
must carry the full postal address.

A thought for today

Violence largely a male pastime, cultures that empower women tend to move away from glorification of violence

STEVEN PINKER

Kyiv-Moscow

That India can talk to both warring nations is important

Modi's engagements with Zelenskyy started with a solemn event that "honoured" the "children taken by Russian aggression" as Kyiv shared the pains of the war; and New Delhi stood in solidarity with its suffering. During Modi's July visit to Moscow, severely criticised by Zelenskyy, Russia had bombed a children's hospital in Ukraine. Modi's Kyiv visit is 'historic' not only because it was a first by an Indian PM, but also because it re-emphasises New Delhi's tradition of non-alignment, carried forward by political leadership, inked slowly and steadily by foreign services, bureaucracy.

Power talks | Zelenskyy also achieved a political goal with Ukraine's successful military incursion into Russia's Kursk early Aug on the heels of its foreign minister's end-July visit to Beijing to discuss end-of-war talks. It served its military purpose - Kursk is from where Russia sustains its troops inside Ukraine. It is also a celebrated site - in 1943, Soviet forces defeated Nazis in a crucial battle. Putin observed the anniversary of that battle by visiting Kursk last year. Analysts argue that the embarrassment to Putin over Ukraine taking over Kursk territory, which Russian forces have failed to reclaim, strengthens Zelenskyy's position in any end-war negotiations.

Walking peace | Zelenskyy's aggression and ability to sustain the resistance is a matter of pride for Ukrainians. Russia has sent conscripts into Ukraine despite its bombast that only volunteers and mercenaries will be on battlefields. Both countries have paid dearly in lives lost. But wars don't peter out. They are forced to an end. New Delhi has more than established its intention and ability to retain political and economic ties with Moscow, despite West's frowning, and with Kyiv. India seeks deeper bilateral ties with the region's democracies - the four MoUs signed in Kyiv are testament to that vision. For a country destroyed, reconstruction need not wait for war to end. When end-of-war is explored, India will be there for both warring nations.

Working 9 to 5...

...And disconnecting afterwards isn't always heavenly

Once upon a time we spent working hours in the office and personal hours away from it. This binary life feels like ancient history because that's how transformative the smartphone and then the pandemic have been. Thanks to them, the work life has been emancipated, to go where you will. You, in turn, have gotten shackled to it 24x7. Hence the growing, worldwide cry for the right to disconnect, to ignore work calls, messages and emails outside of working hours.

Australia has become the latest country to enshrine it in law. France was the first. *Naturellement*. Japan, at the other extreme, has a word for death from overwork. *Karoshi*. Everyone clocking out at 40 hours a week and taking all the vacation to which they are entitled, is unimaginable there.

More generally, common sense says it should depend on the job. Someone who works at the intersection of multiple time zones, for example, can't deliver their KRAs doing 9 to 5. Then too, as Dolly Parton sings, doing a 9 to 5 job where you're just "a step on the bossman's ladder" is nobody's dream either. A toxic manager can give you stress enough during the official work hours, while a job you love will eat into your holiday no matter the law. Bottom line, workers are not slaves. We have to work to live. But our mindfulness about the kind of work-life balance we desire will only serve us well, if we actually have choices.

Duty Of Beauty

Western women's silhouettes have changed...but not the constant pressure to look good

Lowering radioactive corsets. Lead makeup. Slimming pills and botched surgeries. With every step towards emancipation, society also instructs women to place all hope and happiness in their appearance. *All The Rage Stories from the Frontline of Beauty* by Virginia Nicholson explores women's changing looks between 1960 and 1990.

Custom, colour and class dictate beauty conventions. A change in desirable silhouettes always reflects social change. As late as the mid-19th century, upper-class female bodies in the West were squashed and imprisoned by a complex infra of crinolines and corsets, bodices and garters. And yet, hidden from sight, the bodies were honest. Fat or thin didn't matter, body hair was fine, hardly anyone wore makeup.

Early feminist dress reform movement was about liberty - bodily, social and political. Cumberbund-wearing caste women were seen as a deliberate restraint created by men. Victorian hypocrisy ran high: women were told to cover up, but not to be unattractive. The body was everywhere in art and sculpture. The gender binary was crucial to women and men had to be clearly top apart. Bustles and petticoats gave women a dramatic S-shape, corsets gripped tighter. Body hair was considered freakish in a woman. Male status was signalled by female uselessness and beauty. Brain work and exercise were discouraged among women.

Meanwhile in India, Jaanandandini Tagore found a way to wear saris with European-style blouses and jackets, allowing higher caste women to appear in public. In England, white women aspired to look like rosebuds. There was also class anxiety: working-class women were expected not to adopt these fine features.

But by the late 19th century, diet, surgery and tech entered the picture to refashion women's appearance. Picture-postcards of professional

beauties flooded the market - in US, the Gibson Girl defined the ideal. But women were also venturing into sports and exercise. The game-changer was bicycling. "She is upon us, the Emancipated Woman," wrote an panicked commentator. Women finally had two legs, wearing knickerbockers, freewheeling to freedom.

The movement for women's suffrage was peaking: activists vandalised art, protesting objectification. Then, to counter their image problem, suffragette leaders publicised their cause while wearing statement hats and lipstick. During WW1, 80% of the workforce was female, and they simply had to wear trousers.

Post-war world brought back both the pursuit of femininity and the rejection of it. Women's faces were lit up by electricity - enter the make-up companies. Cinema idols brought them new bridges of perfection to chase. Hemlines rose, waists had dropped. The body ideal changed. The Jazz Age needed women to be angular, sleek and sexy - un-

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up to be measured. By 1920, women could vote, drive, run for elections. After WWII new icons emerged: Brigitte Bardot in a bikini, Marilyn Monroe trading love for diamonds. Design houses like Dior and Balmain showed diverse looks. And yet, the synthetic images peddled on social media, the temptation of cosmetic procedures, are also all around us.

Men have always had the luxury of being indifferent to their own bodies. Perhaps, the 21st-century man should also aim simply for the capacity to respect their bodies as functional entities that breathe, digest, feel and think.

Pre-History Of Violence

Understand the roots of male aggression. Empower women to counter it

Rupa Sengupta

Men can be mad, bad and dangerous? Women can, too. So said criminologist Freda Adler back in 1975, in her Pulitzer-nominated book *Sisters in Crime*. Women's emancipation, she declared, afforded a newly 'virilised' sisterhood access to 'illegitimate' opportunities, 'violence-oriented' crimes included. Only women's lib didn't end up spurring female offending, something traditionally linked poverty and chaotic avenues. Had fewer, smarter, better-off women turned violent in droves, crime wouldn't still be a boys-heavy club.

Barren prostitution, men lead criminal categories, including property-related and white collar offences. But violent crimes' their bastion: armed robbery, organised crime, sexual assault, murder. Women are mostly self-defensively violent: globally, around 738mm have faced physical and/or sexual violence in their lives. If males comprise 8% of homicide victims, male intimate partners or family kill over five women/girls every hour.

Prison population rates reflect crime's yawning gender gap. Globally, females constitute just 6.9%; in Europe 5.9%, Asia 7.2% (India 4.3%), the Americas 8%. Male jail occupancy's so massive, even the much-touted 'chivalry' thesis - lawmen let off women - can't explain it. Expectedly, imprisoned violent offenders are overwhelmingly men. Which begs an old question: Why has male aggression straddled all ages, cultures and social milieus, with men outclassing women in chest-thumping, fist-clenching and bloodletting?

Many scholars attribute aggression's gender-skew to 'nature' (culture) not 'nature' (biology). 'Socialisation', they claim, erects a man-woman 'binary': toughened-up, peer-pressured boys; passive, cowed-down girls; bellicose male providers; docile female homemakers. Conversely, girls bully and boys do cry: femininity and masculinity can't be essentialised. 'Biological' women, and Darwin & Co dub them 'inferior'. 'Pathological' female deviance; and women become controllable. 'Naturalise' male aggression, and there's your not-guilty murder plea.

These concerns are valid. Soft-peddling male violence isn't. Society shoves people, indisputably. But, as cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker says, people aren't 'blank slates'.

Rethinking the 'nature/culture distinction', philosopher Judith Butler rightly says 'biological and social forces' interact 'in embodied life' (*Who's Afraid of Gender?*, 2021). Not culture's violence, the gender theorist inculcates some superorganic 'social organisation' of...masculine domination', not so much flesh-and-bloodmen. Butler raps a femicide! 'act of brotherhood', yet suggests violence - both conspiratorial and coalitional - isn't 'male or masculine' (interview, *NY7*). Butler rightly suggests all men are rapists (*Who's Afraid...*) - yet - reducing many feminists' fear of assault to paranoid penis-fixation - seemingly forgets most rapists are men.

Critiquing an inflexibly culturalist 'rape-is-not-



about-sex doctrine', Pinker correctly diagnoses in 'tabularasa' dogma a 'modern denial of human nature' (*The Blank Slate*, 2002). He makes three points of relevance here. One, the sexes - biological realities as old as complex life - aren't indistinguishable. Two, minds aren't 'silly putty' - enculturation requires the brain's 'innate circuitry'. Three, violence's prehistoric roots, plus 'deliberate chimpanzee' in our chimpanzee cousins, suggest evolution was afoot long before 'culture'.

According to anthropologist Richard Wrangham, shock-discovery of killer apes in the wild indicated 'extreme violence' wasn't exclusively human, engendered by intelligence or culture (*Demonic Males*, 1996). Field-studied chimps seemed all too human: 'male-bonded, patrilineal kin groups' raiding, eliminating outsiders. A 2016 study, 'The phylogenetic roots of human lethal violence' (*Nature*), suggests human interpersonal violence down the ages, reflecting primate behaviour, owed partly to humankind's position within an ancestrally - and especially - violent mammalian grouping. Sociality and territoriality seemingly abetted this inherited propensity for intra-species killing.

Citing sexual selection, evolutionists say male reproductive strategies undergird cross-species aggression: mating competition, status-seeking, sexual adventurism. But note: emphasising women's evolutionary journey; feminist scholars debunked Darwin's

androcentric idea of 'pugnacious' males outthrusting 'coy', mate-selective females. Anthropologist Sarah Hrdy spotlighted female agency among primates: competition for resources, defensive cooperation, pragmatic promiscuity. Evolutionary psychologist Anne Campbell projected risk-aversion: 'staying alive' - as hardwired maternal investment in offspring survival.

Evolutionary psychologists Margo Wilson and Martin Daly famously applied sexual selection theory to a 'Young Male Syndrome': risk-taking, status-competitive, crime-prone belligerence in young adults, especially the underclass. This classic homicide-related study (1985) examines how reproductive pressures of social rootlessness create a sense of precarious manhood, provoking dangerous dominance-seeking behaviour.

Evolutionary biologist Carolee Hooven calls testosterone's brain 'modulates muscle flexing'. He already 10-20 times those of young males, male T production surges 30-fold at puberty, dipping - significantly - with fatherhood and ageing. Her book *The Story of Testosterone* (2021) puts multidisciplinary focus on how this sex-differentiating steroid hormone builds muscle, masculinises brain and modulates muscle flexing. Her message for 'T-skeptics': given aggression's ubiquitous 'gendered pattern', downplaying the biology of violence isn't socially beneficial.

Concerning sex and gender, nature or nurture 'depends' on what's being examined, says oncologist Siddharth Mukherjee (*The Gene*, 2016). Turned on (or off), one's 'master gene', SHY, determines male (or female) sexual anatomy - the 'binary'. But a 'geno-developmental cascade', with lower-ranked genes assimilating environmental (and other) cues, informs gender.

Concerning aggression, controversial 'warrior genes' research implicates a nature-nurture 'gene x environment' link: risk-carrying MAOA variants plus psychosocial stressors like childhood trauma. On warfare, the debate's still nurture-versus-nature. Did Neolithic farmers invent war? Or is it hardwired, and of hunter-gatherer antiquity? Either way, war's a sex-linked male bloodsport, sustained by militaristic masculinity's cultural glorification.

Ultimately, neither biology nor culture is destiny. Reproductive 'tyranny', homo/trans-phobia, gendered racism - no bias-free landscape today. Millions of lights-conscious women aren't dupes of some 'hetero-normative' world conspiracy. Nor are all men aggressive. Without sublimating mating drives and killer instincts, without the creative cooperation anthropologist Agustín Fuentes tirelessly highlights, nobody could coexist.

Many scientists, if they need it, want 'man-kind's' 'darker' side recognised, seeking effective antidotes. If one prescribed remedy is patriarchal society's feminisation, sisters-across-borders should stop apologising for being women. Half of humanity women needn't be disembodied to combat sexism. They needn't ape men to be men's equals. They needn't create 'warrior genes' their strengths. Rather, women should celebrate what most women are: empathetic, compassionate, collaborative, peace-prone and war-averse - the life-affirming 'better angels' of human nature.

How Does Ukraine See India? In 3 Different Ways

First, Kyiv wants to understand New Delhi's position. Second, Kyiv wants to figure out New Delhi's motivation. Third, Kyiv is grateful for the very fact of Modi's visit

Rudroneel Ghosh @timesofindia.com

Air-raid sirens blared early in the morning in Kyiv even as Modi made his way to the Ukrainian capital by train from Poland. A grim reminder that Ukraine very much remains a war-zone, notwithstanding the bustle and banter of everyday life here. That Modi reached Kyiv on Ukraine's national flag day - also a day before its independence day - was more symbolic than any message that Putin was trying to send across by firing ballistic missiles at Ukrainian cities.

Curiosity to gratefulness | The Ukrainian response to the visit - the first by a sitting Indian PM to independent Ukraine - elicited three kinds of reactions. First, there was genuine curiosity about India's position on the war. Zelenskyy may have bristled at Modi hugging Putin last month in Moscow while Russian missiles struck the largest children's hospital in Kyiv, but Ukrainians are also discovering that the world is a complicated place.

European support for Ukraine comes in multiple shades. Hungary's Viktor Orban's reluctant support is mindful of its business interests. The Baltic states are the most vociferous in their support. But as Ukrainian independent MP Larysa Bilozir put it, the Baltic support is not because they are special love for Ukraine, but is motivated by the fear of a Ukrainian collapse.

Second, the Ukrainian concern today is what kind of neutrality India adheres to. Is it neutral because it

has serious compulsions, or is it neutral because it doesn't agree with Ukraine's point of view?

Third, there's general gratefulness for the fact that Modi chose to come to Kyiv. Ukraine sees any leader who takes the trouble to make the journey in this difficult moment as a friend, if not a potential ally.

Baby steps | Plus, there is candid assessment that a gap in understanding exists between India and Ukraine. This is being variously blamed on lack of adequate



learning about Eastern Europe and Ukraine's failure to actively build relations with countries of the Global South. Therefore, at the level of the Ukrainian population, India today continues to be viewed through old tropes of spirituality and yoga. India's IT prowess is just beginning to register here.

Similarly, new Ukraine, especially post-Maidan revolution of 2014, is still not well understood among Indian circles. This also feeds into the perception among

a section of Indians that the war is essentially a product of an international power tussle between US and Russia. Ukrainians find this exaggeration. They just want the world to realise they are fighting for their own freedom. In this context, Modi's visit helps both sides take the first baby steps towards bridging the cognitive divide.

Russia, the big bad wolf | The other part of the puzzle for Ukrainians is why countries like India don't understand that today's Russia isn't the Soviet Union. The common refrain one hears in Kyiv is that Ukraine too was part of the Soviet Union. And much of the technical and defence cooperation between India and the Soviets was actually championed by Ukrainians within the Soviet space. Ukrainian experts blame the successful hijacking of the positive Soviet legacy by Russia as the root cause of Ukraine's lack of traction in the Global South today.

Fighting imperial legacy | Finally, the phrase 'as long as it takes' deeply defines Ukraine's approach to the war today. Victory means decolonisation and permanently dismantling what Ukrainians see as Russia's imperial structures. In this regard, Ukrainians would like to draw parallels with India's anti-colonial struggle. 'You fought colonialism. Like we are fighting now' is an argument that is frequently thrown at Indians here. And as the largest democracy in the world, Ukrainians want India to empathise with their own yearning for freedom.

But one is one thing that all Ukrainians agree on. Modi is the only leader to have called for peace and abjuring conflict multiple times in front of Putin. For that alone, he has Ukrainians' respect.

Calvin & Hobbes



Shift Attention To Atman For Instant Liberation

Jaya Row

Krishna was born in a prison. The day he was born was magical.

The guards fell asleep, and the prison gates flung open. Krishna was Atman personified. Spirit cannot be limited by matter. We are Spirit enclosed in matter. If we identify with matter, we remain imprisoned by the body, mind and intellect. Shift your attention to Atman and you are instantly liberated.

Yashoda, Krishna's father, carried the child across the river Yamuna to Gokul, where Yashoda and Nand had just had a baby girl. He gently swapped the two infants and returned with the girl. Thus, Krishna's childhood was spent in the village of Gokul.

Krishna was dark-complexioned to denote that Atman is unknown to us. We know only matter. Krishna was blue and

was a pitambar: yellow garment. Blue represents infinity, while yellow is the colour of the earth. We are Spirit clothed in matter.

Krishna played the flute expertly and attracted the whole world with his divine music. The flute is hollow with several holes, representing our personality with seven windows to the world - the five senses, mind and intellect. When you learn the art of dealing with them you bring out exquisite music. Without this crucial knowledge, only discordant notes emerge.

Krishna was an epitome of joy, cheer, and mischief. Your life gets filled with laughter and fun; sorrow vanishes when you learn the technique of living.

Krishna says emphatically in the Bhagwad Gita - there is no place for

sorrow in life. If you are unhappy, it is because of wrong identification with your matter layers and the unintelligent attachment to them.

Once, when Krishna was playing with his friends on the banks of a lake, the dreaded multi-headed serpent, Kalya, appeared. It had poisoned the water.

Krishna danced on Kalya's heads. The wives of Kalya then paid homage to Krishna.

The lake represents the mind. It is polluted by desires, denoted by Kalya. As you turn inward and focus your attention on the higher, the desires vanish, and the

objects of desire come to you. The wives of Kalya represent worldly objects. Fix a higher goal and work for a noble cause. Then, the object of desire comes to you.

Just before the Mahabharat war began, both Arjun and Duryodhan

Sacred space

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Viktor E Frankl

went to Krishna to ask for help. Krishna said he would divide his resources equally between the two. One would get his army and weaponry, while the other would have Krishna alone, unarmed. Since he saw Arjun first, he gave him the first choice.

Inside the Arjun, Krishna, while Duryodhan was only too happy with the army. During the war, it was Krishna's invaluable advice that helped the Pandavs win.

Thus, Krishna, as Arjun's charioteer, provided the wisdom with the wisdom of the Gita that helped Arjun overcome his grief and win the war. The Gita helps us win our battles in life. Today, take a moment to reflect on your life.

Let the teachings of Krishna rekindle your passion and zest for life.

Join us for a special *Janmashtami webinar* on Aug 24, 6 pm on YouTube. WhatsApp 9820138429 for the link

J&K witnessed landmark elections in 2002



LT GEN VINAYAK PATANKAR (RETD)
FORMER COMMANDER,
15 CORPS, KASHMIR

THE Election Commission of India's (ECI) announcement on holding the three-phase Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir brought back memories of the landmark polls held in September-October 2002. While the forthcoming elections would be the first in the Union Territory, the one in 2002 was also significant for several reasons.

While there has been a rise in terror attacks in the Jammu region in the recent past, it was the Kashmir valley that had witnessed an escalation of terror activities in 2002. It was the first time that the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) participated in the Assembly polls. There was a call for boycotting the elections, given by the Tehreek-e-Hurriyat. This was also the first poll in J&K in which EVMs (electronic voting machines) were used.

Even before the announcement of the dates of the four-phase elections was made, it was widely

known that they were in the offing. While the PDI had pulled out all stops to reach out to the electorate, the J&K National Conference appeared to be relying on its solid organisational structure down to the grassroots level in its traditional strongholds. While the political parties had already begun their preparations, the official machinery had also started gearing up for the important event. It included, besides the Central and state governments, various security forces and intelligence services. The dynamic security situation was being closely watched and discussed regularly at the Unified Command Headquarters.

It was apparent that the security situation was widely different in urban and rural areas. The terrorists, wanting to make their presence felt, were more active in towns and cities, which had a large concentration of population, rather than in sparsely populated villages and hamlets. The urban population, which enjoyed better civic amenities, had more time to participate in political activities. In those areas, it was relatively easier for terrorists to enlist overground workers and quasi-political organisations like the Hurriyat. In mountainous areas, daily life was hard in the absence of basic facilities like medical treatment, supply of water and electricity which left little time for poli-



BALLOT POWER: The 2002 Assembly elections reflected the true will of the people. *ICRIMS*

tics, except at the local level. The urban population was thus more polarised along existing political lines, whereas rural folk looked forward to have their say to improve their lives. In the rural areas, the enthusiasm to vote in the elections was palpable, especially among the youth and first-time voters. Interestingly, the rural population showed greater inclination to participate at the hustings, even defying threats and intimidation from terrorists and at times tearing posters warning voters of dire consequences.

The first phase of the elections was to be held on September 16, 2002.

The rural population showed greater inclination to participate at the hustings, even defying threats from terrorists.

James Michael Lyngdoh, then Chief Election Commissioner, visited Srinagar a few times in the weeks prior to that to hold detailed discussions with the state administration and oversee polling arrangements. He was unequivocal in emphasising that he would accept no mismanagement at booths and would order repolling as many times as needed to ensure free and fair polling.

After the official announcement of the election schedule, the elected state government went into suspended animation and the Governor, Girish Saxena, took charge. About a week prior to the

first round of polling, he held a meeting to take stock of the situation and satisfy himself that all was in readiness for the big event. Apart from officials directly involved in the conduct of polling, the meeting was attended by local heads of various security forces, intelligence agencies, senior bureaucrats of the state government and a few others. At the end of the meeting, the Governor wanted to know what in our estimate would be the percentage of polling (voter turnout). As he went around the room, the estimates varied from 10 to 20 per cent. The Army's estimate of 'nothing less than 40 per cent' seemed too optimistic to all present, including the Governor.

By the evening of September 16, reports of polling started pouring in. As expected, the percentage was low in urban areas, but that from the countryside were above 40 per cent; in fact, in remote areas along the border regions and the Line of Control, where the number of voters was small, it was as high as 80 per cent! The overall turnout that day was almost 48 per cent!

Pakistan's proxies had already increased their activities to somehow force the cancellation of the elections or at least impede the process. It had also stepped up its propaganda broadcasts on radio and TV. An

amusing incident occurred on September 16. That evening, in a round-up of news from 'India-occupied Kashmir', a Pakistani TV channel showed fake footage of 'unwilling voters' being 'pulled out from their houses to cast their votes' by Indian security forces, besides other 'atrocities' being committed by them. The red-faced channel had to withdraw the story in a hurry as it became known that there was no polling in that constituency that day, having been countermanded following the death of a candidate due to cardiac arrest!

All four phases of the elections were conducted smoothly. At the planning stage, the ECI felt that it had a tough assignment ahead; various agencies involved in holding the elections also considered it to be a challenging task. However, the skeptics and naysayers were proved wrong in the end. While the ECI, along with the state and Central governments deserved to be applauded for the successful conduct of the election, the real winners were the people of J&K.

In the end, the elections reflected the true will of the people. People elected those in whom they placed their trust to make a fresh start with a new dispensation. It was a victory of the ballot over the bullet, a paradigm shift in the political landscape of J&K.

The road to Viksit Bharat is peppered with challenges



SUBIR ROY
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's Independence Day speech offered a useful insight into his key goals to take the economy forward. One is to transform agriculture and make it more robust so as to combat the growing unpredictability of monsoon and address climate change.

In the manufacturing sector, the aim is to utilise the PLI (production-linked incentive) schemes in order to design in India for the world, thus making the country a global manufacturing hub.

The overall aim of economic development will be to uplift the poor. Significantly, there was no mention in the speech of the sharp disparity between the few who are extremely wealthy and the vast number of people who are poor.

In 2023-23, the top 1 per cent of the Indians earned Rs 53 lakh each. In stark contrast, those falling in

the bottom 50 per cent earned merely Rs 75,000 each. Likewise, in 2022, the top 1 per cent pocketed 22.6 per cent of the income, while the bottom 50 per cent managed to get just 15 per cent of it.

Notably, the top 1 per cent controls 40 per cent of the country's total wealth. And the disparity is only growing bigger with time. The richest 1 per cent of India's population currently has the highest concentration of wealth it has had in six decades.

While inequality soars, the economy has a lot going for it. India is the fastest-growing large country in the world, with the economy growing at an average rate of around 8 per cent. Besides, the inflation rate is well within the RBI's range. The Indian stock market is among the most preferred in the world, surpassing the sentiment for the Chinese stock market. The Union Budget has also addressed one of the legacies, consumption, allowing infrastructure spending to take a back seat.

So, where do we go from here if the foremost goal is to address the severe inequality, which is underlined by widespread poverty? According to the Asian Development Review (2017), extreme poverty stood at 18.5 per



GOAL: The government is keen to make India a global manufacturing hub. *AN*

cent in Bangladesh, while in India, it was 21.6 per cent. In contrast, Sri Lanka recorded just 1.9 per cent poverty.

The quickest and surest way to address poverty is to create more jobs, offering people better-paying employment over time. Since rural areas witness a higher level of poverty, the key will be to create more and better jobs there. But we have to sort out a contraction. As agriculture

One major policy challenge will be to find rural migrants better-paying jobs in the organised sector in urban areas.

is made more robust, better seeds, pesticides and tillage will be arranged with the help of greater mechanisation. This will modernise agriculture. But the resulting higher output will be delivered through fewer hands. So, even if we raise farm incomes, what will those rendered jobless do?

The workers thrown out of farms will have to find employment in rural services. As rural agricultural

business. And the workers will then have to look for other equally unstable jobs.

For the bottom 50 per cent to earn more, the policy will have to work on several fronts. It would require workers in the informal sector to make more money.

But in order to earn more, they must possess basic skills. For that, it is necessary for them to receive a minimum level of education and acquire rudimentary skills.

There are some state and Central schemes, like Ayushman Bharat, that cover one's basic health-care needs. Plus, efforts are on to provide at least middle-school-level education to all. It seeks to ensure that everyone can master basic language comprehension exercises and do simple arithmetic calculations.

Besides, there is a push to improve the standards of industrial training institutes. The PM has announced the setting up of 75,000 medical seats so that the country can become a global hub for international students. While the plan is welcome, there is a need to first deliver on the basics highlighted above. The PM has outlined his vision to make India a developed nation (Viksit Bharat) by 2047. But for that to happen, steps will have to be taken today.

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- Discarded (4-3)
- Severe decline in trade (5)
- Being contested (2,7)
- Imitate (3)
- Wide range (4)
- African city, enemy of Rome (8)
- Respectful (6)
- Shade of meaning (6)
- Whimsical (8)
- Come (4)
- Unreliable tennis service (3)
- Disproportion (9)
- Looking dirty and shabby (5)
- Ladacious (7)

DOWN

- Hard but brittle (5)
- Mausum (3)
- Drive out (4)
- Sparing (6)
- Wide range (8)
- Face to face with (2,7)
- Come before (7)
- Indifference (9)
- Boundless amount (8)
- To cheat (7)
- Move ponderously (6)
- Chessman, other than pawn (5)
- With the addition of (4)
- Catch in wrongdoing (3)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Goodwill, 5 A far, 9 Upset, 10 Colours, 11 Out of this air, 13 Uneven, 14 Scrape, 17 Fast and loose, 20 Columbia, 21 Harsh, 22 Dodo, 23 One-sided.

Down: 1 Giant, 2 Obscure, 3 With open arms, 4 Locate, 6 Fauna, 7 Reserved, 8 Plain clothes, 12 Sufficed, 15 Awarded, 16 Adjoint, 18 Solid, 19 Thud.

SU DO KU

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

V. EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

AUGUST 24, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Bhadrapad Shaka 2
- Bhadrapad Purnimashi 9
- Hijri 1446
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 5, up to 7:52 am
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 6, up to 5:31 am
- Gandha Yoga up to 6:06 am
- Vridha Yoga up to 3:07 am
- Asvini Nakshatra up to 6:06 pm
- Moon in Aries sign
- Gandmoola up to 6:06 pm

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	34	27
New Delhi	34	27
Anantnag	34	28
Bathinda	37	25
Jalandhar	34	25
Ludhiana	34	25
Bhiwani	34	26
Hisar	35	26
Sirsa	36	27
Dharamsala	28	20
Manali	27	18
Shimla	24	16
Srinagar	29	17
Jammu	34	25
Kargil	33	14
Leh	30	12
Dehradun	30	23
Mussoorie	23	18

Candidate Kamala

Trump has his work cut out in presidential race

WITH US Vice-President Kamala Harris formally accepting the Democratic Party's nomination, the battle lines are clearly drawn for the November 5 presidential election. Her rival, Republican Donald Trump, had looked virtually unstoppable till last month — he defiantly pumped his fist after narrowly escaping an assassination attempt and couldn't stop smirking as President Joe Biden's campaign went from bad to worse. However, things have changed drastically over the past few weeks. Under immense pressure from his party, Biden abandoned his re-election bid and made way for Kamala, the daughter of Indian and Jamaican immigrants. The Democrats are now truly back on track, and Trump has every reason to feel jittery.

Kamala tilted the right boxes in her acceptance speech, predictably warning Americans about the 'extremely serious' consequences of putting an 'unserious man' back in the White House. In his trademark over-the-top style, Trump wondered whether she was talking about him. But in his heart of hearts, he knows very well that she will spare no opportunity to tear into him for his alleged crimes and misdemeanours. The chaos witnessed during his years in the Oval Office and the attack on the Capitol after he ended up as a sore loser in the 2020 election are still fresh in the minds of Americans. Trump will have to pull a new rabbit out of his hat to counter Kamala's growing popularity. As per a new Gallup poll, her favourability ratings have gone up appreciably.

For starters, Trump has to hold his own in the televised debate against Kamala next month. He had eclipsed Biden in the June debate mainly because the latter, plagued by age and health issues, was all at sea during the televised event. The much younger and sharper Kamala will be a different kettle of fish. Nevertheless, mere Trump-bashing may not take her all the way. She needs to come up with a workable action plan to chart a 'new way forward' for America.

Hema panel report

A case of stalled justice in Mollywood

THE Hema Committee Report has turned into a case of unmet promises and lost opportunities. What began as a hopeful initiative to bring justice and reform to the troubled Malayalam film industry has, unfortunately, devolved into a situation marked by inaction and evasion. The Kerala Government had established the Justice Hema-led committee led to investigate the abuse faced by women in Mollywood. Its report, which revealed pervasive sexual harassment and gender bias in the industry, was submitted to the government in 2019. However, it was only released earlier this week, with several pages redacted. This has sparked an outrage as the redactions raise questions about what is being withheld and why.

Despite the report's damning findings and call for course-correction, it has languished in bureaucratic limbo, with key stakeholders showing a concerning lack of urgency. The absence of a follow-through undermines the trust of the women who opened up about their experiences and perpetuates a culture of impunity. Every day that passes without implementing the committee's recommendations is another day that women in the industry remain at risk.

Taking note of the gravity of the situation, both the Kerala High Court and the state human rights panel have intervened, urging swift action on the report's findings. The high court has admitted a PIL seeking the registration of criminal cases for sexual exploitation in the industry. The human rights panel's advocacy for gender justice highlights the systemic failures plaguing the industry. The report should have been a catalyst for change. Instead, it stands as a reminder of the systemic barriers that continue to thwart the fight against sexual harassment and exploitation in the workplace. The time to act on its recommendations is now, before further harm is done.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, AUGUST 24, 1924

A unanimous demand

THE most obvious feature of the evidence so far recorded by the Reforms Enquiry Committee is the all but complete unanimity of opinion among the witnesses both as to the need for immediate further advance and the measure of that advance. We have already seen how all the four ex-Ministers who have appeared before the Committee have with one voice demanded the immediate abolition of darchy and the substitution in its place of a complete responsible government in the Provinces as well as responsibility in the Central Government as regards all departments, with the exception of Defence, and Political and Foreign Affairs. And the most significant thing about this demand is that it is not based on any general or abstract grounds, but solely on the impossibility of working the present Constitution with any prospect of either securing the efficiency of the administration or giving satisfaction to those whom any Government that wishes to justify its existence must please or even fulfilling the intentions of the authors of the Reforms. Here were men than whom no one was in a better position to speak with authority on this subject, who had, indeed, been chosen by the Government itself to work the Constitution, and yet all of them, speaking solely with reference to their experience of the working of the Act, gave it as their firm and decided opinion that darchy is an incurable disease and that the complete irresponsibility of the Government of India is utterly inconsistent with any genuine measure of a responsible government in the Provinces.

Modi's Ukraine visit is the message

The West wants to win India over — despite its grime, it's a nation of gritty people



THE GREAT GAME JYOTI MALHOTRA

CHANTS of 'Har, Har Modi' and 'Jai Shri Ram' by overenthusiastic Indians in Kyiv on Friday may have somewhat marred Prime Minister Modi's solemn visit to the garden in the Ukrainian capital where Mahatma Gandhi's statue stands. Minutes later, though, the visible emotion that marked the meeting between Modi and Volodymyr Zelenskyy in front of a memorial that commemorates some of the fallen in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war was emblematic of the difficulty that India faces as it seeks to follow the middle path in this war.

On the face of it, it's a no-brainer. Russia invaded Ukraine and must be roundly condemned — many Indians as well as Russians do. But look closely, and the context creeps in. Two years ago, Russia ostensibly went to war because it was insecure about NATO expanding to its frontiers.

Today, the war is less about victory or defeat between Russia and Ukraine, old partners and co-religionists, but much more about the ongoing argument between Russia and the US about Russia's place in the world.

Everyone, especially the Ukrainians, knows that if it were not for the sophisticated weaponry being supplied by the US as well as large parts of the Western world to Zelenskyy's men, the war would have been long over. But it isn't and innocent people are continuing to die. Big power



ASSURANCE: Modi told Zelenskyy in Kyiv that India is ready to play an active role in any effort towards peace. PH

politics has taken over. This is what this Ukraine war is about. *Kansu banega duniya ka dada?* The Americans clearly are unwilling to relinquish the top spot since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 end. The Russians, still not as strong as the Americans today but strong enough, insist that there's place for more than one. And as always, the Chinese watch and wait, eager and willing to play both sides — expanding trade with the US, even as they support Vladimir Putin's anxious need to remain relevant both at home and abroad.

What of PM Modi and India? The answer to where India stands in this ongoing great game is complex. On the one hand, Modi told Zelenskyy in Kyiv, one of the most beautiful cities in the world, that India is ready to "play an active role in any effort towards peace". Just before, the two had embraced each other warmly — a bit like the long hug into which Modi and Putin had collapsed six weeks ago in the latter's dacha outside Moscow, which Zelenskyy had, openly, admitted to

Those in the West condemning India for refusing to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine need to look inwards.

being upset about. Moments later, Modi placed his left hand on Zelenskyy's left shoulder, like elder brothers often do with younger ones, and left it there for many moments while the photographers took many pictures. Seems Modi was genuinely moved — it's a good thing he was. India usually stands with the underdog — its defence of the Mukti Bahini in the former East Pakistan is a good example. But something else

seems to be happening here. It seems as if Modi was quite persuaded that he should be seen to be standing with the Ukrainians — and therefore, the US. The Americans had made no bones about their displeasure with Modi's visit to Moscow. The fact remains that India-US trade is still double that of between India and Russia, notwithstanding the jumped-up volumes due to the purchase of discounted oil by Delhi from Moscow in the last two years.

Those in the West condemning India for refusing to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine need to look inwards — and at the risk of being accused of whataboutery, we must ask, for example, if they are doing anything to prevent Israel from bombing hospitals or schools or UN compounds in Gaza. Or if any of these Western nations, most of them Permanent-Five members of the UN Security Council, raised one little finger of dissent when the US decided to bomb Iraq in 2003, in ostensible anticipation of Saddam Hussein using weapons of mass destruction.

Wait, one second — Saddam didn't have any.

Meanwhile, the visit of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh to Washington DC, at the exact minute that Modi was in Ukraine, may be a coincidence — signing a defence pact or two with the Americans is a fine thing to do. But if it's not a coincidence, then two other conclusions may be made.

First, that America is not comfortable about dissent, including by a fellow democracy. There would have been a lot of conversation between Delhi and Washington DC as well as several other Western capitals, seeking to persuade Modi to meet Zelenskyy in Kyiv.

And second, it's clear that Ukraine is turning into Modi's toughest foreign policy challenge so far. Remember, again, that Ukraine is just an alibi, rather a notable cat's paw for the Americans. Nothing wrong with going to Kyiv — much better to check things out for yourself, no matter what Putin or Joe Biden have said. If the PM is able to manoeuvre between the cat's claws, like many of his predecessors have ably done, he will succeed in re-establishing India's unique place in the world.

Certainly, the world will be watching — like it watched the Modi visit to Moscow — for any telltale signs of shift. The West wants to win India over — despite its grime, it's a nation of gritty people.

Moreover, unlike Biden, Rishi Sunkar, Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz and some others, all of whom belong to the same side, India has always belonged to itself — its long and arduous walk between national interest and high morality is a challenge that it owes to itself. And so, for the moment, as the PM takes the train back from Kyiv, the inescapable conclusion is that Modi's Ukraine visit itself is the message, both to India and the world.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The war in Ukraine remains an open wound at the heart of Europe. —Antonio Guterres

Stand by the hands that heal you

NIMRAT S SIDHU

EVERY morning is a mini marathon for me as I shuttle between my son's routine and my own. I have never felt guilty that I don't spend the first half of the day with him; that's because my job is fulfilling and gratifying. As a child specialist, I get to meet a lot of children, and these encounters give me solace. My work may not be glorious, but it is a wholehearted effort. Week is worship, and also a safe haven.

Sometimes, it's baffling to see how no other profession is subjected to such disrespect. Do we beat up our tailor for getting our measurements wrong? Do we abuse our chartered accountant if our income tax returns are not filed in time? But doctors are subjected to all kinds of assault — physical, mental and now sexual. The one unfortunate thing that remains common is the gender of the person at the receiving end of the whip; women have to bear the brunt all the time.

Things haven't been the same ever since a doctor was brutally raped and murdered in Kolkata. And I don't think they will ever be. That girl could be me or you, and this thought will always cross our minds whenever we are on emergency duty, in the evening OPD or on late-night rounds. The hours won't be filled with excitement towards recovering patients and devout prayers for the ailing ones; instead, there will be a sense of doom, a constant fear to look over our shoulders because our system has failed us.

These men only see our skin; our hard-earned white coats have failed to hide our physicality, because that's what we are for these cannibals — just flesh and bones. Nothing else matters to them, neither whether we are on duty nor our education or background.

The solution to this lies not in covering our bodies, shunting us inside because it's dark outside, not speaking to men because a few may be predators. It's about shutting the eyes that see us in a demeaning manner, and assured security at the workplace, no matter what hour the clock is striking. It's about instilling a strong sense of fear of the consequences in the potential offenders. It's not about women or men anymore, it's mankind vs monstrosity. We have not been able to save our girl child, we have failed to safeguard our women; at least stand by the hands that heal you.

When they said, 'Betiyon sab ke muqaddar mein kahaan hoti hain, khuda ko jo ghar pasand aaye wahaan ki kali hoti hain,' they didn't realise that 'ghar ke bahar wale bagh mein beti khil nahi sakti'.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Madhav's comeback

With reference to the editorial 'Ram Madhav returns', the development comes at a time when the BJP is navigating a transformed political landscape in Jammu and Kashmir; thanks to the abrogation of Article 370 and the delimitation exercise that has altered electoral dynamics. Madhav, once the architect of the BJP-PPD alliance, has now entered a more complex arena, where his ability to deal with new challenges will be crucial. His recent call for humility in politics hints at an evolving BJP strategy, potentially softening its image. As J&K prepares for Assembly polls after a long hiatus, the newly inducted BJP election in-charge could play a pivotal role in shaping a campaign that moves beyond divisive rhetoric, offering hope for a region long embroiled in turmoil. But the most question is: Can Madhav's pragmatism help bridge the deep divide in J&K's politics?

SAHJPREET SINGH, MOHAJI

India not safe for women

Appropos of 'Unsafe women'; it is unfortunate that women in India hesitate to even go out at night because they fear for their safety. Rape cases make headlines every day, striking fear in their minds. Isn't it ironic that women don't feel safe in a country that reveres goddesses like Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati, among others? Only a collective effort can make a difference. From the powers that be to common folks, we all bear responsibility.

GAURAV BADHWAR, ROHTAK

Bid to cover up rape a disgrace

With reference to the news report 'CEI sees cover-up bid, says crime spot allowed', if the probe agency's allegation about an attempt to hush up the matter is true, it is a disgrace. It raises a lot of questions. Whom are the people in power trying to shield? And why? The nation, which has still not recovered from the shock of the Kolkata honour, is keen on seeing the culprits brought to justice. The matter must be probed thoroughly so that no one who tried to cover up the heinous act is spared.

JAGDISH CHANDER, JALANDHAR

Polio scare in India

A fresh case of polio has been detected in Meghalaya, even though India was declared polio-free a decade ago. The resurgence of this debilitating disease in the country is alarming.

It is a stark reminder of the need for sustained efforts to eradicate polio. The onus is on the government authorities and health officials concerned to take immediate measures to contain the spread of the disease and ensure that all children are vaccinated against the disease. Besides, steps should be taken to spread awareness about the importance of inoculation in the fight against polio. Moreover, it is essential to strengthen our surveillance and monitoring systems to detect and respond to the detection of polio cases promptly.

KARAN KUMAR, JALANDHAR

Switch to IPVs to combat disease

A two-year-old in Meghalaya has become the first case of polio in the country since 2011. It is a matter of grave concern, as India was declared polio-free by the World Health Organisation in 2014. The return of the highly contagious infectious disease that can even cause fatal paralysis must be taken seriously. Children in developed countries like Canada and the US are administered inactivated polio vaccines (IPVs). India, however, relies on the use of both IPVs and oral polio vaccines to combat the threat of the disease. The fresh case in Meghalaya highlights the urgent need for India to ditch oral vaccines and switch completely to IPVs.

BHUMIKA, BY MAIL

Ensure specialised care for geriatrics

We age every minute, but what is the cut-off age to be considered old? Many definitions have been proffered. In our country, the retirement age varies from 58 to 60 years. In some sectors, the age of superannuation has been pushed up to 65 years. A WHO classification of age groups is: 0-17 (underage), 18-65 (young), 66-79 (middle-aged) and 80-plus (the aged). It is important to develop consensus on who is a 'geriatric'. Despite elderly people accounting for a sizeable portion of the population, there are hardly any specialised clinicians for their care or exclusive department to attend to their needs. When geriatrics face medical problems, they are treated by clinicians who handle general patients. The masses are unaware that this age group requires specialised care, which is available at only select institutions. It is time to take remedial measures in this regard.

ROMA UPPAL, BY MAIL

Get Ready to Enter The Copper Age

Supply should trail industrial demand a while

We may be entering our second Copper Age — the first one, the Chalcolithic (copper + stone) Age, spanning 6,000 to 4,000 years ago, being the period when humans first used metal. This time around, AI, automation and energy transition, with copper at their core, is driving up demand. The world will have to mine more of the metal now than it has in its entire history. China, which is at the forefront on all three technological revolutions, accounts for well over half of global copper imports, and its stockpiles have a bearing on record prices reached earlier this year. A rare surge in Chinese exports has confounded commentary of a structural bull market in copper. A short squeeze in the US allowed the Chinese an export window. China's dependence on the Democratic Republic of Congo for its copper imports frees up the other top producers, Peru and Chile, to supply to the rest of the world. New mines are being developed in South America and Africa. But supply is likely to trail industrial demand for better part of this decade.

China's demand weakness is largely episodic. It hasn't fallen off the cliff even with slow growth and a property market bust. It has the biggest energy transition requirement on the planet, even as it holds on to its position as the world's biggest, not sole, factory.

Copper demand, relative to iron, provides a marker for value addition in manufacturing — and for a country like India that aims to climb the value chain by importing over 90% of the metal. As demand from EVs and server farms mounts, India will need to secure steady copper imports. It is exploring buying copper assets in Chile, the world's largest producer. It is also scouting around for lithium in South America and Australia, and for copper in Africa. India needs to move fast in securing mineral supplies given the scale of its energy transition, as well as the defined window to offer global manufacturers a China-1 destination. But it's entering the race late after the era of cheap copper mining is over. Better late copper than never.

Celebrate National Give Space Day

On Friday, the Indian state celebrated National Space Day, commemorating the first successful Indian moon landing on August 23, 2023. Indeed, it's a milestone worth celebrating and commemorating. But, perhaps, India could also observe every August 25, starting this Sunday, as National Give Space Day.

Despite its vastness, India is a densely populated country — 30th among countries (tiny Vatican City and Palestine included) with an average population density of 426.1 people/sq km. Our urban spaces are even more jam-packed, with conglomerates existing cheek-by-jowl. If not tumbling on each other. Within a vast number of households, family members coexist in more restricted spaces than in other more densely populated but richer countries like Singapore, Bahrain and the Netherlands. Intimacy is a regular casualty.

The sanctity of personal space needs to be inculcated from a young age. And this is as important as instilling social values, the blurring of private and public space actually affecting both deleteriously. It's one thing to negotiate a crowd, and quite another to become a crowd in somebody's private space. The need to sensitive people about the latter is not just about good manners but decent citizenry. By virtue of valuing the individual and his or her space, one could also organically become more aware of the difference between a caring state and an overbearing one. As with most social entities, clarity begins at home. Allowing space — between couples and the rest of the family between guardians/parents and their wards/children, etc — should be nurtured, not frowned upon. Effects of such a Lakshman rekha in place can work wonders over time for the mental health of not just individuals but also of a society at large.

Ensure that there is never a market monopoly in commerce.
 Make sure that e-commerce companies don't peddle at the cost of sellers and customers.
 Concerns in commerce about the sale of fake or spurious products from sellers need to be addressed.
 There needs to be transparency in pricing and commissions, and we need to address false-discounting. However, offline retailers also frequently sell products below cost to clear unsold inventory.
 Predatory pricing should be addressed.

JUST IN JEST

Would you listen to a new take on drinking, or long-living old-timers?

Alco's Bad for Long Life, Long Live Alco!

We hate to be bearers of bad news, especially when it involves your weekend rendezvous with your wine stash. But it turns out that red wine — yes, even good old Dr Rouge — might not be the health hero we were last told it was. Last week, Devi Sridhar, a top public health expert from the University of Edinburgh (do we detect a Scotch bias?), pointed out that WHO has reviewed the latest body of research and found zero evidence that drinking booze — even vino — has any benefits that can outweigh the harm it does. In short, alcohol isn't doing your body any favours, and might just be trimming your time on this planet.

Sad, yes. But, hey, it's not all doom 'n' gloom. There's always a way to dodge those nagging wellness tips. Just take a page from the playbook of the super-elderly if you want to stick around that long (not everyone is keen to hang around that long, anyway). There are plenty of legends out there: Doris Olive Netting, who made it to 100 in Plymouth, Britain, swore by her daily glass of Guinness. Susannah Mushatt Jones, who hit 116, started every day with a plate of bacon. Richard Overton, who lived to 112, had a fondness for cigars and a splash of whiskey in his coffee. His best advice: 'Just keep living, don't die.' So, now that you've got some solid evidence, pour yourself that glass of red wine and raise it to longevity!

RETAIL eCommerce has reinvigorated the growth of brick-and-mortar retail, not hampered it

Don't Fear the Bogle, Welcome Push, Not a Shove

Don't Regress, It'll Hurt All



Nikhil Pahwa

I remember clearly the day I told Amitabh Kant about my preference for bright-colored socks. It was late in the evening at Udyog Bhawan on May 15, 2014, a day before Narendra Modi's BJP came to power. As then-secretary Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP), Kant was presiding over a stakeholder discussion on whether multi-brand retail should be allowed in India. Over a decade since, Piyush Goyal has got again, highlighted his government's concerns over the growth of e-commerce in India — that there will be social disruption, there is predatory pricing in e-commerce, and the number of models in the country has increased over the past 10 years. He is concerned — and rightly so — about the fate of millions of small retailers and kirana stores in the country.

The point that I made to Kant in 2014 still stands: e-commerce offers consumers a much wider variety of products, whether coloured socks, numbered swimming goggles or air purifiers. It benefits both sellers and buyers. Consumers in Tier 2 and 3 towns access a wider variety of products online, without relying on someone to go to a metro to purchase it. Sellers find buyers across the country. Without e-commerce, you won't be able to buy Solapur Sherigadga Chutney in Lucknow, and someone in Solapur won't be able to buy a Lucknowi Chikankari kurta. e-commerce has also spawned an entire industry of D2C online-only brands that, in many cases, 'make in India', and have spawned a supporting infrastructure of storage, packaging, delivery and online advertising, and, hence, substantial employment.

Goyal should back his conjecture regarding employment with data. On his comments about cloud kitchens as a threat to restaurants, let's not forget that food delivery services like Zomato and Swiggy actually allow many restaurants more than what their seating capacity allows. It's not just people aren't going to restaurants any more. Goyal's right that we don't see many physical mobile stores in India as we did 10 years ago. But consider this: we didn't see many mobile stores 20 years ago either. Retailers evolve their product range to meet customer needs. Just as they added mobile phones to their shelves 10 years ago, they need to adapt and find other products and services.

Many kirana stores actually offer greater discounts today than e-commerce stores do. It's just that on e-commerce, products are often shown as overpriced, then discounted. Some Indian retailers have addressed this anomaly by allowing customers in-store to check prices online, and price-match. This is actually great for customers. We need to be careful about a few things:

- Ensure that there is never a market monopoly in commerce.
- Make sure that e-commerce companies don't peddle at the cost of sellers and customers.
- Concerns in commerce about the sale of fake or spurious products from sellers need to be addressed.
- There needs to be transparency in pricing and commissions, and we need to address false-discounting. However, offline retailers also frequently sell products below cost to clear unsold inventory.
- Predatory pricing should be addressed.

Welcome Push, Not a Shove



Rajiv Kumar & Shreya Ganguly

Over the last few days, there has been extensive commentary on the findings of the Public Data Foundation (PDF) report. Assessing the Net Impact of E-Commerce on Employment and Consumer Welfare' released on Wednesday. The report's findings are principally based on a pan-India survey of 2,062 online vendors, 2,031 brick-and-mortar vendors, and 8,209 consumers of products from e-commerce websites. It was conducted across 35 cities in 20 states and UTs.

The survey itself was guided by a robust methodology and conducted by PRICER (People Research on India's Consumer Economy). Given the veracity of the survey findings, it would be most useful for policymakers to take cogni-



Spreading pulp fiction

tion to start again from scratch. Any e-commerce policy should be for the benefit of consumers, and not for creating a regressive environment for businesses, foreign or Indian.

Additionally, India needs to address an archaic restriction that prevents foreign e-commerce companies from selling products from third-party brands as retailers, though they may operate as an online mall, rather than a store. They've found legal loopholes around this, and it's time we ended this facade by either clamping down on such practices or allowing FDI in multi-brand retail to enable further investment in the Indian retail market, especially in terms of setting up offline stores. It's true that e-commerce hasn't invested billions of dollars in India for philanthropy. However, they've invested because they intend to stay in the market and aren't fly-by-night operators. That investment has generated skilled employment and built infrastructure.

A regressive policy environment won't only harm India's economy. Earlier this week, Walmart sold its entire stake in China's JD.com and exited the country. That reflects poorly on China as an investment destination for technology.

The writer is founder, MediaNama

ving their product offerings, adopting more technology or listing their products on e-commerce platforms. Moreover, they have moved into a hybrid model by also adopting online services.

This has enabled some to make an entry into export markets, thereby substantially expanding their demand base. With growing domestic market, and future entry into export demand, the Indian retail sector offers sufficient space for a healthy growth of both online and offline retailers.

At present, e-commerce has an estimated 7.8% share in India's retail trade. This is significantly smaller than in China (4%) and the US (16%). India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), under the commerce ministry, has estimated that CAGR of e-commerce is expected to be about 27% from 2018 to 2020. At this rate, e-commerce's share will double every three years. Even at the exceptionally high CAGR, the share of e-commerce in total retail trade by 2030 will be no more than 32%, a hint of the total retail trade. That certainly does not spell the demise of traditional brick-and-mortar stores.

Importantly according to the most recent Annual Survey of Unincorporated Enterprise (ASUE) 2022-23 released by the ministry of statistics and programme implementation (MOSPI), the total estimated number of unincorporated retail traders in India is about 20 million. This number, based on data by the Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) and often quoted by some senior policymakers of there being '100 million offline retail traders' in the country is a wild exaggeration. The number of brick-and-mortar retailers in India has a share of nearly 81%. PIF's survey found that on an average, an offline vendor employs about 9 workers, which is higher than the 6 employed by an e-commerce vendor. The survey figures yield an estimate of 15 million workers employed in the e-commerce sector. And, more impressively, female employment in online retail is appreciably higher than offline.

Even more crucially, online retail has helped to raise consumption demand by offering greater choice and confidence to the consumer and lower prices. Lower prices do not directly translate into returns to the producers, whether these are SMEs or farmers. Online retailers are able to offer lower prices by eliminating the multiple layers of intermediaries in the supply chain. The net effect returns to the producers, whether these are SMEs or farmers. Online retailers are able to offer lower prices by eliminating the multiple layers of intermediaries in the supply chain. The net effect returns to the producers, whether these are SMEs or farmers. Online retailers are able to offer lower prices by eliminating the multiple layers of intermediaries in the supply chain. The net effect returns to the producers, whether these are SMEs or farmers.

Consumers from Tier 3 cities spend more time and money on e-commerce platforms than those in Tier 1 and 2 cities. The liberty of choice of e-commerce to semi-urban and rural areas will also help raise currently flagging rural consumer demand. The PIF report also highlights a few other important findings that need government interventions. It cites CCI's concerns around deep-discounting practices of large online platforms. The report emphasises the need for fair competition. Physical retailers today are more engaged in digital adoption, customer satisfaction, advertisement, home delivery and after-sales services than ever before. Traditional retailers have shown resilience in a readiness to compete with, and even integrate into, modern retail.

One-fourth of brick-and-mortar vendors surveyed intend to expand by purchasing new stores, renovating or enlarging their existing stores, diversifying their product offerings.

Kumar is chairman, and Ganguly is research associate, Public Data Foundation

THE SPEAKING TREE

Cosmos and Correctness

SUMIT PAUL

In *The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho writes, 'When you embark upon a noble mission and want to achieve something worthy by the whole universe conspires for you to accomplish that.' 'Trade' garnek hon / Imbad nati hai kaatna se? — If objectives and intentions are genuine and honest? The help comes from heaven.

The cosmos corresponds with correctness in an old German saying that's still relevant and will always be. The universe is very friendly and conspires for you to accomplish that. One may not believe in god and esoteric things; yet, one can relate to the benevolence and beatitude of the universe that acts upon the intentions and emotions of human beings. When intentions are genuine, things start falling in place and help us achieve our goals.

The lifelong activist and exponent of Nyaya Darshan, Bimal Krishna Matilal, who was also the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford University, so wanted to elucidate the records of the Nyaya sutras (formule) of Nyaya and Sankhya Darshan, two of the six schools of Indian philosophy. He had been diagnosed with a terminal condition. He managed to finish the most comprehensive treatise on Nyaya and Sankhya ever written just a week before his untimely death.

When our consciousness is in tune with the universe, we feel and fathom its boundlessness. In Western alienation and philistinism, individualism, it's firmly believed that though every individual is all alone and none weave relate to, it's the universe and its comforting presence in our hearts that sustains us through vagaries, vagueness and vacuum of human life.

LOLLING ON SATURDAY

View From Upper Management

A crow was sitting on a tree, doing nothing all day. A cat asked him, 'Can I also sit like you and do nothing all day long?' The crow answered, 'Sure, why not.' So, the cat jumped down, sat on the ground below and rested. A dog jumped on the cat and bit it black and blue. Moral of the story: To be sitting and doing nothing, you must be sitting very high up.

Fish Dish

'Two young hilla are swimming along one day. As they do, they are passed by a wiser, older fish coming the other way. The wiser fish greets the two as they pass, saying: 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' The other two continue to swim downstream in silence for a little while but then the first hilla turns to the other and asks, 'What the hell is water?'

Achhe-Bure Din

Pessimist: Oh, this can't get any worse!
 Optimist: Yes, it can!

Chat Room

From H2O To H2Ouch

Apropos the Edit, 'Don't Dilute India's Water Problem' (Aug 23), water needs to be preserved with far greater diligence and true reverence. History records the collapse of Akkadian and Mayan empires as well as the Tang dynasty as water ran dry. Water-storing capacity in the country's major water reservoirs and water bodies is hardly enough to meet the requirement for the whole year. We need a lot more reservoirs on rivers and streams that discharge into the sea. Nature is getting disappointed with its premier creation, man, on whom it had laid much hope to repay what he owes to nature.

NRNARAYAN Nishi Mambani

M--S-O-C-Y-N-Y, Go On, say it

they address only part of the problem. The national conversation still largely ignores misogynist attitudes that permeate our society. Rape is not an isolated crime but a symptom of a larger culture of violence against women. This culture is sustained by deep-seated apathy toward women's demands and needs, and by a social system that enables violence against women.

Despite calls for justice in the RG Kar case, broader societal issues remain unaddressed. The fact that images of the victim's mutilated body became a top search on the internet is a chilling reminder of pervasive misogyny around us. Anti-women rhetoric from clerics, politicians and a growing legion of internet-enabled trolls by men's rights activists further fuels this toxic environment.

India's legal system has provisions to remove criminals from society. But few seem willing to condemn the attitudes that support and enable violence against women. Focusing solely on punishing the criminal without addressing the misogynist mindset that leads to such crimes, challenges the status quo. In some cases, this denial is rooted in a lack of education about gender issues, or limited exposure to diverse perspectives. Without addressing the complexities of misogyny, many fail to see how societal factors contribute to crimes against women.

While it does not explicitly use the word 'misogyny', the report thoroughly discussed the systemic issues, cultural attitudes and societal norms that contribute to violence against women — many of which are rooted in misogynistic beliefs.

The committee emphasised the need for a change in societal attitudes toward women, and called for greater respect for women's autonomy and rights, indirectly addressing the concept of misogyny. But to implement these recommendations, we must first articulate and define the problem in the public sphere.

Addressing the issue requires confronting it head-on. Yet, there seems to be a collective hesitance to even utter the word 'misogyny'. Conservative ideologies worldwide often reject the

acknowledgment of misogyny as it challenges the belief that their society is near-perfect and their culture must be preserved.

In the US, for example, Republican White conservatism tends to blame crimes against women on 'outsiders' while upholding traditional gender roles. Democrats, on the other hand, often blame misogyny on men's rights activists. In India, both major political parties, while opposing each other on many issues, share common ground on several anti-women stances, such as the Sabarwal Bill. The entry debate to the ongoing denial of marital rape as a crime. Their silence on misogyny is telling, and troubling.

If we are to make India safer and more inclusive for women, misogynist mindsets must be addressed alongside the need for safer public spaces. This includes promoting comprehensive gender and sex education at a societal level, which can help deradicalise the youth. How will men — and women — learn that rape is not driven by unbridled lust but is an act of violence and domination unless we confront the underlying misogyny? India's female MP's must take the lead in this fight, tackling misogyny directly and demanding systemic change for women's safety and empowerment. Shifts must go hand in hand. If all our political parties are united in their denial of the problem, what hope do women have for their rights? Change in misogyny must be systemic. Only by addressing the root causes of gender-based violence can we begin to reverse the dismal reality of women's status in society and build a future where women can live without fear.

First, face it

Opinion

SATURDAY, AUGUST 24, 2024



INDIA'S SPACE PROWESS
President Droupadi Murmu

The progress of India's space sector is extraordinary. Be it a successfully completed Mars mission with limited resources, or the successful launch of more than a hundred satellites at once, we have made many impressive achievements

Noise over e-commerce

Conflating the modern age of technology with the old era of imperialism is faulty

THE IRONY COULD not have been starker. Commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal's concerns about predatory pricing by multinational e-commerce firms, where he specifically named Amazon, comes at a time when the Competition Commission of India is examining whether the proposed Reliance-Dishney merger has the potential to harm competition. The basic issue being examined is whether Reliance's combined market share of TV as well as over-the-top streaming will give it unfair pricing power with regard to cricket broadcasting rights. Goyal's comments also come at a time when the ministry of corporate affairs (MCA) is in the process of drafting a Digital Competition Act, which puts in place an ex-ante regulatory framework to prevent anti-competitive conduct in the digital sphere where big tech firms operate.

The issue is straightforward — big businesses in any area have the potential to harm competition and kill smaller players. However, is it fair to see the issue in terms of global as well as domestic firms, as the minister may have erroneously alluded to by naming Amazon? Not really, as experience shows. Much before Flipkart was acquired by Walmart, it was fighting Amazon in the corridors of power as well as in the market in terms of global versus local, forgetting that the bulk of money invested in the platform was foreign. Coming to Reliance once again, almost all top global tech firms have invested in its digital arm, Jio Platforms. This is the same arm, which way back in 2016 was accused of indulging in predatory pricing by incumbent telecom operators.

In the process of drafting ex-ante regulations, the MCA also realised that approaching any regulation in terms of global versus local was faulty as the feedback to its consultation paper showed that there's no strict dividing line between global big tech firms and major domestic digital platforms. If some domestic firms see Google, Meta, Amazon, and Apple acting as a bully, there are several other home-grown enterprises who see Zomato, Swiggy, and Oyo in a similar light. Coming specifically to e-commerce in retail, where the minister expressed his concerns, policies have evolved since 2009 in a manner which puts curbs on multinational firms to protect the interests of local mom-and-pop shops. The restriction on 100% foreign direct investment (FDI) in multi-brand retail, no FDI in online business-to-customer trade, and checking related party vendors on platforms like Amazon, are steps in this direction. True, the companies concerned have designed complicated seller structures from time to time to bypass the regulations, but the anti-trust body is alert and acts upon such complaints.

The government itself is alert by tightening the regulations whenever required even as it works on a national e-commerce policy and Digital India Act. Goyal was right in clarifying that the government is not against global e-commerce companies and wants to invite FDI and the best technology. Technology has fashioned businesses in a way that has benefited unorganised sector players. Just as mobile phones enabled higher earnings for plumbers, electricians and the like, tech platforms have broadened the geographical reach of kirana stores and small businesses and enhanced their earnings, while creating more jobs. All along the consumers have been the beneficiaries. However, the government and regulators need to be vigilant and act expeditiously if cases of anti-competitive practices emerge either by local or global firms. However, to conflate the modern age of technology with the old era of imperialism is faulty.

Nestlé CEO switch signals tough times ahead

WHO KNEW the world of cat food and coffee could be so brutal? Nestlé SA has abruptly parted company with Mark Schneider, its first outside chief executive officer in almost 100 years, who reshaped the world's biggest food maker into a nimble company focused on high-growth markets.

Schneider ran into problems more recently: A botched peanut-allergy treatment acquisition and operational mistakes. But replacing Schneider with Laurent Freixe, a long-time Nestlé executive, risks returning to the years of drift before Schneider's arrival. The shares fell as much as 4.1% to a near five-year low.

When Schneider became CEO in 2017, the company under his predecessor Paul Bulcke, now chairman, was struggling for strategic and operational focus. He quickly set about shaking up Nestlé's portfolio, selling its US confectionary business, its skin-health operation and its US mineral waters. He also paid \$7.2 billion for the rights to use the Starbucks brand in grocery stores and made several vitamins acquisitions.

In particular, the focus on coffee and pet care proved prescient, given that people became at-home baristas during Covid-19 lockdowns and the pet population soared. Add in a move towards more premium products, and he was able to orient Nestlé towards faster growing areas of the more sluggish food business.

The shares returned more than 100% including reinvested dividends between the start of 2017 and early 2022, outperforming the S&P 500 consumer staples index by better than 70%. More recently though, the company has grappled with operational issues in water purification and an IT integration in its US vitamin business that led to product shortages. Last month, it cut its forecast for organic sales growth this year, as the US grocery market became more competitive. Since their high in 2022, the shares have fallen 32%, underperforming rivals. It doesn't help that Unilever Plc is finally getting its act together under new CEO Hein Schumacher.

The \$2.1 billion withdrawal on its investment in peanut-allergy medicine Palforza undoubtedly damaged Schneider's reputation.

But the company has had to grapple with an unexpected surge in demand since the pandemic in some areas, for example pet care, which now represents about 20% of sales, compared with 14% in 2017. Add in soaring commodity costs, and this puts a strain on any company. Nestlé is not the only one to face challenges. Rival Reckitt Benckiser Group Plc has been particularly accident-prone. Nor is Nestlé alone in struggling to sell more pizzas and plant alternatives, particularly in the US grocery market, where lower income consumers are cutting back.

So, parting with Schneider looks short-sighted, particularly as the incoming CEO said on a call with analysts that while the performance could be better, it was acceptable. The change was clearly unplanned. Schneider was due to participate in a Barclays event next week.

As an insider, Freixe, who has been with Nestlé since 1986 and also previously ran both its American and European businesses, knows Nestlé and its culture inside out. He should be able to galvanise the organisation and help it grind out sales growth in what promises to be a tough environment. The first task right now looks to be selling more coffee creamers and frozen meals, rather than M&A.

But the danger is that without Schneider's dynamism, Nestlé's performance sinks. Already, the reshuffle has sparked concerns as to whether it can maintain sales and profit targets.

It's not clear whether Freixe, 62, will be a long-term CEO, or whether he will aim to get the company through a tricky patch before handing over the reins.

He looks like the cat who got the cream. But investors should be wary of Nestlé's post-Schneider era.



ANDREA FELSTED
Bloomberg

INDIA NEEDS A DRAMATIC SHIFT IN PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN

A nation of bystanders

THE WEST BENGAL government's handling of the horrific rape and murder of a young doctor at her workplace reflects the most basic shortcomings in governance in general and crimes against women in particular. What emerges from the latest brutal incident is a story of an unequal balance of power between the might of the state and a majority of its citizens, officials' disregard for protocol, and their seeming unconcern for a grieving family trying to come to terms with a tragedy.

The apathy and negligence of the police and the state administration in this case is shocking, but it shouldn't surprise anybody in a country where one woman complaint of police apathy every two hours, according to National Commission for Women data. It is in any way a well-established fact that the police and bureaucracy are hostage to political power in almost every state, West Bengal being no exception.

The RG Kar episode has shaken the nation's conscience, just as the Nirbhaya case did 12 years ago and the Hathras case four years ago. The first one involved one of the most heinous crimes in the history of our country in which a 23-year-old physiotherapy intern was brutally gangraped and mutilated in a moving bus in Delhi. It led to one of the most landmark judgments of India, which has brought many changes in the rape laws.

But it's obvious that the stricter rape laws after the Nirbhaya case did nothing to mitigate the suffering of women. Data released by the National Crime Records Bureau showed a large increase in the number of crimes against women in 2022 over 2021, and nearly a 20% increase compared to the number of gender crimes reported in 2020. The chargesheet rate was a mere 75.8% in 2022. A staggering 31,516



SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR
shyamal.majumdar@expressindia.com

rape cases were recorded in the country in the year and the victim count for workplace sexual harassment against women increased from 402 in 2018 to 422 in 2022.

The actual figures are likely to be much higher because such crimes mostly go unreported due to fear of reprisal, prevailing stigmas around victims, and a lack of faith in police investigation. Notably, the National Family Health Survey-5 report concludes nearly one-third of women aged between 15 and 49 years in India have experienced physical, sexual, or domestic violence.

The reason why the stricter laws haven't worked is simple: Law can hardly change people's minds. Beyond media sensationalism and legal recourse, when it comes to violence against women, there is an underlying layer of human interaction that is much more sinister — apathy.

The insensitivity and apathy is visible on the social media itself. "Dank" memes and their host pages churn out jokes after jokes about rape culture, which often get "haha" reactions. What kind of society is this? The candle lights and the protest marches are spontaneous reactions to the horrific crime, but the question Indian middle class should ask themselves is whether the expressions of col-



It's a fact that victim-blaming attitudes and misogynistic undertones prevailing in society also cause under-reporting of several crimes

lective trauma, anger, and mourning will serve any purpose beyond the short term. It's a fact that victim-blaming attitudes and misogynistic undertones prevailing in society also cause under-reporting of several crimes. People have plenty to say on podiums and on their social media accounts on crimes against women, but when it comes to practical scenarios, the apathy which they display is deplorable.

Consider the case where a 28-year-old woman was raped in broad daylight by a 21-year-old drug addict, on a busy pavement in Vishakhapatnam, and onlookers did nothing to help her. Rather some of them recorded the incident on their cell phone and the incident became "viral". It's a horrific reflection of where our society is headed towards.

Or take the incident at Hathras four years ago where a 19-year-old Dalit girl was gangraped and brutalised. Two weeks later as the girl succumbed to her injuries in a Delhi hospital, the UP police carried her body back to her village and forcibly cremated her without the consent of her family. Despite clear statements by the victim about sexual assault the police and the government authorities kept denying the charges of rape, and the victims' family remained isolated and confined to their house and was con-

stantly subjected to slurs by the upper caste residents of the village. Three of the four accused were acquitted later.

There's more. In May last year, a 16-year-old girl was killed by her alleged boyfriend who stabbed her more than 30 times and hit her with a concrete slab on a busy street in Delhi's Shahdadi Dairy area. Most of the people chose to walk past while some stood quietly, witnessing the gruesome act.

Such bystander approach of citizens is sickening. In her separate opinion in the 2017 Nirbhaya judgment, Justice R Banumathi had hit the nail right on the head when she said, "Apart from effective implementation of the various legislation protecting women, change in the mindset of the society at large and creating awareness in the public on gender justice, would go a long way to combat violence against women." That should be our priority.

Everyone is happy ticking the boxes. For example, the Supreme Court has set up a task force to formulate protocol for enquiring justice of doctors. What purpose would it serve? There are enough guidelines and recommendations from the ministry of health and family welfare, National Health Mission, and the National Health Policy. But these mandates and policy directives remain on paper. There have been no concrete steps or directions towards translating policy into practice.

The pre-dawn hangings of four men convicted in the Nirbhaya case had brought a semblance of closure to her parents, prompting her mother, to say, "Women will now feel safe. It's a colossal tragedy that even 12 years later, her perception is nowhere close to reality as the biggest problem by far is silence and tolerance ingrained in our psyche. A society genuinely committed to gender equality wouldn't put up with this situation for a moment. A dramatic shift in public attitudes is the only answer."

Do cryptos have any rationale?



SRINATH SRIVIDHARAN
LIKHITH WADGA
Respectively, policy researcher and corporate advisor, and global financial services expert
X: @ssnmumbai, @likihit_wadga

WHY DO CRYPTOCURRENCIES exist? Beyond the dissatisfaction with government responses to inflation and economic crises, which emerged notably after the global financial crisis, they reflect a limited distrust of traditional financial systems. Driven by a desire for financial autonomy and the belief in blockchain technology's transformative potential, this movement continues to unfold, its long-term financial and existential sustainability still uncertain.

Are cryptocurrencies a revolution or just speculative bubbles? Advocates see them as a store of value and a new asset class. Some believe decentralised technology will revolutionise finance, enabling cross-border payments and even charitable giving. Enthusiasts argue cryptocurrencies could democratise financial services and significantly advance inclusion.

Despite regulatory resistance, cryptocurrencies continue to thrive. Recently, former President Donald Trump expressed support for Bitcoin at a crypto gathering, even suggesting it could become a strategic reserve if he returns to office. This is surprising, given that cryptocurrencies lack the stability of gold or cash. Bitcoin's extreme volatility — rising from \$11,000 in 2020 to over \$60,000 in 2021 before sharply declining — highlights the risk. Currently, its price hovers around \$70,000, indicating the challenges of considering it a reliable strategic asset.

Despite almost no use cases, what is the "social purpose" of crypto? What is the economic reason for crypto to exist? Human behaviour often gravitates towards the allure of novelty, even when

practical use cases are absent. Investors know cryptos are private digital currencies, not endorsed by governments or central banks. They aren't currencies because they can't be widely exchanged for products and services. But even if they were, it wouldn't make sense for most of us, as we invest in assets that at least can be purchased with currency, and for real currencies that have social acceptance. Also, the financial plumbing necessary to make buying and selling easy is absent. Furthermore, there are no rating agencies or instruments like credit default swaps. News like FTX bankruptcy or the socialising losses idea of WazirX do not help.

What we do not hear often is this: one does not need cryptos to leverage blockchain or tokenisation in financial services or any other sector. Blockchain technology, the underlying framework for cryptos, offers a range of benefits like enhanced security, transparency, and efficiency that can be harnessed independently of digital currencies. Financial institutions have been using blockchain for secure and transparent transaction processing, reducing fraud and operational costs. Similarly, tokenisation — the process of converting assets into digital tokens — is being applied to a variety of sectors without relying on cryptocurrencies.

The speculative nature of the crypto market often overshadows its underlying potential. Critics argue that cryptos have

Cryptocurrencies lack an immediately identifiable economic function. Instead, their value is driven by narratives that sell promises of a future potential

become more of a speculative asset than a functional currency. The regulatory environment too poses significant challenges. In India, the regulatory stance has oscillated between outright ban and cautious acceptance, reflecting the complexity of integrating cryptocurrencies into the financial system. Concerns about money laundering, tax evasion, and financing of illegal activities are legitimate and necessitate a balanced regulatory approach that safeguards innovation while protecting public interest.

is FOMO the main reason for putting money into cryptocurrencies? Probably yes. There seems to be a broader societal trend where individuals are eager to participate in what they perceive as lucrative opportunities, fearing they might miss out on potential gains.

The limited acceptance by financial institutions and merchants restricts the practical utility of cryptos as both a medium of exchange and a store of value, raising questions about their long-term economic sustainability. Financial institutions, such as banks and payment processors, remain cautious about embracing them due to regulatory uncertainties, security concerns, and the potential for aiding illicit activities.

Merchants face practical challenges to accepting cryptos as payment. The volatility of crypto assets makes it difficult for businesses to price their goods and services consistently. This discourages both merchants and consumers from using

cryptocurrencies for everyday transactions. Besides, the lack of integration with traditional financial infrastructure means that converting crypto to fiat currency — a necessary step for most businesses — can be cumbersome and costly. The absence of seamless, cost-effective conversion mechanisms undermines the efficiency and convenience that cryptocurrencies are supposed to offer. This issue is compounded by high transaction fees and slower processing times than conventional payment methods.

It's not uncommon to see children trade sports cards today, just as it wasn't unusual for societies to barter objects that now seem trivial or absurd. Since the dawn of civilisation, humanity has traded everything from shells and spices to gold and paper, each object reflecting a value that was acceptable then. Cryptocurrencies are merely the latest in this long line of evolving assets. The future of digital assets lies not just in their technology, but also in our collective belief in their value. They will test the boundaries of trust, redefine ownership, and reshape the very fabric of global finance.

However, while the fans of these digital tokens focus on their potential, regulators must grapple with the evolving risks associated with digital assets and ensure society is shielded from the volatility of these speculative "objects as assets". Cryptocurrencies lack an immediately identifiable economic function, as they neither produce goods nor services. Instead, their value is driven by narratives that sell the promise of a future potential, with the attraction of what could be rather than what is.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Serious concerns

The Supreme Court, taking suo motu cognisance of the Kolkata case, in its hearing on Tuesday, has very rightly announced a national task force to look into the safety of doctors and medical professionals. Gender violence should be a matter of serious concern in every sphere, not least the informal sector, where women are employed in large numbers. The sweeping changes brought into the

system after the 2012 Nirbhaya rape have not been enough. The National Crime Records Bureau's latest available annual report of 2022 shows that 4.45 lakh cases of crimes against women were registered, which is equivalent to nearly 51 FIRs an hour.

While confirming the death penalty of the four rapists in 2017, the court said that besides effective implementation of laws, a change in the mindset of the society and creating awareness on gender justice would go a long way to

combat violence against women. Campaigns led by women after the RG Kar Hospital rape, in Kolkata and elsewhere, should serve as wake-up calls to the government and society.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Brokering peace

Approval of "Modi in Kyiv" (FE, August 23), amidst many Indian casualties in war-torn zones of Russia and Ukraine, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is walking a tightrope by visiting Ukraine

after his visit to Russia last month. He should tell President Volodymyr Zelenskyy the same thing which he told President Vladimir Putin, to resolve conflict through dialogue and diplomacy. India will have to leverage its growing international stature in politics and economics to be counted in this complex scenario and not annoy Russia at the same time.

—Bal Govind, Noida

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com



If an exchange between two parties is voluntary, it will not take place unless both believe they will benefit from it. Most economic fallacies derive from the neglect of this simple insight

Milton Friedman

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Ramnath Goenka

CONTINUED VIGILANCE ON FOOD PRICES MUST TO TAME HEADLINE INFLATION

THE old debate of core versus headline inflation resurfaced when the Economic Survey 2023-24 asked the RBI to consider an inflation target excluding food, whose prices are influenced more by supply than demand. But RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das recently dismissed such a possibility. The minutes of the recent monetary policy review meeting released Thursday confirm all members of the rate-setting panel are on the same page. Since July 2023, food inflation has remained significantly higher than other two components of headline inflation, averaging 8 percent and contributing 75 percent to the headline number during April-June 2024. Food price rise has fallen from its peak of 10.6 percent in July 2023, but continues to be above 7.3 percent. If you exclude this, the core inflation rate would collapse to a new low of 3.1 percent in the current series. It means a progressive decline in food inflation is essential to achieve the 4 percent headline inflation target.

Persistent food price shocks cannot be ignored given its high share in the household consumption basket. It also has a significant weight of over 46 percent for computing retail inflation; so one cannot ignore its movements while evaluating the headline number. The risk of spillovers to non-food components also complicates the task of taming inflation. As committee member Rajiv Ranjan noted, any adjustment of the goalpost, apart from undermining central banks' hard-earned credibility, may invite the wrath of markets and wipe out the work done so far.

That said, the wedge between headline and food inflation continues to widen, negating the gains made through the decline in core inflation. Importantly, higher food prices are spilling over to households' inflation expectation and consumer confidence—which is why the RBI insists on maintaining the status quo. As Deputy Governor Michael Patra observed, food prices may originate outside the realm of monetary policy and initially manifest themselves in supply mismatches, but when they affect components of inflation, they can propagate through second-order effects and get generalised—to which monetary policy cannot be insensitive. Persistently rising prices are always and everywhere a reflection of too much demand chasing too little supply, even if it is a supply shortfall that starts the price spiral. As outgoing external committee member Ashima Goyal reasoned, continued vigilance is the price of success.

INNOVATION KEY TO SAFETY IN DISASTER-PRONE KERALA

EVERY disaster contains valuable lessons. The recent Yavand landslide has pointers for the future that Kerala, as also the country, cannot afford to ignore. While the disaster underscored the effects of climate change, it also served as a dire warning to accept new realities—need to adapt or perish. A study by climate scientists pegged global warming, which has increased the intensity of monsoon rainfall in the region by 10 percent, as a trigger for the landslide. Warmer atmosphere can hold more moisture, making downpours heavier. While that explains the spells of unusually heavy rain Kerala is witnessing, other factors that come into play in a landslide are steepness of the slope, permeability of the soil, and human activities like land use change, deforestation, mining and construction. Sudden heavy downpours and human activities are associated with Kerala's frequent floods, too. Add to this the fact that almost 15 percent of Kerala is landslide-prone and an equal area is flood-prone, the seriousness becomes apparent.

So climate change and the region's fragility should be kept in mind while taking up developmental activities in Kerala. Fast urbanisation and high population density make the task difficult. Dealing with it does not mean stopping developmental activities. People need facilities and the state needs to progress in tune with the times and its reputation. Challenges and disasters should prompt innovations that make lives safer while ensuring progress. In this, Kerala can learn a lesson or two from Atizawl. After a landslide that killed 17 in 2013, the Mizoram city prepared comprehensive landslide hazard maps and enforced strict slope modification rules, helping curb later damages.

While Kerala must bring in regulations for slope modification and promote disaster-resilient construction, it must also put in place a better disaster-response system. Effective data-driven monitoring and early warning systems should be set up so that accurate and actionable alerts are available timely. The government can bring together its agencies, academic institutions, independent climate researchers and ordinary people to develop a strategy for hazard identification, monitoring, response and rescue. Vulnerable communities should be given access to data on risks, which will help them to be proactive and protect themselves. Risks are often unpredictable, but Kerala must show the resolve to change course and keep itself safe.

QUICK TAKE

RIGHT TO SPEEDY INTERNET

IN an ironic inversion, Pakistan has blamed the country's internet users for markedly slower connection speeds. While common users blame the slowdown on a new cybersecurity regime, business users are crying foul over a 40 percent fall in data speed. The Pakistani government, which blocked social media platforms and throttled speeds after Imran Khan's arrest sparked riots last year, has pointed an accusing finger at users' preference for virtual private networks to skirt state surveillance. As curbs in Manipur and Kashmir show, India is no saint when it comes to web access. Apart from the rights show moves trample on, governments must consider the business losses they cause.

BEFORE we plot the high-stakes connection between the Indian Premier League and market logic, let's look at an observation from Peter Cramton, an economist who has done extensive work on auction design. He wrote in the *European Economic Review* in 1998: "With neither theory nor experiments providing definitive results, it is easy to conclude that which auction format is best is an empirical matter. How one would go about answering this empirical question is difficult at best, since rarely do we see multiple formats being used in easily comparable settings."

This is where the IPL and Ravichandran Ashwin come in. The IPL is a laboratory for experimenting with auction design—a rare luxury that India's government, public sector units or bankruptcy courts do not have. And the spinner, who has 310 wickets in 324 T20 matches, recently spoke out loudly against the possible reinstatement of the right to match (RTM) card at the next IPL auction. He believes the RTM system undervalues the player.

Before we weigh the logic behind Ashwin's claim, let's define the key terms. At the IPL, players are traded in an ascending price auction—the teams place bids in increments. The winner is the team willing to pay the most, with no one else willing to outbid it.

In economic literature, RTM is also known as the right of first refusal. Introduced at the 2018 IPL mega auction, the rule allows teams to keep up to five players from the previous season by using the player retention rule before the auction or RTM at the auction. If they match the highest price bid at the auction, the RTM allows a team to reacquire a player who they did not retain before the auction. A maximum of three retentions or three RTMs were permitted, subject to the overall limit of five.

Why teams want RTM
Recent reports indicate that teams want to bring back RTM in the 2025 auction. Rebuilding an entire team defies logic. So teams would like to retain as many core players as possible. At the least, they would prefer a mix of retention and RTM.

Some preferential treatment is observed in other sports leagues, too. An example would be to let the team that performed the worst in the previous season pick the first player from the available pool in the ensuing

IPL is a lab for experimenting with fair price discovery systems. So Ravichandran Ashwin's recent warning against reinstating the right to match rule should be taken seriously

HOW ECONOMICS CAN MAKE IPL AUCTIONS FAIRER

S CHANDRASEKHAR

Professor, India Gandhi Institute of Development Research



SHIVANGI CHANDEL

Associate Professor, IIT Delhi, Global University



This allows everyone to build a competitive team. But this idea cannot be extended to RTM.

At the IPL auction, the team interested in exercising RTM puts in a bid at the base price of the player and then watches the bidding unfold between other teams. They would behave differently if they had to participate actively in the auction for a player who was not part of their team. In the latter case, the team reveals the maximum price it would pay for a player; under RTM, the true valuation of the player as ascertained by the team exercising the RTM is not necessarily revealed.

Consider the case of Faif du Plessis in

2018. He had played for Chennai Super Kings, who matched the highest bid of ₹1.6 crore and retained him. In 2022, he was bought by Royal Challengers Bangalore for ₹7 crore. The IPL 2022 mega auction did not have RTM. It was probably a combination of recent form, the desire for RCB to have him as their captain and the absence of RTM that contributed to his higher valuation.

A mathematical model formalising this line of thinking will throw up the downside of RTM for players. RTM can discourage bidders from bidding actively. A team will expect that winning against the RTM holder is more expensive. It brings in a big element of uncer-

CLOUDBURST PROTESTS CALL FOR NEW CROWD COMPUTING

HERE did all the crowds that thronged Dhaka come from at a short notice as revolutionary fervour swept Bangladesh and ousted its elected prime minister? Where did the mob that vandalised Kolkata's R G Kar

Hospital after the horrible rape and murder of a woman doctor emerge from? Indeed, how did protests erupt across India in support of the rape victim and against a similar incident in Maharashtra?

We have witnessed many protests in India and elsewhere. But in recent years, it can be said that social media plays an important role in the eruption and scaling of mass protests with a speed that can be stupefying for administrators. In the old normal, crowds gathered at a slower pace, often from nearby areas. In the new normal scheme of things, the so-called archaic warriors can turn active street protesters when and where required.

This monsoon, the subcontinent has seen both crowd bursts and cloudbursts. I would like to think of the latter as a metaphor for the former. Scientifically speaking, cloudbursts occur after warm air currents impede the normal flow of raindrops, leading to an accumulation of water. In a political sense, pent-up anger or simmering protests are like warm currents that reach a flashpoint when patient, peaceful people are ready to storm the streets—as we witnessed in Dhaka, Kolkata and Thane. I would include in this category the recent riots in the UK, where far-right mobs ran amok, attacking immigrants or non-whites following a baseless rumour that the perpetrator of a knife attack that killed three young girls was a Muslim immigrant. Like water held back by warm air, pent-up feelings flared by propaganda and fears can cause crowd bursts. Cloud experts say climate change and greenhouse gas emissions have altered nature. Similarly, the internet and messenger apps have changed the nature of crowd behaviour.

The 2011 riots in London were linked to incendiary BlackBerry Messenger texts that escaped the attention of authorities. As the media observed, that eruption was a far cry from the Tottenham riots in 1985, when a megaphone-wielding man incited a smaller crowd. Technology has made many things go easily viral, and easily scalable. Protests can and do resemble flash mobs that used to be in fashion over a decade ago.

It's a group of people that assembles quickly in a public place like a railway station to stage acts of entertainment, satire or artistic expression. The term is not officially used for protests. But the underlying technology is much the same. The internet enables quick assembly of people, whether as protest groups or art troupes.

Crowd computing now needs so sophisticated cloud computing. One does not



A combination of rumours amplified on social media, propaganda shared on encrypted messengers and police high-handedness can combine to form situations that only need a trigger to cause a flood of people on the streets. Authorities need to revise crowd control methods at a time technologies are more democratic

mix metaphors to say that cloud-based software can help law enforcers if only they dig deeper to find patterns before they descend like furious cloudbursts. WhatsApp and other encrypted messengers like Telegram can spread rumours, useful information, hate calls and solidarity messages alike. Authorities must go that extra mile to keep track of social trouble spots.

Both good and bad crowds can emerge out of nowhere. Social media played a big role in the Arab Spring in Egypt and North Africa between 2010 and 2012. One research paper described the Janatha Aragalaya (People's Struggle) in Sri Lanka in 2022 as an "informed revolution" in which the public was educated about im-

portant political and legal facts. After the severe earthquake at Bhuj in 2001, Curritors from across the planet raised relief material using early Internet sites. I recall an afternoon in Hyderabad two decades ago, when the founder of an IT company explained to me how his company had helped the UK's Scotland Yard to identify probable crime spots by processing geographical information system data from potential areas of trouble. Data science and cloud computing can make it easier. Police across the world can and do use digital heatmaps and mathematical models to tackle riots and mob violence, but this needs to be stepped up and become more refined. The recent street protests show there is a long way to go—not to speak of the direction in which things must go.

Writing after the recent Bangladesh protests, a Colombo-based correspondent looked back at the ouster of Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. She said a lot of hard work was necessary for journalists to get a clear picture as the protests had "no coherent narrative or clear author". So she underlined the importance of "listening" at multiple levels to find clarity. That applies just as much to law enforcers. What is increasingly apparent is that the combination of social media, rumours, encrypted messengers, propaganda and police high-handedness can combine to form cloudburst-like situations that only need a trigger event to cause a flood of people on the streets. Authorities need to reverse-engineer the traditional definition of crowd control, where a teargas shell or police firing could disperse relatively smaller crowds.

Listening to the voices of fears and injustice can provide democratic intelligence that was seemingly lacking in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Britain and West Bengal. Having an ear to the ground has a whole new meaning when people can assemble like nimbus clouds and rain on imperious rulers. You can't sleep in peace with authoritarian fantasies when the technology is democratic.

(Views are personal) (On X @madoversty)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

US meddling

Ref: *The spectre of instability on the eastern front* (Aug 23). If the US is indeed fomenting regime change in parts of Asia, it may be coming on the nation's side. There are so many disaffections inside its social fabric. Any internal strife within the nation will certainly cause an earthquake-like situation. Sankara Venkataraman, Chennai

Recasting castes

Ref: *Backwardness needs relook to make more inclusive policies* (Aug 23). There is a real need to hold a conversation on the Constitution's dynamic nature, suggesting it is a pathway for evolving societal values rather than a rigid boundary. However, this flexibility can also lead to varying interpretations, potentially creating inconsistencies. The challenge lies in balancing the need for progress with preserving the Constitution's core principles. G Nataraja Perumal, Belagavi

Constitution's fixity

Ref: *Morality, metaphors and the Constitution* (Aug 23). Justice H R Khanna's metaphor articles were not only a critique of the Constitution's dynamic nature, suggesting it is a pathway for evolving societal values rather than a rigid boundary. However, this flexibility can also lead to varying interpretations, potentially creating inconsistencies. The challenge lies in balancing the need for progress with preserving the Constitution's core principles. Naayan Kizhundayar, Thiruvr

Pharma regulations

Ref: *Vigil fire an alarm to shed regulatory sloth* (Aug 23). Industrial safety data is disappointingly dismal. In pharma operations, reactor sensitivity to temperature and pressure is critical. Safety management systems are in place, but not fully in use. Licensure in statutory impact would be ruthlessly denied. Buddha Jagdish Rao, Visakhapatnam

Industrial tragedies

The blast at a pharma unit in Anakapalli district of Andhra Pradesh is yet another major industrial disaster in the state after the fire at an Ahtutapuram SEZ factory and a toxic gas leak in May 2020. India has been witnessing a surge in explosion-related accidents in factories. On the one hand, the country boasts of having an industrial powerhouse with a lot of innovative schemes and reforms in place; on the other, tragedies like those mentioned above are becoming too common, with vulnerable workers often paying the price. R Sivakumar, Chennai

Mpxx alert

The World Health Organization has declared Mpxx a public health emergency of international concern. So the health minister should issue advisories for vigilance at all entry points like airports and seaports. Nabhin Panigrahi, Rayagada



Mahendra Jani borrowed money from a private lender who has taken away the papers of his flat in Ahmedabad. VIJAY SONELI

Caught in the jaws of loan sharks

In Gujarat, poor and lower-middle income families who are often turned away by banks approach the hundreds of unregistered private money lenders and soon fall into an unending debt trap. The lenders constantly harass them, issuing threats or seizing their lands, which pushes them to attempt suicide. Mahesh Langa reports on the victims and the police's efforts in curbing this increasing trend

Trigger warning: The following article has references to suicide. Please avoid reading if you feel distressed by the subject.

Mahendra Jani (name changed), 53, looks crestfallen when he talks about his small flat located in Akh-barnagar area in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. He may have to sell it by October this year if he is not able to repay the amount he had borrowed from a private money lender in 2022. When he began suffering losses in his business of running a communication agency, Jani borrowed ₹4 lakh at an interest rate of 4-5% per month from the money lender. He has already repaid about ₹5 lakh in various instalments in the last two years, but the lender has now asked him to pay ₹4 lakh more in order to "settle" the account. Meanwhile, Jani has wound up his business and found a salaried job.

The lender, Jani says, has taken the house papers for the flat from him, and set October as the deadline for the payment of ₹4 lakh. "I am going through a harrowing experience," Jani says. "I made a huge mistake in borrowing from this lender, who I found through a common friend. My life is nearly ruined."

On his phone, Jani points to each instalment he repaid from his bank account. "The lender gradually increased the interest rate from 5% to 10%," he says. Tired of the money lender's constant harassment, Jani plans to approach the police with a stack of documents.

In Santej industrial zone in Gandhinagar, Rameshchandra Gajjar, 49, runs a small pharmaceutical unit. Gajjar had borrowed ₹2.49 crore from two private lenders, Hardik Mehta and Jalpaben Jani, allegedly at a 4% "extortionate rate", a term that the police use to describe such cases. In his complaint to the police, Gajjar stated that he repaid the ₹2.49 crore with interest and penalty, yet the lenders had demanded ₹2 crore more.

In the last few years, the Gujarat Police have registered several such cases of harassment, property seizure, exploitation, and even violence by private loan sharks. The police say these lenders have networks everywhere, from villages to cities such as Ahmedabad, Surat, and Rajkot. Often, these lenders are not registered with the State government under the Gujarat Money-Lenders Act, 2011. Police say often, lower and middle-class families turn to these lenders in desperation for treatment of health issues, resurrectoring dying businesses, or organising weddings.

Chasing exploitative lenders

In 2021, Hitesh Parmar of Ahmedabad's Chandkheda locality had borrowed ₹40 lakh for his mother's cancer treatment from two lenders, Tarun and Krunal Tiwari. He claimed in his complaint to the police that he had repaid the amount with a monthly interest of 10%, yet he was allegedly being harassed to pay ₹1.2 crore more. Parmar even moved into a new house to avoid the lenders, but they found him eventually and used violence to intimidate him. Parmar finally approached the police to file a complaint.



My life has been destroyed by these private money lenders. I have been suffering for years.

ANURAG CHELANA
Farmer

In many cases, what starts as a normal financial transaction between a borrower and a lender (or lenders) often turns into a tragedy, with the lenders seizing property or persisting with threats and demands that often even push the borrowers to attempt suicide.

For instance, Akash Sankhla, 32, who is based in Vastral in Ahmedabad, had borrowed ₹5 lakh from a lender named Vipul Vyas. He needed it as working capital for his business. At the time of borrowing, the lender had clarified neither the tenure of the loan nor the interest rate, Sankhla alleges. A few months later, however, Vyas coolly informed Sankhla that the principal amount had increased to ₹15 lakh and that Sankhla had to pay ₹2.25 lakh per month as interest. Sankhla had repaid the initial ₹5 lakh by January 2024, but Vyas's torture continued, driving him to attempt suicide. Sankhla underwent treatment for mental harassment, as per the complaint he lodged with the Ahmedabad Police earlier this month.

Since 2023, the Gujarat Police has been carrying out a special drive against such lenders. This year, in a press release, the State government had said that 322 cases had been lodged against 565 individuals until July 31. Of them 343 people, who were involved in charging hefty interests and causing harassment or even resorting to violence, were arrested.

"We have seen many cases of harassment by the lenders. Therefore, at the direction of the Chief Minister, we launched this drive against private lenders to help the victims," Gujarat's Junior Home Minister, Harsh Sanghvi, had said in July. The drive entails filing cases against lenders who hound borrowers; ensuring that the properties of borrowers are returned to them if the lenders have usurped them; and helping borrowers get finance or credit from government banks and institutions. On August 23, Sanghvi said that the drive against the "monster lenders" would continue and the police would deal sternly with them.



A banner alerting people who are victims of debt traps to immediately contact the Ahmedabad Police on their helpline number. VIJAY SONELI

Police officials admit that there have been many cases of suicide and violence, including rape, by private moneylenders. Many of them operate illegally. The interest amounts they charge far exceed the State-mandated maximum rate of 12% per annum from a borrower who has provided security, and 15% from a borrower who hasn't. There are often huge penalties on late payments and daily interests that compound.

"A bank charges 10-12% interest annually, while private lenders charge more than 51% a month. We have organised a camp with municipal corporations to facilitate credit to poor and lower middle-class borrowers from government banks and other financial institutions. We are also acting against the loan sharks after filing FIRs against them," Ahmedabad Police Commissioner, G.S. Malik, had said on July 18.

In Surat too, the police organised several such camps. They returned to the borrowers a dozen houses or flats, four plots, and three cars, which were seized by the lenders. "We will not allow any high-handedness. We have launched a crackdown on lenders who use muscle power against borrowers," says Surat Police Commissioner, Anupam Singh Ghehot.

Similarly, in Junagadh, about 320 kilometres from Ahmedabad, the police booked 45 lenders in 37 cases between June 21 and July 31 this year. They found more than 250 blank signed cheques which were taken by the lenders from the borrowers. They also found the registration books of 21 vehicles, which had been seized by the lenders.

Death by harassment

In the midst of the special drive that continued until the end of July, the State's most circulated daily, *Gujarat Samachar*, wrote in an article that these seizures and findings were merely the tip of the iceberg. The newspaper also wrote that 797 people had ended their lives due to harassment and violence by lenders between 2017 and 2023. It provided year-wise figures that it had meticulously compiled from various districts and reported that in the last two years alone, nearly 1.6 lakh people in Gujarat had become victims of extortionate rates charged by private lenders.

There is no official data on the number of deaths by suicide due to private lenders. However, police officials who *The Hindu* spoke to in half a dozen districts and cities confirmed that the situation is alarming, especially among the poor. Once families borrow money from loan sharks, they end up being trapped for a long time and sometimes even work as bonded labour for the lenders. Their struggle to repay the money for months and years pushes them to the depths of despair, the police said.

In a strongly worded editorial on July 13, Rajkot's popular Gujarati evening news portal, *Akila*, implored the State to instil fear among lenders who have been operating with a sense of impunity. "We noticed that families are being destroyed because of these exorbitant interest rates," says the editor, Kirti Ganatra.

Ganatra cites the example of Nilesh Hindocha and his friend Bhargavbhai, who run a small milk parlour in Rajkot. Their case was widely reported in local newspapers. The two men had borrowed ₹6.7 lakh in staggered amounts. "Against the principal borrowing of ₹6.7 lakh, both of them had paid back ₹27 lakh. But the lenders were threatening them and demanding more money. One lender even asked Hindocha to sell his kidney and settle the 'outstanding amount' of ₹6 lakh," he says. A police complaint was lodged against four people on July 29 in Rajkot.

The situation is particularly bad in Surat, an industrial city populated by diamond factories and textile units.

"The diamond sector is in bad shape due to various global factors and the textile industry is also not doing well. As a result, workers turn to lenders for their petty needs, who harass them. In Surat, there are 3-4 deaths by suicide every day due to economic distress. Usury is also a factor in pushing such hapless people to take extreme



A bank charges 10-12% interest annually, while private lenders charge more than 51% a month.

G.S. MALIK
Ahmedabad Police Commissioner

steps," says Surat-based Manoj Mistry, a local journalist who runs a paper called *Gujarat Guardian*.

Awareness programmes

Last year, when the first drive against lenders was launched in Surat, the then Police Commissioner, Ajay Tomar, had described the lenders as "blood suckers." He had launched the drive after realising that the borrowers were afraid to approach the police in such cases. Tomar verified the data of private lenders and investigated how many were registered with the State government. Only registered lenders were eligible to lend money to people at a fixed third term interest rate. Economic distress is forcing people to use the services of private moneylenders to borrow paltry amounts for their immediate needs, say police officials. They add that obtaining loans from banks is an arduous task for many people. In addition, banks turn down applications on various grounds, forcing people to go to private lenders.

Senior police officials say lenders get borrowers to sign blank cheques and then deposit the cheques when the borrowers don't yield to their unreasonable demands. "Once the signed cheque is deposited and dishonoured for lack of balance or for any other reason, the lender then initiates criminal proceedings against the borrower for default. This tactic is used to scare the borrowers with police action," they say.

On August 20, the Ahmedabad Police organised a loan camp for families in Jamalpur, a minority and lower caste-dominated area in Ahmedabad. "It is an awareness programme against private lenders, and to promote loans from government banks. The government needs to organise these camps in every locality of the city to get the victims released from the clutches of private lenders. I thanked the police for organising the camp in my area," says the Congress MLA from Jamalpur, Imran Khedawala.

According to Khedawala, due to widespread fear of unregistered private lenders, the victims suffer in silence. The fear of lenders is so strong that those who file complaints often refuse to give any more details than what they have already provided to the police.

Instead, they resort to extreme steps. Anurag Chelana, 45, is battling for life at the Sola Civil Hospital. A small farmer in Ganeshpura village of Patan district in north Gujarat, Chelana had borrowed about ₹2.5 lakh from a local lender in 2016 and had repaid almost double the amount in the next few years.

"Yet, the lender kept demanding more," alleges Vishnu Desai, Chelana's younger brother. "A few months ago, he threatened Chelana saying he would have to pay ₹20 lakh or else lose his land and house. Chelana filed a police case against the lender's family in June. Within two days, the lender and others came to his house and beat up everyone, including Chelana's children. The police did nothing."

On Thursday morning, a defeated Chelana attempted suicide and was rushed to the Civil Hospital. Doctors say he is critically ill. In a note he left behind for his family, Chelana named Dharmshi Desai and his three sons as the lenders who had tortured him. "Those four monsters have ruined my brother's life and family," says Desai. Chelana's wife has been pleading with journalists to try and get them out of this nightmare.

Chelana says, "My life has been destroyed by Dharamshi and his sons. I have been suffering for years. These lenders are simply unrelenting."

Helpline numbers: If you are in distress, please reach out to these 24x7 helplines: KRAN 1800-599-0089.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Surging ahead

Kamala's socialism resonates with people while personal attacks by Trump diminish his chances in the US elections

As the United States gears up for another contentious election, the spotlight is once again on Vice President Kamala Harris. Her steadfast commitment to secularism has struck a chord with a diverse electorate that values the separation of church and state. In contrast, former President Donald Trump's attacks on Harris, aimed at undermining her credibility, may be backfiring, potentially diminishing his chances in the upcoming elections. As the political climate in the United States continues to evolve, Vice President Kamala Harris has emerged as a prominent advocate for policies rooted in democratic socialism. Her focus on social justice, economic equality, and government intervention to address systemic issues resonates with a growing segment of the American electorate. Meanwhile, former President Donald Trump's attacks on Harris appear to be weakening his appeal, potentially diminishing his chances in the upcoming elections. Kamala Harris's brand of socialism centres on creating a fairer society through progressive taxation expanded healthcare access, and stronger social safety nets. Her policies aim to address the widening wealth gap, ensure affordable education, and promote racial and gender equality. These ideas have gained traction, particularly among younger voters, minorities, and working-class Americans who feel left behind by the current economic system. Harris's commitment to these principles is seen as a response to the pressing needs of a diverse and economically stratified nation. By advocating for policies that prioritize the needs of the many over the interests of the few, Harris is tapping into a widespread desire for systemic change.

In contrast, Donald Trump's strategy has often relied on personal attacks, attempting to discredit Harris by questioning her policies and character. However, these comments have not only failed to undermine Harris's growing support but may also be backfiring on Trump himself. Many voters perceive Trump's rhetoric as divisive and out of touch with the issues that matter most to them, such as healthcare, education, and economic justice. Moreover, Trump's focus on personal attacks rather than substantive policy debates could be alienating voters who are looking for solutions to real problems. As the electorate becomes increasingly concerned with issues like income inequality, climate change, and access to healthcare, Trump's attacks may come across as a distraction from the pressing issues at hand. Kamala Harris's approach, rooted in democratic socialism, offers a vision of an America where everyone has a fair shot at success. This vision is resonating with a growing number of voters who are frustrated with the status quo and are seeking leaders who will champion their interests. Meanwhile, Trump's jabs may be costing him the support of those who are tired of political mudslinging and are looking for a leader who can address their needs.



A mahout bathes an elephant at Elephant Orphanage in Pimpri

Empowering Women: Mandatory self-defence training in schools

This proactive approach could provide women with the skills and confidence to fend off potential attackers, empowering them

The cauldron of public rage is boiling over in the aftermath of the rape and murder of a young resident doctor in Kolkata. It isn't the first time that the nation is witnessing such gruesomeness, and it won't be the last either unless something drastic happens at all levels — societal, legal and psychological. It isn't that there were no horrific instances of sexual assault on women before Nirbhaya. There were, but Nirbhaya's case brought the issue of women's safety (or the lack of it) front and centre, and it resulted in instituting legislation that offered women more protection and legal support. Stringent measures have been implemented, yet incidents keep happening across the country. It nearly feels like no external force can stem this rot, and it is time for women to take their protection into their own hands, literally. In light of the above, I am wondering if it wouldn't be more prudent and practical to arm our girls with self-defence tactics right from the beginning. Crimes against women have become so regular, that attention must now turn towards finding means to empower women in a way that will give them confidence and security in different realms of their professional and private lives. The violations can probably be attributed to a deep-rooted patriarchal mindset that has been the bane of women (not just in India), but fixing the blame on society or its vagaries does not help us fight critical issues such as this. It's worse when women themselves are held responsible for the abuses they are subjected to. If society wants to pin the responsibility of safety on women, then there must be an action plan to arm women with the necessary armament. In simple words, why not



ASHA IYER KUMAR

make martial arts and other self-defence lessons compulsory in the school curriculum? If there can be a sports or PE period, there can be a martial arts period too. The very idea of equipping our girls with the skills to fend off troublemakers makes me jubilant and offers hope that no legislation can offer. Widespread condemnation and demand for punitive action cannot pre-empt future instances. What can curb it is the general knowledge among errant men that the woman they have cornered is capable of packing a punch, a chop or a kick that will neutralise them. Martial arts has been an optional activity for girls in an urban setting, but only when it is introduced as a part of the curriculum from primary grades in every school and they must be genuinely emancipated from the dangers that lurk at every corner of their daily lives. It is encouraging to learn that the government is intent on its aim to ensure the safety of women in the country and hand out the severest punishment to perpetrators,

Violence against women: Unheeded cries

As public outrage grows, the challenge before the authorities is to provide safety and dignity of women across the country

In a flashback all the past horrendous incidents of violence against women, particularly incidents of rape cross the mind. Here in our country, newspaper pages more than often bring out horrifying accounts of sexual violence — a 65-year-old grandmother assaulted in Kharagpur or a teenage girl, native of Uttar Pradesh, was gang-raped inside a government bus at the Dehradun Inter-State Bus Terminal (ISBT) in Uttarakhand on August 12, 2024, and the latest from Maharashtra, when on August 20, 2024, two minor girls, aged 4, studying in Nursery, were sexually assaulted by a school sweeper in the washroom of a well-known Adarsh Vidya Mandir in Badliapur school near Mumbai. These incidents happened within days when the entire nation was gripped by the horrors of the R G Kar Medical College and Hospital at Kolkata. And these are not isolated incidents — they are part of a grim reality where a rape is reported every 21 minutes. Yet, despite the horror these crimes evoke, they are quickly forgotten by all except the victims and their families, who are left to fight lonely, often futile battles for justice for years, which sometimes is only the ray of hope for them. India's response to sexual violence remains disturbingly inadequate. More than a decade has passed since the Nirbhaya case — a brutal gang rape that shocked the nation and led to the passage of new sexual assault laws. But the situation has barely improved. Nearly 50 years before Nirbhaya, the fearless, Aruna Shanbaug, a 25-year-old nurse, was viciously assaulted by a hospital cleaner in Mumbai. Sodomized, strangled with a metal chain, and left for dead, she survived — only to remain in a vegetative state for 41 years until her death. Her ordeal led to a landmark judgment on passive euthanasia in India, yet her suffering stands as a testament to the enduring failures of a society that continues to fail its women. The recent brutal rape and murder of a 31-year-old postgraduate trainee doctor in Kolkata serves as a grim reminder that little has changed. Female healthcare workers or



women workers per se, still fear for their safety even in supposed sanctuaries such as hospitals. This ongoing crisis underscores the dire need for real change — a change that goes beyond laws and addresses the deep-seated cultural and institutional failures that allow such atrocities to persist. This incident of R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital has shaken the conscience of West Bengal, and the ripple effects are being felt across the political landscape — and the entire nation. The public's reaction to this crime has been fierce and unyielding. Protests have erupted across the state, with citizens demanding justice not only for the victim but also calling for broader reforms to ensure such incidents are not repeated. The political and social response to the incident has been equally chaotic. The decision for a swift call for a CBI investigation and capital punishment, alongside the rally for "Khela Hobe Divas", has been met with criticism for its timing and focus. Additionally, state actions, such as the transfer of doctors allegedly involved in protests and the use of social media to counter celebrity critiques (read singers), have further fueled debates about the handling of the case. The political implications of this incident

HIGH-PROFILE CASES OF ASSAULT, TRAFFICKING, AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HIGHLIGHT THE PERSISTENT VULNERABILITIES FACED BY WOMEN

could be far-reaching. But beyond politics, the safety of women and girls in India remains a critical concern, deeply rooted in societal norms, legal frameworks, and institutional practices. Despite advancements in legislation and public awareness, instances of violence and harassment against women are prevalent. High-profile cases of assault, trafficking, and domestic violence highlight the persistent vulnerabilities faced by women and girls. The legal system, while equipped with laws like the 'Protection of Human Rights Act' and the 'Criminal Law Amendment Act', or for that matter, the 'Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO of 2012)', often struggles with implementation and enforcement. There are systemic delays in justice delivery and shortcomings in police response, which exacerbate the sense of insecurity. Protective measures, including the establishment of fast-track courts and specialized police units, aim to address these issues and provide some ray of light in this dark world for women. Further, societal attitudes towards women play a significant role in undermining these measures. Deep-seated patriarchal views and cultural practices continue to normalize gender-based violence, making it difficult for protective laws to translate into tangible safety for women. The lack of comprehensive sexual education and community engagement further perpetuates harmful stereotypes and behaviours. Right education for the boys at home is another crucial area for intervention by the government and NGOs. The role of NGOs and grassroots movements has been pivotal in advocating for women's rights and safety. Effective safety measures must involve not only legal reforms but also significant shifts in overall attitudes and community involvement. The challenge before the authorities is not just one of governance but of moral leadership — a test that will define their legacy to guarantee safety to women and girl children. *Aarti Tomari, masturi kora, Jarnoni boudhara /Tobe aamar manojbanjo keno bonchito kora... (I am no other, but the daughter of yours. O' motherland/Why deprive me of the legacy of my human life...)* Written in the year 1933 by Rabindranath Tagore, these lines echo far and wide and call for collective action. It is time to stand up to see where we stand and where we fall. *(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

VALID CONCERNS ON E-COMMERCE

Madam — Union Minister of Commerce and Industry, Piyush Goyal, has raised valid concerns about the questionable practices of e-commerce companies, particularly regarding predatory pricing, cash burning, successive years of losses, and the use of FDI to cover these losses. His concerns emphasize the need for policymakers to ensure a level playing field for local businesses and industries. More troubling is the destination and intent behind the FDI in these companies. E-commerce companies consistently declare significant losses in their income tax returns, carrying them forward year after year to offset against future profits. This cycle continues with mergers, where the losses of merged companies are also carried forward. In contrast, local traders and entrepreneurs pay regular taxes on their incomes, while e-commerce companies avoid taxes through their accounting strategies. This tax advantage, along with the convenience and wide range of products offered by online trade, gives e-commerce companies a significant edge. Goyal suggests that cash burn by e-commerce companies should not be allowed as a deduction, and the period for carrying forward losses should be limited to a maximum of two years. The impact of e-commerce on local traders is already evident, with potential job losses on the horizon. Another concern is the shift of youth from traditional businesses and agriculture to delivery jobs, leading to their migration from rural areas to metro cities. *Rinal Johri | New Delhi*

MODERN SLAVERY

Madam — "I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed more if only they knew they were slaves". One need not look beyond these thought-provoking words of an American abolitionist Harriet Tubman to decipher the evils of slavery. Though Tubman spoke at the end of the 19th century, her words hold true for modern slavery as well. Human trafficking, bonded

Lateral entries rolled back



Bal Govind Noida

labour and forced marriages are direct examples of today's slavery whereas domestic work, construction activities, and sexual exploitation fall into the 'domain' of forced labour. Nothing can exemplify modern slavery better than the child labour. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has identified about twenty five million men and women as victims of modern slavery. Nobody can turn somebody into a slave unless the latter allows them is now something like a misnomer. ILO has specifically targeted migrant workers who are easily lured because of their poor understanding of local language and tradition. To take stock of the progress done by ancillary agencies and the respective governments, 'International Day for the Abolition of Slave Trade' is observed on August 23. It is hoped that the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights that states "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms" gains a fresh momentum. *Ganapathi Bhat | Akola*

government wanted to rope in 45 lateral entries into our civil services, which was not the first time, it has been happening since Nehru's days. But such is the compulsion of coalition politics that the government had to give in to the demands of its own allies. Prime Minister Modi had also rolled back critical three farm laws which were in the larger interest of the farmers. So now after this decision, it is going to boost opposition's morale to put God on the mat again in future, and it has given Modi's government a negative and weak government's image. Hopefully it will learn its lessons and take opposition and allies on board before rolling out any sensitive changes or policies in future. It is the most democratic thing to do anyway because what is democracy if it is not inclusive and does not reflect people's will.

NO LIMITS FOR PARA PLAYERS

Madam — The season of Paralympics is all set to begin with Indian athletic contingent start reaching over there in the Game village of Paris. So far, the closing of Paris Olympics done, with India taking on six medals only, however some sports stars and aficionados are setting the medal count limit with 12 medals at the Paralympics. India has successfully lifted 19 medals in Paralympics Tokyo edition of 2021, for all those are setting the bar before the real talent actually comes up, it is crucial to appreciate the talent and zeal of our para players. Let's not set any artificial boundary of medals that they have to win for the nation. Why just 12, our players have the capability of winning much more. May their competitive spirit and sportsmanship, let them conquer the sports laurels in a celebrated manner without any pressure. *Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur*

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

TELANGANA



In solidarity: Members of the Telangana Junior Doctors' Association taking out a protest rally at Osmania Medical College at Koti in Hyderabad following the rape and murder of a female trainee doctor at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata. RAMAKRISHNA G.

Guardians of health, victims of harassment

Female healthcare professionals across government hospitals are increasingly facing threats to their safety. Incidents of physical violence and sexual harassment have become alarmingly common, revealing a critical shortfall in security measures. Despite repeated warnings and calls for reform, many hospitals remain inadequately equipped to protect their employees, finds **Siddharth Kumar Singh**

In a sultry afternoon in mid-May, a middle-aged man walked into an Area Hospital in the western part of Hyderabad, seeking relief from scabies, a contagious skin disease that causes itching and rashes. The duty doctor — a young woman in her early 30s — explained the treatment, administered the prescribed cream on his hand, and left the patient to rest in the emergency ward of the secondary-care health centre.

But when she returned an hour later to examine the affected area, the man suddenly unzipped his trousers and exposed himself, leaving the doctor momentarily paralysed by shock. The doctor froze for a few seconds before she finally bolted from the ward, her voice trembling as she frantically called for security. "It took me 10 minutes to find them and have the man removed from the ward," she recounts.

The doctor shared her traumatic experience to highlight the pervasive issue of sexual harassment while taking part in a solidarity rally held in front of the Osmania Medical College (OMC) in Hyderabad on August 20, following the recent rape and murder of a female trainee doctor at Kolkata's R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital on August 9.

"While it might shock many, such incidents are disturbingly common for doctors, especially women, working in government hospitals. We face these threats regularly, and it's a reminder of the need for stronger security and support systems at the workplace," she says.

That incident, unfortunately, was not an isolated one. Female healthcare professionals across government hospitals in Telangana are increasingly finding themselves in unsafe and hostile environments, where the very sanctity of their workplace is under constant threat.

Despite the alarming frequency of such incidents, they often find themselves grappling with a system that offers little protection. The doctor, like many of her colleagues, has learned to balance caution with resilience, but the emotional toll is undeniable. "We come to work every day, prepared to handle medical emergencies, not personal threats. It is disheartening that the very places where we dedicate ourselves to healing others can become sources of distress for us," she rues, her words echoing the urgent need for systemic change to ensure the safety and well-being of those on the front lines of healthcare.

A senior resident doctor at the Government ENT Hospital in Hyderabad recounts a distressing incident from a few months ago. During a night shift in the emergency ward, she and her colleagues were handling two cases simultaneously. One was a critical emergency, wherein the patient was promptly treated. The other patient had come in with a simple complaint of ear pain, which the doctor says she personally examined. After prescribing medicines, she discharged him. The rest of the night passed without incident.

A few days later, however, the same patient took to a social media platform and posted that no doctor was available to treat him when he visited the ENT hospital. "The hospital authorities brought this to my attention and began questioning me," she recalls.

Fortunately, CCTV cameras were operational



We often work 24-hour to 36-hour shifts, and the duty doctor's room is our only refuge. Yet, many of these rooms are in deplorable condition, often shared by up to 10 doctors, regardless of gender.

A FEMALE DOCTOR, Kakatiya Medical College, Warangal

that night, and the footage clearly showed the doctor attending to the patient. "It was both shocking and frustrating to see that when I knew I had done my job. Thankfully, the CCTV footage helped clear my name. But this experience made me realise just how vulnerable we, especially female doctors, are to false accusations," she says.

Environment of fear amid lax security

This vulnerability is not limited to accusations. There have been numerous instances of doctors and hospital staff being physically assaulted too. In May last year, senior resident doctors of the Nephrology department at Nizam's Institute of Medical Sciences, Hyderabad, were violently attacked by a patient's attendants. A group of 10-12 people stormed into the Acute Respiratory Care Unit ward after a 62-year-old patient, who had been admitted in critical condition, died. The group attempted to assault a female senior resident, and when her colleague stepped in to defuse the situation, he was struck on the shoulder. The attendants then grabbed his neck, and attempted to strangle him.

The glaring inadequacy of security in government hospitals remains a critical issue, and yet it often goes overlooked. Despite repeated reports of harassment, meaningful reforms have been slow to materialise.

In 2019, the Telangana government issued Government Order (G.O.) no.103, which outlined the creation of 164 security posts under the control of the Director General-Telangana Special Protection Force (SPF), for deployment in government teaching hospitals and medical units. According to the G.O., 128 personnel were to be

deployed across eight government teaching hospitals, with another 36 assigned to hospitals in Nizamabad and Mahabubnagar.

"Even though this order was issued over four years ago, little has been done to ensure the safety of doctors in government facilities. There are still many hospitals without any SPF deployment at all," says Isaac Newton, a doctor of OMC.

The issue of SPF deployment has become a flashpoint for doctors in Telangana, who have been protesting for over a week following the rape and murder of a female trainee doctor at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata. The protest, initially sparked by solidarity for the doctor's tragic death, quickly evolved into a broader demand for urgent action on longstanding security issues.

"When we met the Health Minister to demand adequate SPF deployment across all government hospitals in the State, we were assured that the 2019 G.O. would be revised and a new order issued soon," shares Chandrika Reddy, spokesperson for the Telangana Junior Doctors Association.

The Kolkata incident galvanised doctors to boycott out-patient and elective OT services, to build pressure on the government to deploy adequate security in hospitals across the State.

On August 16, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare mandated that institutional FIRs must be filed within six hours of any violence

against healthcare workers on duty. This order, responding to the growing violence against doctors and staff in government hospitals, emphasised that most assaults are by patients or their attendants.

The National Medical Commission (NMC) has also instructed medical colleges to

develop a policy for a safe work environment within the college and hospital campus for all the staff members and to ensure prompt investigations and FIRs relating to incidents involving medical students. A detailed report must be submitted to the NMC within 48 hours of any incident, the order said.

Gruelling shifts, poor working conditions

Compounding the security issues are the deplorable conditions of doctors' resting rooms in State-run hospitals. A doctor from Government Medical College in Nizamabad district describes the inadequate facilities and lack of security that leave doctors feeling unsafe during gruelling shifts. "The resting room at our hospital has only three beds, which are shared by doctors across shifts, so the door is frequently left open. With no security personnel nearby, we fear that a tragedy like the one in Kolkata could just as easily happen here. We submitted a written representation to the District Collector about this issue, but were told that there aren't enough security staff to cover every area of the hospital," she says with a sigh.

A female doctor from Kakatiya Medical College in Warangal echoes the concern. "Take a closer look at the RG Kar incident — it happened while the doctor was resting after long hours on duty. I won't hesitate to say that a similar tragedy could easily occur at any government hospital in Telangana. We often work 24-hour to 36-hour shifts, and the duty doctor's room is our only refuge. Yet, many of these rooms are in deplorable condition, often shared by up to 10 doctors, regardless of gender. For female doctors, it is even more challenging as there are often no dustbins available to dispose of sanitary napkins during menstrual cycle," she explains.

Samhita, a doctor of OMC, highlights the pressing security issues at Osmania General Hospital (OGH), which handles around 800 to 900 out-patient visits daily, a number that swells with

accompanying attendants. "The government should enforce security measures, including screening attendants and limiting the number to two per patient," she suggests. She also raises a concern: many attendants arrive intoxicated, which can lead to violent behaviour and endanger the safety of doctors and staff.

A fellow doctor from OMC shares her anxiety with regard to night shifts at OGH, which run from 12.30 a.m. to 4.30 a.m. and from 4.30 a.m. to 8.30 a.m. "In the dead of the night, the hospital parking lot is often full, forcing me to park my two-wheeler near the old building. The 10- to 15-minute walk from there, in the dark, is nerve-racking. At times, I call a family member or a friend to stay on the line until I get into the hospital safely," she shares.

On addressing the security concerns, N. Rajkumar, Superintendent of Gandhi Hospital, a government-run tertiary care health facility in Hyderabad, assures that the hospital has robust security measures in place.

"At any given point of time, we have seven SPF personnel on duty, supported by a sufficient number of private security guards. Besides, our senior residents, postgraduates and other doctors work in groups to avoid situations where they might feel unsafe. We are committed to addressing any security issues raised by our staff," she explains.

Hostile environment, ineffective laws

While doctors grapple with numerous challenges, including inadequate security and poor working conditions, misconduct within the profession adds another layer of risk for female doctors.

A recent case underscores this troubling reality: N. Laxman Singh, the District Medical and Health Officer of Kamareddy, was suspended in May this year following allegations of sexual harassment.

According to a report filed by the Kamareddy District Collector, Dr. Laxman had seven criminal cases against him on charges of sexually harassing female medical officers. He was arrested and produced before the Judicial First Class Magistrate court, where he was released on bail pending the filing of a charge sheet and trial. An inquiry led by Amar Singh Naik, Additional Director (Medical), found that Dr. Laxman had failed to adhere to administrative protocols, resulting in a recommendation for further disciplinary action by the Director of Health and Family Welfare.

Sexual harassment in the medical field is so pervasive that a duty doctor at a private hospital recounts her decision to study medicine in the Philippines, at half the cost and in a torture-free environment. "I was offered a B Category seat in India for ₹75 lakh upfront, and it would have cost over 1 crore to complete the course while possibly enduring harassment. In Telangana, caste also plays a role in harassment. The main offenders are often duty doctors and visiting consultants," says the doctor, Kalyani G. (name changed upon request).

Kiran Madala, secretary general of the Telangana Teaching Government Doctors Association, says: "If we look at the assaults on doctors and the consequences that follow, it is alarming to see that out of every 1,000 people arrested for attacking duty doctors, only three or four are actually convicted."

He points out that even to secure an arrest, doctors often have to resort to protests or strikes, but meaningful action is often slow, leaving them in a constant state of fear and uncertainty.

In response to the ongoing threats, the Union Health Ministry issued an Office Memorandum on August 21, forming a National Task Force to address the safety of medical professionals. This 14-member panel, constituted following a Supreme Court direction, aims to implement stronger protection laws across the country. However, as Madala points out, "The Centre claims that around 26 States have laws to protect doctors from assault, but without an organised system in place, these laws are ineffective. This is why we are advocating for the Central Protection Act to be implemented uniformly across the country."



15 THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"A minority of voters will always demand more draconian measures against foreign arrivals. But a quieter majority is amenable to the argument that fair rules, properly enforced, can also operate in a spirit of openness to the outside world and compassion for people fleeing conflict and persecution." —THE GUARDIAN

The Gupkar stranglehold

J&K needs a new beginning. Assembly elections could end the domination of scions



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

IT IS GOING to be a battle royale in Jammu and Kashmir. The Union Territory, carved out from the erstwhile state of J&K in 2019, will be holding its first-ever elections in September. The Election Commission has announced polling in three phases to the 90 assembly segments of the UT legislature. After the abrogation of Article 370 and the creation of J&K as a UT, certain administrative measures were to be completed before starting the electoral process. While the J&K region in the erstwhile state had 83 assembly segments, that number has been increased to 90 under the reorganisation act, thus necessitating a delimitation exercise. The delimitation commission was established in March 2020 under Justice Ranjana Desai, a former Supreme Court judge. The Commission completed the process by the middle of 2022, despite regional political parties like the National Conference, PDP and People's Conference coming together to form a short-lived alliance, the "Gupkar Alliance", and challenging the exercise in courts.

The main players in the elections will be national parties like the BJP and Congress and regional parties like the NC and PDP. There will be several other smaller parties that have emerged in the Kashmir Valley, like the People's Conference led by Sajjad Lone and JK Apni Party led by Altaf Bukhari. A new surprise in the Valley politics is the rise of a separatist outfit called the Awami Ittehad Party (AIP), led by a mercantile separatist leader Sheikh Abdul Rashid, popularly known as Engineer Rashid. Rashid shocked observers of J&K politics earlier this year by winning the North Kashmir Lok Sabha seat of Baramulla, defeating Omar Abdullah, the NC strongman and a towering leader in the Valley's politics. Since then, speculation is rife that Rashid's party would emerge as a strong force in the Valley politics through the legislative elections, not good news for the region and the nation.

The BJP, with its stronghold over the Jammu region, will continue to be a formidable force. It has a strong organisational and political presence in almost all the 43 assembly segments in the Jammu region, including Muslim-dominated areas like the Pir Panjal and Chenab Valley. Several prominent Muslim leaders have joined the party in the last few months enhancing its winning chances in 10-odd seats in the region, even in areas where the Muslim votes matter.

The NC is hoping to make a comeback by winning a majority of the seats in the Kashmir Valley. But the party's ambition was dampened by the defeat of its leader Omar Abdullah in the Lok Sabha elections from a

constituency that sends 16 legislators to the assembly. In a desperate bid, the Abdullahs decided to join hands with the Congress, hoping that the INDI Alliance would help them stem the BJP's surge in Jammu. However, after the departure of Ghulam Nabi Azad in August 2022, the Congress Party has been a lacklustre force in the region. Several of its other leaders have migrated to parties like the BJP.

Far from benefiting from joining hands with the NC, the Congress will have to face the wrath of the people of Jammu and the nationalist elements in Kashmir, besides the people of the country, for this opportunistic alliance. Just a few days before the election, the NC came out with its election manifesto which categorically stated that the party's first demand would be for the restoration of Articles 370 and 35 A in the Indian Constitution. "The first order of business of the elected assembly should be to make it known not just to the rest of India but to the world at large that the people of J&K don't agree with what happened to us on August 5, 2019. Then we start undoing what was done to us", Omar Abdullah said a week ago.

The party's manifesto smacks of a soft separatist mindset, Kashmiri domination and scant respect for the people of Jammu, especially the SCs and STs. Sheikh Abdullah, its founder, was the champion of the idea of "autonomy" of Kashmir, a dangerous slogan that forced Jawahar Nehru to send him to jail in 1953. Again, it was Feroz Abdullah's government in Jammu that brought the infamous "autonomy resolution" in 2000, trying to stoke separatism in the state.

The Azaal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government in Delhi had snubbed Ferozq Khan Abdullah by rejecting the resolution in Parliament. It is saddening that after two decades the NC manifesto once again talks about autonomy and Article 370. The manifesto also talks about releasing prisoners who were jailed for pro-terrorist and anti-national activities and refers to the famous Shankaracharya Hill in Srinagar as Takht-i-Sulaiman and the adjoining Jhar Parvat as Koh-e-Maran.

The Modi government has introduced Scheduled Tribe reservation in the state to provide social justice to Gujjars, Pahadis and other tribes. The NC manifesto wants to "review" all the reservation in the state. It betrays NC's anti-Jammu streak and throws a challenge at the marginalised sections of the Jammu society like Hindu SCs and Pahadis and Muslim Gujjars and Bakarwals. The Congress Party leadership has to answer if it shares the NC's soft-separatist and anti-SC/ST political agenda.

The elections will continue Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of freeing the people from family politics and ushering in true democracy through free and fair elections. It was this vision that resulted in the Kashmir Valley sending a Sunni, a Shia and a Gujjar to Parliament for the first time from its three seats, truly representing the rich diversity of the Valley and rejecting the politics of scions. With the BJP continuing to be a strong force in the UT, this election will witness historic results and free people from the stranglehold of Gupkaris.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal

Reaching out, pointing a finger

At the Democratic National Convention, Kamala Harris did both. She will need to find the language to address even those who voted for Donald Trump and still support him



VAMSEE JULURI

KAMALA HARRIS'S SELECTION as the Democratic candidate for US President has brought joy to a part of America that deserves it. For four long years, many Americans have lived through the self-congratulatory strain of saying things are great under President Joe Biden while also saying things are not great at all because former President Trump is still around. They waited patiently for President Biden to rise to the occasion again, but then decided finally that it would be better to thank him for his service and confront their fearsome nemesis with a new arsenal instead.

And what spectacular energy has ensued from that arsenal since the Democratic National Convention (DNC) began? Harris has been consistently described as an amazingly competent and compassionate human being by colleagues, family, and friends for the past few days. Personal testimonies have poured forth from people who knew her from the beginnings of her public life as San Francisco District Attorney, California Attorney General, Senator, and recently, as the US Vice President. It would not be out of place to describe the mood at the DNC as one of religious fervour, and of course, faith, in a much-needed saviour.

Texas Representative Jasmine Crockett's speech summed up this mood perfectly. When she met VP Harris, she was very emotional. She said, and then, "the most powerful woman in

the world wiped my tears and listened to me." Confronted with tales of such empathy, what else can human beings do but believe?

Even the hip cartoonists at the New Yorker couldn't resist representing the metaphysics of hope emanating from Chicago. One cartoon shows passengers in a plane shaking in their seats while the captain warns them of "moderate turbulence" from the "energy field pulsing up from the Democratic National Convention."

Naturally, this mystical energy field has pulsed its way all the way up to an ecstatic climax with the breathlessly awaited appearance of the final speaker at the DNC — Harris herself. To start with, her speech was consistent with the description of her as someone capable of wiping away tears from the face of suffering Americans. She called for an end to bitterness and divisiveness. She noted that people with all political views were watching, and promised to be a leader for all Americans — "country over party," as she saying goes. That was a much-needed gesture. Whatever the differences in positions and proposed policies of the two parties, the fact that she did so when no one expected her opponent to make generous "reaching across the aisle" moves was indeed welcome.

But then, that promise was ephemeral. Her attention then turned promptly to Donald Trump, whom she called an "insecure man." She turned to issue grave warnings about what his return might do to America. It was an unexpected grasp at a gratuitous rhetorical crutch after all the lofty presidential image-building exercises at the convention. The "boogymen" trope about Trump was perhaps par for the course when other speakers used it ("vindictive, vile, villain" was one of the more colourful phrases), but a step backwards when heard from someone working diligently towards greater gravitas in a darkly cacophonous time of po-

litical history. When you demonise an opponent who is still incredibly popular with many Americans, you run the risk of being seen as demonising those Americans who just promised to be a President for as well. On that count, despite all his obvious communication tics, tick-offs, and tactics (including his latest physical gag of mocking his advisers who tell him to talk about policies and avoid personal attacks on opponents), Trump still has some references to a familiar everyday American reality in his rhetorical arsenal that the Democratic campaign has failed to offer a persuasive alternative to.

The Democrats may chant "USA!" like Trump fans, but then the sight of American flags and monuments being desecrated in protests and riots these past few years under Democrats — slogans such as White Supremacy and Palestine — will not be forgotten by many people, across race, religions, and cultures, for whom "country" still symbolises an honourable form of association and identity. More importantly, it is quite apparent that the Democrats are also attempting to turn some of the unignorable social concerns highlighted by Trump such as crime and safety, and prices, into wins for them by highlighting Harris's prosecutorial record, and the Republicans' proximity to wealth, respectively. There are empty spaces in both houses.

The convention has come to an end, and so has an incredible experience in the meaning of politics to some in this, supposedly post-religious, age. "After the ecstasy," as the title of a famous book goes, is the laundry. That it will get dirty is obvious. But much more than we know will be at stake if we are unable to avert our eyes from the spin and see it all for what it is.

The writer is professor of Media Studies, University of San Francisco



RAJESWARI SENGUPTA AND BHARGAVI ZAVERI SHAH

Don't control the rupee

Changing rules of the game can have damaging effects on costs of doing business

THE INDIAN RUPEE follows a managed floating exchange rate regime. This means that the central bank intervenes in the foreign exchange market to buy or sell dollars in order to stabilise the value of the rupee. In recent times, however, the RBI seems to be using its regulatory powers to gain greater control over the rupee. We argue that currency management must not entail the use of regulations. The purpose of regulations is to address market failures. Currency volatility is not a market failure — it is the fluctuation of the currency in response to demand and supply forces. The use of regulatory powers for currency management introduces uncertainty in the central bank's currency policy, and also increases the cost of doing business in RBI-regulated sectors. We discuss three such regulatory measures and the problems associated with them.

First, prohibiting speculative trades on exchanges. This exacerbates the difficulties of taking rupee exposure in India. In 2008, the RBI allowed Indian exchanges to launch a currency derivatives segment. At that time, the RBI's guidelines on currency Futures and Options allowed Indian residents to participate in this market "to hedge an exposure to foreign exchange rate risk or otherwise". While the RBI continued to prescribe the product design, position limits, and trading hours, the general trend was towards opening up this market. The idea was that as India became more globally integrated, the demand for such instruments and for liquidity

in the derivatives market would increase. At some point, the 2008 guidelines were overtaken by several circulars, with the last version issued in 2016 having been amended at least 11 times. These regulations explicitly allowed taking positions in rupee-linked currency derivatives up to \$100 million across all exchanges, "without having to establish evidence of underlying exposure".

Earlier this year, however, the RBI explicitly mandated exchanges to inform users that they "should be in a position to establish the existence of a valid underlying contracted exposure, if required". This warning compelled the bulk of retail traders to wind up their positions as a result of which trading volumes collapsed by about 80 per cent across all exchanges. This regulatory measure essentially restricts speculators from trading in the onshore rupee market. It overlooks the fact that a liquid market requires all kinds of traders, including speculators, who act as de facto market makers. This move is an irreversible blow to a reasonably liquid market, which allowed hedgers to take positions on the rupee at low costs. It is likely to drive away volumes to the offshore currency derivatives market. Second, regulating offshore trading platforms. The RBI proposed to regulate offshore electronic trading platforms (ETPs), which facilitate rupee-linked derivative transactions. Published on its website in April 2024, this proposal seeks to empower the RBI to oversee the offshore currency forwards market, commonly called the non-deliverable for-

wards (NDF) market. The NDF market allows people to trade in the rupee without undertaking any physical delivery of the currency, thereby reducing the cost of trading. In the last few years, the rupee NDF market has grown substantially in size, and is now reported to be almost three as large as the onshore market. This has led to concerns in the RBI that the offshore market, over which it has no direct oversight or control, could be playing a significant role in determining the rupee's value. The recent regulatory proposal requires ETPs to register themselves with the RBI, and confers fairly extensive powers on the central bank, such as the power to refuse registration, seek information, specify "eligible instruments" that Indian residents may trade in, and impose additional terms and conditions.

Legally, the RBI can restrict Indian entities' rights to deal with non-residents or to transact in foreign currencies, but it is a jurisdictional leap to regulate offshore platforms on which Indian residents trade. This is akin to Sebi asking the New York Stock Exchange to register with itself, simply because Indian residents trade at these venues. Instead of expanding its regulatory powers, the RBI must make it easier for people to trade the rupee in India. This will help bring back rupee linked trading volumes and allied businesses onshore.

Third, the RBI's instructions to banks. Earlier this month, when the rupee-dollar exchange rate depreciated close to the \$4 mark in the spot market, the RBI is reported to have orally instructed some large commercial

banks not to add to their existing trading positions against the rupee. This step seems to have been taken to stem further rupee depreciation. On August 16, the RBI similarly instructed banks that handle trade with the United Arab Emirates to partially settle their trade payments using rupee instead of the dollar. This means that banks should directly convert rupees into dirhams and vice versa without first converting them into dollars. One objective of this move seems to be to reduce dollar dependence in international trade. But settling trade in rupee also helps insulate the currency from the impact of dollar outflows, that is, lower the extent of rupee depreciation against the dollar. In other words, this is yet another regulatory measure that helps to manage the currency.

Notwithstanding the debate on the costs and benefits of a "managed" currency for an emerging economy like India, the RBI must not seek to manage the rupee's volatility through an indiscriminate expansion of its regulatory powers. Regulations are the rules of the game. Unlike market operations that involve central banks buying or selling the currency in the foreign exchange markets, changes to the rules of the game can have a more permanent, damaging effect on the incentives and the costs of doing business in the country.

Sengupta is associate professor of Economics, IGIDR and Shah is a doctoral researcher at the National University of Singapore

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SAFETY, IN REAL TIME

THIS REFERS to the editorial, 'Fighting the water' (IE, August 23). Flash floods, landslides, cloudbursts have been causing loss of life and extensive damage to property in Himachal, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Assam, etc. The state administration is caught unprepared except in Odisha. All states must devise effective plans with the help of experts to issue timely warnings, carry out evacuation and provide shelter to the displaced people. Water management is the key to efficiently mitigating the effects of the fury of the weather. It is not difficult if suitable steps are initiated well in advance.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

TELECOM CONCERNS

THIS REFERS to the editorial, 'Market facts and fears' (IE, August 23). Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal raised valid concerns over "predatory pricing" by e-commerce platforms and emphasised the value of a level playing field. This is important for healthy competition. Goyal should also pay attention to other sectors. Predatory pricing in the telecom sector has been widely reported previously. After the introduction of Reliance Jio in 2016, there has been a significant shrink from 11 to three key market players. This is concerning and deserves attention.

Prashant Kumar, via email

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

THIS REFERS to the article, 'Bringing talent, not localists' (IE, August 23). The Centre's decision to cancel lateral entry recruitments in bureaucracy is a demonstration of how good policies become collateral damage in political battles. Lateral entry is a means for the government to recruit people with domain expertise and proven leadership and managerial skills who would otherwise not have considered joining the government. It is concerning that the Opposition sought to define the issue through the prism of reservation.

SS Paul, Nadia

RETHINK ON RUSSIA

THIS REFERS to the article, 'When Modi meets Zelenskyy' (IE, August 23). Ukraine became an expense for Russia due to its proximity to the US and NATO. Two years after the war began, the world needs to adjust its acts. Russia has an impact on world economics owing to its oil and gas production. Considering its mammoth scale, sanctions have not been an effective strategy. Dialogue has to be initiated. India, which followed the policy of non-alignment during the Cold War, is trying to play a proactive role. With growing bilateral trade with Ukraine and age-old ties with Russia, new avenues of cooperation need to be explored.

Ramanpreet, via email

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

KAMALA HARRIS

With her personal story and arc, Democratic presidential nominee has enthused party. She needs to reach out, and across

IT'S A DISTINCTLY American story," Maya Harris's words captured a multi-generational journey that culminated on August 22 with her sister becoming only the second woman presidential candidate in the US, and the first person of Indian origin to rise to that level. As she accepted the nomination and spoke on the final day of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Chicago, Kamala Harris spoke of her mother Shyamala Gopalan Harris, of how, as a 19-year-old Indian student, she came to America, married Kamala's Jamaican father and instilled in her daughter the values that have marked an incredibly successful — and for many, inspirational — career in public life. Through her story, Vice President Harris framed that elusive notion that draws so many to the US — the American dream. She sought to frame her background and her identity in a way that reflects a diverse nation. Her achievement is certainly a milestone for the Indian diaspora — when Harris was coming of age, a half-Indian woman president would have been difficult to imagine. She spoke of choosing unity over divisiveness and sought to reach out to the White working middle-class — a chunk of this vote is now thought to be rallying behind Donald Trump: "I want you to know, I promise to be a president for all Americans. You can always trust me to put country above party and self."

There is little doubt that Harris has enthused the Democratic party, and energised its base, more deeply perhaps than at any time since Barack Obama's presidential campaigns. Only five weeks ago, when President Joe Biden was the presumptive nominee, it seemed that the Democrats were flailing as they tried to present an ageing incumbent as a serious challenger to Trump. Opinion polls now have Harris and Trump neck-and-neck, with some giving a slight edge to the VP. Harris's attacks on Trump at the DNC, however, undercut her attempts to reach across the aisle. The well-rehearsed denouncing of Trump with familiar rhetoric was predictably well-received among Democrats. But for those who voted for him and those who still support him, there was little that was persuasive, with one exception: On reproductive rights, Harris was clear about the dangers posed to women — physical, emotional and mental — by the overturning of Roe v Wade. It is an issue that affects voters across class divides, race and even politics. The Republicans' and US Supreme Court's curbing of women's bodily autonomy is widely seen as one of the major reasons for the Republicans' poor performance in the mid-terms.

Kamala Harris has a little over two months to convince "undecided" Americans. Her campaign will now enter what her running mate Tim Walz — a former American football high school coach and public school teacher — called the "fourth quarter," with the ball in her hand on offence. Harris's Indian-Jamaican-American story will compete with Trump's, whose pitch has been protectionist globally and revanchist in terms of diversity and immigration. But Trump, too, appeals to those who feel left behind. Walz, in his speech, sought to reach out to a larger audience by framing freedom as standing together as citizens, even with those you disagree with. Going forward, Harris will need to build on his theme.

RATIONALISE THE RATES

Gross GST revenues have been growing, rate structure has stabilised. This is the moment for a reset

MOST STATES DON'T seem to be in favour of changes to the existing five main goods and services tax (GST) rate slabs: 0, 5, 12, 18 and 28 per cent. The general argument being advanced is that since gross GST revenues have been growing — from a monthly average of Rs 94,734 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 1,23,608 crore in 2021-22, Rs 1,50,640 crore in 2022-23, Rs 1,68,187 crore in 2023-24 and Rs 1,84,724 crore in April-July 2024-25 — and the rate structure has "stabilised", why disturb it? It should actually be the other way round. As GST collections are robust, thanks to improved compliance and plugging leakages through measures such as making e-invoicing mandatory for firms with turnover exceeding Rs 5 crore and use of artificial intelligence and machine learning, that is precisely the time for embarking on rate rationalisation. That includes both reducing the number of slabs from five to not more than three, and also reviewing the list of items under each slab.

The incongruity and, probably, unfairness, of the GST rates applicable on several items are well known. Why should GST on cement, a basic construction material, be 28 per cent? The same goes for the 18 per cent GST payable on medical and life insurance policy premiums, which, in Union Minister Nitin Gadkari's own words, amounts to taxing individuals seeking to purchase cover against "life's uncertainties". There's similarly no logic to milk not attracting any GST, but skimmed milk powder being taxed at 5 per cent and butter and ghee at 12 per cent. So while dairies pay no tax on milk procured from farmers, they have to shell out GST on both powder and fat used for reconstitution into milk. A 12 per cent GST on milk fat is also an anomaly when vegetable fat (edible oil) is taxed at 5 per cent. Multiple slabs are clearly a recipe for confusion, adding to the complexity of doing business.

Most states may be averse to rate rationalisation, fearing loss of revenue. But a simplification of the current slabs will also promote economic activity, particularly consumption, that would ultimately lead to higher tax revenues. States should, moreover, explore raising more non-tax revenues through revision of user charges on water, electricity and other utility services, besides resetting stamp duty rates and registration fees along with guidance values on property for better compliance. The Indian economy today needs a fiscal stimulus, in the form of lower indirect taxes, rather than higher government spending.

THE DAY SPHEN DIED

Death of Sydney's beloved gentoo penguin offers lessons in loss — and how to deal with it

IN THE YEAR of Magical Thinking (2005), Joan Didion writes of the year she came home to her with the deaths of her husband and daughter: "Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it." In the gut wrench of bereavement, she tells herself how wild things do not suffer such heartbreaks and seeks comfort in that. Only, it turns out, that they do. At Sydney's Sea Life Aquarium, when Sphen, the gentoo penguin known for his devotion to his same-sex partner, died last week, grief became a song. When Magic, Sphen's younger partner, with whom he had raised two chicks, was brought to say his final goodbye, he broke out in what could only be described as a dirge.

Sphen and Magic had spent six years together but grief seems to be an emotion that transcends sentience. Elephants have been known to grieve the loss of their partners, parents and cubs; bald eagles and black vultures mate for life; dogs remain emblematic of a rare kind of fealty to their owners — for nine years until his own death, Hachiko, a Japanese Akita dog, waited at a railway station every evening for his master to return from work. He had never gotten over the loss of his owner, an academic at Toyo Imperial University. But if grief is pervasive across species, there are also lessons in resilience from the animal kingdom.

Dealing with the shock of the untimely death of her father, writer and naturalist Helen McDonald channels her anger and hurt into becoming a falconer. In *His for Hawk* (2014), she writes of the lesson that the fierce and unyielding goshawk teaches her that grief would not allow her to see: "You see that life will become a thing made of holes. Absences. Losses. Things that were there and are no longer. And you realise, too, that you have to grow around and between the gaps, though you can put your hand out to where things were and feel that tense, shining dullness of the space where the memories are."



SUDHEENDRA KULKARNI

A CONFUSED BJP that lacks a majority in Parliament, a weakened Prime Minister who lacks the courage of conviction, and a Congress-led Opposition that lacks a long-term plan for India's inclusive development but only seeks short-term electoral gains have combined to kill a key administrative reform. The lateral entry scheme meant to revitalise a moribund *babudom* is dead. It will be long before a strong and visionary PM arrives on the scene with a resolve to infuse life into it.

Privately, many forward-looking leaders across party lines admit that the country's administrative machinery needs radical reforms, and that the lateral entry scheme is one of them. They will also tell you that to be meaningful, the scheme should be free from the provision of quotas. But the election-winning priorities of parties are so heavily influenced by the warped debate on "social justice" that there are hardly any prominent voices defending a scheme the Modi government introduced only to withdraw it at lightning speed.

The sorry predicament of Modi 3.0 is obvious even before it has completed 100 days. The feeble dissent from coalition partners is enough for it to reverse its steps. The Congress's hypocrisy is also out in the open. In its eagerness to embrace caste politics and a caste-based development model, and a hurried bid to recover lost support base, especially in north India, it is trying to outdo even Kanshi Ram and Chandrashekhar Azad (Raavan). See how stiffly it opposed the lateral entry scheme. Rahul Gandhi slammed it by calling it "privatisation of IAS", forgetting that his own father, grandfather and great-grandfather also invited external non-IAS, non-quota talent into their governments. Bizarrely, his party supported the Bihar Bandh on August 21, which denounced the recent Supreme Court verdict on sub-categorisation of SC/ST quotas. His colleague Siddaramaiah, Karnataka chief minister, has welcomed the verdict as "historic".

Why does India need a certain number of external professionals to join the administration, especially at the middle and senior levels? And why is it necessary to exempt such lateral entry from the provision of reservation? The answer is obvious to all who know the glaring shortcomings in our system of governance at the Centre and in states and municipal corporations. For India to overcome the gigantic challenges in development and

Lateral entry scheme, now withdrawn, prioritises a governance that is necessary to uplift the disadvantaged

Challenges in development and governance are becoming highly complex in the modern world. Therefore, higher echelons of administration require professionals with deep domain knowledge and expertise, rather than generalists like most job-secure IAS officers who hop from one domain to another in relatively short stints with little people-monitored accountability. The traditional public service system does not produce enough of such specialists. Why should public service remain a monopoly of IAS or IFS officers, who, quite often, become an elite 'caste' unto themselves and fiercely resist the entry of external talent?

meet the rising aspirations of its 1.45 billion people, especially those belonging to poor and neglected communities, nothing is more crucial than efficient, responsive and results-oriented governance. Which caste or religion public servants belong to is immaterial. What should matter is whether they are competent, pro-people and can deliver outcomes that benefit the nation as a whole and, particularly, the disadvantaged citizenry.

For example, officers in education, health-care or any of the employment-promoting departments, regardless of their caste or community identity, will contribute more to the cause of social and economic justice if they are highly competent and dedicated. Competence and commitment, which are caste-agnostic, are also imperative in other fields of governance — from justice delivery to scientific research, from rural development to women's empowerment — since everything cumulatively promotes or hinders the holistic development of society, especially those left behind.

There is also a second compelling reason. Challenges in development and governance are becoming highly complex in the modern world. Therefore, higher echelons of administration require professionals with deep domain knowledge and expertise, rather than generalists like most job-secure IAS officers who hop from one domain to another in relatively short stints with little people-monitored accountability. The traditional public service system does not produce enough of such specialists. In contrast, India's burgeoning private sector companies, top-notch universities, research laboratories, think tanks, cultural institutions, media and other civil society institutions have many professionals both competent and eager to offer their services to nation-building. Why should the nation be deprived of this precious resource? Why should public service remain a monopoly of IAS or IFS officers, who, quite often, become an elite 'caste' unto themselves and fiercely resist the entry of external talent?

Some may argue: Let there be lateral entry, but with strict adherence to reservations for SCs, STs and OBCs. This defeats the very reason of the reform. Rahul Gandhi recently posed the wrong question in Parliament by wanting to know how many officers from quota categories were among secretaries to the Government of India. The question to be

debated is different. What contributes more to social and economic justice for SCs, STs, OBCs and other marginalised communities? Is it a small number of elite quota beneficiaries in the higher levels of government service or competent, efficient, accountable and high-quality governance that can benefit millions of people from the very same communities? Sadly, the debate on the lateral entry scheme has been hijacked by quota "Brahmins" at the expense of multitudes who remain victims of poor governance. Their opposition to the creamy-layer concept also shows their exclusionary touch-me-not mindset.

Another question: Should India remain blind to international experience? All rich countries, and many developing countries, offer public service opportunities to highly competent and interested professionals. In the US and China, it is routine for specialists in universities and private sector companies to be called upon to work in government departments, including in foreign service.

No sane person who is wedded to social justice, economic democracy and other constitutional values can be indifferent to the need to ensure a fair reflection of diversity in India's governance structure. But indifference bordering on disrespect for competence and commitment in public service is detrimental to the realisation of these very lofty values.

How can we make lateral entry socially representative without mandatory quotas? We must accelerate efforts to build needed competencies in professionals from less represented sections of society. This requires major and long-neglected reforms in government-run universities, whose low standards are hurting the poor among SCs, STs, OBCs and all other communities. Private sector companies too must come forward to provide ample growth opportunities to talented human resources in these communities.

Above all, government service demands a paramount virtue from all who wish to enter its portals through regular or lateral channels. At work they must "annihilate" their own caste and religious identities, and embrace only one "jati" — of public servants — and only one *dharma* (duty): Service of India and all Indians without any discrimination.

The writer was a close aide to former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee



SURANJALI TANDON

THE INEXPLICABLY LOW rates of tax paid by multinationals stirred a row after the global financial crisis. In response, the G20 mobilised the OECD's technical wherewithal to address some of the concerns. The last decade was dedicated to the cause and the OECD anchored the work of creating a profit-shifting programme. Fifteen action points to ensure transparency in cross-border income reporting and anti-avoidance measures were recommended. The organisation opened its gates to low-income countries to participate on an "equal footing" with its developed peers at the Inclusive Framework (IF). The seat at the table was made available not only because the world was changing and markets mattered, but also because tax competition among developed countries had intensified. They competed to offer low tax hubs while bilaterally negotiating treaties with preferential terms with developing countries.

The bonhomie lasted until countries ran into a messier terrain of redistribution of taxing rights. Questions were raised about when large tech companies should be paying taxes — the country of residence (predominantly US) or markets such as India? To forge consensus, the OECD kept going back to the drawing board to only come up with more complex solutions. More efforts were made to live up to the ideal of inclusivity, officials from developing countries such as Jamaica co-chaired the

WHERE TO TAX A COMPANY

UN framework will find it difficult to resolve issues of cross-border taxation

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IF and many, including from India, voiced their concerns. Yet, this unmythologised process of consensus building began to tire members. Disillusioned countries and regional groups demanded a shift. They proposed it was time for an intergovernmental tax body at the UN.

In a momentous move, 125 countries, including India, voted in favour of a UN global tax convention in 2023. However, 48 countries, including the UK and US, rejected the proposal. Despite resistance from developed countries, the UN proceeded to work on the terms of reference. The final version, released on August 15, was rejected by only eight countries but still included the US and UK. EU countries that initially opposed and remained divided on the agenda, abstained from voting on the final draft of terms of reference.

There is no doubt that the UN is poised to assume prominence in international tax negotiations. However, two aspects will determine its fate. First, time and money have been invested in building institutional frameworks at the OECD that have ensured exchange of information, quick adoption of anti-avoidance measures in treaties and cross-country information sharing. Would it be wise to duplicate this work unless the current system is riddled with flaws — an issue that EU countries have raised? The convention also acknowledges this overlap and recommends that the committee consider synergies. It remains to be seen how this

is managed. Second, economic interests between and within groups of countries will continue to diverge. Forging consensus on cross-border matters can be difficult, especially if the sovereignty of countries in tax policy-making is to be preserved. The iterative revisions to the UN tax convention are material for scope. For example, the language was revised in specific aspects — a shift of focus to tax avoidance and evasion by high-net-worth individuals. It also emphasises sovereignty, while committing to fair allocation of taxing rights and meeting SDGs. The recognition of fair allocation of taxing rights is a shift in international tax thinking, although the concept of fairness remains undefined.

The UN breaks away from the practice at IF by establishing formal processes including that of election of members of the negotiating committee on an equitable basis. Public information on country votes also lends transparency. It allows experts and civil society to identify and engage with the naysayers. A pragmatic approach will include cross-border services including digital services and illicit financial flows. The challenge will be to get acceptance from countries such as the US and UK. It is doubtful that they would adopt the protocols, especially since countries will have the flexibility to sign.

The writer is associate professor, NIPFP



AUGUST 24, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

PROVINCIAL COUNCILS

THE GOVERNMENT WAS willing to consider provincial councils as units of devolution for the entire country. Sri Lankan President Jayewardene said. The district councils in existence will remain intact, but soon, provincial councils will be conceived. The President said the formation of provincial councils as an organic part of the second chamber concept set up by him to the all-party conference called to consider the problem of Sri Lanka Tamil.

CONG POLL PLANNING

ABOUT HALF A dozen cabinet ministers of

Bihar will be told to quit for taking up organisational work as part of the Congress (I) high command's plans to strengthen the party before the forthcoming elections. This became obvious after Bihar Chief Minister Chandrababoo Naidu and his predecessor, Jagannath Mishra, had talks with the central leaders.

ANTULAY'S BAIL PLEA

THE PROSECUTION APPLICATION for cancellation of the former Maharashtra chief minister, A.R. Antulay's bail was rejected by Justice S.N. Khatri at the Bombay High Court. Giving his ruling, Justice Khatri said it could not be conclusively said that the accused had in-

dulged in tampering with the government files relating to cement transactions during his tenure as chief minister.

NTR'S DISILLUSIONMENT

THE BATTLE OF Andhra Pradesh must be won before any further talks of opposition party unity at the national level N.T. Rama Rao, the Telugu Desam party leader told ENS just before departing for Hyderabad. Rama Rao's health seems to have improved much since his arrival in Delhi. He, however, appeared to be disillusioned about the Centre and did not expect either the recall of the Governor or the dismissal of the Bhaskara Rao Ministry.

FIRST COLUMN

THE ESSENCE OF BEING: BEYOND BODY AND MIND

The soul is envisioned as pure and tranquil, the mind remains latent and unmanifest.



RAJYOGI BRAHIMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

It is now becoming something of a cliché in various circles of modern life—from religion to psychology to holistic medicine—to use the phrase “body-mind-soul” or “body-mind-spirit” when referring to our totality as human beings. So, what do we exactly mean when we ask, What is the body? What is the mind? What is the soul? and What is the spirit? It is often said that the real self is behind the mind or intellect. It is also said that we can experience and know the self when we go beyond the mind, which is like a sheath of the soul.

This is truly said, but it means something different than what is generally understood because to experience or perceive the soul, we do not have to cross the mind which is considered to be a subtle form of matter. No! Instead, we have to calm the ripples of the mind, stop it from being agitated by the outer world, and check its outward tendency. From a spiritual perspective, it should be understood that when the soul is in the soul-world, it is pure, calm, tranquil, and above all bondages or attributes.

There, the mind is unmanifest, and its abilities of volition, action, desire, understanding, ascertainment, etc., are not at play but at rest—not emerged but latent and merged. While in the soul-world, the soul is pinned, so to say, only on one thought, one consciousness, one feeling, one understanding, viz—‘I am a Soul, I am a Soul, I am a Soul’. That is—all nothing more. The turbulence, the vagrancy, the sportiveness of the mind is at rest, or you may say that, in a sense, it is in deep sleep. Therefore, when it is said that “if we want to experience the peace and tranquility



of the soul or have to know the self, we will have to go beyond the intellect and the mind,” it does not mean that we will penetrate, percolate through, tear away, or cross over to a material form as the mind is understood to be. No! It means that to know ourselves, we will have to concentrate our mind on the maxim: ‘I am a soul, a child of the Supreme Soul.’

We will have to make our intellect and mind one-pointed and disposed to understand the Self alone. We will have to lay all our memories, thoughts, feelings, etc., to rest. This is what would be going beyond the mind. For this, there are so many methods that have been advocated, demonstrated, advised, and laid down by various spiritual and religious teachers. However, the all-knowing Almighty has offered His supreme advice that we should control the mind using the intellect. This means that we have to know the Self, the Supreme, etc., and using that, know the Self to calm ourselves. He has sermonized that it can be best done by pinning the mind on the name, form, attributes, and relation of the Supreme with the soul.

His sermon is, “Marimna Bhav,” i.e., concentrate your mind on me, your love, your faith in me. And I assure you that I will bless you with supreme sanctity, peace, and bliss, and you will attain me. I will purge you of all sins, rest assured. If we act as HE says, all our inner conflict will end, and we will work only as His divine instrument. By aligning ourselves with the Supreme, our mind will cease its endless wandering, and we will find ourselves centred and at peace. We will then be able to adjust ourselves easily and quickly in any situation. Having been freed from other psychological memories, except that of the Supreme and our duty, our energy potential will find no resistance and will be free for full performance. We will thus be able to attain excellence and experience peace and tranquility without putting in much effort. This state of effortless being is what every soul seeks, whether knowingly or unknowingly. The Supreme guides us to this state of fulfillment, away from the darkness of ignorance. Now, it's up to us whether to listen to the Almighty or keep wandering in the darkness of ignorance.

(The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist; views are personal)

Reject calls for extraditing Sheikh Hasina

India must stand firm in its refusal to hand over a leader who has been a steadfast ally, particularly when such demands come from factions with anti-India sentiment



HIARANMAY KARLEKAR

India must not pay the slightest heed to the demand by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's secretary-general, Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, to extradite Sheikh Hasina to his country. From reports in Indian newspapers, he seems to have cited two grounds, both utterly laughable, for his demand. The first is that she should stand trial for the murder and other charges levelled against her. The question is: will she receive a fair trial under the conditions now prevailing in Bangladesh? The matter is important. Even if the charges levelled against her are true, and she has done terrible things, she has an inalienable right to a fair trial.

This, she will not get with large mobs literally hating for her blood, statues of her father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the architect of the country's emergence from East Pakistan to sovereign Bangladesh, are being pulled down, the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum of 32 Dhanmondi, Dhaka, his erstwhile residence, ransacked and burnt, and the Liberation War Museum at Suhrawardy Udyan Dhaka, razed to the ground.

Clearly, a section of people is trying to take advantage of the situation created by the Anti-Discrimination Students' Movement (ADSM), to target the symbols of Bangladesh's liberation struggle. Undoing the country's independence and its re-unification with Pakistan is, of course, out of the question. But cultivating closer ties with Pakistan, pursuing a stridently hostile policy towards India, which such elements have never ceased hating for playing a decisive role in Bangladesh's independence by routing Pakistan in the 1971 war, and replacing Bangladesh's secular, democratic polity by one practicing fundamentalist Islam, has been a part of the agenda of the country's fundamentalist Islamist groups.

It is no secret that the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, recently re-incarnated as Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJeI), its students' organization, Bangladesh Islami Chhatra Sangha (BICS)—which was Islami Chhatra Sangha (ICS) in 1971—and allied organizations like al-Bashir, al-Hind, Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams, and Shanti Committee, had sided with Pakistan and committed despicable war crimes during the liberation war of 1971. A number of them have been punished, including some who have been executed, by the International Crimes Tribunal set by the Bangladesh Government in 2009 by an amendment to the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act, 1973, to investigate and prosecute personnel of the Pakistan Army and BJeI, Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams, and Shanti Committee, accused of committing genocide during the 1971 liberation war.

The BJeI and the BICS, which have close links with Islamist terrorist organisations like Ansar al-Islam, linked to Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), clearly joined the ADSM to further their own agenda, which is transferring a secular and democratic Bangladesh into an Islamic emirate. To do this, they must eliminate from the political scene not only the Awami League and its leaders, particularly Sheikh Hasina, but all secular, democratic and humanist civil society organisations and leaders.



GIVEN THAT THE AWAMI LEAGUE HAS BEEN REDUCED TO SUCH STRAITS THAT IT COULD NOT EVEN OBSERVE THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE GRENADE ATTACKS ON AUGUST 21, 2004, IT COULD HARDLY BE IN A POSITION TO CONSPIRE TO DEFEAT THE STUDENTS' UPSURGE

Revealingly, circulating in Bangladesh in the wake of Sheikh Hasina's ouster is a list of intellectuals, scholars, lawyers, academics, human rights social activists, who its shadowy authors want to “see.” Included in the list of 50 or more were the Professor Abul Barakat (a well-known economist who had exposed the sources of the BJeI's phenomenal wealth), Rana Dasgupta (general secretary of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council), AAMS Arefin Siddique, (former vice-chancellor, Dhaka University), and Professor Sadeka Halim (vice-chancellor, Jagannath University) and a number of journalists and film personalities. In these circumstances, Sheikh Hasina's life will be in danger if she is extradited to Bangladesh; nor can she be assured of a fair trial, particularly given the fact that judges will either be under tremendous pressure or will be pre-disposed to convict her as they have been appointed by the Interim Government and are hostile to her.

The second ground that, according to the reports, Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir has cited for Sheikh Hasina's extradition, is that the Awami League and she were conspiring in New Delhi to falsify (sic) the victory that students and other citizens of Bangladesh have achieved. Nothing could be more ludicrous. Most Awami League leaders are in Bangladesh, busy defending themselves in courts

against charges brought against them, or in hiding. A number of them have been lynched. The homes and business establishments of many of them have been destroyed and set aflame.

In fact, the Awami League has been reduced to such straits that, unlike in the earlier years, it could not stage an event to observe the anniversary of the grenade attack on an Awami League rally in Dhaka on August 21, 2004, to protest against increasing terrorist attacks on its cadres and leaders. Perpetrated by the terrorist outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HUJIB), it left at least 24 persons dead and over 300 injured. Among the wounded was Sheikh Hasina, whose hearing has been permanently impaired. Ivy Rahman, secretary of the Awami League's women's affairs wing and wife of its general-secretary, Zillur Rahman, who subsequently became Bangladesh's president, was also seriously hurt. She later died later in hospital.

Given that the Awami League has been reduced to such straits that it could not even observe the anniversary of the grenade attacks on August 21, 2004, it could hardly be in a position to conspire to defeat the students' upsurge. It may well be argued that Sheikh Hasina needs to be present in courts to stand trial and face cross-examination to establish the veracity of the charges levelled against her, or examine the complexity of others involved.

For that, the interim government or its successor must establish that a prima facie case exists against her and then request India to allow an emissary to question her in any facility that New Delhi may provide. Meanwhile, there can be no question of extraditing her. The BNP-BJeI coalition government, in office from 2001 to 2006 with Begum Khaleda Zia as prime minister, made no bones about its hostility to India. Indeed, except those headed by Sheikh Hasina, all governments of Bangladesh since the murder of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, have been hostile to India and pro-Pakistan.

To cite one example, under them, Bangladesh provided sanctuary, assistance and training to northeast India's secessionist rebel groups. On the other hand, Sheikh Hasina not only closed down their sanctuaries but handed over to India some of the leaders of these secessionist terrorist groups. In fact, India-Bangladesh relations were perhaps more cordial under her than even when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman headed the government in Dhaka. Extraditing Sheikh Hasina would send the message round that even the most loyal friends of India cannot depend on it for support in times of distress. That is not something that New Delhi should want.

(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

Lateral entry in bureaucracy: A double-edged sword of reform and controversy

The implementation of lateral entry has sparked serious concerns about social justice and the representation of marginalised groups in the Indian bureaucracy

The introduction of lateral appointments in India's bureaucracy has sparked intense debate, particularly due to the absence of reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). The issue gained traction with a recent UPS advertisement for 45 senior positions, which did not include the constitutionally mandated quotas, raising concerns about social justice and the representation of disadvantaged groups in high-level government roles.



K S TOMAR

However, the lack of provisions for reservations in this system has led to widespread criticism. Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition, accused the NDA government of undermining the Constitution by excluding reservations from these appointments. He argued that this move was a direct attack on social justice, sidelining the underprivileged and diluting their representation in the

higher echelons of bureaucracy. In response, Arjun Meghwal pointed out the Congress's past practices, highlighting the appointments of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as Finance Secretary in 1971 and Montek Ahluwalia as Planning Commission Chairman without transparent procedures. Since the inception of the lateral entry system in 2018, the government has received 6,077 applications, resulting in the appointment of 63 individuals to senior positions across various ministries, with approximately 35 from the private sector. While these appointments aim to bring in expertise and fresh perspectives, the exclusion of reservations has overshadowed the intended benefits. The backlog of vacancies

in proportion to these 63 officials can only be addressed if the government creates new posts specifically for candidates from SC, ST, OBC, and EWS categories. The delay in amending recruitment rules has already caused significant harm, as many eligible candidates may have crossed the age limit. The introduction of lateral appointments has been met with mixed reactions within the bureaucracy. While it brings in specialized knowledge and fresh perspectives, it also poses several risks to the traditional bureaucratic structure. Demoralization of Bureaucracy: Traditional bureaucrats, who have risen through the ranks, may feel demoralized seeing lateral entrants appointed to senior positions without undergoing the rigorous training and years of service they have endured. This could lead to a perception that meritocracy is being



undermined and create uncertainty regarding career progression. Integration Challenges: Lateral entrants may struggle to integrate into the established bureaucratic culture, leading to friction with traditional bureaucrats. 3rd. Potential Conflicts of Interest: Lateral entrants from the private sector may face conflicts of interest, where their decisions could be influenced by their previous affiliations. This raises concerns about policy bias and the potential prioritization of private sector interests over the public good. Accountability and Transparency Issues: Unlike career bureaucrats, lateral entrants might not undergo the same level of public scrutiny

and evaluation, leading to concerns about transparency in decision-making. Their lack of deep institutional knowledge could also affect the quality of their decisions, especially in complex policy areas. Impact on Administrative Cohesion: The introduction of lateral entrants at senior levels could fragment authority within the bureaucracy, leading to inefficiencies and delays. Positive Takeaways: Lateral entry into senior government positions offers several benefits. Expertise Infusion: Brings specialized knowledge from various sectors, enhancing policy-making. Diverse Perspectives: Introduces new viewpoints, fostering innovative solutions.

Increased Efficiency: Private sector professionals bring a focus on performance and efficiency. Skill Gap Bridging: Addresses deficiencies in areas like technology and finance. Meritocracy Promotion: Emphasizes skills over seniority, potentially improving leadership quality. Governance Flexibility: Allows for quick adaptation to new challenges with experienced professionals. Public-Private Collaboration: Strengthens ties between government and private sectors. (Writer has been ex chairperson of Standing Committee of All State Public service Commissions in India and former chairman of HP Public Service Commission; views are personal)