



## Caste in jail

Time for State governments to end systemic discrimination in prisons

The most notable aspect of the Supreme Court ruling prohibiting caste-based discrimination in the treatment of prisoners is that it required a judgment from the highest court to end colonial practices and systems in prisons. While the Court has dealt elaborately with specific rules in the jail manuals of various States and the way in which caste-based hierarchy plays a role in allocation of duties, classification of prisoners, and the treatment of certain social groups as “habitual offenders”, it is quite remarkable that prison authorities and State governments had done so little about these aspects since independence. It is as if the prison system has been out of the reach of the core philosophy of the Constitution: the ushering in of an equal society, the ending of all forms of discrimination, the prohibition of untouchability in any form, and the abolition of forced labour and exploitation. Responding to journalist Sukanya Shantha's writ petition, the Court has analysed the controversial rules and practices in jails in the backdrop of these constitutional objectives. It has ruled such provisions unconstitutional, and directed the revision of prison manuals within three months. Tracing the history of such rules and practices, the Court has noted, with much justification: “In line with their overall approach, the colonial administrators linked caste with prison administration of labour, food, and treatment of prisoners.”

Not only were menial work and supposedly polluting occupations allocated to prisoners from communities placed lower in the caste hierarchy, some were expected to carry out their “hereditary trades” within prisons, the Court found. On the other hand, the caste privileges of a few placed higher were preserved. Few can disagree with the observation that “the notion that an occupation is considered as ‘degrading or menial’ is an aspect of the caste system and untouchability.” The provision that food must be cooked by prisoners from a “suitable caste” and rules that referred to those from the “scavenger class” being assigned tasks such as manual scavenging, sweeping, and cleaning violated the constitutional prohibition against untouchability. Distribution of labour cannot be solely based on birth. Such rules violate the right to dignity and the right against forced labour and exploitation. The Court has also favoured doing away with vague definitions of ‘habitual offenders’, as they seem to ascribe criminal tendencies to whole tribes, even though the idea of notifying ‘criminal tribes’ has long been given up. It is time for State governments to respond to the verdict and revisit their laws and regulations related to prison administration and put an end to systemic discrimination in an institution that may treat any form of resistance as indiscipline.

## The other monsoon

Better modelling of the impact of northeast monsoon is essential

India's southwest monsoon has ended on an optimistic note, with 8% more rain than anticipated. Reassuringly, the rainfall forecast by the India Meteorological Department (IMD), particularly since July, was accurate. Monsoon clouds continue to prevail over the country but given the centrality of rainfall to the Indian economy, focus has already shifted to the ‘other monsoon’, the northeast monsoon. It is named so because of the direction in which the winds exit from the land mass into the sea. Following the withdrawal of the southwest monsoon in mid-October, the northeast monsoon is characterised by a reversal of winds that brings rain to parts of coastal Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and parts of southern Karnataka. For Tamil Nadu, the northeast monsoon is the main source of rainfall. The northeast monsoon brings in only about 11% of India's annual rainfall.

The IMD has forecast that this year's post-monsoon rainfall is likely to be ‘above normal’ or about 12% over the historical average. Because of its limited spread and quantity, the northeast monsoon does not get as much attention as the southwest monsoon. However, it significantly affects the productivity of rice and maize in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Records show that in years of deficiency, there was a considerable decrease in agricultural production in the region. The northeast monsoon rainfall, averaged over the five subdivisions where it is predominant, has a variation of almost 25%, exceeding that of the southwest monsoon rainfall (10%). This translates into years of massive deluge followed by dry spells. In 2015, Chennai experienced a deluge during the northeast monsoon, resulting in significant loss of life and property. In 2019, the city faced severe water shortage. If this year's forecast holds, it will be the second consecutive year of a normal northeast monsoon. Expectations are high that a La Nina, or cooling of the equatorial central Pacific, will support this. However, most global models have struggled to forecast the timing of La Nina this year. Thanks to improved forecast systems, the northeast monsoon is less neglected than before. Nevertheless, more focus is needed on modelling its impact regarding urban flooding. Climate change uncertainty makes such prognosis essential, and disaster management agencies in States must develop credible strategies to incorporate these buffers into budgets.

On July 30, two villages, Mundakkai and Chooralmala, in the Wayanad district of Kerala, were hit by landslides. On October 4, while noting that the disaster ranked among the deadliest in India, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that 231 people had died and 41 remained missing. The catastrophic event has once again exposed our helplessness in the face of nature's fury. At the same time, it has raised questions about our approach to disaster management not only in the area of Wayanad that was affected this time and that has suffered a few deadly landslides over the last four decades, but for the State as a whole.

### No longer relatively disaster-free

With the sea to its west and the Western Ghats to its east, Kerala used to be considered a relatively disaster-free zone. Its development activities have taken place on this premise. Settlements are distributed throughout the State, from the coastline to the steep hill slopes. Kerala is perhaps the only State where human settlements have sprung up along the coastal line. Though the forest boundary is frozen, there are encroachments by the people and for development projects. Along with settlements, roads and other infrastructure have been built with complete disregard for natural drainage and slope stability. The average population density of the parts of the Western Ghats in Kerala is well above the all-India average.

The natural advantage of being relatively disaster-free seems to be waning. In the last few decades, the intensity and frequency of disasters have increased. Kerala has three distinct geographic zones, and all three are facing disasters, especially floods and landslides. Coastal erosion, a regular phenomenon, has affected more than 250 kilometres of the total coastal length of 590 km in the State. Besides, sea surge has affected different parts of the coast. The lowlands and midlands suffer from floods. Parts of the lowlands surrounding the Vembanad lake get inundated during every monsoon. The World



REUTERS



**Srikumar Chattopadhyay**

Scientist (retired),  
Centre for Earth  
Science Studies,  
Thiruvananthapuram



**K. Soman**

Scientist (retired),  
Centre for Earth  
Science Studies,  
Thiruvananthapuram

Once landslide susceptibility maps surrounding population centres are ready, monitoring the triggering mechanism would ensure that timely warnings are provided

Meteorological Organization described the Kerala floods of 2018 as the ‘floods of the century’ and attributed the disaster to climate change. Landslides in the Western Ghats are also becoming regular during every monsoon.

### Landslide inventory map needed

Wayanad, located to the east of the Western Ghats bordering the Mysore plateau, is characterised by deep gorges and ravines. Like the river Sharavati, the Chaliyar also originates in the eastern side of the Western Ghats. Both these rivers cut across the mountain range and debouch into the Arabian Sea, in spite of the easterly tilt of the Wayanad-Mysore plateaus. This can be attributed to the existence of tectonic factors. A spatial correlation exists between tremors and landslides. Incidences of fractures/cracks have been reported from Wayanad and Idukki post landslides. Tremors were felt in parts of Wayanad after the July landslide as well. Recurring incidences of landslides and the huge human and economic losses call for scientific re-appraisal of the causative factors, which are now being simplified and confined to parameters such as slope, soil thickness, rainfall intensity and duration, and land use change. The ongoing debates show that there is a gap in understanding the incidence of landslides in this region.

Global research in this field calls for a nuanced approach. We need a landslide inventory map of each region/area. To finalise zones susceptible to landslides, we can prepare a landslide susceptibility map factoring in the geological set up (lithology, structure and tectonics, rock composition, physico-mechanical properties), slope, soil characteristics, hydrologic parameters, drainage and infiltration, vegetation cover, human activities such as mining and quarrying, slope alteration, and agricultural activities. Once such maps surrounding population centres are ready, monitoring the triggering mechanism (rainfall or tremors in the case of Kerala) would ensure that timely warnings of landslides are provided, and lives saved. The State and trained local self-help groups can do this together.

Due to rapid warming of the Arabian Sea, there is an increased risk of extreme weather and climate events, such as floods, heat waves, and cyclones. The heat content of the Indian Ocean has risen rapidly since the 2000s. There has been an anomalous increase of 1.2°C in summer sea surface temperatures over the last 100 years in the generally cool western Indian Ocean (Arabian Sea). This has created an environment conducive for cyclogenesis (development or strengthening of cyclonic circulation in the atmosphere) in the Arabian Sea. The impact of these changes is being felt on Kerala. In 2017, Cyclone Ockhi hit the State. It was the most severe cyclonic storm to affect Kerala in recent memory.

On the whole, the ‘safe operating space’, a term coined by Johan Rockstrom and the group at the Stockholm Resilience Centre in the case of global environmental change, is shrinking in Kerala. The occurrence of staggered events of floods and landslides, and simultaneous landslides on either side of the hill ranges, as in Wayanad and Vilangad (Kozhikode district) this time, and at Puthumala (Wayanad district) and Kavalappara (Malappuram district) in 2019, also warrant elucidation.

### A paradigm shift

Under these circumstances, there is a need for a paradigm shift in disaster management practices, which are mostly reactive, top-down, and revolve around rescue, relief, and rehabilitation. Globally, this has given way to a more proactive and comprehensive approach of addressing all aspects of a disaster cycle, such as preparedness, resilience, risk reduction, mitigation, reconstruction, recovery, response, and relief. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction provides guidelines for disaster risk reduction. It recognises the primary role of the State in disaster risk reduction but says that the State should share this responsibility with other stakeholders including local governments, the private sector, and communities. We need to understand the risk of disaster, strengthen disaster risk governance to manage the risk of disaster; invest in disaster risk reduction for resilience; and enhance disaster preparedness for effective response to ‘build back better’.

First, Kerala needs to work out disaster risk zones based on multiple criteria covering both physical and social components within a social ecological frame with the help of subject experts and generate a permanent database. As landslides and floods follow watershed boundaries, the disaster risk zones must be translated according to the watersheds/river basins. Second, Kerala needs the people's participation in preparing disaster risk maps. Given its experience in the People's Plan Campaign, it is important for Kerala to introduce a community-based disaster risk management in which at-risk communities are actively engaged in identifying, analysing, planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating disaster risk reduction initiatives. This would provide opportunities for strengthening communication, discussion, and learning within the community and between the community and the local and Central government. It would also ensure a bottom-up approach, help reduce tension and potential conflicts and pave the way to integrate disaster risk management in local level development. A quadruple helix model involving community and social organisations, academia/research institutes, the government, and business and industry may be useful.

## In Gaza, it is a battle for survival

On February 10, 2024, Abdul was hoping to find food for his family amid the devastation in northern Gaza. “I wanted to surprise my mum with some salt or flour,” he recounted later to my colleagues. But as the 15-year-old scoured abandoned homes, he was grievously injured during an Israeli airstrike. His leg shattered, Abdul crawled for more than an hour through the chaos, missiles falling around him. Alone and terrified, his cries for help went unanswered until someone finally carried his fragile wounded body to the nearest functioning hospital. Even there, his suffering did not end. With hospitals overwhelmed with casualties and critical supplies lacking, doctors were forced to perform surgery on Abdul without anaesthesia.

After receiving emergency surgery in Gaza, Abdul was one of the very few Palestinian patients who was allowed to be evacuated from the war zone for medical reasons: first to Egypt, and then to a reconstructive surgery hospital of MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders) in Amman, Jordan. Seven months later, he is learning to walk again with crutches.

Unfortunately, Abdul's story is just one among thousands. More than 10 children per day on average lost one or both legs during the first three months of Israel's assault on Gaza, according to Save the Children. As devastating and distressing as Abdul's story is, it is one of the very few stories with a hopeful ending: he is alive and getting access to treatment.

### The grim reality in Gaza

Israel's blockade, which has suffocated Gaza for 16 years, has turned into an outright nightmare during the past 12 months. Since October 2023, more than 41,000 people have been killed, and



**Farhat Mantoo**

Executive Director at  
Médecins Sans  
Frontières  
(MSF)/Doctors  
Without Borders,  
South Asia

Essential supplies, such as oxygen concentrators, surgical equipment, and generators, have been delayed or blocked by Israeli authorities repeatedly

according to the World Health Organization, an estimated 12,000 are in desperate need of medical evacuation. Yet, only 41% of medical evacuation requests have been approved by Israel. This is not just a logistical challenge; it is a denial of the basic human right to healthcare. For those lucky enough to be evacuated, as Abdul was, survival often means months of painful recovery – a luxury many still trapped in Gaza cannot afford. Thousands of displaced people are unable to access medical care due to destroyed health facilities, restricted movement, and the extremely dangerous conditions on the ground.

We have borne witness to the devastation this violence has wrought on Gaza's health infrastructure. Of Gaza's 36 hospitals, 17 are now out of service. Over 500 attacks have targeted healthcare facilities, crippling the capacity to provide essential care. Our teams have watched patients die on hospital floors as overwhelmed staff struggle to cope with the flood of the wounded. Essential supplies, such as oxygen concentrators for anaesthesia, vital surgical equipment, and generators, have been delayed or blocked by Israeli authorities repeatedly. Without these vital resources, life-saving surgeries have become nearly impossible, leading to thousands of otherwise preventable deaths.

### Psychological wounds

The war's toll extends beyond physical injuries – it has inflicted deep psychological wounds on Gaza's population. Children like Abdul and Karam, a 17-year-old who suffered severe burns in an airstrike that killed 13 members of his family, are physically and emotionally scarred. According to UNICEF, over one million children in Gaza now need urgent mental health and

psychosocial support. Even as aid and healthcare workers tirelessly support these children, the trauma of living through constant bombardment, witnessing death, destruction, and enduring displacement will affect them for decades to come, if they are fortunate enough to survive the brutality of the aggressions.

### Violation of international humanitarian law

The ongoing violence and the Israeli blockade represent a gross violation of international humanitarian law, its principles completely disregarded and violated. An immediate and sustained ceasefire is the only viable solution to meet Gaza's overwhelming medical and humanitarian needs. Without this, more lives will be lost, and this war will leave yet another indelible stain on our collective conscience.

All parties need to guarantee safe passage for humanitarian assistance inside Gaza, which requires the opening of essential land borders, including the Rafah crossing. Equally crucially, there should be immediate medical evacuation of those whose lives depend on it, along with their caregivers. Safe, voluntary, and dignified return to Gaza for all patients and their caregivers must be ensured.

Abdul's story is not just a statistic – it is a harrowing reminder of the real human cost of this war. No child should have to crawl through the rubble for survival, yet thousands of Palestinian children face this unimaginable horror. The suffering in Gaza needs to end. Governments must act now to secure a ceasefire, ensuring displaced populations have access to the healthcare they desperately need to survive and rebuild their lives. This is not just a humanitarian issue. It is a global moral imperative.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A wake-up call

It is shocking that caste-based discrimination was institutionalised for so long within places meant for rehabilitation (“Caste bias, segregation in prisons violate dignity: SC”, October 4). The Supreme Court's order sets a precedent for eliminating systemic discrimination. This ruling not only upholds constitutional values, but also highlights the importance of reforming our prison systems to ensure

humane treatment for all prisoners, regardless of caste or background.

**Avni**  
Kurukshetra

### Irresponsible remarks

It is highly irresponsible for the U.S. President to make such comments (“Biden says ‘discussing’ possible Israeli strikes on Iran oil facilities”, Oct. 4). It is because of the U.S.'s firm support that Israel is pounding Gaza and now Lebanon. Instead of finding

a solution and condemning Israel, the U.S. is adding fuel to the fire. Meanwhile, the United Nations is nowhere to be found.

**V. Ganapathy Subramanian**  
Nagercoil

### The ranking race

While it is true that an obsession with anything is harmful, ranking does help students know the true picture of a university or institution, provided that the rank has been given by a credible institution (“An

obsession with ranking is harming India's universities”, Oct. 4). We should not have a problem with the system of ranking, but with bodies that tweak rules or provide misguided rankings. The parameters for ranking should include the share of students who got placed, the quality of research, the qualifications of the faculty, the quality of physical amenities such as the hostel and canteen, etc. **Prafula Kumar Rai**  
Azamgarh

As the philosopher Epictetus once said, “If you are ever tempted to look for outside approval, realise that you have compromised your integrity. If you need a witness, be your own”.

**A. Subbain**  
Thanjavur

### Internship scheme

India Inc. has been complaining for years about the non-employability of our graduates due to the poor quality of education. Now, young graduates will

be able to gain practical business exposure and bridge the gap between academic learning and industry requirements (“Internships to bridge job market-skills gap; pilot project takes off”, Oct. 4).

**Bal Govind**  
Noida



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# GROUND ZERO



Forensic experts collect evidence from a container truck at Veppadai in Tamil Nadu's Namakkal district. The truck was allegedly used by the robbers who targeted ATMs in Kerala. E. LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

## The pre-dawn heists in Kerala

Seven men from Haryana allegedly broke into three ATMs in Kerala's Thrissur area and stole ₹67 lakh. They were chased across the border into Tamil Nadu, where the driver was killed and the rest taken into custody. The capture shows the communication and cooperation between the two States and within districts as well, finds R. Sivaraman

It was 2:35 a.m. on September 27 when the control room of the Thrissur rural police station received an alert from the central control room of the local State Bank of India (SBI) branch. There had been a break-in at the bank's ATM kiosk at Mapranam in Irinjalakuda town, approximately 21 kilometres from Thrissur city, Kerala. A team jumped into the police four-wheeler, its blue light flashing, and reached the spot within 10 minutes. They examined the CCTV footage, and initiated a vehicle check across roads in the district.

Exactly an hour after the first break-in, a second SBI ATM kiosk at Naikkanal, about 20 km from Mapranam, in Thrissur East, was broken into. A third break-in occurred at Kolazhy village, around 6 km from Naikkanal, within the Viyur police station limits, at 4:20 a.m. Both these fell within the Thrissur city police limits.

Police say they received the alert about the first robbery 25 minutes after it occurred, the second robbery only 50 minutes after, and the third 20 minutes after. It was later revealed that over ₹33 lakh was stolen from the first ATM, over ₹25 lakh from the second, and ₹9 lakh from the third. Midhun K.P., Station House Officer at Viyyur, who was left in charge that night, rushed to the ATM kiosks at Naikkanal and Kolazhy to inspect the crime scenes.

By around 5:30 a.m., the police had identified the presence of a white mid-size SUV without a number plate at all three crime scenes, thanks to the CCTV footage. The initial investigation began based on this lead. R. Ilango, District Police Chief (Thrissur City), passed on this information to his counterparts in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, which proved crucial.

Further examination revealed that the ATM cameras had been spray-painted before the break-in happened. Smoke at the crime scenes suggested the robbers had used a gas cutter.

Ilango says the police began to suspect the 'gas cutter gang', known for similar operations in Mewat, Haryana. "They had also carried out a similar operation in Kannur in 2021, when three ATMs were robbed in a span of about 45 minutes. Their modus operandi involved using container trucks to escape with the loot," says Ilango, who had been the Superintendent of Police in Kannur at the time.

Evidence later showed that the container had passed through the Panniyankara toll plaza in Pa-

He has never been up to anything productive in his life. After what he has done, I want to disown him

**ABDUL SUBAN**  
Father of Showkeen, one of the accused

lakkad district, Kerala, about 70 km from Thrissur, before entering Tamil Nadu. Meanwhile, Tamil Nadu police revealed that similar ATM break-ins had occurred in Krishnagiri district, just a week earlier.

As the day broke on September 27, the police had gathered information about the potential gangs involved, their modus operandi, and their likely escape route. Ilango notes, "They specifically target SBI ATMs because those are never short on cash." Police intelligence also revealed that these gangs often struck deals with drivers of commercial container trucks to conceal the vehicles used in burglaries. These trucks would be returning empty to the northern parts of the country after unloading consignments.

### Over the border from Kerala to TN

S. Rajesh Kannan, Superintendent of Police, Namakkal district, says he received a call from the Thrissur police at 5:40 a.m. "I forwarded the information to our senior officers. I also put it on

our district WhatsApp group, saying that the gang may come on the Komarapalayam and Pallipalayam road (National Highways connecting Kochi and Salem)," he says. Vehicle check points were activated on the national highways and State highways. The police were looking out for a mid-size white car, but also for a container truck.

One of the many police barricades had been erected at a bakery near the Komarapalayam Junction, in Namakkal, about 220 km from Thrissur. Deputy Superintendent of Police P.M. Imayavaramban, who was involved in the operation, says, "The driver slowed down, but when we stopped the vehicle and asked him to open the container, he accelerated and hit the barricade." A chase ensued, with the vehicle heading towards the neighbouring district of Salem. "We alerted the Sankari police in Salem," he adds.

Sankari Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) S. Raja explains that they got a call at 8:30 a.m. "Soon our personnel assembled before the Sankari (Vaikundam) toll plaza and placed barricades to stop the vehicle. But 500 meters before the toll plaza, the truck turned right, again towards the Komarapalayam Road," he says. The truck did this thrice, taking U-turns each time, he adds. The armed police, on 10 bikes and four two-wheelers, chased after it.

On the last lap, the police decided to meet the container truck head-on, and at Pachampalayam near K.R.P. School, the police stopped the patrol vehicle in the middle of the road and also asked a trucker to block the road with them. The container truck driver swerved over the median, entering the ICL factory road and the Sankari-Pallipalayam State Highway. "The public and parents of students also started to chase the vehicle along with the police," says K. Murugesan, Namakkal District Crime Record Bureau (DCRB) DSP and the investigation officer for this case.

### People on the road get involved

P. Sivaraj, a Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation driver, describes the event like a cinema chase. He had driven his bike to Sankari to visit a relative. "I thought the container truck had hit some vehicles and was escaping from the police. So, I immediately chased the truck on my bike, along with the police," he says. The police had blocked the road at the Veppadai four-road junction in Namakkal district, he says.

The driver turned the vehicle into an Indian Oil petrol bunk, about 300 meters from the Veppadai police station, at around 9:05 a.m. "There, the truck stopped. I went near the vehicle, but the driver suddenly moved the truck, and it hit my bike. Thankfully I jumped and saved my life," Sivaraj says.

A. Prakasam, 38, runs a grocery shop at Veppadai that overlooks the petrol bunk. He says he heard loud noises and came out to find the police chasing the vehicle. "Fortunately, there were only a few vehicles at the bunk. Usually, it is very busy. After hitting two bikes and a car, the truck went towards Sankari. All this happened in a couple of minutes," he says. The other bike rider fell on the road but got up just in time, or he would have been under the wheels of the truck, he says.

At Sanniyasipatti, people hurled stones at the truck in a frantic effort to stop it. Finally, when the truck's windscreen shattered, the driver stopped, say police. "We surrounded the truck, securing four people in the cabin. The driver, who was the fifth, said two more people were inside the container. We thought they might have



They had also carried out a similar operation in Kannur in 2021, when three ATMs were robbed in a span of about 45 minutes. Their modus operandi involved using container trucks to escape with the loot

**ILANGO**  
District Police Chief (Thrissur City)

guns and if we opened the container in the presence of the public, it would be a safety risk. So, we asked the driver to move the vehicle to the Veppadai police station." The chase had lasted an hour. But there was more.

On their way to the police station, near Thoppukadu in Paatharai panchayat, the inspector accompanying the driver allegedly heard noises from within, and so asked him to open the container door. The police say one person jumped from the vehicle with a bag, while the driver attacked the inspector. The two men allegedly ran towards the field flanking the road. However, the other person inside the container was caught.

When two members of the police force chased after them, one of the men used a sharp hook to attack one of them, police say. To protect his teammate, the inspector allegedly fired two rounds from his service revolver, injuring the suspect, who was later identified as 37-year-old Jumanuddin from Andhrola village, in Palwal district of Haryana.

The inspector claims he warned the man who had the bag, but he tried to get away, and two more rounds were fired. The two were taken to the Government Hospital, Pallipalayam, in a private ambulance. Jumanuddin, the driver, was declared dead on arrival and Mohammad Azru alias Azar Ali, 30, from Bisru village in Nuh district, went through an operation to amputate his leg.

The spot where the killing took place at Thoppukadu, about a kilometre from Veppadai police station, is surrounded by lands populated with bushes and trees. There is a dry water channel that saw some of the action.

Director General of Police Shankar Jiwala, who is in the Tamil Nadu police head office, says, "We are asking SBI to give us details of similar cases since the modus operandi is clear." He says this is not the only gang operating in this way, and they have put together a special team for the investigation. "We are also writing to DGPs of different States seeking details of cases of similar nature reported in their States in the last one year."

### Prep before the incident

The police say the investigation revealed the two gang members arrived in Chennai by truck to offload some goods in the city. Three others came by car and two took a flight. They assembled in Chennai about 15 days ago and moved in the truck and the car up to Palakkad. Later they loaded the car into the truck using a ramp.

An officer says, "There was a hole under the body of the truck so that they could jump out and escape easily. If there had been a gap in our chase, they may have escaped easily."

The gang operates between 2 a.m. and 5 a.m. "The gang targeted a particular model of ATM called Presto, which are vulnerable to heists," said Namakkal SP, Rajesh Kannan.

Police officers said these criminals hail from Palwal and Mewat districts in Haryana. "One of the accused men, Akram, had allegedly been involved in seven break-in cases — four in Telangana, where ₹74 lakh was stolen; and three in Telangana, where ₹30 lakh was taken," Kannan says.

### Meanwhile in Haryana

While the police forces in Tamil Nadu and Kerala congratulate each other on the cooperation, in Haryana's Palwal district, a video of the incident went viral. Five of the men were from the district, while two were from Bisru village.

In Andhrola village, where Jumanuddin's body was brought, anger churned. "My brother has been driving commercial vehicles for a decade but never has anyone raised any complaints against him," says Mohammad Mubaraq, adding that he had done the Chennai route in the past, and would do long distance trips at least thrice a month. He says that there were no previous criminal cases against him and that in all probability, the gang who robbed the ATMs had rented his vehicle for transportation.

"When a vehicle is booked, how will the driver know about what is being transported and who had rented it," says Arzida, Jumanuddin's pregnant wife. The family accuses the police officers in Chennai of conducting an 'encounter'. Mubaraq says he will file a case against the wrongful murder of his innocent brother. "He has five children and was the sole breadwinner of his family," he says.

In Lacknagar village, Sayeda, 65, Mubaraq's mother, says he had met Jumanuddin at one of Palwal's driving schools. "He had hired him as the second driver for ₹12,000-₹13,000. Apart from that I know nothing else," Sayeda says.

In Mallai village, Abdul Suban, 70, father of 23-year-old Showkeen, who has been arrested, expressed disdain. "He has never been up to anything productive in his life. After what he has done, I want to disown him," says the father, who works as a truck driver.

Shabeer, 26, a resident of Ghadavali village and one of the accused, had a similar case of attempted robbery of an ATM in Panipat and was out on bail, says his 75-year-old single mother, Jaibhuni. He had been working as a dairy farmer in his uncle's business and had left home telling his family he was going to check rental spaces in the capital to set up dairy stores. The family learnt days later that he was one of the six arrested for robbing ATMs in the south, in Kerala.

With inputs from M.P. Praveen in Kerala, Sabari M. in Salem, and Alisha Dutta in Haryana

sivaraman.raajasekaran@thehindu.co.in



Police personnel brought the accused persons to the Kumarapalayam judicial magistrate court, in Namakkal district. E. LAKSHMI NARAYANAN



the hindu businessline.

SATURDAY - OCTOBER 5, 2024

## Churn in Haryana

BJP defends 10-year rule against resurgent Congress

For the 90-member Haryana Assembly which goes to polls on Saturday, a bipolar contest has emerged between the incumbent BJP and the Congress. Regional parties and alliances — including former Deputy Chief Minister in the BJP government Dushyant Chautala's Jannanayak Janata Party (JJP) which has tied up with Chandrashekhar Azad's Azad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram); the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) which has a tie up with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP); besides the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) — have not really made much headway in this election; it is entirely split between the BJP and the Congress.



The BJP is defending its 10-year rule with a fresh face in Nayab Singh Saini as the Chief Minister, a manoeuvre attempted before the Lok Sabha elections to dilute the rumblings of anti-incumbency associated with former CM Manohar Lal Khattar. Saini carries no baggage and symbolises the BJP's strategy to consolidate the OBC vote which comprises roughly one-third of the electorate in the State. However, it worked only partially in the Lok Sabha elections where, after the sweep of all the 10 parliamentary seats in the 2019 elections, the BJP came down to five seats in this year's general elections.

An important statistic in understanding the ongoing poll battle in Haryana is that when the BJP won 10 Lok Sabha seats in the 2019 general elections, it had led in a staggering 79 Assembly segments out of the total 90. But just five months later, during the 2019 assembly polls, this tally came down and the BJP could secure only 40 seats, six short of the majority mark. It made up the shortfall by tying up with the JJP which won 10 seats in the 2019 Assembly polls. This time, in the Lok Sabha polls, the BJP won five parliamentary seats and led in 42 Assembly segments.

The situation on the ground is challenging for the ruling party. There are three dominant issues in the Haryana elections — Kisan (farmer), Jawan (soldier) and *pehelwan* (wrestlers). The State was the epicentre of the year-long farmers' movement in 2020-21 and another wave recently when the farmers gathered at the Shambhu border between Punjab and Haryana, demanding legalised MSP. Manohar Lal Khattar described them as "fake" farmers out to destabilise the BJP, a remark that has hurt sentiments in Haryana. The Agniveer scheme is also a burning topic in a State which has just over 2 per cent of India's population but comprises a major chunk of the Army's ground force. The scheme is unpopular among the youth which looks at the Army as a provider of permanent jobs. Finally, there is much heartburn in the State against the BJP's inaction vis-a-vis its former MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh who, as president of the Wrestling Federation of India, was accused by women wrestlers of sexual harassment. The BJP is feeling the heat in Haryana — notwithstanding the infighting in Congress.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH

From deposits to mutual funds:  
The big picture

**MONEY MATTERS.** A shift in asset preferences does not lead to overall decline in bank deposits. But their rate of growth can change



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



GURBACHAN SINGH

In the last three or four years, many people in India have shifted from bank deposits to mutual funds. This did show up as a rise in the assets under management (AUM) with the mutual funds but not as a fall in the level of bank deposits. This is because the deposits merely shift from the accounts of the bank customers to the bank accounts of the mutual funds, and then from there to other bank accounts. This process goes on.

The aggregate bank deposits stay on; these cannot fall even if there is a lower demand in this context! This has become a familiar narrative. While the above narrative can be useful as a starting point, it is not the complete story. And, given the incompleteness, the story can even get misleading. It is important then to complete the story.

This is where we come to some very interesting economics and data. Though in the case under consideration, the level of the deposits does not fall, that level of deposits is on a time path of deposits, and the time path can get relatively flat. In other words, there can be a decline in the rate of growth of deposits.

And, the rate of growth of inflation-adjusted deposits can decline even more, if the inflation rate gets higher than it was previously. But how can all this possibly happen?

## PREFERENCE SHIFT

Due to a shift in asset preferences, there is an excess of deposits relative to the

demand. Next, observe that bank deposits are, by definition, a part of the money in circulation. It follows now that we have excess money in the economy! This is what economists would call excess endogenous money. It arises from within the economy; it has not been issued or induced by the central bank.

However, like an increase in exogenous money, the endogenously created excess money too can be inflationary, if there is no intervention. It is, however, reasonable to expect that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) would intervene.

How? In the normal course, the RBI keeps on increasing the reserve money (or base money) every now and then to meet the needs of the economy in which the nominal GDP is rising. But given the excess money in circulation within the economy, the RBI can deal with the situation by decreasing the rate of growth of reserve money from outside to deal with the situation.

Given the relationship between the reserve money issued by the RBI, and the money in circulation with the public, the slower expansion of reserve money by the RBI can, in turn, slow down the rate of growth of money in circulation in the economy. And, since money in circulation includes bank

**The first part of the adjustment mechanism is the downward tilt in the path of nominal deposits. The second part is the shift in preferences from banks to mutual funds**

deposits, the rate of growth of deposits too can get slowed down on the supply side.

We can return to the main argument now. While the existing bank deposits in the economy cannot fall even though there is a preference shift away from deposits, the additional bank deposits on the supply side can be less than what these would have been otherwise. This helps in adjusting to a relatively lower demand for bank deposits, which is the starting point of the analysis here.

If the RBI adequately decreases the rate of growth of reserve money, and nothing else changes, then the story of adjustment more or less ends there. However, if the RBI does not adequately decrease the rate of growth of reserve money, then obviously there will be some excess money in circulation. And, this can actually lead to higher inflation rate to some extent.

## INFLATION FACTOR

The higher inflation rate can, in turn, tilt the time path of real deposits downwards. This change in the path of real deposits is the second part of the adjustment to the shift in preferences from banks to mutual funds.

The first part of the adjustment, which we saw earlier, is the downward tilt in the path of nominal deposits. It will help to elaborate on how higher inflation can come about. Higher inflation can, under the circumstances considered here, happen in two possible ways.

First, the excess money in circulation can sustain cost-push inflation due to the higher food prices in the economy.

Second, the excess money can cause higher demand-pull inflation; think of "too much money chasing too few

goods". The rate of growth of reserve money has come down from more than 10 per cent to nearly 5 per cent in the last four years.

Even so, the average inflation rate in the last 4-5 years has been more than 1 percentage higher than in the previous few years. All this is still not the complete story. There has been yet another very important development. Currency as a percentage of deposits has fallen from 17 per cent to 15.1 per cent from October 2022 to September 2024.

Relatedly, the money multiplier has risen from 5.2 to 5.6. So, the money supply and bank deposits would, *ceteris paribus*, rise. But all other things did not remain equal! There was a shift from banks to mutual funds — the main story here. So, there were two counteracting forces — a rise in the path of deposits due to the reduced demand for currency, and a fall in the path of deposits due to a shift from banks to mutual funds. The result is that overall the time path of deposits has actually not shifted substantially and consistently.

The RBI is not responsible for this; it has merely responded to the economic conditions. To conclude, due to a shift in preferences from bank deposits to mutual funds, the level of bank deposits does not fall but the path of bank deposits can adjust downwards in nominal terms and possibly a little more in real terms. This adjustment mechanism has been very much at work but it has been, in practice, countered by some other changes like the demand for currency in the economy.

The writer is an independent economist and former visiting professor, Ashoka University

## Looking beyond the Hema Committee report

Implementation of POSH Act through fast-track courts and clarity on 'workplace' in the film industry, are ways forward

Ramesh K Vaidyanathan  
Mansi Singh

The last few weeks have been action-packed for the Malayalam film industry. The Kerala government had constituted the Justice Hema Committee in 2017 to examine issues of sexual harassment and other grievances in the Malayalam film industry. The Hema Committee Report (Hema Report) released by the Kerala government last month uncovers disturbing details about sexual harassment and other challenges faced by women in the Malayalam film industry. The report triggered strong reactions across the country.

The Hema Report highlighted the open secret of casting couch in the industry. This is not unique to the Malayalam film industry and is prevalent across the entertainment industry in India and overseas.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act) was enacted to prevent sexual abuse of women at workplaces. POSH Act provides for the setting up of an Internal Committee (IC) at every workplace to investigate matters of sexual harassment. However, as the Hema Report uncovered, setting up an IC may

be futile as its members could be influenced or coerced.

While workplaces in India are required to have policies in place against sexual harassment, women seldom use them to complain for fear of reprisals, the stigma associated, etc. Those who finally do gather the courage often end up weighed down by years of legal process and career stagnation.

## WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

The one immediate solution is that the POSH laws are strictly implemented. The entertainment industry has been a laggard as producers and production houses often evade accountability by claiming that the nature of their contracts and the absence of a clear-cut workplace exempts them from POSH laws.

The term 'workplace' is not restricted to only a traditional workplace such as an office. On the contrary, film production sets or units, temporary as well as permanent, are covered under the ambit of a workplace. Workplace also includes any place outside the movie set such as coffee shops, bars, make-up rooms, houses and the virtual world. If harassment occurs during a shoot, the principal employer (generally the producer or co-producers collectively) is liable to conduct an enquiry under POSH laws.



HEMA PANEL. Demand for justice

In 2022, in response to a series of Public Interest Litigations, the Kerala High Court observed, in the context of the movie industry, that the production unit of each film serves as the workplace for the individuals involved. Each production unit must establish an IC if they employ 10 or more workers. If the number of workers is less than 10, such workers are entitled to lodge complaints with the Local Committee set up in every district to investigate matters of sexual harassment under the POSH laws.

Further, the aggrieved woman can also file a police complaint where the alleged misconduct constitutes an offense under criminal laws or the

Information Technology Act, 2000, ensuring that both civil and criminal remedies are pursued for justice.

It can be concluded that law will only be able to protect women, and women will only feel empowered to speak up, when the law is implemented at every workplace and there is speedy prosecution of those involved in acts of sexual harassment.

In most cases, either no action is taken against the perpetrators, or they are released on bail in a matter of weeks or less or allowed a free run until their anticipatory bail pleas are allowed by courts, and the complainant is subjected to vicious online attacks, especially if she is a prominent figure.

Bringing transparency to reports such as the Hema Report and taking swift action through fast-track courts is the only way to instil fear in the minds of the perpetrators. Further, as highlighted in the Hema Report, the conditions of work need to improve for women and basic facilities like changing rooms, rest rooms and toilets, secure transport facilities must be provided at every workplace.

We cannot let go the opportunity that the brave whistleblowers have presented to us for a clean-up of the system.

Vaidyanathan is Managing Partner, Singh is Partner, BTG Advaya

✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to [bleditor@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bleditor@thehindu.co.in) or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

## Midair fear

This refers to "Middle Seat blues" (October 4). The article touches upon a much neglected and little discussed behavioural malaise — women's fears while seated between two males on a flight.

Now there are rules for penalising erring passengers, but fears prevail. Such conduct also shows that a male's class or financial status has nothing to do with his sexist attitude. IndiGo's move to enhance women's security is welcome. Airline owners may consider reserving some seats for women if required, at an extra charge. They may consider some non-financial incentive for

passengers who agree to offer their seat to women. This should not detract our concern from men going unpunished for their behaviour.

**YG Chouksey**  
Pune

## Youth internship

This refers to the news report 'PM Internship Scheme for youth kicks off' (October 4). A nation's growth hinges on its capacity to create jobs on a sustained basis. The PM Internship Scheme rolled out by the BJP-led government is welcome as it aims to create one crore youth internships in five years.

The new scheme will enhance the skills of the youth and make them employable. 'Employability' not only gives confidence to job-seekers, but also leads to economic growth.

**S Ramakrishnasayee**  
Chennai

## Non-tariff barriers

Apropos Editorial 'Green Game' (October 4), the deferment of implementation of European Union Deforestation Regulations (EUDR) by a year has given temporary relief to exporters from India, Brazil, China, Malaysia and Indonesia. The provisions of EUDR insist that the EU importers along with their

supply chain partners must have proper systems to establish last mile traceability in ensuring that the listed export items such as coffee, cocoa, soyabean, paper, paperboard, oilcake, wood, palm oil, leather and bovine meat should not have led to deforestation of land after December 2020.

The EU acts like a rule maker and protector of the global environment. A year ago, it introduced Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) on many vital products such as iron, steel, cement, fertilizers, aluminium, and hydrogen and now comes the EUDR. The EU must come out openly with

actions taken in mitigating the climate challenges within their territory and its contributions made to the Climate Mitigation Fund in helping the poorer countries in tackling the mitigation crisis. Such hard provisions adversely impact the trade of several countries including India whose exports to the EU is valued at \$1.3 billion. Proving last mile traceability in a short span of a year would be practically an impossible task as it would raise several operational challenges in micro mapping of details.

**RV Baskaran**  
Chennai



# Kamala Harris: Walking a tightrope few women survive

ALISON FRAGALE & ADAM GRANT

Given that Kamala Harris is running for the world's most powerful elected office, it's no surprise to see voters and pundits commenting on her "power moves" and "boss energy." What's remarkable is that they mean it as a compliment. That's a far cry from the experience of many women — in politics and beyond — who have dared to assert themselves.

It's even a far cry from Ms Harris's experience four years ago. In the crowded Democratic presidential primary field of 2020, she and other female candidates were mostly criticised for lacking warmth. When she joined Joe Biden's ticket, the warmer Ms Harris seemed, the more positive impressions people formed of her. But overall, people viewed her primarily as assertive and ambitious. Attempts to soften her image, such as the "We did it, Joe" video clip that the campaign released after the elec-

tion was called for Mr Biden, were sometimes mocked for seeming contrived.

Seeking power has always been a maddening tightrope walk for women. Show up as too dominant and they're seen as cold; reveal too much vulnerability (or, God forbid, cry) and they seem weak. Over time Ms Harris has figured out how to navigate these double standards, and her playbook may help other women do it, too.

One of the clearest markers of her evolution as a candidate has been her ability to convey both strength and sympathy, and in ways that come across as authentic. An early triumph came during the 2020 vice-presidential debate. When Mike Pence interrupted her, Ms Harris didn't get flustered — and she didn't get steamrolled, either. She stood firm and said: "I'm speaking." But then she softened that power move.

Ms Harris prefaced a strong interjection with a respectful honorific: "Mr Vice President, I'm speaking." Next, she smiled warmly, tilted her head and nod-

ded. She tempered her statement with a polite tag question: "I'm speaking, K?"

Psychologists find that these kinds of adjustments can make strong language more palatable and more persuasive. With both verbal and nonverbal cues, Ms. Harris played up her warmth without compromising her toughness. Four years later, "I'm speaking" is still a rallying cry among her supporters — Donald Trump even tried to co-opt it during his recent debate with her.

Now, in her second attempt at the Oval Office, Ms Harris has continued to balance forcefulness with friendliness. Think about how she started that debate: She strutted across the stage, introduced herself and shook her opponent's hand. That boss move was a way of unilaterally setting the terms of engagement.

In a similar vein, Ms Harris tends to begin pivotal communications with praise for others. When Mr Biden announced his withdrawal from the race in July, her statement to a nation that did-

n't know her very well led with gratitude to her boss: "I thank Joe Biden for his extraordinary leadership as President of the United States and for his decades of service to our country." It wasn't until two days later that she highlighted her own record. Research suggests that this "dual promotion" of herself and Mr Biden is an effective way to convey both competence and care, circumventing the gender stereotypes that punish women for anything that smacks of self-promotion.

Ms Harris has managed to display warmth even when anger would be a reasonable response. When Mr Trump claimed that she had only recently decided she was Black, she could have taken umbrage; instead, her tone was sorrowful. With a softened voice, she labelled it a "tragedy" that a presidential candidate would attempt to "use race to divide the American people."

People tend to associate male anger with power and competence — but if it's a woman who's expressing that emotion,

she is likely to be dismissed as "hysterical." The risk of backlash is even more extreme if a Black woman dares to be incensed: She's perceived as downright hostile and penalised by being deemed unfit to lead.

At the other end of the emotional spectrum, Ms Harris's laugh has been front and centre this election season. Although Mr Trump has criticised it, it's generally working for her — and science can explain why. Looking at people's faces, we make judgements of their warmth and competence within a tenth of a second. You can probably guess the results: Whereas men are rewarded for looking tough, women are judged more favourably when their faces convey compassion and support.

In an analysis of the 2020 election, people who saw Ms Harris's face as "feminine" were more likely to support her.

Jokes do, too. During the debate, she quipped that "Donald Trump was fired by 81 million people," making light of the irony that he rose to fame by doing the firing. Humour turns out to be a useful tool

for gaining influence — especially for women, as long as the humour isn't at their own expense. Psychologists find that when leaders make self-deprecating jokes, we judge them as more capable if they're men but less capable if they're women.

But all these strategies have limits. Some voters are frustrated that Ms Harris is offering them more sweet childhood stories than concrete plans. As she has leaned hard into establishing her relatability, she has sometimes sacrificed clarity about her policies. To sustain her momentum, she may need to devote as much time to her vision as her likeability.

Of course, she doesn't have to do it alone. When Ms Harris was disparaged as a childless cat lady, it was her husband's ex-wife who came to her defence. We want to live in a world where women don't have to balance so precariously on a tightrope to leadership. But even if these complex biases and pitfalls vanish, projecting care along with competence will still be a winning combination — for women as well as for men.

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ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

## A case of exploding pagers



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

The pager and walkie-talkie explosions in Lebanon on two days in mid-September added a new and very scary dimension to the conflict in West Asia. At least 40 people died, and thousands were injured. It was perhaps a matter of luck that none of the compromised devices were on an aircraft in flight.

According to reports, Hezbollah had started to use pagers and walkie-talkies around February 2024, suspecting that Israeli security agencies were monitoring cell phone networks.

The pagers in question were branded as Made-in-Taiwan, by a Taiwanese company, Gold Apollo. But they were "manufactured" by another entity, BAC Consulting, which is based in Hungary. Both BAC and the Hungarian government claim the devices were actually made by somebody else and merely marketed by BAC.

The New York Times says an Israeli agency set up a manufacturing unit and inserted plastic explosives into the devices. Gold Apollo says the financial transactions between Hungary and Taiwan pertaining to the pager were routed through financial entities in West Asia.

In this case (and with the walkie-talkies, which have similarly

complicated provenance), the supply chain was obviously infiltrated by a malicious actor. But the supply chain and transaction chain is typical of many types of normal transborder arrangements in a globalised economy.

Company A, based in one nation, may sell products in many other nations, while sourcing components from multiple places and assembling them elsewhere. The pertinent intellectual property or properties may also be spread across many jurisdictions. It all boils down to cost and logistics. Labour may be cheaper in one country, while another may offer better economies of scale for certain components, with R&D taking place elsewhere. Transshipment costs, tax and tariff rates, and trade agreements also come into the picture.

India, for example, is trying to move up the value chain with the manufacture of electronics, telecom networking equipment, and other items, using production-linked incentives, and other policy sweeteners. In automobiles, India is a major global export hub, with some companies looking only at vehicle exports from their India facilities.

While the entities based in India source many components domestically, many more components are also imported from multiple places, with the final turn of the screwdriver applied by *dest* labour.

It makes for economic efficiency. But it also means components arriving from all over the place for assembly, with some of those components themselves assembled from parts sourced elsewhere. A Korean component may have sub-components sourced from Thailand or Vietnam. In addition, it may make sense to route marketing for these

through entities parked elsewhere.

Since a modern consumer electronics item, a car, or network equipment may have thousands of components, it's almost impossible to untangle the supply chains.

The global economy took a massive hit during Covid because of this entanglement. While there was famously a global shortage of semiconductors (chips), and of bulk drugs, other industrial items were randomly in short supply because one place or another from where those items were sourced was in lockdown.

A further complication is caused by the embedding of chips and sensors into all sorts of "smart stuff". Chips are literally there in everything, and as the Internet of Things becomes more common, chips are proliferating exponentially.

Chips are run by embedded software, which is impossible to decipher or alter in most cases. So, there may be backdoors or malicious code wired into them, which are effectively impossible to detect.

Note that the pagers worked perfectly well for months until they were triggered to explode. It would be possible to render any given chip non-functional upon contingency, if there was specific code written into it. The fear of such backdoors is one reason why many countries are wary of sourcing telecom and power equipment from China.

This is a nightmare scenario that many analysts have spoken about. The pager attack turned it into reality. Every security agency and terrorist network will be gaming variations of this.

It is a security nightmare, given the impossibility of checking every electronic component of every device in existence. A globalised economy is truly vulnerable in ways we can barely comprehend.

# Writings on the Haryana wall

The BJP's 2024 Haryana campaign is different. Modi's isn't the lead face on hoardings, and after two terms in power, the party is relying once again on its mainstay: Upper castes and Punjabis

Searching for writings on the wall in this sedition of state elections in Haryana, you'd be struck by what isn't to be seen there. Or what almost isn't: The face and name of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Nor even promises from him. *No Modi ki Guarantee, no Modi ka bhariosa.*

The party's campaign tagline is, "*Bharosa dil se, BJP phirse*" (Trust your hearts, bring the BJP to power again). That's a bit prosaic, given the high standard the BJP sets for itself in coining slogans. Plus, it doesn't rhyme. Or, as a gaggle of young *karyakartas* tell me on the sidelines of a modest rally in a banquet hall, "*Tuk bhi nahin milti*" (It doesn't even rhyme properly).

The most striking discordant note on the walls, however, isn't poetic, but visual. It isn't as if Mr Modi is entirely missing. It is just that his image isn't the lead picture in any of the party's posters or campaign stationery. The lead picture is mostly that of the candidate in a constituency.

In the top right corner, in slightly smaller size, is the bearded face of Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini, sworn in just a month before the general elections in April, as the party belatedly realised how unpopular its two-term chief minister, Manohar Lal Khattar, had become. Cheek by jowl with Mr Saini is a face most of us won't recognise. At least I didn't. I'd also say in my defence that when I asked a dozen people at BJP rallies and street processions, nobody was able to name this particular notable.

A more senior campaign manager helped. This is Mohan Lal Badoli. And who's he? He is the state chief, appointed in a belated attempt at damage control after the Lok Sabha setback, when the BJP lost five of the 10 Haryana seats. Among the losers was Mr Badoli himself, from Sonapat. The only reason he was elevated was his caste: Brahmin.

After two terms in power without needing to underline its loyal caste coalitions, the BJP is now back to the basics. Upper castes and Punjabis (many of them from families of Partition refugees) are its mainstay. They are also the most numerous along the Grand Trunk Road, where the most urbanised constituencies lie and where the BJP won most of its seats in the 2014 and 2019 Assembly polls. This zone also has the smallest percentage of Jats, who the party has alienated.

For it to have any chance of winning a third term, or collecting enough seats to achieve a hung Assembly in which to play, it must max out along the G T Road.

In the 2014 and 2019 elections, both for the Lok Sabha and the Assembly, the BJP didn't need to flaunt its caste base. It could take that for granted as long as the two other factors worked: Hinduised nationalism and the powerful draw of Narendra Modi's name. These were synonymous. This is why the BJP won a majority, with 47 seats in a House of 90 in 2014. To understand why this was so dramatic, we need to note that the party's previous highest tally was just 16 seats in 1987, most of which were won in urban constituencies along the G T Road.

It was the rise of Narendra Modi that won the BJP rural Haryana, especially its Jats. They might constitute only about 22 per cent of the vote, but as you'd expect, given their political and social domination, they punch way above their weight. This metaphor is particularly apt in this land of contact sport: Boxing and wrestling.

At some point, the BJP got ahead of itself and decided it could do without the Jats. In its first term, the community was sidelined. In the second, it was outsourced to coalition partner Dushyant Chautala, one of the great-grandsons of Devi Lal, who had split from his jailed grandfather Om Prakash Chautala's Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) to launch his own Jannayak Janta Party (JJP).

That move has bombed and the Jats, furious at this denial of pre-eminence, have moved to the Congress, especially its leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda. This showed in the 2024 Lok Sabha results, as the BJP lost all predominantly Jat/rural/Dalit seats but managed to win most urban seats. Notably, it lost both seats reserved for Scheduled Castes. Rural Haryana, Jats and Dalits no longer seem to be in Modi's thrall.

This is what the party is now acknowledging in this campaign's most important writing on the wall. On banners, the candidate's picture dominates, with the chief minister and party chief's images coming next. Modi's face is among the smallest. Not just that, he is just the first in a series of 10 tiny mugshots at the top



WRITINGS ON THE WALL

SHEKHAR GUPTA

## Off the beaten tram track

EYE CULTURE

KANIKA DATTA

In Calcutta, before it became Kolkata, the electric tram governed the rhythms of my childhood home. Living on a main road bisected by a tramline, the sounds of the day started with the clatter of the first tram at first light merging with the sound of the muezzin's call from the nearby mosque. At the end of the day, it was possible to set the clock by the time of the last tram of the day thundering by to the nearby depot at 11.30 pm. Through the day, the tinkle of the conductor's bell and the rattle of the carriages formed a reassuring background riff. Over the years, we never failed to derive amusement from the alarm of first-time visitors who felt the drawing room tremble every time a tram went by.

Yet those who lived near tram lines never considered trams noisy or intrusive. Through the city, especially in the congested north, they were as much part of the city's daily culture as its quirky humour and work-to-rule principles. Now, with the state government announcing its decision to eliminate tram services, a network that has shrunk rapidly since the nineties, fleeting images come to mind. Of the conductor wailing with practised ease a long bamboo pole stored in the rear carriage to hook back the wheeled loop

connecting the tram to the electric line above, a frequent daily occurrence that stalled trams on the tracks; or the terrified expression of men who mistakenly boarded the ladies' compartment and had to endure till the next stop glares that would make Attila quake; the scuffed wooden fittings of the oldest trams with brass plates declaring that Calcutta Tramways was registered in London; and the clipped accent of the commentator on a surprisingly well-curated tourist tram trip (which the government plans to retain).

Few remember that Calcutta Tramways was listed on the London Stock exchange till the late sixties, after which it was nationalised. It was unclear if the service ever earned the state government revenue; absurdly low fares and the increasingly ramshackle appearance of the tramcars suggest not. Still, the company did retain upscale auditors Lovelock & Lewes at one time. Pramod Bhasin, once chief executive officer of GE Capital, had worked in the Calcutta office and remembers doing the audit for Calcutta Tramways, which involved reconciling hundreds of thousands of ticket stubs with ledger entries. "I think everybody should go through something like that at least once in his life," he joked.

In a distracted way, Calcuttans were proud of their trams. Now the prospect of an imminent demise has mobilised the citizenry to protest. Though the objections are

focused on urban nostalgia with histories of the service proliferating in the media, the bigger concern should be the link between mass transport solutions and urban pollution. Ironically, a state that was considered forward-thinking has been dismantling its tram network even as more countries are embracing trams as a mass transport solution to urban pollution. Europe, for instance, has tramway systems only a little younger than Calcutta's. Unlike Calcutta, those cities have regularly upgraded them so that the clunky monsters of yesteryear have metamorphosed into sleek, noiseless wagons running on double connectors so that the dangers of disconnecting from the overhead electric line are eliminated. The old city of Istanbul, for example, adopted trams in the nineties as a means of preserving its monuments from fuel-spewing tourist buses around Sultanahmet Square, where the sound of the first sleek tram whizzing by at dawn and the muezzin's call provoked much nostalgia. China's urban administrations started adding trams to their cities from the second decade of the 21st century, displaying a prescient understanding of their potential. In India, electric cars and buses and capital-intensive metro systems are seen as solutions to urban pollution; trams, a knowhow that we have possessed for a century, are being relegated to the museums.

## The inevitability of party politics



TICKER

MIHIR S SHARMA

Why do political parties split — or stay together? For most of us, the obvious and intuitive approach to party politics is the following: Parties represent a relatively cohesive bloc of voters who are aligned by material interest, or regional or community consciousness, or economic ideology. When the interests of some of these voters diverge from others, then parties split. If there is space in the polity for an additional party, then both survive. Otherwise, only one does.

The British parliamentary system, the ancestor of most other legislatures, demonstrates this quite effectively. There is space for two large parties and one or two smaller ones in the mainstream of English (and therefore British) politics, alongside three regional parties representing the smaller nations in the United Kingdom. Parties — particularly the Labour Party — have split in the past few decades. In the last decade alone, some prominent cen-

trists abandoned Labour during the years the left was in the ascendant in the party, and created a new bloc. It did not survive. A previous generation of centrists split off in the early 1980s to create the Social Democratic Party, which eventually had to merge into the third-party Liberals to create today's Liberal Democrats. These cleavages were driven by clear ideological differences and are relatively easy to understand.

But other polities can be dramatically different. Consider Ireland, where power has been divided for decades between two parties — but which barely seem to have any ideological differences. Both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael are right-of-centre; their differences were born a century ago and now — to unsmiting, non-Irish eyes — appear not to be large enough to sustain a two-party polity. Unsurprisingly, a third entrant — left-wing populist Sinn Fein — is now large enough to challenge the centre-right duopoly.

This week I was reminded of the puzzling nature of party politics when Japan was informed it had a new Prime Minister, following a bruising campaign within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The right-wing LDP has been dominant in post-War Japanese politics, with the Opposition barely getting a few short spells in power. Absurdly, however, intra-LDP politics can be every bit as bruising and bitter, if not more, than inter-party politics. The party even has, or had, an organised

system of "factions" often associated with specific ideologies and personalities. These factions have their own histories, divisions — and scandals. To non-Japanese eyes, it is as if there are two different party systems here — an uncompetitive, formal system for elections to the Diet, and a competitive but informal system within the LDP that determines which faction is dominant.

Why the LDP has not split, or why any breakthrough factions have not coalesced into a "normal" two-party polity, is hard to understand outside Japan. Certainly, it has had major crises — during the "40-day war" in the 1970s one faction barricaded itself within party headquarters — but it has remained a single, formal bloc and politically dominant through all of them.

In some sense, for Indian eyes this system is as if the Indian National Congress (INC) had never split in the 1960s, and replaced its post-Indira Gandhi framework with a factional system in which various successors of the Syndicate leaders competed to win the favour of party members. It is not impossible to imagine this, but it is not clear how it could have been stable for decades. The split of the dominant party of the freedom movement a few decades after its purpose was achieved, and the rise of alternatives — representing the dominant small landowning castes (Janata and its successors) or Hindu nationalism (the Bharatiya Janata Party, or the BJP) and finally regional aspirations

(the Dravidian parties and the Trinamool) — seem almost inevitable to us.

A natural experiment on such inevitability is occurring in South Africa. The African National Congress (ANC) — which shares multiple similarities with the INC in its origins, purposes, organisation, and fuzzy ideological nature — is convulsed with internal tension. A former leader, Jacob Zuma, has created a powerful breakthrough party, which has a populist agenda at odds with that of the grantees who remain in control of the official ANC. Blocs within the ANC — economic nationalists, pro-business moderates, and others — have different visions of the country's future. Ethnic and regional parties — representing the Zulu ethnicity, or drawing strength from more English-speaking and White-dominated parts of the country such as the Cape Province — are growing in power as local challengers or influential coalition partners.

India, it seemed for a while, was going in the opposite direction. We were promised a "Congress-mukt Bharat", indeed an Opposition-free polity, and it really seemed that was achievable. But it seems countries like Japan are unique. People want party politics even if the differences between the parties are slight, as in Ireland. A one-party BJP-dominated polity would merely have opened up space for splits within the new establishment, the way the Congress of old disintegrated.

This is excerpted from #WritingsOnTheWall. By special arrangement with ThePrint



The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

## Importance of Haryana polls

The outcome will influence the national political mood and push parties to re-strategise

The outcome of assembly elections in Haryana will be significant for at least five reasons. One, this is the first state polls since the general election results were announced in June this year. Its outcome will have a bearing on the political mood ahead of the upcoming assembly polls in Maharashtra and Jharkhand. Two, it will be a test of the BJP's resilience in holding on to office in states, which it has managed successfully in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh for decades though the party's rise in Haryana is more recent — since 2014. Three, issues such as the Agnipath scheme for recruitment to security forces and farmer discontent have been at the heart of the poll campaign and the results are likely to impact the Centre's stance on these going ahead. Four, the BJP's social engineering of building a coalition of non-dominant OBC communities to neutralise dominant caste-centric political mobilisation is on test in Haryana. Five, this is the first election since the Supreme Court order on sub-categorisation in Dalit quota and how the Dalit vote, close to 20% of the electorate, responds politically will be keenly watched.

Both the BJP and the INDIA bloc have a lot riding on the outcome. The BJP is fighting anti-incumbency of two terms: Though it failed to win a simple majority five years ago, it formed a government by sharing power with the Jannayak Janta Party (JJP), which has since left the alliance. The BJP removed Manohar Lal Khattar, its surprise choice for the chief minister's office in 2014, ahead of the general election to contain anti-incumbency. It didn't yield the expected returns — the party's Lok Sabha tally was reduced by half (from 10 in 2019 to five in 2024) and its vote share fell from 58% to 46.11%. The past five years have been a difficult time for the Khattar-Nayab Singh Saini government with farmers taking to the streets over the farm laws furthering the rural-urban divide, the state's top wrestlers on the warpath against BJP and Wrestling Federation of India heavyweight, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, and the youth restive about the Agnipath scheme. These factors hurt the party's prospects in the general election and have lingered, despite the Centre's efforts to engage with the aggrieved sections.

In Haryana, it's a crowded field this time with the Indian National Lok Dal, the JJP, the Bahujan Samaj Party, Aam Aadmi Party, and even Chandrashekar Azad Ravan's Azad Samaj Party, working out alliances to complicate the electoral calculations of the BJP and the Congress. The smaller parties and alliances can turn voter-cutters and cause surprises. The BJP has also sought to paint the Congress as a party solely committed to the interests of the numerically and politically powerful Jat community, in a bid to create a non-Jat polarisation in its favour. This is a tactic that helped it gain ground in the past. The visible domination of former CM Bhupinder Singh Hooda and his family in the Haryana Congress and the restiveness among some party leaders over this have helped the BJP to amplify its message. The Congress, riding high on the 99 seats it won in the general election, has tried to dispel this impression and consolidate its core vote, which includes Dalits, Muslims and, of course, the Jats, around a rights and governance agenda.

For the BJP and Congress, a win in Haryana will embellish their narratives regarding the 2024 general election outcome — if it was an aberration or a trend — and build momentum going ahead.

## Why India must push e-commerce exports, and how

A slew of policy reforms can help India leverage the coming e-commerce boom to achieve its 'developed nation' goal

India needs exponential export growth if it aspires to become a developed nation by 2047. The moot question is where that export growth is going to come from. E-commerce, which has enormous growth potential and is widely recognised to be the wave of the future, can be a large part of the answer.

Some numbers put this in perspective. India has \$4.5 billion in e-commerce exports, amounting to about 1% of its total merchandise exports. China's e-commerce exports are 50 times India's, amounting to 6.4% of its total merchandise exports. Clearly, India needs to capture a significant share of the burgeoning e-commerce opportunity if it is to grow its exports.

The government wants to boost e-commerce exports to \$200-\$300 billion by 2030. In August, it came up with a plan for e-commerce export hubs. More recently, it extended some existing export incentives to e-commerce exports through the courier medium. Changes in the regulatory framework for e-commerce, however, are also needed if India is to hit its ambitious targets of expanding e-commerce exports 50-fold or more in six years.

A recent report by Assocham and Ernst & Young, *Enabling E-Commerce Exports from India*, explores what these changes could be. Another report by Niti Aayog and Foundation for Economic Development, *Boosting Exports from MSMEs*, also has useful suggestions on how e-commerce exports can be unlocked. Most of these changes relate to Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Master Direction No 16/2015-16 dated 11.2016 on Export of Goods and Services issued to Banks under Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999. Some indicative changes:

**Remove the 25% variance cap on payments:** RBI requires that foreign exchange received by sellers should not vary more than 25% from the stated value. However, exporters face variations between declared and realised values due to discounts, returns, and platform fees. China has no such cap. The 25% variation clause needs to be removed and flexibility provided to sellers to decide the commercial aspects of selling through e-commerce.

**Allow more time for payment realisation and repatriation:** The seller is mandated to receive export proceeds within nine months of the export shipment. This is not always feasible for exports on e-commerce platforms, making the guidelines practically impossible to follow. China does not mandate a specific time for payment realisation and repatriation. India should follow suit, or at the very least extend the time limit to 18 months.

**Implement an aggregate model of reconciliation:** E-commerce exports require individual consignment-wise shipping bill and payment reconciliation, ramping up the reconciliation workload. China allows for bulk payment reconciliation over a month. An aggregate model for the declaration of shipping goods and payment reconciliation should be adopted — whether done monthly/quarterly/annually.

**Redefine the responsibility of the seller and e-commerce operator:** China's e-commerce law clearly defines roles for the platform and seller. It requires sellers to register in the marketplace and acquire relevant licences, largely relieving the compliance and logistics burden which is handled by the e-commerce operator. India does not demarcate these roles, requiring the seller to participate in every stage of the complex export and payment processes. It should only mandate the seller to obtain company and product licenses, create marketplace account and list products, while other compliances are undertaken by the e-commerce operator. This may require amendment in the definition of exporter in the FEMA Act/Regulations and other export-related Acts/Rules.



Alok Chaturvedi



Swagato Ganguly

## A future in Jammu and Kashmir that isn't the past

In 1974, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat told the United Nations, "I come to you bearing an olive branch of peace in one hand and the freedom fighter's gun in the other. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand". It is always hard to distinguish between terrorist threats and hopes, but politicians must be different. Kashmiri politicians confusing the similarity of the 2024 and 1996 elections for sameness are reverting to habits of soft separatism such as suspending election campaigning to commemorate Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah — designated a terrorist outfit by the US and several other countries — after he was killed in an Israeli attack. They are mistaken. Kashmir's context has changed forever, and so must they.

The similarities with the 1996 elections are interesting. Both happened after about 10 years, with a narrative that J&K can't — and shouldn't — be run from Delhi. Both followed Parliamentary elections with unexpected results. Both had different issues resonating in the Jammu region and Kashmir region. Both faced multiple disruption attempts by Pakistan's terror factory. Both have candidates promising troublesome assembly resolutions (an autonomy demand was passed last time) and lowering the temperature for terrorists (terrorist

surrender ceremonies and the Police Special Operations Group were disowned last time).

But 2024 is different. Article 370 is gone forever. Pakistan's terror factory confronts new rules with cross-border strikes. Pakistan's once-powerful garrison State — no prime minister (PM) has ever completed his/her term — is weaker than ever. In 1996, radical and violent Islam (as distinct from moderate Islam) was regarded as a thorn in the flesh; the global community now recognises it as a dagger in the heart. The exodus and return of Kashmiri Pandits wasn't an issue in 1996; it matters greatly to the rest of India in 2024. Pakistan's per capita GDP was higher then; India's GDP is now 10 times higher, and our stock market is 120 times more valuable. Unlike the terrorists inspired by the Cold War ending in 1989, most Kashmiris now see the horrible pain inflicted by terror groups, in the saying, "Lookan hoondh khoon lookini muth" (smear the blood of the people on their faces).

The 2024 elections are the first under the Indian Constitution — the last 11 were held under the J&K State Representation of People Act, with six-year government tenures and exclusion of residents from voting based on their birthplace, birth date, or ancestry. The National Conference (NC) won all 75 seats in



MN Sabharwal



Manish Sabharwal



Changes in the regulatory framework for e-commerce are needed if India is to hit its ambitious target, of expanding e-commerce exports 50-fold or more in six years

**INDIA'S E-COMMERCE EXPORTS AMOUNT TO \$4.5 BILLION (ABOUT 1% OF ITS TOTAL MERCHANDISE EXPORTS). CHINA'S ARE 50X INDIA'S — 6.4% OF THE COUNTRY'S TOTAL MERCHANDISE EXPORTS**

**Reduce the cost burden of payment reconciliation:** Bank charges for payment reconciliation are as high as ₹1,500-3,000 per consignment. This is a significant burden on small sellers. These charges should be waived, reimbursed or levied as a small percentage of the consignment value.

**Raise consignment limit for courier mode:** The consignment limit for exporting e-commerce goods via courier mode as opposed to the much slower cargo mode is currently \$12,000, which is insufficient. To be competitive with China, this should be raised to \$50,000.

**Create custom supervision codes for e-commerce exports:** To improve data collection and operational efficiency, have separate custom supervision codes for e-commerce exports on the pattern of China along with rapid clearance guidelines.

**Reduce custom clearance time for e-commerce exports:** It takes about three to four hours for customs clearance following submission of details on the Express Cargo Clearance portal for export shipments. India should follow China's practice of issuing the approval within a minute of the declaration submission because of having a special supervision code for e-com-

merce exports. **Facilitate re-imports:** Customs officials often misidentify re-imports of exported goods as new imports, forcing e-commerce sellers to pay import duties. There should be clear guidelines for re-import transactions. They could, for instance, allow duty-free re-import of up to \$600 akin to the limit prescribed in baggage rules. For higher-value consignments, a protocol should be formulated for recognising returns as re-imports akin to what has been prescribed for gems and jewellery.

**Allow international order-backed purchase and sale model:** In China, sellers are allowed to collaborate with e-commerce marketplaces to export goods even if sellers aren't registered exporters. Enable similar functionality here to help MSMEs test demand for their products abroad before becoming full-fledged exporters. While some quick results can be achieved by changes proposed in the RBI Master Direction to Banks and changes in FEMA Act/Regulation and other regulations, real achievement can be made by enacting a comprehensive E-Commerce Act on the pattern of China.

Such measures in concert should suffice to transform India into a truly global hub of e-commerce, generating employment on a large scale and enabling MSMEs across the country to showcase Indian talent not only as a country of artisans and specialised products such as textiles and handlooms, but also of advanced technology products.

Alok Chaturvedi is director general, Export Promotion Council for EOUs and SEZs and a former IAS officer. Swagato Ganguly is senior fellow, The Convergence Foundation. The views expressed are personal



Prosperity through peace is the future of Jammu and Kashmir

the first state election of 1951 because 43 NC candidates were elected unopposed a week before. In 1957 and 1962, the NC acquired a majority before polling began using the same technology. In 1972, women candidates contested for the first time. The 1983 elections were ferociously fought — Indira Gandhi hadn't forgotten Sheikh Abdullah's betrayal of 1977 — but Farooq Abdullah led the NC to victory on soft separatism. This victory was soon sabotaged by Farooq's sister's husband, GM Shah, in partnership with Indira Gandhi. Mufti Sayeed's leaving Congress in 1987 changed state politics, but his low point was thanking Pakistan as chief minister in 2014 for allowing peaceful elections.

The rhetoric in the 2024 polls that Article 370 will be restored is wilful fraud; this is a constitutional impossibility for any modern parliamentarian to support. This demand by Kashmiri's and Delhi's dynasts gave Pakistan's PM a chance last week to compare Kashmir to Palestine at the United Nations and their defence minister to cheer for the latter's vic-

tory. Communal statements by the same politicians gave Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei a chance to tweet, "We cannot consider ourselves to be Muslims if we are oblivious to the suffering that a Muslim is enduring in .. #India." Rhetoric has dangerously reverted to Kashmiri domination over Jammu in state politics. Finally, the national Opposition leader saying "major contracts are going to outsiders" creates a divide our Constitution does not recognise and Kashmiris call *moonon droth ta patran saq* (watering the leaves while cutting the roots).

The lack of new faces in this election is sad; dynastic politicians frustrate ambitious young people because they cement the elitism proposed by Pakistan's national poet Muhammad Iqbal: *Jamhooriyat ek tarz-e-hukumat hai jis me logon ko gina jaata he, tola nahin* (democracy should count people instead of weighing them). Kashmir is an economic infant; it has not benefited from India's prosperity because of Pakistan's terror factory, Article 370, fraught federalism, a mistaken UN reference, and politicians using soft separatism. Whoever wins this election must understand that India's citizens now recognise that nostalgia about J&K's past is amnesia about sectarianism, factionalism, Islamism, regionalism and nepotism. Prosperity through peace is the future of Kashmir, especially since the escalating war on terrorism in West Asia has Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the US aligned while Pakistan is confused. Political candidates in J&K must, as they say in Kashmiri, *poetim mash-ravv, bronh kun nazzar thaav* (forget the past and look to the future).

MN Sabharwal is a former director general of J&K Police, and Manish Sabharwal is a J&K-born entrepreneur. The views expressed are personal

## Animals can't vote, so we must in their interest

Elections in Haryana, Maharashtra, and Jammu and Kashmir have the media full of reports on the manoeuvring of various political actors as well as speculation and analysis on the electoral chances of the political parties in fray. As a conservationist, my thoughts often turn to what the various contenders for power have to say on the matter of wildlife and conservation. Issues related to wildlife conservation generally find little or no mention in most poll manifestos and campaigns, especially when it comes to Assembly elections. To their credit, both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress had included references to

human-wildlife conflict (HWC) and the need to address the challenge in their manifestos for the parliamentary elections earlier this year.

How then might issues related to wildlife conservation figure prominently on the agenda of politicians? What if animals had a vote? Of course, if invertebrates could vote, they would easily form the largest voting block and it would be hard for vote-seekers to ignore the demands of flies, ants, centipedes, and millipedes among other invertebrates.

If, however, the vote was limited to the vertebrate species besides humans, the outcome would probably be very different. The

last WWF *Living Planet Report* painted a depressing picture — a two-thirds decline in the population of vertebrate species globally. Not very encouraging; if they could vote, what might be the issues they would raise?

For instance, would the Great Indian Bustard, once a contender for the status of National Bird but whose numbers are less than 200 today, push those soliciting its vote to promise that they would ensure its arid grassland habitat is no longer diverted for other uses?

Would the Asian elephants vote for the party that promises the strictest punishment for failing to ensure that overhead electricity transmission lines are at the minimum prescribed height and not sagging, something that recently caused the death of several of their brethren by electrocution? They might even ask for action to be taken against those who illegally draw power from overhead transmission lines in a desperate bid to protect their crops from depredation by wildlife and end up killing wild animals, including elephants, that come

into contact with the live wires.

Might the river dolphins that rely on sound for communication, navigation, and feeding ask for curbs on heightened activity and sound on river ways they inhabit?

Animals, wild or otherwise, do not vote. It is thus left to State and non-State actors and the citizenry to be their spokespersons and vote in the interests of the non-human species we share our planet with. The voting public and those who seek their votes need to turn their attention to issues that adversely impact and threaten the wild denizens we share space with. Wildlife will not have a vote but advocates for wildlife conservation do and the constituency of these voters needs to be large enough to compel the vote seeker to give conservation concerns their due once elected. No matter which party wins, governments, once elected, need to commit to wildlife preservation.

Yash Magan Shethia is director, Wildlife and Habitats, WWF-India. The views expressed are personal

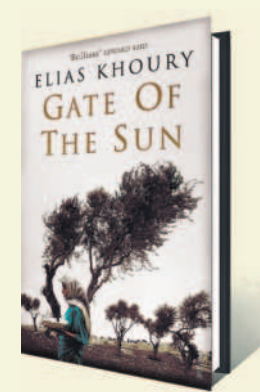
### { EDITOR'S PICK }

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

## REMEMBERING ELIAS KHOURY

Israel signalled the widening of its ground operation as it continued to strike targets across Lebanon and drove nearly 1.2 million people from their homes. The displacements are the latest in a series of such events in the region over the last seven decades. Lebanese writer Elias Khoury, 76, whose writings reflected the pain and loss of those at the receiving end of this conflict, died days before Israel expanded its offensive.

This week, we recommend Khoury's *Gate of the Sun*, based on the 1948 Nakba or the expulsion of Palestinians for Israel's creation. Khoury's 14 novels depicted the region's recent history including the dispossession of Palestinians. *Gate of the Sun* is known as his best novel based on stories of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and those who remained in Galilee, in what is now Israel. Khoury described *Gate of the Sun* as an act of love for the Palestinians. He wrote their stories to provide an overview of Palestinian history. The novel was translated into 14 languages.



Gate of the Sun: Elias Khoury Year: 1998





**WORDLY WISE**  
FOR AGE IS OPPORTUNITY NO LESS THAN YOUTH  
ITSELF, THOUGH IN ANOTHER DRESS.  
— HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# Feeling the heat

Temperatures, not rains, matter more for inflation and rural demand



PRANJUL BHANDARI

## MONSOON CUES

More benign outlook for food prices should be reason for RBI to consider a cut in its benchmark repo lending rate

THE SOUTHWEST MONSOON this time has been the best since 2020 — the year Covid struck — with the all-India weighted rainfall being 7.6 per cent above the normal long period average (LPA) for the season (June-September). As many as 23 out of the country's 36 meteorological subdivisions received rains more than their LPAs and only seven registered significant shortfall exceeding 15 per cent. The monsoon was also temporally well-distributed. Rainfall was 11 per cent below normal in June, but above the LPAs in July (9 per cent), August (15.3 per cent) and September (11.6 per cent). The effects of these have been seen in higher acreages under most *kharif* crops — barring a few such as cotton, *bajra* and *urad* where the decline had more to do with relative prices than rainfall — and water levels in major reservoirs rising to nearly 88 per cent of full storage capacity, as against the 10-year-average of 77 per cent for this time.

The monsoon-aided bumper *kharif* crop, whose market arrivals will take off in the next few days, should enable a further softening of consumer food inflation. It has already eased somewhat to 5.4-5.7 per cent year-on-year in July and August, after ruling close to double digits for much of the time since mid-2023. That high inflation period coincided with El Niño and heat waves, impacting both the *kharif* and *rabi* crops in 2023-24. This time, there has been no El Niño — and with the Met Department forecasting above-normal rains in the post-monsoon season (October-December) as well as a colder-than-usual winter on the back of a developing La Niña, the prospects look good for the upcoming *rabi* crop too. That should, in turn, translate into an overall good agricultural year following a poor 2023-24.

The more benign outlook for food prices, compared to six months ago, should be reason enough for the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy committee to consider a cut in its benchmark "repo" lending rate. Whether or not that happens at the rate-setting panel's meeting early next week, the stage has definitely been set. An agricultural production rebound will also be good for rural incomes and consumption, which has been a drag on the economy for some time now. The Narendra Modi government has been proactive in dealing with food inflation — through measures both good (lowering import duties on pulses and edible oils) and bad (banning/curbing exports of cereals, sugar and onion and imposing stockholding limits on wheat and pulses). It should show similar alacrity when it comes to farmers. The recent moves on relaxing restrictions on rice and onion shipments, and approving procurement of soyabean by states at the minimum support price, are welcome.

## PRISONS OF PREJUDICE

The Court shows the way by directing prohibition on caste-based discrimination in prisons

THE CONSTITUTION PLACES equality and the dignity of the individual at the heart of the republic's legal and moral architecture. However, given the reality of stratification in society and the nature of the colonial state apparatus — much of which independent India inherited — realising the constitutional promise is an ongoing task. On Thursday, a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court, led by the Chief Justice of India, ordered the Centre and state governments "to revise their Prison Manuals/Rules" by removing discriminatory language and provisions. It directed that the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023 include a prohibition on caste-based discrimination in prisons.

The Court is right to point out that "Not providing dignity to prisoners is a relic of the colonisers and pre-colonial mechanisms, where oppressive systems were designed to dehumanise and degrade those under the control of the state". The Uttar Pradesh Jail Manual, 2022, makes open reference to "convicts of the scavenger class" while the West Bengal Jail Code says that "Food shall be cooked and carried to the cells by prisoner-cooks of suitable caste". And that "Sweepers should be chosen from the Mether or Hari caste, also from the Chandal or other castes, if by the custom of the district they perform similar work when free." The Madhya Pradesh Jail manual entrenches colonial-era prejudices against certain "de-notified" tribal communities — notified as "criminal tribes" during the British Raj — by classifying them as "habitual offenders". The rules governing prisons can be summed up by a line in the Andhra Pradesh Prison Rules — "make allowance for caste prejudice".

In the last few years, both political debate and policy reform have been informed by a call for "decolonisation". It seeks to place the blame for many social ills — including caste-based discrimination — on the colonial hanger. It has culminated in the three new criminal codes. The Court shows the way by championing constitutional values of dignity and equality for the incarcerated. However, it is not in prisons alone that both the repressions of "traditional" Indian society as well as the vestigial oppressions of the colonial system find expression. As the SC pointed out in *Armesh Kumar v. State of Bihar*, the police, for instance, is an institution that "has not come out of its colonial image despite six decades of independence, it is largely considered as a tool of harassment, oppression and surely not considered a friend of public". For the political project of "decolonisation" to be meaningful, it must cast its net wider and include aspects of law, government and bureaucratic functioning that continue to be discriminatory.

## AND THE WINNER IS...

An octogenarian participated in a beauty pageant. She knew something her competitors didn't

THERE IS SOMETHING about the granny era. After a lifetime of chasing professional milestones, looking after the family, this is, finally, their moment to do as they please. Go off the grid, cock a snook at convention and live it up. This is what 81-year-old Choi Soon-hwa from South Korea did. A former hospital worker, Soon-hwa took up modelling at 72 at the suggestion of a patient. Her children had flown the nest, the family income had almost never been enough, and the endless time after retirement only made apparent the loneliness that had always been on the horizon. This year, when the Miss Universe beauty pageant relaxed their age criteria — the earlier bar had been 28 years — Soon-hwa saw in it an unexpected opportunity: A chance to participate. That she didn't win the South Korea leg of it mattered little. She was dreaming a little dream and the usually ageist beauty industry, with its impossible standards and its veneration of youth, was willing to play along.

There are several delicious ironies here, not least of which is the desperate attempt of the beauty industry to stay relevant by subverting its own prejudices. In recent years, it has modified its criteria to let in married women, single mothers and transgender women. Despite its tokenism, the award went to a 22-year-old. But Soon-hwa owned her wrinkles, white hair and crow's feet to win the Best Dressed award.

Perhaps, there is another message in Soon-hwa's confidence: The grannies know what 20-somethings trying to fit their lives into social moulds rarely do. That age is the realm of survivors, those who know what it's like to wrest back control given half a chance and do things their way. As the British poet Jenny Joseph wrote in "Warning", "When I am an old woman I shall wear purple/ With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.../ I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired/ And gobble up samples in shops.../ And make up for the sobriety of my youth."

A COUPLE OF years ago, we pointed out that reservoir levels matter more than rains when it comes to forecasting India's food production and inflation. Now, we take it a step further by focusing on temperatures. We find that they do a much better job in explaining and predicting food output and price rises.

Using records that stretch back to the 1950s, we can see that average temperatures have been rising along with temperature volatility. Sure, that's not a surprise. But what we find next is that with an appropriate lag, the correlation between average temperatures and India's food inflation has been rising consistently over time. As Earth heats up, crop yields fall. Indeed, scientists and researchers project that a 2.5-4.9 degrees Celsius increase in temperatures across the country could lead to a decrease in wheat yields of 41-52 per cent, and a fall in rice yields of 32-40 per cent.

Look no further than the heatwave of March 2022 which lowered the sugarcane crop yield by 30 per cent, while hurting the production of vegetables, as well as oilseeds. Or, the heatwave of March 2024, where temperatures rose to 50.5 degrees Celsius in some areas, leading to a sharp rise in vegetable prices due to crop damage caused by heat stress. In both cases, crop damage led to high inflation and weak rural incomes.

All of this is clearly visible across various food items. Analysing a decade of data, we find the correlation between average temperatures and food inflation has been rising across all the main crops — perishables (vegetables and fruits) and durables (cereal, pulses, oilseeds and sugar).

And, this is not just limited to crops. High temperatures can raise animal mortality. Even the prices of dairy, poultry and fishery products are becoming increasingly sensitive to rising temperatures.

Most perishable crops are short-cycle crops (for example, vegetables which can be harvested every two to three months). These crops have traditionally been more sensitive

to heat waves than others, and this sensitivity is rising. We find that the average correlation between temperatures and the price of perishables has risen from 20 per cent to 60 per cent over a decade, marking a three-fold increase. Durable crops are long-cycle crops (for example, cereals which are harvested every six-12 months). Together with animal proteins, they have traditionally been less sensitive to temperatures, but their sensitivity is growing, with the correlation rising from 10 per cent to 45 per cent over a decade, marking an even bigger five-fold increase.

This, then, brings us to another important question. If the sensitivity of food production and inflation to temperatures has risen over time, what role do rains and reservoirs play?

To answer this, we need to get technical. We bring out our trusted food inflation model, which can help us parse the role of temperatures on food inflation better, alongside other variables that also impact it. These include reservoir levels, the government's minimum support prices for agriculture, and a variable that picks up supply-side food price management steps. We find that nimble steps by the current government to buy or sell from government granaries, import or export, and then quickly transport food items across the country have helped lower food inflation over the last decade. Clamping down on hoarders has helped too. We capture all of these supply-side management steps with a dummy variable which switches on in the last 10 years.

Our model is a robust one (with a R-squared of 80 per cent), doing a good job of predicting food inflation. But strangely enough, when we include temperatures in our model, it doesn't sit too comfortably with the other variables. It messes up their importance. Perhaps, the temperature variable contains all the information which the reservoir variable holds. To check for that, we keep the temperature variable in the model but remove the reservoir variable. And this does the trick. It vastly improves our model and

its forecasting power (the model's R-squared goes up to 90 per cent).

What does all of this mean? Temperatures are far superior than rainfall in explaining and forecasting food inflation. In fact, once temperatures are included, there is no value in analysing rains and reservoir levels. There could be a couple of reasons for this. One, with irrigation facilities improving, the low rains have been less of a problem, especially in areas like north-western India, known as the food bowl of the country. Two, with reservoirs and temperatures having a 50 per cent correlation, our sense is that a lot of the meaningful information contained in the reservoir variable gets picked up by temperatures. Three, there is a non-linear relationship between temperatures and food inflation.

So, what are current temperatures saying about the outlook for food inflation and rural demand? There is some good news here. The El Niño weather phenomenon from last year, typically associated with low rains and high temperatures, has made way for La Niña, associated with cooler temperatures and stronger precipitation. Temperatures have fallen over the last month (compared to the Mar-Jun period). If this sticks, food inflation could fall quickly, taking headline inflation close to 4 per cent, which is RBI's target, by March 2025. With temperatures cooling after a severe heatwave earlier this year, we expect the RBI to start easing rates in the fourth quarter of 2024.

While this is good news at a time when temperatures are normalising from high levels, it is worth keeping it in the back of our minds that over the medium term, rising temperatures could become a big problem for inflation management. The impact of weak rains can be managed by better irrigation facilities, but there is no magic wand to manage the impact of rising temperatures.

The writer is chief India economist, HSBC



SANDIP ROY

## A STREETCAR NAMED NOSTALGIA

It's the end of the track for Kolkata's trams

THE CYNICAL JOKE goes that if you want to save something in Kolkata you need to find its connection to either of the city's presiding deities — Rabindranath Tagore or Satyajit Ray. Mamata Banerjee even wanted to acquire the house in which Tagore had lived for a few months in London in 1912.

But neither Tagore nor Ray seem to be enough to save Kolkata's trams. Tagore wrote a famous poem, 'One Night I had a Dream', that was part of *Sahaj Path*, the first book many Bengalis read. In it, the whole city is in motion. The roads slither like pythons and the trams thump along on them. Ray used the tram for the opening credit sequence in his 1963 classic *Mahanagar* (The Big City). His biographer Andrew Robinson wrote that those shots of the "intermittent flashing and popping of an overhead connector on a moving tram" set the "workaday mood of the story" by showing something that is "part of the fabric of Calcutta existence".

A restored *Mahanagar* was just re-released by R D Bansal Productions. Ironically, as I watched it in a theatre, I also heard the Bengal government planned to get rid of trams altogether except for one little loop preserved as a touristy memento. Since then social media has been awash in the "ding-ding" tram nostalgia. This was the first city in India to get a tram. It is the last city to still have them. Now in its 151th year, it feels like the end of the line.

The arguments for and against are well-worn, like the tram tracks. Proponents of trams claim they are coming back around the

world as eco-friendly modes of transportation. Opponents insist that as cars have increased exponentially, Kolkata's streets are too congested and narrow to support lumbering trams. The Calcutta Tram Users Association points to other congested cities with streetcars, like Hong Kong. Transportation consultants say that there have been massive technological upgrades to streetcars. They are quieter, faster and more efficient.

But in a world that worships speed, whether in cars, chips or phones, who will speak up for a tram that trundles unhurriedly at its own pace? Governments like shiny new things. So they would rather invest in a fleet of electric buses and sleek metro rails. The tram feels like a colonial throwback, a streetcar named nostalgia. Even the Communist government had declared them "obsolete" in the nineties. But like a stubborn old aunt who refuses to die, trams hung on even as 50-plus routes dwindled down to two or three.

Inertia, strong unions and sentiment might have inadvertently saved Kolkata's trams when other cities got rid of them. A smarter government could have built on that happenstance to make them part of a blueprint for a greener future. New suburban townships like Newtown could have easily been serviced by streetcars. Instead the government chose to let trams rot, hoping they would rust away into oblivion. A retired tram services employee told me that cars, bereft of maintenance and upgrades, were just moving

by God's grace. But he also claimed if they only allocated some Rs 30 crores the current fleet could still run for the next 15-20 years.

But the problem has always been lack of imagination. Raised tram-only tracks were lowered so as to not take up extra road space but no tram stops were built which meant people had to board and alight from trams in the middle of careening traffic. The very people who used the tram the most, the elderly, mothers bringing children home from school, were the ones least able to dodge two lanes of traffic to hail a tram. Then the government said trams were not generating enough business. The Calcutta Tram Users Association calls it "planned obsolescence."

Activists are fighting it out in court and through cultural events like Tramjatra. The matter has been before a committee appointed by the High Court in 2023 whose findings are still awaited. No matter what happens there, it's clear not everything is worth saving for nostalgia's sake — hand-pulled rickshaws, for example. But the real tragedy here is that this was a rare case where nostalgia could have propelled the city forward instead of backwards. Trams could have been part of the future, not just a vestige of the past.

The yellowing signs inside the tram cars still read "Please tender exact fare. No change available for Rs 100 or Rs 50." But a change in mindset is much harder to find.

Roy is a novelist and the author of Don't Let Him Know

## OCTOBER 5, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### PUNJAB BOMB BLASTS

TWO PERSONS WERE killed and scores hurt as extremists hurled bombs on Ramlila crowds at Mansa in Bhatinda and Amritsar. In another incident, two suspected terrorists were killed in encounters with security forces in Gurdaspur district. Two persons, including a child, were killed when the terrorists lobbed a bomb at a Ramlila crowd at Mansa.

### ROTTEN WHEAT DEATHS

AT LEAST 200 people have died of diarrhoea after consuming "poisonous atta" (wheat flour) distributed as relief in the flood-ravaged

Sitamari district, according to official reports. The reports said that "rotten wheat" had also been supplied to the consumers through fair-price shops. The Union Minister of Food and Civil Supplies, Bhagwat Jha Azad, had ordered an inquiry into the allegations recently.

### TIHAR JAIL RECORDS

SOME PRISONERS SEEM to have disappeared from Tihar jail without a trace as there are no release orders on documents showing their departure from jail. Last week, Jail Superintendent A B Shukla, lodged a complaint with the Janakpuri police about the missing records. But before the police could

register a case, the superintendent withdrew the complaint claiming it was an "internal affair" of the jail administration.

### INDIA-NZ TIES

INDIA AND NEW Zealand are set to improve their relations. This was evident from the talks between Indira Gandhi and the New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange. Lange announced his government's decision to reopen its High Commission with the Everest hero Sir Edmund Hillary as the High Commissioner. The New Zealand High Commission, which was closed down two years ago, is likely to be reopened in December.





# 13 THE IDEAS PAGE

## Plugging the global skill gap

Government initiatives to develop skills will help Indian workers cater to the needs of ageing developed economies. Experiences of these migrants will also stand their home country in good stead



PRAVEEN PARDESHI

THERE WON'T BE any "brain drain" when 997 youth from across Maharashtra, with only high school certificates, begin their jobs in Israel at a monthly salary of Rs 1.37 lakh. It will be circular migration, resulting in skill gain for both Israel and India. This move is part of the labour mobility agreements which Prime Minister Narendra Modi has crafted with countries like Germany, Japan and Israel. Permanent migration from India of highly-qualified doctors and engineers is, indeed, brain drain. Until 2000, most doctors and engineers who eventually settled abroad had studied in highly subsidised institutions funded by Indian taxpayers. Their remittances were large, but dwindled as they settled down permanently in the destination countries. Moreover, the total remittances originating from high-income individuals from the US, the UK, Canada and Australia amount to only 32 per cent of the inward remittances to India. On the other hand, manual workers in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman contribute 40 per cent of the total remittances to India.

Human migration across centuries has shaped cultures in several parts of the world. Following the discovery of the Americas and Australia in the Age of Exploration, and in the absence of immigration and border controls, people from Europe quickly populated these lands. Thanks to the vast resources available there, Europe was able to escape poverty. Even Imperial China, which was heavily populated in the eastern mainland, expanded westwards to the vast empty lands of the Gobi desert and the Tian Shan mountains and beyond. India, on the other hand, was hemmed in by the Himalayas in the north and the ocean in the south, and our civilisation evolved by welcoming outsiders rather than colonising other lands.

Today, mass migration of this kind is not possible due to border controls. The migration of a few thousand highly qualified people from India to the developed North is only a small fraction of the 12 million people who join the workforce every year. It makes no dent in the job market or poverty in India.

The Economist magazine, quoting Charles Goodhart, Manoj Pradhan and Pratyancha Pardeshi, has surmised that the ageing population in Western Europe and Japan can incentivise the flow of skilled workers and caregivers from the developing world. The ageing demography of the developed world has created the greatest opportunity for India to enhance the quality of life of many Indians in a single generation. Today, there is a great shortage in Europe and Japan of people who can write algorithms for quantum computers, build infrastructure or work in healthcare. "The biggest challenge for Europe's largest economy will be growth constraints due to a workforce shortage," said Robert Habeck, Germany's Federal Minister for Economic Affairs, recently. Circular migration is a win-win solution, with government-to-government agreements to safeguard the wages and so-



CR Sasikummar

cial security of migrant workers in destination countries and their guaranteed return.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has followed up his global outreach with bilateral agreements with non-Anglophone countries like Germany, Israel and Japan to meet skill deficits. Israel has a demand for over 100,000 skilled masons, carpenters and home-based carers, who will be given an assured monthly salary of Rs 1.3 lakh and accommodation and social security by the employers.

Even though India has the requisite numbers, fulfilling the global skills gap is not an easy proposition. Language barriers are a major challenge. G-to-G agreements for circular migration require exact skill-matching and many legal compliances. These include acquiring a passport and the ability to demonstrate skills in a format required by the receiving country.

The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) has aggregated the skill gap demand for many of India's partner countries. The Maharashtra Institution for Transformation (MITRA) worked closely with the NSDC, under the Union Ministry of Skill Development (MSD) and the Maharashtra state departments of Labour and Employment, Skills and Entrepreneurship over the last three months to evolve SOPs and policy norms so that skilled youth could access higher wage markets.

For example, it was a challenge to identify, at scale, youth with the exact required skills, who were willing to work in Israel. Selection and placement in Israel is based on physical tests as per protocols. Though Indian workers may have the requisite skills, they may not be able to demonstrate them in the pre-defined manner with the use of specific tools. Hence, they need booster training. The NSDC has developed a four-day course on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to upgrade the existing skills.

MITRA and State Skill Development Young Professionals worked with a call centre to update the data of nearly two lakh construction workers in the trades of plastering, ceramic tiling, formwork and bar bending registered with the Maharashtra Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board. Nearly 2,500 willing workers were shortlisted and a pre-selection test was organised. Thereafter, 24 ITIs were identified and will-

Today, there is a great shortage in Europe and Japan of people who can write algorithms for quantum computers, build infrastructure or work in healthcare. 'The biggest challenge for Europe's largest economy will be growth constraints due to a workforce shortage,' said Robert Habeck, Germany's Federal Minister for Economic Affairs, recently. Circular migration is a win-win solution, with government-to-government agreements to safeguard the wages and social security of migrant workers in destination countries and their guaranteed return.

ing workers were asked to participate in a booster training in English and construction skills. This gave them a competitive edge in the tests conducted by the Israel Builders Association. Where many candidates did not have passports, the Ministry of External Affairs and regional passport officers of Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur fast-tracked the issuance of passports, even giving interview dates on holidays to clear the new applicants. CSR funding was organised by Nagpur's Collector for candidates who could not pay their passport application fees.

Then came the challenge of setting up testing facilities exactly as per the protocol prescribed by Israel. ITI Pune took up the challenge. However one hurdle came up: Bar bending required a specific machine which was not used in India. Experts at the ITI fabricated the 12 bar bending testing machines which matched the Israeli requirements. Finally 997 candidates were selected by the Israeli team after a rigorous four-day testing process.

As this is part of a circular migration agreement, these workers will come back to India after five years. But they will bring back enhanced experience of working with sophisticated construction machinery and advanced management protocols, which will benefit the Indian construction industry.

MITRA is working with the Maharashtra Skills, Labour and Medical Education departments to create a dynamic database of willing youth with specific skills that match the needs of partner countries like Israel, Japan and Germany. The NSDC is partnering with the Maharashtra Skill Department to ensure that these youth get refresher training. The state government has also decided to provide them the opportunity to learn Japanese, German or French.

Ultimately, as artificial, non-economic barriers to the free movement of workers, created in the 19th and 20th century, collapse, driven by skill deficits in parts of the world with ageing populations, India should position itself to become the global source of human capital. Circular migration will ensure that the movement takes place at scale and that India also gains from the experience of returning workers.

The writer is CEO, MITRA

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The Democrats have lost Arab-American and other voters — Kamala Harris has differed from her boss in tone more than substance — while Mr Trump will seize on higher oil prices due to the crisis and anything that can be portrayed as weakness towards Iran. The shrinking of America's status could accelerate." — THE GUARDIAN

## A licence to borrow unwisely

For states, interest on debt is not related to their fiscal position. Finance Commission should find a way to encourage prudent behaviour



ISHAN BAKSHI

IN 1975, NEW York City was facing a fiscal crisis. With the precarious state of its finances, the city was also locked out of the markets. Initially, Gerald Ford, the then US president, vehemently opposed providing assistance. Ford went on to say that he would "veto any bill that has as its purpose a federal bailout of New York City to prevent a default". The rationale was straightforward — denying a bailout would force the city to put its house in order. This explicit dismissal of the possibility of a bailout by the federal government was succinctly captured by the headline in the *New York Daily News*: "Ford to City: Drop Dead". Ford, however, did help later on, extending loans worth \$2.3 billion.

The issue of a federal bailout or backstop for sub-national debt, or the extension of a guarantee, either implicit or explicit, or the lack thereof, is worth revisiting in light of the fiscal stress facing many states in India.

State government borrowings in India are perceived to be backed by an implicit guarantee of the Union government. In practice, the implicit guarantee seems to be exercised through an auto debit mechanism on the states' bank accounts (CAS Nagpur). This guarantee, which essentially implies that the probability of a default is near zero, eliminates the credit risk of states. Thus, unlike in the private market where interest rates differ depending on the financial position of the borrower, yields on state bonds hardly vary despite a difference in their fiscal position. Higher interest rates are not charged to compensate for the credit risk.

For instance, take Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab. Not only is Gujarat an economic powerhouse, but it also has a lower debt-to-GSDP ratio, a lower fiscal deficit and a revenue surplus. Both Punjab and Himachal Pradesh are under severe fiscal strain. In fact, Himachal Pradesh was recently unable to pay salaries on time. Yet, this difference in the fiscal position of these states does not reflect to a similar degree in their bond yields. The market does not differentiate. Fiscally stressed states do not have to worry about the wrath of bond markets. And so they can continue borrowing at a rate that does not reflect their precarious financial position.

It has often been argued that India needs to move towards pricing of state debt that is market-determined. In Himachal Pradesh's case, for example, it would force the state government to tighten its belt, and take the necessary measures to improve its fiscal position as it would have to pay a much higher interest rate on its borrowings. Put differently, the market would ensure fiscal discipline. But is it really that straightforward? Would market pricing lead to states in a stressed financial position — such as Bihar,

Kerala, Punjab, Rajasthan, and West Bengal (as per an RBI study), as well as some of the special category hill and Northeastern states — being simply priced out of the market? This is not just a problem for the government's bankers, but an economic and political problem. Perhaps this lack of clarity is one of the reasons holding back foreign investors from fully embracing state debt.

The peculiarity of the situation often manifests in ironic ways. For instance, in one northern state, a power corporation is said to have inserted the auto debit mechanism in its contracts — perhaps in an attempt to get a higher rating. Another fiscally stressed state is more punctual in paying its power suppliers than in paying salaries of government employees. Farmers, who are the primary beneficiaries of free power in the state are, after all, a more powerful political lobby. State bond yields though don't reflect this stress.

State government finances are plagued by the problem of TIPS: Tariffs on electricity and water that do not reflect the true cost of provision, and are minimal in large parts of the country; interest payments on state debt which are eating away a large share of states revenues; pension obligations that may rise further as states opt for the old or the unified pension scheme; and allocations for the increasingly long list of subsidies that are being announced with greater frequency. While there is considerable variation across states, in the case of a large number of states, just the allocations for interest payments, pension and power account for more than 70 per cent of their own tax revenue. A large number of states are now borrowing not for capex, but just to fund their consumption.

States also respond in different ways. As per reports, the Himachal Pradesh government is looking into the myriad subsidies that have been extended, perhaps looking for ways to reduce its obligations. On the other hand, the Punjab government reportedly sought a bailout from the 16th Finance Commission. But the question is whether another bailout will fix the underlying problem. After all, what is the position of the power discoms after the Uday bailout?

As the taxation power of states is limited, and considering their reluctance to increase collections through the non-tax route, the route to adjust their debt deficits will be through expenditure control. Perhaps the imposition of austerity or the mere threat of it will change the incentives of politicians. As long as fiscally imprudent behaviour is not penalised, there will be no incentive to behave responsibly.

How long will the implicit guarantee be extended to state borrowings? It cannot be anyone's case that this arrangement should continue forever. Is there a way out? Will a new set of fiscal rules, which vary depending on a state's fiscal position be appropriate, or will market discipline be more effective? The 16th Finance Commission should offer a way out.

ishan.bakshi@expressindia.com

## Tale of two UN speeches

Netanyahu, Zelenskyy say they want conflict to end, but only on their terms



RAM RAJA  
BY RAM MADHAV

AT THE UN General Assembly last week, two speeches, delivered by leaders of countries engaged in wars in Eurasia attracted global attention. Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, talked about the war on terror that his army has been waging for almost a year now. Then, there was Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, who spoke of the spirit of his people in defending their territory against Russian invasion for over two years.

Both Netanyahu and Zelenskyy insisted that they wanted the wars to end, but on their terms. Netanyahu said that he did not intend to come to the UN initially, but "decided to come and set the record straight" after listening to "the lies and slander levelled at my country". Netanyahu minced no words in condemning what he called the "moral stain" of the UN in dealing with his country. He described the UN as a "house of darkness" and "anti-Israel flat-earth society" and complained that there is an "automatic majority" that can be mustered for "any false charge, any outlandish allegation". Netanyahu was not making wild accusations. The UN has condemned Israel 174 times in the last 10 years, while it condemned all other countries just 73 times. When Netanyahu emphatically stated at the end of his 35-minute address that Israel will "win this battle because we don't have a choice", not just those in the galleries but people outside it applauded.

President Zelenskyy, who spoke a couple of days before Netanyahu, also complained that

it is impossible to "truly and fairly" resolve matters of war and peace at the UN, because "too much depends in the security council on the veto power. When the aggressor exercises veto power, the UN is powerless to stop the war," he said. People applauded Zelenskyy when he sought support from "all nations of the world" for "peace for my people — real and just peace".

However, there is a difference between Netanyahu's war and Zelenskyy's peace. While Netanyahu wages his war without seeking anybody's involvement, Zelenskyy assumes that the onus for ending the war in Ukraine lies on all other nations in the world. Even in that, Zelenskyy insists that he would only accept the peace formula presented by him a year ago at the UN and a few months before that at the G20 summit in Indonesia as the sole basis for ending the war. He does not mind throwing jibes at those who come up with alternative suggestions. "The peace formula has already existed for two years. Maybe somebody wants a Nobel prize for their political biography for frozen truce instead of real peace", he quipped.

More countries stood by Ukraine than by Israel in pursuit of the resolution of the conflict. Yet, more people see Netanyahu's war on his own terms as more justified than Zelenskyy's peace on his own terms. This is because many outside the Western powers see the Ukraine conflict as an ego clash between Russia and the NATO powers. While almost every major nation has condemned Russia's tanks rolling into Ukraine, not everybody views the end of

the war from Zelenskyy's prism — not even former US President Trump who has called NATO "obsolete".

Two decades ago, when the US faced its worst challenge in the form of a terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in September 2001, President Putin was one of the first to call then-US President George W Bush to extend support, prompting Condoleezza Rice, Bush's National Security Advisor, to comment that "the Cold War really is over". Eight months later, when Bush and his wife visited Putin in St Petersburg and Moscow, many in the US administration assumed that Russia would not only join the WTO, like China did a year before but even the European Union. Some optimists argued that it could join NATO too, an organisation created to crush its former avatar, the Soviet Union.

But Putin wanted to join the Western powers on an equal footing and wanted NATO to go. He recalled what James Baker, Secretary of State in George Bush Sr's government, asked frozen truce instead of real peace", he quipped. A few months after the collapse of the German Wall: Would the Soviets retreat militarily from the occupied eastern half of Germany in exchange for the NATO's promise to not expand further east towards Russia? Gorbachev was willing to accede to the proposal, but the Soviet Union had collapsed before it could be formalised. While Gorbachev, and later, Putin repeatedly raised this issue of NATO's expansion, the Americans seemed convinced that

Russia was not in a position anymore to stall the same and went about inviting more European countries into its orbit.

When NATO was started, it had 12 member countries. Twenty more joined through 10 rounds of expansion. Seven rounds of expansion happened after the Baker-Gorbachev conversation, which brought in countries in Russia's neighbourhood: The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 1999, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004, Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, North Macedonia in 2020, Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024.

Both Gorbachev and Putin believed that the West had tricked them. George Kennan, the US diplomat of Cold War era "containment" policy fame, had warned that the expansion of NATO would be "the most fateful error" that would "infect the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russia". Kennan proved right when NATO came knocking at Putin's doors through continuous expansion. The Ukraine war is the result of that tussle between two egos — it can be resolved through a "frozen truce", which Zelenskyy dislikes. Does he remember that in the 2019 presidential elections, he ran on the plank of a negotiated settlement with Russia on Donbas, prompting his rival, Yanukovich to brand him as "dangerously pro-Russian"?

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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### GAME OF HOPE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'In the game' (IE, October 4). India is yet to win the Women's T20 World Cup. The India team will walk in with the hope of finally claiming the trophy. In the 2020 final at Melbourne, it wilted against Australia, the defending champion. Today, Harmanpreet Kaur's strong unit will clash against New Zealand in Dubai and a good first outing is essential. A significant shift in both preparation and mindset is required to avoid upsets like the one in the Asia Cup final.

SS Paul, Nadia

M K Gandhi's birth anniversary, someone who championed satyagraha as a tool for social change, popular Ladakhi activist Sonam Wangchuk and his group were denied entry into the capital and detained for two days. Wangchuk has consistently articulated the need to protect the Himalayas, which have a significant influence on the survival of local communities and people throughout north India. It appears that the government has been disgruntled with Wangchuk since his frequent "ground zero" disclosures after the 2020 border flare-up with China.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

### RELEASE THE DATA

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Elephant in the room' (IE, October 4). Tracking elephants should not be an impossible task for the state. Unless present census numbers are disclosed, meaningful remedies cannot emerge. We need more than just a feeble finger pointed at urbanisation and poaching. Mandating reduced speed in elephant corridors has been a move in the right direction. Yet, the government's claim of "population stability" is arbitrary and as uncertain as the future of cheetah conservation efforts seen of late. Releasing accurate census data is the need of the hour.

Raja Bandopadhyaya, Vadodara

### CONSIDER WITH CARE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Both for and against' (IE, October 4). The practical implementation of the One Nation One Election proposal raises important questions. The necessity for constitutional amendments to facilitate synchronised elections cannot be overlooked. Moreover, the diverse political scenarios across states mean that local issues may not receive the attention they deserve in a combined electoral approach. Each state has its own set of concerns that often differ from national priorities, and merging them could dilute the electoral process's efficacy. Further, there is a risk that local candidates and state-specific platforms might be overshadowed by national political narratives, potentially leading to a lack of representation of regional interests. A thorough discussion involving all stakeholders is essential.

Arsh Noor, via email





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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to [explained@indianexpress.com](mailto:explained@indianexpress.com)

# The desi cow and the economics of Maharashtra's subsidy scheme

**PARTHA SARATHI BISWAS**  
 PUNE, OCTOBER 4

EARLIER THIS week, the Maharashtra government announced a subsidy of Rs 50 per animal per day for cattlesheds (*gaushalas*) that take care of indigenous (*desi*) breeds of cows.

The financial incentive will help preserve the state's *desi* cow population, the Cabinet note said. The government has also declared the state's indigenous cow breeds as "RajyaMata-Gomata".

## Maharashtra's proposal

The subsidy scheme to preserve *desi* breeds of cows will be implemented by a Goseva Ayog, which will have scrutiny committees in all districts. *Gaushalas* that house indigenous breeds will have to apply online, and the subsidy will be released after the district-level committee submits a report.

The numbers of indigenous cows were on the decline, the government said. According to the 20th Livestock Census conducted in 2019, Maharashtra had 46,13,632 cows under the "indigenous/ nondescript" category. This was 8.7% less than the population of 50,53,490 for these cows recorded in the previous Census (2012).

The official government resolution (GR) for the scheme is yet to be released. It is, therefore, not clear whether the subsidy will be for all the state's indigenous cow breeds as cows under the indigenous/ nondescript category, or only for those animals that are certified as indigenous. It is financially not feasible to provide Rs 50/ day to 46 lakh cows.

## Indigenous vs nondescript

Indigenous cows are those that belong to any of the breeds registered as such by the Karnal-based National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources, a body under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) that



The most common indigenous breed in the state is Khillari. Wikimedia Commons

aims to "protect and conserve indigenous farm animal genetic resources for sustainable utilisation and livelihood security".

Nondescript cows, on the other hand, have no recognised breed characteristics.

## Cows in Maharashtra

The Maharashtra Animal Husbandry Commissionerate defines indigenous cows as including both descript and nondescript

animals, with the latter having at least 50% indigenous-breed blood. A large proportion of the state's cattle population comprises nondescript animals with less than 50% blood of any recognised indigenous breed.

There are 19 breeds of indigenous cows in Maharashtra. Khillari accounts for half the indigenous cow population in the state. The breed is favoured by farmers for its sturdiness and potential for use as a draught animal. Most of the state's Khillari cattle population is found in Pune division, where bullock cart races are held regularly.

Other indigenous breeds in Maharashtra include Deoni, Red Kandhari, Sahiwal, and Tharparkar.

## Desi milch animals

There are 37 indigenous cattle breeds in India, of which only four are good milch animals, Dr Nayanar Hegde, former president of the Pune-based nonprofit BAIF Development Research Foundation, said. The vast majority of indigenous breeds are pri-

marily used for agriculture and transport.

Indigenous breeds produce only 3.44 kg of milk per day on average, compared to 8.55 kg per day for exotic/ crossbred animals, according to the central government's Basic Animal Husbandry Statistics (BAHS) 2023.

While Indian breeds are harder and believed to be better suited to Indian conditions, for farmers, milk production is key.

## Arguments for desi

The conservation of indigenous breeds has long been on the agenda of the BJP both at the Centre and in the state. The National Gokul Mission which was launched in December 2014 had a component of the preservation and promotion of indigenous breeds of bovine animals. The decision of the Eknath Shinde government has come as the state heads to Assembly elections.

Advocates for *desi* breeds claim they produce 'A2' milk, which is supposed to be healthier than the 'A1' milk produced by animals that have been crossed with exotic breeds like

Holstein Friesian, Jersey, and Brown Swiss. A1 and A2 contain genetic variants of proteins, which differ in their amino acid sequence.

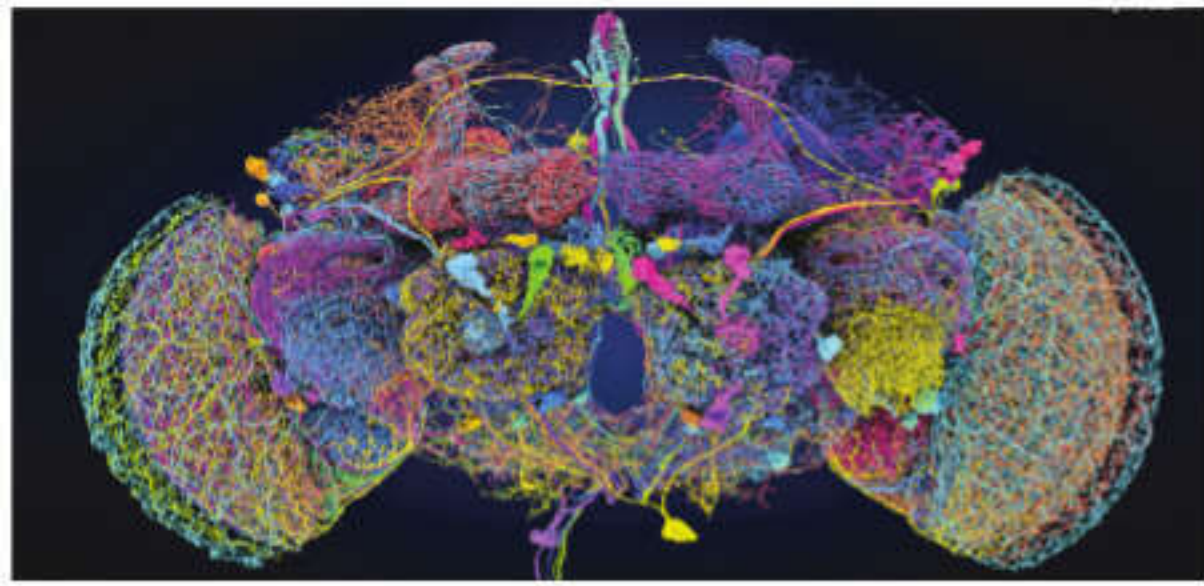
There is no scientific consensus on whether A2 milk is really healthier. Dr Hegde said the claims about A2 are not supported by research or ground observations. In August, the food safety regulator Food Safety and Standard Authority of India (FSSAI) advised Food Business Operators (FBOs) to not market their milk and milk products "in the name of A1 and A2", but withdrew the advisory days later.

## Subsidy and prices

The scheme has been announced for animals reared in *gaushalas*, and not by farmers. Most farmers are more keen on remunerative prices for their milk. While the state government has announced a Rs 5/ litre subsidy to farmers battling low realisations, the release of the subsidy is conditional upon farmers receiving a base price of Rs 30/ litre from dairies. And most dairies are not paying more than Rs 27-28 per litre of milk.

## EXPLAINED SCIENCE

# SCIENTISTS MAPPED THE FRUIT FLY'S BRAIN: WHY IS THIS SIGNIFICANT?



Distinct circuits of neurons (shown in different colours) in the fly brain. The NYT

SCIENTISTS ON Thursday said they have successfully mapped the entire brain of an adult fruit fly — the first time that researchers have been able to create such a detailed survey of an adult animal. The neurological milestone is a step toward one day making a detailed map of the human brain that will help in understanding — and probably treating — mental health conditions such as Parkinson's and depression.

Nine papers, describing the research in detail, were published in the journal *Nature* on Wednesday. Hundreds of scientists and citizen scientists worldwide contributed to the work.

Sebastian Seung, one of the co-leaders of the research and a professor at Princeton University, told *Reuters*, "You might be asking why we should care about the brain of a fruit fly. My simple answer is that if we can truly understand how any brain functions, it's bound to tell us something about all brains."

## How was the brain mapped?

Scientists began mapping in 2013 by dunking the brain of an adult fly in a chemical bath, hardening it into a solid block, according to a report by *The New York Times*. "They shaved an exquisitely thin layer off the top of the block and used a microscope to take pictures of it," the report said.

Researchers then shaved another layer and took a new picture — in all, 7,050 sections were imaged and 21 million photos were taken to map the entire brain. The first high-resolution picture of the brain was produced more than a decade after the work kicked off.

## Why is this significant?

Scientists detailed more than 50 million connections between more than 139,000 neurons, the brain nerve cells. They also classified the cells into 8,453 distinct types, making it the biggest catalogue of cell types in any brain. The NYT said.

These achievements provided numerous insights. Scientists analysed what different types of cells do, how the fly's eyes process motion and colour information, and discovered a large assemblage of "hub neurons" that may speed up information flow, a report by *Reuters* said.

The mapping of the fruit fly's brain can also give information about not just other animals but also humans. Although the human brain is far more complex than that of a fruit fly, the logic or "source code" at work when neurons communicate and interact with one another is similar, John Ngai, a co-leaders of the work, told *The Washington Post*.

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**JAY MAZOOMDAAR**  
 NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 4

THE ENVIRONMENT Ministry has shelved its elephant census report, 'Status of Elephant in India 2022-23', citing a delay in the census in the Northeast. *The Indian Express* reported this week. The report on the current status of the national heritage animal in the rest of India has been printed but its release is now on hold until at least June 2025.

## Elephant numbers are down

Data from the unreleased report show a sharp decline in elephant populations in the east-central and southern landscapes. The slide in numbers is especially dramatic in Southern West Bengal (84%), Jharkhand (64%), Odisha (54%), and Kerala (51%).

The report identifies "mushrooming developmental projects" such as "unmitigated mining and linear infrastructure construction" as a significant threat to the species.

The Environment Ministry has pointed out that the elephant census employed refined methodologies, suggesting that these numbers may not be comparable with the outcomes of previous censuses that have been conducted every five years since the 1990s.

However, the new counting methods may not fully explain the fall in elephant numbers. "The new method based on DNA profiling has not brought down the numbers in the northern (Shivalik Hills and Gangetic Plain) landscape where the latest figure (2,062) closely aligns with the outcome of the previous census (2,096)," a wildlife biologist based in Bengaluru pointed out. "So, the drastic fall in numbers elsewhere can't be dismissed as a fallout of methodological variation," the biologist said.

## Old counting methods

Until 2002, elephants were counted in India by the "total direct count" method, which means a simple head count of elephants that were sighted. This method has "limited or no scientific basis for large landscapes or populations", the latest census report says.

In 2002, the "indirect dung count method" was introduced in the southern states. Enumerators walked in pre-designated straight lines through the forest and recorded elephant droppings and the "dung decay rate". The data were extrapolated to estimate elephant density in an area by factoring in the "defecation rate" of elephants.



People take selfies with a wild elephant by a highway in Munnar. Hadlee Ranjith

Around the same time, the "total direct count" method was modified to "sample block counts" — or a survey of limited areas of 5 sq km each to maximise the probability of detection and enumeration of all elephants in that block. Elephant densities in the surveyed blocks were then extrapolated to estimate populations in larger areas.

## Elephants and tigers

On the occasion of World Elephant Day (August 12) in 2021, Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav announced that the government would "harmonise population estimation methods along more scientific lines" by "converging elephant and tiger population estimation" for the first time.

In this method, the entire forest area is broken down into similar-sized cells or blocks (say, A, B, C, and D) where ground surveys are conducted to look for tiger signs (pug marks, droppings, etc.) and identify tiger-occupied forest cells (say, A, B and D).

The survey also assesses a range of "covariates" — common variable factors such as the quality of vegetation, availability of prey, distance from water/ nightlight, degree of human disturbance etc. — to determine the relative tiger-holding potential of these blocks. For example, if A has the highest tiger

potential with a score of 100, the indexed score for B and D could be, say, 75 and 50.

## Mark-recapture method

For logistics, camera traps are set up only in a limited area (say, B). After each round of photography, the tigers that are snapped are identified using their unique stripe patterns.

The next step employs the statistical method of "mark-recapture", which relies on the number of common — recaptured — individual tigers photographed in two consecutive rounds. The bigger the population, the lesser the chances of a tiger being recaptured, and vice versa.

Based on this, estimators derive a tiger number and density (number per 100 sq km) for forest cell B, which is then extrapolated for forest cells A and D where no camera was set up. If, say, the tiger density estimated in B is 12, in A and D, using their co-variate scores, it would be 16 and 8.

The Synchronised All India Elephant Estimation 2022-23 (SAIEE 2023) differed from this tiger census method in only one aspect: it used a genetic mark-recapture model.

The elephant hide has no unique markings like tiger stripes. So elephant dung samples collected during ground surveys were analysed in the lab to identify unique ele-

phants by differentiating individuals based on eleven microsatellite loci (genetic markers).

## Why the delay hurts

Irrespective of the refinement in census methodology and the delay caused by logistical limitations, the results that are already available should not be held back, experts said. "This helps neither science nor governance. This is precious data obtained by spending public money. The five-year census cycle is overdue. There is no reason why available data should not be in the public domain and guide policies," a former member of the Environment Ministry's National Board for Wildlife said.

An elephant researcher familiar with the census efforts in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh said the Northeast numbers are unlikely to salvage the downward trend. "If modelled correctly, the results from the Northeast will also show a 20-25% fall or correction, whatever you call it. The government is only buying time," he said.

A retired forest officer from Odisha said the delay could prove costly for elephant populations in distress. "While habitat loss and conflict are common threats to elephants across India, certain risks are landscape-specific. In Odisha, for example, it is mining and low-hanging power lines. The drastic fall in our elephant numbers should have triggered intervention by now," he said.

## Why the numbers matter

In 2023, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala used a protocol combining the block count and dung count methods, which, the unreleased report said, "finds corroboration through genetic mark-recapture methods used in SAIEE 2023" — suggesting its potential scalability for future large-scale adoption in combination with genetic mark-recapture in selected sites.

The 2017 elephant census report had underlined why it was "desirable to maintain some level of continuity with the previous population estimations to make a meaningful comparison with past figures to infer broad trends".

Absolute numbers for elephants or tigers have no meaning beyond news headlines, a senior forest officer from Karnataka said. "We estimate populations to know how a species is doing in the wild. So continuity is important for comparison. When we claim to have drastically improved the method, we have to accept the new baseline data as a reality check without worrying about the optics."

# Which are India's 5 new 'classical languages', what does the tag mean?

**DIVYAA & ARJUN SENGUPTA**  
 NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 4

THE UNION Cabinet on Thursday extended the "classical language" tag to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali. Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Odia already enjoy this status.

## When and how did the concept of "classical language" arise?

Following demands from various states, the UPA-1 government decided to create a category of Indian languages known as "classical languages", and lay down various criteria for this status.

On October 12, 2004, Tamil became the first Indian language to receive "classical" status due to its high antiquity and rich literary tradition.

In the following month, the Ministry of Culture set up a Linguistic Experts Committee (LEC) under the Sahitya Akademi to examine proposals for "classical language" status from various states and bodies.

On November 25, Sanskrit was declared a classical language. Subsequently, this status was conferred upon Telugu (2008), Kannada (2008), Malayalam (2013), and Odia (2014).

## What are the latest criteria for "classical languages"?

On July 25 this year, the LEC unanimously revised the criteria for classical status. The criteria now includes:

- High antiquity of early texts, and recorded history over a period of 1500-2000 years;
- A body of ancient literature/ texts, which is considered a heritage by generations of speakers;
- Epigraphic and inscriptional evidence;
- Knowledge texts, especially prose texts in addition to poetry; and
- That classical languages and literature could be distinct from its current form or could be discontinuous with later forms of its offshoots.

Following this, the committee recommended the addition of the five new clas-

sical languages, the proposals for which had been with the Centre for some years. This was approved by the Union Cabinet on Thursday.

## What is behind the recent additions?

**MARATHI:** With the state Assembly elections just weeks away, the inclusion of Marathi comes over a decade after the state government first forwarded the proposal to the Centre in 2013.

Modern Marathi descends from Maharashtri Prakrit, a Prakrit dialect used in western India which was the official language of the Satvahanas. Some Marathi scholars have claimed that this was the first among Prakrit languages, but this claim is contested. The oldest evidence of Maharashtri Prakrit can be found in a stone inscription in Pune district, dated to the 1st century BCE. The earliest evidence of the more modern Marathi can be traced to a copper-plate inscription found in Satara, dated to 739 CE.

**BENGALI & ASSAMESE:** The West Bengal and Assam state governments had also sought "classical" status for their respective languages.

Both these languages can find their origin in Magadhi Prakrit, a form of Prakrit popular in East India, and the official language of the Magadha court. The exact date in which they emerged is contested, with scholars putting forward dates of origin ranging from the 6th to the 12th centuries.

They took on a form which may be recognisable today well into the second millennium CE. The legendary linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji suggested that the Indo-Aryan vernacular likely differentiated itself in Assam before Bengal.

**PRAKRIT & PALI:** There is no single Prakrit language. Rather, the term refers to a group of closely-related Indo-Aryan languages, whose defining feature was that they were the language of the masses as opposed to Sanskrit, which was restricted to the elites and high literature. Historian A

L Basham wrote in *The Wonder that was India* (1954): "By the time of the Buddha the masses were speaking languages which were much simpler than Sanskrit. These were the Prakrits, of which several dialects have been attested."

These vernaculars were thus also the language of popular heterodox religions that emerged in the first millennium BCE.

Jain *agamas* and the *Gatha Saptashati* are in Ardhamagadhi, a Prakrit dialect which some scholars consider to be its definitive form. This Prakrit thus continues to have resonance among the Jain community, and still sees use in the religion's ritual practices.

Pali, likely a form of somewhat Sanskritised Magadhi Prakrit, was the language of the Theravada Buddhist Canon — the *Tipitakas*. Considered to be the language of the Buddha himself, Pali survived in places like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, where the Theravada school prospered.

## What will the 'classical' tag mean for

## these languages?

Officials say that the broader cultural and academic impact of this designation will extend nationally and internationally.

The Ministry of Education takes steps to promote classical languages. Three Central Universities were established in 2020 for the promotion of Sanskrit. The Central Institute of Classical Tamil was set up in 2008 to facilitate the translation of ancient Tamil texts, and offer courses in Tamil. Similar Centres of Excellence have also been set up for the study of Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Odia.

Officials told *The Indian Express* that the newly added classical languages will be promoted in a similar fashion.

The National Education Policy also calls for the inclusion of classical languages in school education. The Ministry of Culture (through the various academies), the Ministry of Education, and respective state governments, will come together for greater knowledge-sharing and research in these languages. Besides, manuscripts in these languages will be digitised for greater access to scholars, the officials said.



# Opinion

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2024



A UNITED INDO-PACIFIC

Union defence minister Rajnath Singh

India's vision for the Indo-Pacific is based on fostering partnerships through sustainable development, economic growth, and mutual security

## Valley of hope

J&K voters have signalled a huge win for democracy, but this is just the beginning of a long journey to normalcy

SOMETIMES ELECTORAL TRIUMPHS are not dependent on the fate of candidates. The conclusion of voting, with an impressive overall turnout of 63.88%, in the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly elections this week is one such instance. This follows a similar pattern in May, when the Union Territory recorded its highest voting percentage (58.46%) in a general election in 35 years. The Lok Sabha vote was perceived by some as a protest against the Centre's decision to revoke Article 370 of the Constitution in 2019. But given the history of conflict and resistance in the troubled region, the voter participation this year has lent legitimacy to India's democratic electoral system. The legislative Assembly election is being held for the first time in a decade in Jammu and Kashmir, following a Supreme Court order last year. The response from voters is thus significant, and reflects a desire to have elected representatives that they can reach out to in place of administrative officials. This in itself is hugely welcome.

It is indeed a far cry from 1987, when controversial state polls that were widely viewed as rigged triggered the rise of militancy and a cycle of violence, including state repression, that continue to stalk the Kashmir valley. In that context, nothing is as it seems. Therefore, it would be a misreading to assume that electoral participation is proof of normalcy and the integration of a disenchanted people into the mainstream. After the abrogation of Article 370, which removed the limited autonomy and special status of the region, the Centre clamped down on the local leadership in the Valley, and deepened direct rule as it suspended the state legislature. While the last five years have witnessed a lull in violence, a sense of disempowerment can be counterproductive and encourage radical elements to fill the political void.

All the key political players — be it regional forces such as National Conference (NC) and People's Democratic Party or the new entrant, Awami Ittehad Party, and national outfits like the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — have stakes in this election. The alliance of NC and Congress fancies its chances as bitter opponents of the BJP-led central government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, a large number of Independents, besides smaller parties, have thrown open the contest for the 90-member assembly, whose results will be known on Tuesday. Post-elections, however, the onus will be on the Centre to gain the confidence of the region's politicians and people in electoral politics.

For a start, it should restore full statehood as promised by Union home minister Amit Shah at a campaign rally. Also, for meaningful progress, it is vital that the incoming government is not at odds with the Centre. Earlier this year, the home ministry amended rules to enhance the powers of the lieutenant governor of Jammu and Kashmir in areas such as police, public order, and transfers and postings. A structural framework that leaves a Centre-appointed administrator with a bigger role than the legislature may lead to friction of the kind often noticed in New Delhi. This has to be avoided. Also, while there are differences between private and government data, reports suggest a high level of unemployment in the region which relies heavily on public sector jobs. Both the local and central governments must work together to focus on job creation, building infrastructure, and security. These, of course, cannot come at the cost of civil liberties.

## Philandering CEOs are finally getting fired

HAVING A ROMANTIC relationship with an employee didn't used to be a fireable offence for CEOs. They would get canned for misappropriating funds to fuel the affair, or for not fully disclosing the details to the board when they eventually got caught. But it was rarely the relationship itself that got them fired — if they even got fired at all.

But in the last few years, boardrooms across corporate America have recalculated whether they should be taking these kinds of ethical lapses as a warning sign of bigger problems. For the latest proof point, look at Norfolk Southern Corp. Last month, the railroad ousted then-CEO Alan Shaw for violating its policies by having a consensual relationship with the company's chief legal officer, Nabanita Nag. (Nag was also fired.)

Norfolk's strict no-tolerance stance about office relationships with subordinates shows just how seriously companies have come to take this type of CEO misconduct. Despite the backlash against #MeToo, this is an area where the movement's impact has stuck: Boards now grapple with the question of what consent really means when there's an innate imbalance of power.

But it's not just the cultural shift that's driving the crackdown on executives' dalliances. Boards have a strong business case as researchers find increasing evidence pointing to a link between problematic personal and professional behaviour. "We know that boards see these kinds of relationships, especially extramarital, as signs that the operation of the organisation isn't tight," says Amy Nicole Baker, a professor of psychology at the University of New Haven who studies workplace relationships. "It's not necessarily about values. This is a signal to the board that there could be other issues." (In the case of Norfolk, Shaw was married.)

The 2015 hack of Ashley Madison — the site's slogan is "Life is Short. Have an Affair" — gave academics a treasure trove of data to examine the connection between cheating at home and at work. One study found that companies run by the 47 CEOs and 48 CFOs who were paying Ashley Madison users (97% of them married) were twice as likely to have had a financial misstatement or involvement in a class action securities lawsuit.

A second group of researchers had a similar finding, but their paper had an additional discovery that illustrates, as they write, why it's so "difficult to engineer a perfect corporate culture due to potential trade-offs between employee creativity, risk-taking, and integrity": Those same companies that employed more Ashley Madison users were also the most innovative organisations, measured by R&D and patent activity.

This paradox neatly captures the challenge facing boards and HR departments. Among them: Bosses shouldn't set unreasonable goals or employees will "take it as a license to cheat", he writes. And don't pass over ethical workers for the more "ethically plastic", or the "lucky risk-takers who do not get caught, and who will thus appear to be especially skilled and productive".

At Norfolk, Shaw was trying to turn around the railroad after its devastating derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, last year. The 30-year company veteran had recently prevailed against activist investor Ancora, which had argued he wasn't ruthless enough and wanted him out. Shaw was under such intense scrutiny, had so much to lose, and yet he still decided to take on the personal and professional risk of an extramarital affair with a colleague. That likely left the board questioning what other lines he'd be willing to cross — a risk it wasn't willing to take.

THE OCTOBER MPC COULD PROVIDE A MORE BALANCED COMMENTARY ON GROWTH & INFLATION

## Pace and timing of transition

### PRE-POLICY PONDERING

THE OCTOBER MONETARY Policy Committee (MPC) meeting will take place amid multiple global and domestic crosscurrents. It will also feature three newly-inducted external members whose approach to monetary policy will be closely observed in these rather uncertain times. The markets will be keenly waiting to find out whether the longest unchanged monetary policy stance of 19 months will finally pivot in the October meeting.

To start with, the external backdrop is more conducive now for some softening of the monetary policy. The triad of lower global interest rates, dollar and oil prices (compared to the August policy) would be comforting to the MPC, as in the not-so-distant past these factors were posing some difficult questions. Moderating global growth is also a favourable tailwind for policy easing.

That said, there are two key global uncertainties in front of the October MPC. First, it will have to assess the potential impact on commodity prices from the ongoing China stimulus, including the possibility of the stimulus extending to a large fiscal support. Second, the rising geopolitical tensions could unleash another wave of supply-side inflationary disruptions. It appears that these issues could keep the MPC cautious in its October meeting.

On the domestic front, there is both good news and bad news on inflation. The good news is that the last two inflation prints at ~3.6% year-on-year have been well below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) mid-point target, and most of the exclusion-based core inflation measures have been benign for a substantial period. Consumer Price Index (CPI) ex-vegetable inflation fell to a 60-month low of just 3.07% in August. This suggests a ~20-30 basis point downside risk to the RBI's

SAMIRAN CHAKRABORTY  
BAQAR ZAIDI

Respectively chief economist-India, and economist-India and Sri Lanka, Citi India



Q2FY25 inflation forecast made in the August MPC meeting. Aggregate monsoon rains were above normal (108% of long-term average), and the government lifting the rice export ban suggests an expectation of decent food grain production. Based on these developments, the RBI's model-based estimates now suggest headline CPI falling below the medium-term target of 4% from Q2FY26.

However, the bad news is that the next three inflation prints (September to November) are likely to be close to 5%, primarily due to unfavourable base effects. Elevated vegetable prices, any impact on the standing crop from late rainfall in September, and a few of the agricultural trade policy changes could pose upside risks too. After waiting for 19 months, it might be challenging for the RBI to start its rate-cutting cycle with risks of 5% inflation prints around the corner. The RBI has been arguing persistently that policy needs to be restrictive until inflation aligns durably towards the 4% target.

Another factor for the RBI delaying any rate easing has been the resilience of India's growth. Despite a somewhat lower-than-expected Q1FY25 GDP print, the RBI's recent model estimate puts full-year FY25 growth at 7.3%, broadly similar to August MPC's 7.2%

estimate. If the central bank maintains its GDP forecasts in the October meeting, there is not much urgency to ease monetary policy. On the other hand, some recent high-frequency activity data points have been marginally weaker. Along with global slowdown risks, these trends suggest that the MPC might gradually become more sensitive to the growth outlook too.

Information from the festive season demand and the Q2 GDP data (to be released before the December meet) could throw more light on these developments. A challenge in interpreting the next few quarters' GDP could also be the statistical issue of GDP growth falling below the gross value added growth due to the base effect from last year. Thus, the evolving growth dynamics could become a key trigger for the MPC to shift its policy bias.

The RBI has also been able to delay any policy easing because financial conditions are not tight by historical standards, despite its "withdrawal of accommodation" stance. Due to surplus banking system liquidity, money market rates are down 20-25 bps since the start of the year. The risk-free rates of government bond yields also fell due to lower supply pressure and increased demand from foreign portfolio investments. Weighted average

It can be acknowledged that the delta of macro data (both growth and inflation) is slowly moving towards creating the right preconditions for a rate easing

lending rates on fresh loans are broadly unchanged from the same period last year and both nominal and real lending rates are much lower than the earlier cycle peaks. Even the real policy rate is not too far from the RBI's estimate of the neutral rate, though the governor has de-emphasised a mechanical interpretation of neutral rates at the current juncture. Any softening of monetary policy now could ease financial conditions even more and lead to the potential risk of causing further froth in asset markets.

So, what are the policy options in front of the October MPC? It can be acknowledged that the delta of macro data (both growth and inflation) is slowly moving towards creating the right preconditions for a rate easing. But even then, October might be too early for a rate cut, as close to 5% headline inflation in the near-term could prove to be a big hurdle to overcome. The macro argument in following the Fed is not convincing enough as India's macro stability parameters are quite comfortable and emerging markets central banks like the RBI have the flexibility to chart their own policy path. In our base case, while we expect the MPC to keep rates and its stance on hold in October, it could provide a more balanced commentary on growth and inflation, in line with the governor's recent comments. In one of his speeches, he said "the balance between inflation and growth is well-poised" — a phrase he might repeat in the October policy. That said, we cannot rule out an outright change in stance to "neutral" from "withdrawal of accommodation" with a stronger guidance that rates could be kept on hold for an extended period, even with a "neutral" stance. While this would reduce the immediate pressure on the RBI to act on rates, there is a risk that the financial conditions would ease further based on that stance signal.

## India needs a unified retail policy



NIRUPAMA SOUNDARARAJAN  
ARINDAM GOSWAMI

Respectively co-founder and CEO, and co-founder and partner, Policy Consensus Centre

When consumers do not differentiate between retail formats, as long as their needs are met, why should any retail policy?

INDIA'S RETAIL SECTOR is a \$850-billion industry. It consists of various formats, including traditional retail stores, organised retail, e-commerce, and direct selling. Arguably, e-commerce is the fastest growing of these formats, at almost 25-30%, while organised retail is expected to grow at 15-20%, and direct selling at 10-15%. The overall retail sector is expected to grow at the rate of 12% per annum. Currently, the direct selling sector constitutes a mere 1% of total retail, while organised retail stands at 12%, and e-commerce estimates vary from 4-7%. This means, even now, nearly 80% of India's retail market comprises traditional stores and other formats such as network and catalogue marketing stores.

The commerce minister recently criticised foreign e-commerce players, particularly Amazon, for alleged predatory pricing, violations of foreign direct investment rules, and their contribution to the Indian economy — and followed it with a swift softening of his stance. This, combined with the recent leaked findings of the Competition Commission of India's (CCI) anti-trust investigations, expose the deep morass in our policymakers' approach to e-commerce and retail policies and processes.

Concerns over predatory pricing and unfair competition were prevalent even when organised retail entered India in the early 2000s. Today, we see traditional retail formats thriving alongside the organised

many businesses in recent years. Indian businesses are not restricted only to those in the traditional retail formats. Numerous micro, small, and medium enterprises have also used e-commerce platforms, foreign and domestic, to expand their market reach and become more digitally savvy as well as more organised with their books and business practices.

India's foreign trade policy, for the first time, has set very specific targets for exports through e-commerce. In fact, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh has been proactive in signing multiple MoUs, some as recent as September (with Amazon), to help facilitate exports through e-commerce from the state. The One District One Product initiative, which began in Uttar Pradesh and has now been implemented pan-India, will require the support of e-commerce platforms to enable even the smallest of businesses to export to foreign markets. In fact, in this situation foreign e-commerce platforms that have extensive global presence can add immense value. These global markets present significant demand for products like Indian handicrafts, ethnic wear, spices, jewellery, and organic food products.

While the advantages to the average

consumer cannot be overstated, what is often not discussed is how e-commerce has helped transform rural consumption. Invest India states that e-commerce adoption and delivery has expanded to almost 100% of all pin codes in India. Furthermore, it notes that close to 60% of e-commerce transactions originate from tier-II and III cities and smaller towns, including rural India. Shoppers in these towns, encouraged by the availability of many brands and products, constitute nearly 50% of all shoppers. The availability of online platforms has empowered rural consumers with access to a wider range of products, often at competitive prices.

The success of e-commerce in these markets has also encouraged the growth of a new breed of entrepreneurs in rural areas, allowing them to sell their products to a broader audience.

The Indian e-commerce landscape is booming. From bustling metros to remote villages, online shopping has become an integral part of the Indian consumer experience, and policymakers are cognizant of this. Yet when it comes to policymaking for the e-commerce sector, there seems to be significant biases. There are many Indian consumer brands that have successful and big e-commerce businesses. They are not just

capable of competing with foreign brands but are doing so successfully. Hence, creating policies that lead to an inherent arbitrage between e-commerce platforms based on origin of capital seems unnecessary and is unfair. While concerns over predatory pricing and unfair competition are justified, we must not forget that unfair trade practices can be adopted by any large brand, irrespective of format or origin of capital, or even sector. Yet, the conversations seem to revolve only around foreign-owned platforms. We must also not forget that the CCI has evolved over the years and has grown into an extremely capable watchdog that can track unfair trade practices and take any company indulging in such practices to task.

What India needs to do deal with the morass in policymaking around the retail sector is develop a unified retail policy instead of piecemeal policies around e-commerce, organised retail, food retail, and direct selling. A consumer wants competitive pricing, selection of brands and products, convenience, good grievance redress, and an enjoyable shopping experience. When consumers do not differentiate between retail formats, as long as their needs are met, why should any retail policy? A unified retail policy can protect consumer interests and ensure fair business practices for all formats of retail irrespective of format and origin of capital. This would be an ideal approach.

Creating policies that lead to an inherent arbitrage between e-commerce platforms based on origin of capital seems unnecessary and is unfair

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Freeing prisons from caste

The Supreme Court's no to differential treatment of prisoners based on caste is a long-overdue and much-needed step towards de-institutionalising the abomination called caste. The lapse of 77 years of independence has not rendered caste obsolete. It is a double whammy for the low caste inmates in the literal prisons, as the grim actualities of life behind bars are exacerbated by the differential

treatment meted out to them based on caste. They are not just victims of "division of labour", but also the "division of labourers into watertight compartments". They are made to perform their "hereditary occupations" or "divinely ordained duties" like sweeping and cleaning toilets. It is most welcome that the apex court has taken a stand against the notions of "superiority and inferiority" and "purity and pollution", upheld constitutional morality and

affirmed human equality. The states and Union Territories should comply with the top court's directions and revise jail manuals.

—G David Milton, Maruthancode

#### West Asia impact

Apropos of "West Asia jitters" (FE, October 4), indeed the West Asian turmoil on war is a double-edged threat to India. On the one hand, the Israel-Iran conflict and the resultant missile attacks will disrupt the oil

supply chain. On the other hand, the Houthis' attack on cargo ships sailing through the Red Sea route will affect the global export trade. India will be affected since it imports a lot of oil from Iran. If the US stops its support to Israel, its wings will be clipped and create chances for peace to return in West Asia by dousing the geopolitical tension.

—NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

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

— Rammath Goenka

## GEOPOLITICS ROILS MARKET, MORE BUMPS ON THE ROAD AHEAD

It seems that for stock markets, if it's not one thing, it's another. Investors were barely relieved for avoiding a flash crash last month following the US Federal Reserve's larger-than-expected interest rate cut. But that joy was short-lived as rising tensions between Iran and Israel this week gripped global markets in fear. On Thursday, indices across Europe and Asia incurred significant losses, while Sensex and Nifty lost more than 2 percent each, suffering their worst intraday falls in two months. As the total market capitalisation of the BSE companies plunged to ₹465 lakh crore, it wiped off as much as ₹10 lakh crore of investors' wealth in a day. It's now crucial that the escalation in West Asia is contained at the earliest; else it could bring about another significant fallout—high crude oil prices.

Global oil prices have already surged as much as 5 percent on Thursday to \$75 per barrel from the week's start. If the prices continue to firm up, they will spell fresh trouble for countries like India, which imports more than 80 percent of its oil. Higher prices translate to a bigger import bill and a wider current account deficit, which is anyways expected to increase to 1 percent in 2024-25. Investors are also worried about the recent resurgence in Chinese stocks, which could prompt an outflow of funds from India. Chinese stocks have been underperforming in recent years; but last week saw a strong rally as Beijing rolled out a substantial stimulus package to goose its economy.

Apart from geopolitical concerns, domestic factors have contributed to Thursday's crash, too. Last week, market watchdog Sebi rolled out six new measures to tame speculative retail trading in the risky futures and options segment, which analysts believe could affect trading volumes. Concerned over these prevailing factors, the Sensex shed over 3,300 points in just four trading sessions as foreign investors pulled out as much as ₹32,000 crore from Indian markets. Even if the situation in West Asia gets somewhat under control over the next few weeks, the current quarter may still be a testing time for markets given the upcoming state elections, the September earnings season, the RBI's monetary policy review and the outcome of the US presidential elections in November. Investors should exercise extreme caution at the moment.

## RESOLVE FISHERS vs WAQF BOARD ISSUE AMICABLY

A coastal village in Kerala is in the eye of a storm as a long-standing dispute between fishermen, who are mostly Christians, and the Waqf Board is getting flared up. The village in the picture is Munambam in Ernakulam district. The origins of the issue can be traced back to the colonial period, when the ruler of Travancore in 1902 allocated 404 acres of land and 60 acres of waterbodies to Abdul Sathar Musa Haji Seth, a merchant who had relocated to Kochi from Gujarat, solely for agricultural development. In 1950, Musa Haji Seth's successor Sidhique transferred the land to the management committee of Farooq College in Kozhikode. As the leased area included lands of fishermen too, there have been disputes ever since.

The issue settled for a while with the high court ruling in favour of the college in 1975 and locals started buying land from the college. In 2022, the issue flared up again as a resident was disallowed to pay tax because the land in question had been designated as Waqf Board property. This began the current dispute culminating in widespread protests and more than five cases pending before the high court.

The issue has now acquired strong communal colours and is regularly getting played up. Two prominent Christian organisations—the Syro-Malabar Church and the Kerala Catholic Bishop Council—have written to a joint parliamentary committee that properties belonging to Christian families for generations have been unlawfully claimed by the Waqf Board. The villagers have lived there for over a century, the Church has insisted, seeking immediate intervention by the Union government. Minority affairs minister Kiren Rijiju has assured proper justice, promptly responding that the issue of Waqf land has been affecting people across communities. The Waqf Board, on its part, has been maintaining a guarded silence. So are the leading political parties in the state except the BJP.

Meanwhile, the issue is getting more vitriolic and communal. Malicious rumours are being spread by both sides, affecting the secular fabric of the state to a great extent. It is high time that all political parties and the authorities sat together and amicably solved the issue. Otherwise, it has the potential for a larger conflagration that must be avoided.

### QUICK TAKE

#### NO CASTE BEHIND BARS

THOUGH it has come decades too late, the Supreme Court's order that there should be no caste discrimination in prisons is welcome. If the Constitution instructs the justice system to be unprejudiced on caste and religion, it should follow that our prisoners be free of such bias, too. The specific address of "entrenched" discriminations against marginalised communities in the verdict underlined the abiding nature of such practices. Also welcome is the quashing of related rules in the jail manuals of at least 10 states. Not only does the Model Prison Manual of 2016 need to be updated, but the states need to adopt it to ensure uniformity in administration.

THE Supreme Court hit the nail on the head on Friday while ordering a special investigative team's probe into allegations of contaminated ghee used in the making of the laddus given as prasadam to devotees at the Hindu shrine at Tirupati. The top court observed it was passing the order "to assuage the feelings of crores of devotees".

On September 19, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu quoted a National Dairy Development Board report alleging that the ghee used to prepare the world-famous laddu at the Sri Venkateswara Swami temple was contaminated with fish oil, beef tallow and lard (pig fat).

This news came down as a tonne of bricks on countless devotees. While many know-alls dismissed the sordid episode as a "non-issue", there were whiz-kids for whom it was one more move on the political chess board. Undoubtedly, the egregious controversy has far wider ramifications beyond the usual power matrix and murky account books of unscrupulous businessmen. As the Supreme Court observed, countless devotees' trust and religious sensitivities are at stake.

The top court's observation at the previous hearing of the case on September 30—that adulterated ghee wasn't used in the prasadam—had brought tremendous relief to believers, who must have been writhing in guilt, pain and hurt after the contamination story had gone viral. The court had said the laddus were not contaminated; the ghee was.

It's a matter of satisfaction that the contaminated ghee wasn't used. But the fact that an effort was made to do so is equally disturbing. What's worse, many of those who have appropriated the platform of secularism tried to trivialise the issue. Their concern wasn't that some vile characters had tried to hurt the sensitivities of the devotees. They were instead worried that the nationalists (read: the BJP and RSS) might take political advantage of this controversy.

The feelings of devotees on these unsavoury developments were mixed, ranging from disbelief to utter helplessness. There was hardly any ruction, which one often sees in India over lesser issues. What is the reason for this? Perhaps, after centuries of oppression, the sensitivity of the Hindu society has dulled. Acquiescing to injustice and putting up with indignities has probably become a second nature to Hindus.

When the British, with help from the communists and Muslim League storm-

The Supreme Court rightly addressed devotees' sentiments on the question of adulterated ghee used at Tirupati. The temple trust needs to institute systemic changes to avoid a repeat

## WHY LADDUGATE NEEDS MEASURES BEYOND ORDINARY

BALBIR PUNJ



Author of the recently published *Trust with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India*



MANDAR PARDIKAR

troopers, partitioned the country in August 1947, millions trudged to the residual India, leaving behind their ancestral homes and life savings. Lakhs of innocent Hindus and Sikhs fell victim to frenzied mobs and lost their lives. The larger Hindu society didn't react. The refugees began to rebuild their lives. They even politically and socially accepted the very class responsible for forcing such a bloody partition on the country sans any warning.

Mahatma Gandhi recognised this escapist facet of the Hindu mindset. During the communal riots in the wake of the Khilafat movement (1919-24), when the movement's activists targeted Hindus in a big way, he called the Muslims "bullies" and Hindus "cowards" in an article published in *Young India* in May

1924. The first significant instance of Hindu insensitivity in independent India occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, when Kashmiri Pandits in the valley were targeted by Islamic zealots, many of them financed and trained by Pakistan. An entire community of five lakh people was forced to flee their ancestral homes and reduced to refugees in their country. None even blinked.

Nearly a decade later, on February 27, 2002, jihadists burnt alive 59 kar sevaks in a train coach near the Godhra railway station in Gujarat. There wasn't any significant reaction inside or outside parliament the following day. A prestigious English daily's editorial even blamed the Hindu victims, stating that they had invited the tragedy upon themselves by

## WHEN GREEN PARK SANG THE CAWNPORE BLUES

WHENEVER I hear of Kanpur or think of the city, it brings back memories of a Bob Dylan song, 'North Country Blues', made famous by Joan Baez's plaintive voice. Its moving lyrics and sorrowful melody speak woe-fully of a city fallen on bad days: "Come gather 'round friends and I'll tell you a tale / Of when the red iron pits ran a-plenty / But the cardboard-filled windows and old men on the benches / Tell you now that the whole town is empty."

And so it was last week when I heard of something that smelt of the town's has-been status. Though India beat Bangladesh comfortably to go 2-0 up in the current Test cricket series, the city's Green Park stadium got bad press for its poor drainage that washed out two full days of play despite there being no rain. The washout belied the ground's fashionable name that reminds of its rich past before independence and its glory as an industrial town for at least a couple of decades after the end of colonial rule.

Only 10 Tests have been played in Kanpur in the past 40 years against roughly as many in the previous 20, symbolising the decline of the ground that was a regular Test venue in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. This is in spite of India playing more Tests per year nowadays. Kanpur was once ahead of even Bengaluru that hosted its first Test only in 1974.

One thing that has certainly changed is that Green Park no longer hosts dull batting pitches. There was a time when a Kanpur Test meant loads of runs on a batsman-friendly wicket. As many as eight of the 10 Tests played at the ground between 1959 and 1979 ended in a draw. It is good to see wickets tumbling in Green Park alongside its reputation as a well-maintained ground.

The UP government this year announced an IT park in Kanpur with an investment of more than ₹5,800 crore, projected to create 2,50,000 jobs. I will believe it when I see it. For me, Kanpur is the heart of India's northern country and just the bluesy equivalent of Dylan's ballad linked to his childhood days in Minnesota. My visits to the city, though I have not been there in a decade, mostly remind me of its glorious past. The drainage fiasco only confirms its fallen state.

Yet, Kanpur is also the city that has an Indian Institute of Technology whose computer science course was legendary in



MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior journalist

### REVERSE SWING

an era when there was no such thing called a personal computer. Only the highest rankers in the cut-throat joint entrance examination for the IITs could make it to the sprawling campus at IIT-K.



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The recent washed-out Test and fewer matches played at Kanpur's Green Park cricket stadium symbolise the city's decline from being an industrial powerhouse. The city, which boasted of large tobacco and leather companies from before independence, is losing out to Noida, which is dreaming of being a tech hub

The cricket ground and the IIT stand testimony of days when textile, leather and other manufacturing industries caused the city to be called the 'leather city of the world' and the 'Manchester of the east'.

With an estimated population of 63 lakh now, Kanpur is like the ageing, abandoned wife of a decadent prince from Uttar Pradesh's declining royal clans, while Noida, with its broad avenues, is like a pampered new mistress as it awaits its first international flight from a spanking new airport slated to open next year and connect the national capital region.

New technologies, feuding Marwari entrepreneur families and rampant trade unionism caused the decline of Kanpur as an industrial hub, much like ye olde

Calcutta. Like the eastern city that was once British India's imperial capital, Kanpur's history is alluring. Its old buildings and smokestack factories invoke poetic thoughts. Like the anglicised Calcutta, the city was once called Cawnpore.

On my last visit to the city, I saw its old city police building still bearing the colonial-era sign that advertised it as the 'Cawnpore Kotwali'. I recall telling a designer friend from the city that she should organise a fashion show in that building that has so much old-world character like Mumbai's Opera House or Kolkata's Victoria Memorial.

Maybe Kanpur's closed textile mills could be redeveloped as commercial or residential hubs, much like their counterparts at Lower Parel in Mumbai. But that would only be a romantic thought as Noida is evidently a better-planned city. Kanpur's leather units earned precious dollars for India in the economically troubled 1990s, but the manufacturing industries also polluted the Ganga, decisively eroding Kanpur's charm even as software stole the national limelight from textiles and leather.

There is much in Kanpur that needs attention and revival. Even the British, who must have bittersweet memories of the city they shaped and made, seem to have forgotten it. The much-awaited but delayed Free Trade Agreement between the UK and India could offer an opportunity for Britain to see if it can breathe some new-age life into rich nostalgia. Kanpur could still do with a Cawnpore touch. Perhaps the new IT park provides a chance to reverse-swing a diminished city.

We may yet see a born-again Kanpur in a state currently torn between the ancient glory of Ayodhya and futuristic fantasies woven around Noida. Perhaps someone will sing "For the times they are a-changin'" in celebration of a new Kanpur; to quote the selfsame Dylan. For now, that appears very unlikely and we must stick to singing the Cawnpore blues.

(Views are personal) (On X @madversity)

### MAILBAG

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#### Student loans

Ref: *Nurturing talent over being stickler for rules* (Oct 4). It is really gratifying that a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court has found the immense determination of Atul Kumar, son of a daily-wage worker, and ordered IIT Dhanbad to admit him to a supernumerary seat. The government can consider offering pre-sanctioned loans for such students who get admissions on merit. **Parthasarathy Mandadi, Tirupati**

#### Ensuring equity

The SC's choice of using its special powers under Article 142 to allow Atul Kumar to secure his seat in IIT-Dhanbad is a welcome move. Similar to the 2021 incident of another Dalit student who was allowed into IIT Bombay by the apex court after having missed his payment deadline, the judiciary has yet again done an exemplary job when it comes to ensuring equity among people coming from varied social strata. **Abirami S, Chennai**

#### Violence cycle

Ref: *They didn't start the fire and seem unable to douse it* (Oct 4). The author gave a very balanced and true view of the realities of the cycle of violence in West Asia. There is no place for terrorism in a civilised society. We must stand as one against it, irrespective of religious affiliations. **Thanmaya Mohan, Kozhikode**

#### Marital rape

Ref: *Don't criminalise marital rape: Govt* (Oct 4). The Centre's demand is queer as the very word 'rape' has criminality suggested in it. It is an assault on a woman when she does not yield to a person's immoral approach. What difference does it make when that person happens to be her husband or anyone else? **Sanath Kumar T S, Thrissur**

#### Metro nod

The Centre's nod, coming as it did after some initial hiccups, scepticism, and delay, for the 118.9 km-long phase-II of the Chennai metro project is a great boon. The project, once completed, will give a fillip to speed up transport within the metropolis, saving a lot of time and energy of commuters. **R Sampath, Chennai**

#### Jail justice

Ref: *SC outlaws caste discrimination in jails across India* (Oct 4). Caste discrimination in jails violates human rights, obstructs rehabilitation and fosters a toxic environment. True justice necessitates dismantling such structures, advocating for equality and respect for all individuals regardless of background. **NR Jagannath, Bengaluru**



# The New Disposables' Sustainability Burden

Buyers accept obsolescence as a way of life

The technology industry is particularly prone to shortening product life cycles on account of the need for hardware to keep pace with demands of software. Typically, a consumer electronics device is obsolete by the time it arrives in the market. These cycles are becoming more compressed as computing-aided performance drives market demand. This creates a situation where buyers lose negotiating power in the market even as they're buying much more than they were earlier. They have accepted obsolescence as a way of life. This gives rise to demands such as the right to repair. But this does not address the large issue of obsolescence rendering consumer electronics inoperable within a relatively short duration from the point of purchase.

The other dimension of technological obsolescence is its impact on sustainability. The tech industry doesn't face any special obligation to recycle, which could have a restraining effect on product upgradation. Recycling should ideally be an industry-specific protocol based on the waste being generated and the ability to reuse materials from waste. Since the materials demand in any industry is likely to be consistent over time, processes should emerge on extracting the best outcome from waste. The nature of global value chains makes this a challenging endeavour given production is spread across economies based on their resource endowments. This shifts the onus of sustainability from industry to government. That does not permit a more productive approach to sustainability.

Since software companies are driving shorter device product cycles, they can't escape their share of the sustainability burden. Specifically, energy intensity of computing that is exploding with generative AI must be accounted for. The negative externalities are yet to be priced in by investors creating the AI bubble. Both investors and consumers will have to assert their rights better in the technology space. Sustainability is as much their concern, and they need to seek mitigating strategies in their economic actions.

# Marital Rape is Rape, Not Another Crime

Rape, as defined by Section 375 of IPC, is defined as sexual intercourse of any kind with a woman 'against her will', 'without her consent', 'when consent has been obtained by putting her... in fear of death or of hurt', and six other circumstances including inability 'to communicate consent'. Two things in this law — carried over and expanded in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita's (BNS) Section 63 — are noteworthy. One, it doesn't apply to rape of a man or transgender (the scrapped IPC Section 377 treated any sexual act, consensual or not, between men or with a transgender as criminal). This is a serious lacuna. Two, it doesn't qualify the woman — whether married or single, divorced or separated, tall or short, etc.

GoI's attempt to keep marital rape — when a husband rapes his wife — outside the purview of BNS Section 63 (2013 amendments to IPC opted to retain the exemption from Section 375) retains an unjust qualifier for a woman who is a rape victim, and who isn't. Rape is rape, as is a victim of rape a victim of rape, something that's for a court of law to prove the veracity of. GoI is neither a marriage counsellor nor is it's job to uphold the sanctity of matrimony across the land.

It's, in fact, dangerous to corral marital rape into the fence of lesser crimes of IPC Sections 354 (assault to 'outrage modesty'), 354A (sexual harassment), 354B (forced disrobing), 498A (cruelty to a woman by husband or her relatives), and Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005. Rape is none of these, the same way a murder is not assault, injury, etc. If the murder of a married woman is the same crime as the murder of an unmarried woman, the same logic must hold for rape. This isn't about upholding marriage. It's about criminalising rape.

**JUST IN JEST**  
Gabbarmat Singh reportedly wants Bachhe Din to descend on Ramgarh

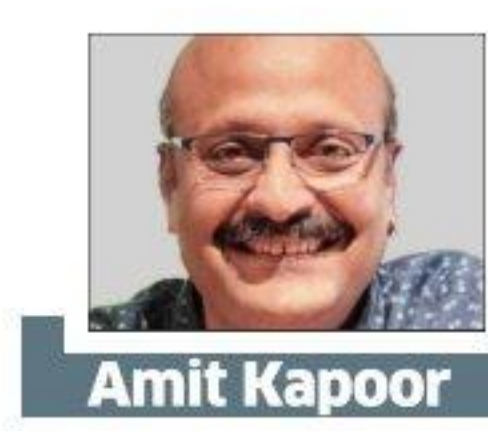
# Hear No OTT Gaali, See No OTT Sex

Beta, so ja. Nahin to Gabbarmat aa jayega. Well, Gabbarmat of India is already making rounds around households that watch streaming films and shows, reportedly planning to bring in 'guidelines' (sic) that will 'beep out profanity and blur explicit scenes'. One presumes this mai-baap plan is to ensure that the child-like people of Ramgarh that is India are not exposed to gaali or steamy content. If true, this colonial mindset that would have been thoroughly approved by Victorian Britons of a certain hypocritical class. The belief (read: phobia) that adult Indians are indistinguishable from children who need to be protected from profanities and smut is as old as the \*\*\*\*ing hills.

One plus side of such a potential chaperoneship is that it will bring back some thrill to cuss words and sex scenes — something that for most people, especially the young, has become blasé, and as plain as a foul-mouthed paratha in lingerie. By beeping out profanities and pixelating erotic content, much will be returned to the imagination — something that may have been neglected in our rather ho-hum, 'everything is ok to be watched and seen' times. One would presume that our Gabbarmat Singh hopes that this will entail a society that will no longer know how to give gaali or indulge in sanskriti-inappropriate sex. Mai-baap, pranaam.

Diversity and tolerance are crucial drivers of innovation and growth for business and economy

# MORE THE WEALTHIER



Amit Kapoor

The hallmark of true innovation is not limited to cutting-edge tech. Diversity and tolerance for all things new is a crucial asset to fuel innovation and economic growth, not just for individual enterprises but also for societies and economies.

In the 1980s, the infamous death spiral of America's chip industry was reversed by Jack Simplot, a potato farmer with no college education but with a terrific acumen for business. Silicon Valley's real 'magic' is not in the grand convergence of brilliant engineers, but in its adventurous culture, tolerance and openness to new ideas. Today, as businesses grapple with complex challenges to stay relevant, DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) has progressed from being a jargon to an essential principle that organisations strive to embrace.

India needs to understand how to extend the value of its diversity beyond its representation and harness it as an engine for inclusive and innovative economic growth. So, why is diversity a key focal point?

Today, the ethos of modern corporations, the economic structure it operates in, and the societal relations it navigates have changed radically. The formula for a thriving economy has come to hinge on the seamless integration of what urban studies theorist Richard Florida calls the 3Ts — talent, technology and tolerance.

Talent undoubtedly fuels innovation. Technology amplifies the potential for



...is the spice of life

innovation. But, most importantly, tolerance ensures that diverse perspectives are embraced, creating an inclusive environment that attracts a broad spectrum of skilled professionals.

Diversity, as it encompasses the 3Ts, is more than just a societal ideal. It's a critical economic driver. The Ts, when combined, create a symbiotic ecosystem that fosters economic vitality and creative dynamism, highlighting the foundation of openness and adaptability for modern success. Let us test the usefulness of this theory, focusing on the significance of diversity and tolerance towards it.

Studies have revealed that firms that embrace a range of perspectives are better suited to innovate and adapt. While quantifying all diversity remains a complex endeavour, statements made by business leaders have made a strong case for the desirability of diversity. It's not merely about recruiting from varied identity groups. Businesses are also learning from their identity-related knowledge and experiences to understand how the organisation can perform its core work better. Experts call this approach the 'learning and effectiveness paradigm'.

Why cultivate a learning orientation to diversity? Take gender. It's now widely accepted that women-led firms not only outperform in terms of market value but also create more positive work environments. Blau's gender di-

versity index, when applied to Western Europe's telecommunications sector, revealed that a 10% increase in gender diversity is associated with a roughly 7% increase in the company's market value.

The 2023 Global Gender Gap Report highlights that evidence on diversity in decision-making shows that a diverse group of leaders makes more fact-based decisions that result in higher-quality outcomes.

Impact of inclusion is, however, maximum when it exists in a supportive economy and society. A 2019 Harvard Business Review study, 'When Gender Diversity Makes Firms More Productive', spanning 1,069 leading firms across 35 countries and 24 industries, concluded that gender diversity relates to more productive companies only in contexts where gender diversity is viewed as 'normatively' accepted. In essence, valuing gender diversity creates a self-fulfilling cycle: industries and countries that prioritise it experience its benefits.

The successful economic performance of the US is often attributed to its openness to absorb people from around the world, while the eventual slowdown of Germany and Japan is pinned at the growing population homogeneity. It is, however, critical to

It's essential to recognise that India's diversity transcends being a mere characteristic of the nation-state. It constitutes a sophisticated and potent ecosystem for innovation



The writer is chair, Institute for Competitiveness

# Hello o1, Need Some Human Help?



Heather Dawe

Last month, OpenAI launched into its ChatGPT platform the o1 series of foundation models. 'We trained these models to spend more time thinking through problems before they respond, much like a person would,' read the launch material. 'Through training, they learn to refine their thinking process, try different strategies, and recognise their mistakes. In our tests, the next model update performs similarly to PhD students on challenging benchmark tasks in physics, chemistry, and biology. We also found that it excels in math and coding.'

After o1's launch, social media was abuzz with discussions about these new models. People described feeding their PhD thesis into o1 and getting a codebase that implemented their research generated within minutes and a few considered prompts.

o1 models are progressive, using more advanced chain-of-thought reasoning than previous foundation models like OpenAI's GPT-4, Anthropic's Claude

and Google's Gemini. Their step-by-step problem-solving, learning from mistakes, takes longer. But it allows them to tackle more complex tasks than earlier benchmarks.

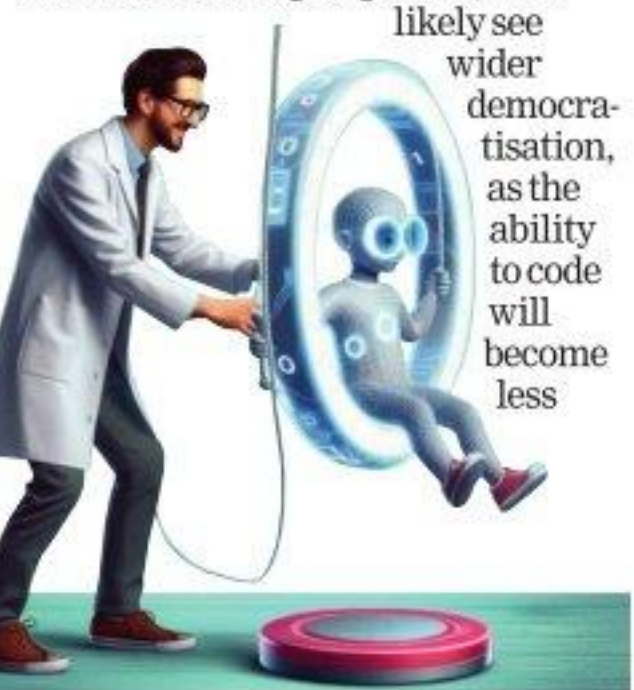
Since ChatGPT was originally launched in Nov 2022 powered by GPT-3, the time progress of GenAI's capability to perform complex reasoning has been significant. Abilities of foundation models like o1 have again improved it markedly.

With each new foundation model release, my first test has been to prompt them to build a portfolio optimisation app — a complex, nuanced method used in asset and wealth management. It's an ideal real-world benchmark for these models. With o1, I had an app running in minutes. It also recommended how to make it more progressive. The generated codebase didn't work the first time. The prompt had to be changed to get that. But it was impressive. GenAI's ability to tackle complex tasks has advanced significantly and will likely keep improving. While these models are trained on vast data and are nuanced, they excel at recollection, not at intuitive leaps — 'eureka moments' — that have driven breakthroughs in human intelligence.

This capability is empowering. Instead of spending time developing solutions, researchers can request them from ChatGPT or

similar tech within minutes, provided prompts and base research are solid. This frees them to push the solution's boundaries, relying on human creativity. If it's been done before, the machine will be able to do it for us. If it hasn't been done before and is based purely on reason, the machine may well be able to do it, too. But there are drawbacks to this empowerment.

Following a logical path leads to the conclusion that fewer human researchers and developers will be needed, and those remaining will need to be at the forefront of science and tech, as simpler content creation tasks will increasingly be handled by GenAI. From a research perspective, we'll likely see wider



A push, not a shove

important. Researchers will still be needed, and will likely interact closely with GenAI, prompting it for complex reasoning and occasionally making intuitive advances that AI cannot achieve.

In this sense, we will truly be blending the highly objective reasoning of AI with the subjective intuition and wider intelligence of humans. Importantly, the researcher will also need to be able to confirm the content created by AI is correct. For complex projects, this will be a challenge.

From a software development perspective, we are likely to see roles change. Less developers and testers will be required. But there will be a need for people who oversee development of integrated solutions by the machine and testing of these solutions by the machine. This oversight will be important to ensure outcomes of these solutions are fit for purpose.

Also, it's crucial to ensure that ethical, legal and security policies are maintained as GenAI performs its reasoning tasks. AI's highly objective nature means it lacks an understanding of right and wrong like humans do. Therefore, safety controls and AI regulation must evolve to stay ahead of AI's advancing intellectual capabilities.

The writer is chief data scientist & head of responsible AI, UST, UK

# Prompt Your AI These Pramanas



Jaspreet Bindra & Vivek Saxena

For many, Christopher Nolan's 2023 biopic, Oppenheimer, brought home the connection between science and Indian scriptures, where Robert Oppenheimer famously quotes the Bhagwad Gita: 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.' It's lesser known that physicists like Erwin Schrödinger and Nikola Tesla were also deeply influenced by Indian philosophy particularly the idea of oneness found in Advaita Vedanta.

There are many such intriguing connections between AI and some of our ancient texts. Take pramana, the means of acquiring valid knowledge, of which six are considered main:

- **Pratyaksha (perception)** Direct sensory experience, like seeing fire and knowing it's hot.
- **Anumana (inference)** Reasoning — seeing smoke and inferring there's fire.
- **Upamana (comparison)** Allows one to understand a new object by comparing it to a familiar one, like learning what a zebra is by comparing it to a horse.
- **Sabda (verbal testimony)** Knowledge gained from reliable sources,

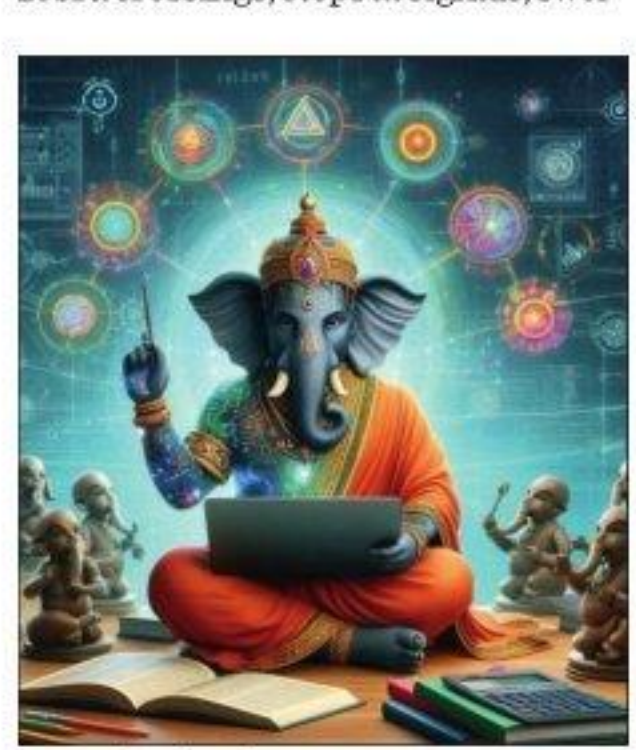
such as trusted experts.

► **Arthapatti (postulation)** Explains something not directly observed, like assuming someone must be eating at night if they are gaining weight despite fasting during the day.

► **Anupalabdh (non-perception)** Knowledge from recognising absence, like knowing a book is missing from a shelf by noticing the gap where it used to be.

In sum, pramana forms the basis of understanding how knowledge is perceived, validated and applied across the spectrum of Indian philosophical traditions. Each Indian philosophical school tailors the pramanas to align with its specific world view and methods of inquiry.

So, how are these 'arcane concepts' related to AI, specifically autonomous vehicles (AVs)? An AV slows down at zebra crossings, stops at signals, swer-



Fuzzy logic primer

ves around obstacles and adjusts to unexpected changes in traffic. But how exactly does it know what to do?

In AVs, perception, or pratyaksha, corresponds to sensors, cameras and LiDAR (light detection and ranging) systems that allow the car to perceive its surroundings. These devices gather real-time data, just as human senses do, enabling the car to detect other vehicles, pedestrians and road signs. However, while this helps AI capture and process vast amounts of visual and sensory data, it lacks the deep contextual awareness. That's where inference, or anumana, comes in.

AVs use inference to predict and react to road situations. For example, if a car detects a pedestrian nearing the street, it infers that it needs to slow down. This type of reasoning is similar to how humans make decisions based on patterns and past experiences. However, AI's inference is limited to the data it has been trained on, while human inference can extend to novel situations without prior exposure.

AVs are trained on large datasets labelled by human experts. For example, AI learns to recognise stop signs through labelled images. This is known as supervised learning, and can be compared to testimony, or sabda. However, a car relying only on pre-existing knowledge cannot assess the reliability or truthfulness of the data like humans can. So, when it comes across something unfamiliar, it uses unsupervised ML, akin to comparison, or upamana, to compare new objects or situations to familiar ones.

If an EV encounters an unfamiliar

object, it compares its features to other known objects to determine whether it is safe to drive over or avoid. But it still does not possess the human ability to draw deep analogies across different, unrelated contexts.

The fifth way to know, non-perception, or anupalabdh, recognises what is missing — such as the AV noticing faded lane markers or missing traffic lights. This helps the car adapt to incomplete external as well as internal conditions. However, AI's ability to recognise absences is again constrained by its programmed parameters, while humans can use intuition and experience to handle the absence of expected patterns in more flexible ways.

Finally, the ability to form hypotheses in the absence of complete data, arthapatti, or postulation, is a human strength that AI still struggles with. A self-driving car may freeze when faced with an unexpected scenario, such as a cop waving cars around an accident scene. Humans can hypothesise, improvise and find solutions in unfamiliar situations, making postulation one of the most significant cognitive abilities that distinguishes us from AI.

AI scientists will be well served to study ancient Indian texts for novel ways to address the thorny problems in AI and its ethics. The pramanas are just one way the texts can teach us about a modern technology. There are many others that could help realise the ultimate vision of Sam Altman and his ilk — AGI, or artificial general intelligence.

Bindra is founder, AI&Beyond, and Saxena is co-founder-CEO, Thinkly



THE SPEAKING TREE

# A Life of Purpose

GANESH KOLAMBAKAR

Pursuing life's purpose can be a perplexing journey, often leaving us with more questions than answers. Questions like 'Who am I?' and 'Am I giving meaning to my life?' are heavily loaded and can further complicate this quest. What we truly need is a clear approach to navigating these questions. The first step is cultivating a genuine desire and deep-seated need to discover our purpose.

Purpose is the foundation of a meaningful and fulfilling life. Without it, life can become disorganised, chaotic and directionless — a mere existence without substance. Can we simplify this concept? Yes, it's a fundamental human need to seek meaning and connect with something greater than ourselves. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs also emphasises this, capturing the aspiration for self-actualisation beyond basic needs like hunger, security, love and recognition.

In simple terms, our purpose could be to find happiness and share it with those around us. According to Vedic teachings, our purpose in life is to become divine beings.

The Purusharthas of Dharm, righteousness; Arth, prosperity; Kaam, desire; and Moksh, liberation, can guide us on this journey. Through reflection and contemplation, we gain clarity and can identify our true purpose.



# Apple Bites

Customer at Apple Store: My iPhone keeps crashing.  
Staff: Hmm, it seems like you have too many apps running. Let me close them for you.  
Customer: Thanks, but I already did that.



Staff: Okay, let's try re-setting your settings. This won't delete your data, just reset your preferences.  
Customer: I did that too. Still no luck.  
Staff: Alright, let's try a factory reset. This will erase everything and restore your phone to its original state.  
Customer: Did that as well. It still crashes.  
Staff: Wow, you've tried everything. Maybe it's time to upgrade to the latest iPhone.  
Customer: But I just bought this one last month!  
Staff: Exactly. Welcome to the Apple ecosystem!

# Drastic Cuts

A company had to cut costs or face bankruptcy. The CEO hired a consultant. After examining the operations and interviewing employees, he presented his findings.  
Consultant: I have good news and bad news. The good news is that you can save a lot of money by laying off half of your employees.  
CEO: That's great! What's the bad news?  
Consultant: The bad news is that the remaining half will be so overworked that they'll quit within a month.

# Chat Room

# Bit of Horse Sense, But a Lot of Luck

Apropos the Edit, 'Three New Horsemen Of the MPCocalypse' (Oct 4), the responsibility of the new MPC is huge, to maintain the accommodative monetary policy itself so far pursued in the midst of neo-political disturbances, leave alone changing the policy rates favouring economic growth, though highly desirable. The benign inflation experienced these days seems to be tapering off in the changed political and economic scenario abroad, and the domestic food inflation that continues to remain high and unbearable for the majority can be a real challenge for the new MPC, RBI and the gov. Smartness of the new MPC will be judged by the way it can diplomatically coordinate the monetary policy and the fiscal policy aiming at the impossible possibility of ensuring price stability and economic growth, and save the people from the emotional and financial miseries of high inflation and high cost of living.

T V GOPALAKRISHNAN  
Bengaluru



## A thought for today

The oil can is mightier than the sword

EVERETT DIRKSEN



## Don't Fan This Flame

US must stop Israel from targeting Iranian oil

With Iran's missile attack on Israel this week, there's little doubt Tel Aviv will retaliate. While US has ruled out Israel striking Iran's nuclear facilities, there's now talk of a hit on Iranian oil producing infra. That would be disastrous in a different way. Washington must do everything in its power to restrain Tel Aviv from targeting Iranian oil.

**Huge provocation** | Hitting Iranian oil infra would be a huge escalation. For, Iran may choose to retaliate by targeting oil shipments from the Persian Gulf. That itself could drag countries like UAE and Saudi Arabia into the conflict. Plus, Iran, despite sanctions, pumps out about 2mn barrels of crude a day, or 2% of global supply. A hit on this production will see crude prices jump, given that oil trade is driven by global market dynamics. In fact, Brent crude has already crossed \$78 a barrel from \$71 a barrel before Iran's missile attack.



**Bad for India** | Countries like India that rely on oil and gas imports from the Gulf will suffer if Iran disrupts this route. Also, oil is traded on forward contracts. These will go for a toss in case of wider war. The knock-on effects for these economies will be considerable. Additionally, India has a huge diaspora in Gulf Arab states. A wider regional conflict may necessitate emergency evacuation.

**Biden's final test** | Hitherto US has been unable or unwilling to rein in Netanyahu. There are now reports that Hezbollah and Israel had agreed to a US-France ceasefire before Nasrallah was killed. If that's true, Biden can be accused of being a lame-duck President. That's certainly not the legacy he wants and many Democrats are privately upset with Israel. The least Biden can do is not let Netanyahu cause anymore major damage.

## No Exemption

GOI's marital rape affidavit is problematic

Given BNSS retained the marital rape exemption that decriminalises spousal rape when it updated the Indian Penal Code, GOI's affidavit to Supreme Court against its removal is on expected lines. Broadly, gov't arguments are (1) sex within marriage is based on reciprocal conjugal rights "incomparable" to ideas of consent, (2) removing the exemption would interfere with the "institution of marriage" and (3) remedies exist such as in the law against domestic violence to deal with non-consensual sex between spouses.

In its landmark 2017 privacy judgment, SC was unambiguous about sexual autonomy – it clearly linked it to dignity and privacy. An individual's fundamental right to privacy is not one any aspect of the relationship of marriage can impinge upon. Until this judgment, the idea of privacy in Indian law would cease and desist at the threshold of the union of marriage. Thus, privacy tended to be used more as a cover to deny married women their rights, perpetuating ideas of 'honour', 'duty', and 'shame'. The privacy judgment placed the individual at the heart of the law, thus turning privacy into an empowering tool for all women, including married ones.

The belief that non-consensual sex within marriage is in some way different from non-consensual sex outside marriage is premised on an archaic view that marriage renders women their husband's property. This goes against every tenet GOI professes. As it reiterated in its affidavit, empowerment of women – from economic freedom to safe mobility – is core policy. GOI bats for women's freedom of choice. That would include her right to decline sexual activity. GOI also argues 'consent' within a marriage is for legislatures to decide upon. What SC is doing is deciding upon the unconstitutionality of the said provision. It is in fact the court's job to do so.



## The Secret Sauce Of Israel's Economy

Battle-testing weapons on the Palestinians

Despite the scale of horror it has inflicted in Gaza, why is the geopolitical outrage against Israel insignificant compared to what any other country would have faced? **The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports The Technology Of Occupation Around The World** by investigative journalist **Antony Loewenstein** builds a detailed case of how in becoming a key supplier of arms and surveillance technologies to most countries around the world, Israel has brought itself excellent insurance against moral censure and other sanctions.

Israel's world-class weapons industry has been developed with equipment "conveniently" tested on occupied Palestinians, then marketed as "battle-tested", the book says. This is then used to rally diplomatic support internationally. UN itself gives Israeli companies security contracts, including for CCTV cameras, drones and threat detection systems.

The book goes further. It says that under Netanyahu not only has ethno-nationalism been turbocharged, he has convinced many other countries to use Israel as a model: "Netanyahuism as an ideology will outlive him."

According to the book, historically, Israel has been an enabler of apartheid in South Africa, genocide in Rwanda, plus dictators like Pinochet, Suharto, Ceausescu and 'Papa Doc' Duvalier. Today, "operational envy" of Israel's technology and its "willingness to act with relative freedom and confidence in confronting threats", has become pervasive. This is reflected in an endless supply of customers, including India, China, US, UK and EU.

It's not just countries, though. From Mexican drug cartels to the 2016 Trump campaign to Harvey Weinstein,

plenty of private parties are also paying for "private Mossads" these days, Loewenstein details.

He also writes that the personnel and machine learning biases of Big Tech support the Israeli line. This means the censorship and restrictions experienced by Palestinians under physical occupation get replicated in the online world. There is widespread "digital orientalism" and then there are even more dystopic tools. Israel has used secret algorithms targeting Facebook to arrest Palestinians on the basis of "precrime incidents".

On the US-Israeli relationship, the book expands on how much Israel has been "benefiting" from the attack on the Twin Towers and Pentagon. The message being: "We have been fighting a War on Terror since our birth. We'll show you how it's done."

After admiration for its homeland security sector, Israel's resilience post the 2008 global financial crisis pulled applause for its start-up "miracle". But what did not get attention was what was generating the innovations and profits. It is actually the experience of controlling another

people that Israel is selling in the global market, the book says.

A "majority" of Israeli entrepreneurs are profoundly influenced by their stint in IDF. The book quotes one of them: "When it comes to US military resumes, Silicon Valley is illiterate. What a waste of kick-ass leadership talent coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan."

Since Oct 7, 2023 Israel's defence companies have actually been experiencing increased demand. It is now live-testing new weapons in Gaza, Loewenstein suggests. And with a "lust aesthetic of warfare", these are being proudly displayed on social media to reach potential global buyers.

## mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



## More Work ≠ Better Work

Controversies over work stress should tell companies something. Treating workers as grist to bottom lines isn't just bad for them, but is also an uncreative way to improve productivity

Chetan Bhagat



There is a debate raging in this country over work. On the one hand, we have industry icons urging young Indians to work 70 hours a week. On the other, the death of an overworked 26-year-old EY employee has caused national outrage. Both sides have their votaries.

The 'work more' brigade believes being young is about building your career and contributing to the nation. Work-life balance, according to them, is for the weak. Who needs sleep or health when you can add to the company's bottom line? Working hard, they argue, is just another way to outwork the competition. And life is all about beating the competition.

**Work culture the issue** | The EY employee who died had only recently cleared the notoriously competitive CA exam. She was then thrust into a demanding new job. According to her parents, she worked late into the night and came home only to receive more work. Being a CA, her job likely involved poring over reams of documents and preparing reports. It must have been hard.

It's not just accountants. In the horrible RG Kar case, young doctors were said to be working sleepless 36-hour shifts. IT managers, investment bankers, consultants, salespeople, mediapersons – these are all professionals for whom work never ends. But that's not how it works everywhere.

I remember an incident from my investment banking years long ago. I had gone to Perth, Australia, to conduct credit due diligence on a mining company. I wanted to set up a meeting with the finance manager. He said his last meeting slot was at 3.30pm because he left for home at 4.30pm, come what may. He never took work home either. And yes, the mining company he worked for did just fine.

But in my banking job in Hong Kong, we worked until 10pm several days a week. That was the culture in Hong Kong. This same work-long-and-hard culture is prevalent in India as well. Junior employees don't want to leave before their seniors do. Seniors don't leave until their superior does. Thus, everyone stays back. Remote work technology has made things worse. Tools meant to make life easier are now being used to ensure you are always online and instantly responsive.

**Grind confused with productivity** | Irony is, Indian companies aren't more productive than global counterparts. True wealth creation comes from vision and innovation. This requires creativity and freedom. It also requires enough free time for people to think of new ideas. If it were only about the daily grind, nothing great would ever be achieved.



One of the biggest time wasters in Indian companies are meetings. Be honest and answer this: Has any company meeting ever helped achieve anything? Couldn't a message on the group have done just as well? But no, meetings are a must in corporate settings.

Indian companies actively dislike innovation. The idea of junior employees making valuable contributions

makes us insecure. Hence, there is no effort to keep junior employees in a happy and creative state. Such employees are just commodified resources, lemons to be squeezed. If you can pay junior employees half of what they deserve and make them do the work of two, that for an Indian manager is a major success. The competitive advantage of Indian companies, particularly in the service sector, is almost always cheap labour, another term for employee exploitation.

**What's the way out?** | In this pressure-cooker environment, what is a junior employee supposed to do? Should you rebel? No, you'll lose your job. Should you quit? Only if your daddy is rich. Should you suck up to seniors and work harder? No, because you don't want your life force drained out of you. So, think of ways to deal with the situation.

First, accept that being junior often means you have to work hard. However, you could be working too hard if you're not getting enough sleep, are constantly fatigued, in poor mental health, or don't have any fun in your life. If any of this is happening, you must talk to your senior.

That could be extremely difficult. You could be labelled a "snowflake" for telling your manager you need decent sleep. Still, have that talk. Do not compromise on sleep. Lose sleep, and eventually, you could lose everything. Work hard, but make time for yourself, your family, your friends. Nobody ever discusses PowerPoint presentations on their deathbed.

**And if it doesn't work?** | What if the manager doesn't listen? Then you can use my patented method, which I employed for years. Implement the LBDN policy: That's "Look busy, do nothing".

So, once a project ends, don't declare it's finished. That way they won't dump fresh work on you too quickly. Meanwhile, open an old client report or spreadsheet to look busy in office. During that time, meditate, watch prank videos, sign up on dating websites, or chat with friends. The moment the boss walks by, type away furiously on the spreadsheet. The boss will leave you alone.

Indian managers are often clueless, with zero compassion or people management skills. They think sharing motivational LinkedIn posts makes them good managers, even as they ignore their team's motivation and exhaustion. Reason with them. If they don't listen, do your own thing and exploit your job with zero guilt – just the way you are being exploited.

## It's More Than Just About Tirupati Laddoos

State control of temples should end. Many argue against this, as did the TOI edit. But courts should give Hindus rights similar to those enjoyed by other communities

R Jagannathan



The Tirupati "contaminated laddoo" controversy, now lobbed into the lap of the Supreme Court, is in danger of diverting attention from the real issues Hindu face, in attempting to claim their religious rights under Article 25.

State control of temples is the norm in southern states, and it may increasingly become a reality elsewhere as politicians eye the wealth of these institutions. The bench hearing the laddoo petitions has already made some caustic comments about the politicisation of the issue, but this should not blind us to the larger reality where Hindus, and Hindus alone, face discrimination when it comes to running their own temples.

Many arguments, including those made in the TOI edit (*Don't Load The Laddoo*, Oct 1), support state control of temples.

● It is said that big temples with large revenues are receivers of public largesse, and hence cannot be given back to private parties to run. Really? And why does this logic apply only to temples?

● Even where temples are indeed run by private trusts or bodies, the state intervenes if a part of the institution's work relates to "secular activities". Question: Can secular work really be separated from religious activity in a religious institution?

● It is concerns about caste-based discrimination that convince many "progressive" Hindus. The Constitution itself provides that the state can make laws to provide for "social welfare and reform, or the throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus". This provision makes Hindus the Constitution's step-child, targeted for interventions unlike any other religion.

Consider an analogy. Companies can pollute the environment, regardless of whether they are in the public sector or private. So if you want less pollution, you can have a law that mandates certain practices and penalties for all

companies, regardless of the sector they belong to. You don't nationalise companies just to reduce pollution.

If we apply this logic to temples, to prevent discrimination against some castes, you need a religion-neutral law, not state control. The state can monitor, reprimand and even intrude into the religious domain to set things right. It cannot permanently reduce religious places to public entities. A state is not meant to run religious institutions.

Quite simply, Article 25, which encourages religious freedom and mandates state intervention only for Hindu religious institutions, is in contradiction to Article 14 that promises equality before the law.

The question for those who want temples to remain under state control is this: can temple funds be used only to run and administer such institutions or should they be used to propagate Hinduism in the same way church and mosque can? If temple funds cannot be used for propagation, should churches and mosques not, in all fairness, be restrained in the same way?

Now, for a more nuanced point. Temples are not public institutions like state enterprises or public parks where everybody has equal rights. Temples are public-private institutions, as they are imbued with history and heritage, and if some of them have inherited a tradition where some families or groups have exclusive rights to run them, it does not amount to unconscionable discrimination against others.

Just as a company promoter and his inheritors cannot be ousted just because the company has become too big, the logical way to reduce family control is

through anti-trust legislation and/or forced divestitures of other businesses. In the case of temples, new franchises of the same deity can be opened to other groups. Indian temples have diverse traditions, some more conservative and traditional and others more liberal. Are we saying that conservative temples have no right to exist in India, when everywhere in the world conservative churches and mosques are allowed to do their own thing?

Thanks to the constitutional handicap, judiciary has bent over backwards to intrude into religious spaces in the name of social justice. In the Sabarimala judgment, one judge used the untouchability argument to end the unique practice of not

allowing women in the reproductive age to visit the shrine because the deity, Lord Ayyappa, is worshipped as a celibate. A differentiated practice cannot be labelled as discrimination, especially when this "discrimination" is one temple's practice, and not universal.

Let's say a group of women decide to set up a "Stree Shakti Mandir" where female deities are worshipped, and only women priests officiate. Would this constitute discrimination against men, or is it just the right of free citizens to form their own associations and build institutions with their own rules and traditions?

A petition filed by the late Swami Dayananda Saraswati as far back as 2012, seeking to free temples from state control, is still to see the light of day. Judiciary needs clarity of vision and courage to deal with this aspect of religious discrimination, in which it has been complicit for decades.



## Calvin &amp; Hobbes



## Sufism Encapsulates Collective Empathy And Bonhomie

Sumit Paul

Rumi introduced himself, saying: *I am neither Christian nor Jew, Neither Persian nor Muslim. I am neither the East nor West, Neither from land nor from water.*

He refused to be confined to any faith or shackles of time and space. Rumi's entire exalted philosophy is not only the kernel of Sufism but also the essence of humanity. Rumi's magnanimous philosophy is the template for Sufism and a panacea to all conflicts and confrontations. The constant conflict of numerous dissenting views leads to bad blood and unrest in the world. Instead of challenging the ideas in a sane and civilised manner, we challenge the individuals.

We seem to have lost the sanity to accept others' viewpoints and sanctity to defend their views if the need arises. What could

be the solution to tackle the growing indifference among people, communities, religions, races and nations? Sufism gave a unique philosophy to the world, which Prof. Hamilton Gibb defined as 'mystic egalitarianism'. As the very name suggests, this philosophy, propounded by the Sufis, respects and accommodates all views and ideas without being judgemental.

Our problem is that we're all more or less tendentious and prejudiced. We tend to form an opinion at the drop of a hat and start behaving accordingly to justify our opinion. We also tend to look at the perceived negative side of anything. Man's mind has several options and possibilities. And because of this quality, we perceive truth in myriad ways. Sufis understood this theory in an all-encompassing fashion; therefore, they removed the

word 'insistence' from their parlance. The universality and all-embracing nature of Sufi syncretism are immeasurable. Once we imbibe its spirit to the hilt, our outlook gets broadened, and our heart becomes so magnificent that it accepts all.

Accepting the Sufi way of life also teaches us to look at everything with compassion and positivism.

Today, there are so many sects, and all are fighting to prove that their respective sect has the divine right to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jami says, "Whether or not one goes to heaven or hell is doubtful, but the world can be turned into

heaven by accepting that everyone's right from his or her angle." The moment we realise that the other person could also be right, all the differences disappear. Let there be no unanimity on thoughts and views, but there can be universal

## Sacredspace



There are two aspects of individual harmony: the harmony between body and soul, and the harmony between individuals. All the tragedy in the world, in the individual and in the multitude, comes from lack of harmony.

Hazrat Inayat Khan



THE SPEAKING TREE



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### Caste bias in jails

SC orders overhaul of prison manuals

THE Supreme Court's recent ruling, which bans caste-based discrimination in prisons, is a monumental step toward dismantling entrenched social inequities. The order rightly underscores that even prisoners have the right to live with dignity. The SC called for the immediate revision of prison manuals across states, quashing outdated provisions that enforced caste-based segregation in labour assignments and housing arrangements. Caste-based discrimination within prisons often reflected broader societal biases. Historically, lower castes were forced into menial tasks like cleaning toilets while upper castes were assigned roles such as cooking. The court emphatically declared that no social group is born as a 'scavenger class,' and that the notion of certain occupations being degrading is an aspect of untouchability, explicitly prohibited under Article 17 of the Constitution.

The judgment identified practices in prison manuals that mirrored untouchability. For example, in states like Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, prison manuals explicitly directed that food be prepared by "suitable castes" and that certain marginalised groups handle cleaning tasks. The SC rightly condemned these provisions, calling them unconstitutional and a violation of the fundamental rights to equality and dignity. The ruling also condemned the categorisation of denotified tribes as habitual offenders, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that further marginalised these communities. Such practices have long been criticised by human rights organisations for reinforcing caste hierarchies and stripping marginalised prisoners of their dignity.

As states revise their prison manuals within the mandated three months, this judgment represents a crucial shift toward dismantling the oppressive systems that continue to harm the most vulnerable. The decision reminds us that justice and equality must extend to all, including those behind prison walls, bringing India closer to the constitutional promise of dignity for all its citizens.

### The Chagos handover

Why the UK still won't part with Diego Garcia

THE UK's decision to cede the sovereignty of Chagos Islands to Mauritius is prompted by geopolitical compulsions rather than diplomatic generosity. Had the UK been truly magnanimous, it would have also handed back the Diego Garcia military base to Mauritius, which it gave to the US as far back as 1966, via an "exchange of notes". It's clear now, just in case it wasn't to those wearing rose-tinted glasses, that the US-UK alliance will never give up control of this strategically important island, citing its "commitment to safeguarding global security" and "averting threats to peace" in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

All the rhetoric, however, cannot conceal the fact that the times when Britannia ruled the waves are long gone. According to the World Directory of Modern Military Warships, the British Royal Navy is ranked ninth on the global list of the strongest navies. Even the Indian Navy is placed higher in terms of the fighting strength. The table-topper is the US, with China breathing down its neck. Heavily dependent on America in the seas, the UK just can't afford to upset its close ally by parting with Diego Garcia.

Britain's position had become untenable when the International Court of Justice said in 2019 that its continued administration of the Chagos Archipelago constituted 'a wrongful act entailing the international responsibility of that State'. Eager to be seen as a responsible Western power, the UK has come up with an agreement that suits it to a tee. The pact is also aimed at curbing the use of the Indian Ocean as an illegal migration route to the UK. Britain has tactfully put the onus on Mauritius to take responsibility for migrants who may arrive on Diego Garcia and make asylum claims. Wary of the growing Chinese assertiveness in the IOR, the UK is busy wooing Mauritius, which has close trade ties with Beijing. India, which has welcomed the Chagos development, would be well advised to prioritise its own strategic interests in the region to counter the Chinese threat.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5, 1924

### A job half-finished

THE Unity Conference, which opened at Delhi on September 26, concluded its sittings on Thursday after a week's deliberations. The problem that it had taken upon itself to solve was the most difficult and delicate that any similar body had ever attempted to tackle, and the manner in which many, if not most, of its members approached the task and the great work it did during the week were such as it might well be proud of. Whether that work will live in history, it is too early to say. It will, among other things, depend upon the spirit in which the country will accept the decisions arrived at by the conference, and the tact, wisdom and courage which the members of the conference themselves will show when the question before them is not merely that of passing resolutions but of carrying them out. But history will bear them this attestation that they have shrunk from no labour and have been guilty of no prevarication. The mere strenuousness of the work has beaten the record of all public bodies in the country with the single exception of the Congress, and there has been no session of the Congress itself at which either the Subjects Committee or any other body of delegates had to work harder or more assiduously or more devotedly for so long a time at a stretch as this committee of the conference had to do. It is easy enough to pick holes. We have ourselves had to do so, and in one most vital respect shall have to do it presently again. But let us fully, frankly and unreservedly acknowledge the good the conference had done before we proceed to say what more it might and ought to have done.

# When the dice rolls in Haryana

It is to punish the arrogance of their leaders that Haryanvis will vote today



THE GREAT GAME  
JYOTI MALHOTRA

UNDER a hot, afternoon sun on Thursday in Haryana's Shahbad constituency, with mere hours to go before the campaigning for the Assembly polls formally drew to a close, BJP workers seemed somewhat downcast as they emerged from a meeting where Yogi Adityanath had just held forth for 20 minutes. But the applause for the UP chief minister had been weak and scattered, as if the fire in his belly had been missing and the response to it bewildered.

"Yeh to phir bhi baazi patlega," said one BJP worker, insisting that the party strongman would reverse the throw of the dice, which seemed insensibly stacked against the BJP. That despite the disarray in party ranks, even in this last moment, the party would be able to showcase all its splendid works — the roads, the subsidies, the schemes for men, women and farmers.

But, the BJP worker and his friends also conceded that it was not going to be easy. For example, they said, the jealous rival to the official party candidate in Shahbad had openly undermined the latter's candidature. "Woh uske gale mein mara hua saanp daal ke bhag gaya hai," one said. (He has thrown a dead snake around the BJP candidate's neck and fled.) A third man, explaining the lack of a crowd at Yogi's meeting, pointed out that the citizenry were so angry with the outgoing BJP MLA's arrogance that they were determined to punish the current candidate for it.



BIG BATTLE: Stakes are high for outgoing CM Nayab Singh Saini (left) and Congress veteran Bhupinder Singh Hooda. PTI

"Uski gardan mein se sariya nikalna toh hai hi," a fourth man said. We have to remove the iron rod from the neck and spine of the BJP candidate.

If Shahbad is the model, then small wonder that the stakes for Haryana's 90 Assembly seats in Haryana are so high. Almost as if when the EVMs are switched on this bright Saturday morning, the equivalent of the fourth battle of Panipat will be joined — this time between the Congress party's Bhupinder Singh Hooda and outgoing chief minister Nayab Singh Saini, an affable enough man who should have replaced his guide and mentor Manohar Lal Khattar much earlier than the six months he was given in March.

That's because, for nine-and-a-half years, no one could touch Khattar. He ruled Haryana with an iron, arrogant hand, ever since PM Narendra Modi first waved the magic wand in 2014, because he and Modi went back a long way. As Modi recounted at a rally earlier this year, back in the 1980s, both he and Khattar often slept on the same durrer and rode on the same bike all over Haryana as

If the BJP loses Haryana, PM Modi knows that one more excruciatingly important domino will fall.

RSS *pracharaks* trying to spread the message. The story goes that Saini worked in the BJP office at the time, typing out notes and press releases, and ever since has owed his rise and rise to Khattar.

The problem with Haryana is that the echo of history is so loud that it tends to drown the noise of the present. Saini is Khattar's protégé, who, in turn, is close to Modi — all best

friends, determined to battle on the same side. And then you hear the dice roll. The sound of the EVMs ping and the finger being softly pressed on the button. The people of Haryana have decided. It's no longer about Saini or Khattar or Hooda — or even, Modi.

It's about removing the 'sariya' from the neck of the arrogant man. It is to punish the arrogance of their leaders that Haryanvis will vote today.

For Modi, the stakes can't be higher. The fact is, tiny Haryana, with only 90 seats, is where it all began, where the blueprint of power was first imprinted on the collective subconscious of the people of the Indo-Gangetic plains. Loyalty, friendship, love, betrayal, violence, hatred — the ebb and flow of every emotion was first tested here, in Haryana, in the run-up to the battle of Kurukshetra, during and after.

Delhi was always the jewel in the intended crown of the Afghan tribals and the potential Mughal rulers — but the sack, rape and pillage of Delhi could only take place if Haryana allowed the strongman to have his way. The

Haryanvi understood that his power lay in assessing the strongman's power. Should he allow him to have his way? And if yes, then at what price?

Modi understands this better than any other politician in India today. If the BJP loses Haryana, Modi knows that one more excruciatingly important domino will fall. Sandwiched between the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi and Punjab, a defeat or victory in Haryana has already acquired the psychological importance of a silver bullet.

Then there's Jammu & Kashmir. And Maharashtra, in November.

Haryana is no longer just 90 Assembly seats — depending on how you see it, it is either the foreword to Uttar Pradesh, or it's extension. That loss of 29 seats in UP this past summer, which punctured the BJP's majesty in the Lok Sabha, still hurts. What Haryana does this morning will either turn that pain into agony or a moderated ecstasy.

For Hooda and the Congress, Haryana offers the idea of the alternative. That the BJP is not invincible, that it can be defeated at its own game, on its own turf, by employing some of the same methods. Kautilya comes in handy as it does for every wily, potential ruler. *Saam. Daam. Dand. Bhed.* That's how it has always been in this part of the country.

At his last rally of the campaign in Panipat on Thursday evening, Hooda exited the meeting with a cloud of dust raised by every one of the enormous 22 SUVs in his cavalcade. "A rahi hai, Congress," screamed the banners and the hoardings. Hooda's men were behaving like he was already installed upon the 'gaddi' in Chandigarh.

Perhaps, there's something about Panipat that tolerates this kind of behaviour. Perhaps Haryana knows that even if it isn't as prized as Delhi, it holds the key to how to win the shiny prize. That without it, Delhi is bound to lose half its shine.

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Vote for the man who promises least; he'll be the least disappointing. — Bernard Baruch

## A Gandhian in the Netherlands

RN MALIK

GANDHI Jayanti brought back memories of my interaction with a Gandhian in the Netherlands five decades ago. He was Jan Tinbergen (1903-94), the first recipient — along with Norwegian Ragnar Frisch — of the Nobel Prize in economic sciences. I was doing MTech at the Delft Institute of Hydraulics Engineering near Hague at that time.

In November 1974, we received a written message in the class, stating that 'Prof Jan Tinbergen will arrive in the institute tomorrow to deliver a lecture at 11 am. All are requested to attend it.' Surprisingly, the staff made no preparations to give a red-carpet welcome to the Nobel laureate.

Next day, precisely at 11 am, Prof Salz, the secretary to the institute director, entered the hall along with Tinbergen and briefly introduced the guest. Then, he said, 'Over to Dr Tinbergen', and sat down on the dais.

Tinbergen, 71 at that time, delivered a one-hour-long lecture in simple and lucid English, covering world affairs, hyperinflation in the wake of the four-fold hike in crude oil prices by OPEC (Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries) members and the turbulence caused by the Cold War. In the closing minutes of his address, he said, 'If nations want to live in peace, they must adhere to the Gandhian philosophy of truth and non-violence as there is no other way to achieve that objective.'

I felt proud on hearing these words. Students of 50 other countries, too, seemed electrified to learn that Gandhi continued to inspire people even 25-odd years after his death. Thereafter, Tinbergen left the institute without any fanfare.

Later, I met Prof Salz to find out why a low-key reception had been accorded to the renowned guest. He told me that Westerners generally despised pomposity, and Tinbergen, being a Gandhian, preferred extreme simplicity on all occasions. He did not own a car and used to travel by tram or train. He took a flight only while travelling to foreign countries for meetings and conferences. That day, he had walked from the tram station to reach the institute. Like Gandhi, he was a vegetarian.

I met Tinbergen at his residence in March 1975. He lived in a modest house; all three rooms were stuffed mostly with books. I gifted him a classic, Lala Har Dayal's *Hints for Self-Culture*.

Tinbergen suggested that India should act as a brand ambassador to spread the Gandhian message of truth and non-violence around the world amid the dangers posed by the Cold War. He also talked about Indian economists like Tarlok Singh and Sukhamoy Chakravarty; the latter was a member of the Planning Commission.

The Nobel laureate informed me that he was heading the committee that was preparing the third report of the renowned Club of Rome. Spending half an hour with this great intellectual and an adherent of Gandhian philosophy was an unforgettably stimulating experience.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Enhance security of doctors

Apropos of 'Doctors targeted'; the killing of a doctor in a Delhi hospital, weeks after the rape and murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata, has jolted the entire nation. It calls for foolproof security measures in and around hospitals throughout the country. Since doctors work under hazardous conditions, it's mandatory for the authorities to provide them a conducive working environment so as to ensure that they discharge their onerous duties without any fear. Doctors are striking work and protesting on the streets in support of their genuine demands for safety and security, but the patients are suffering a lot. This does not augur well for the nation. Augmenting security of doctors is the pressing need of the hour.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

#### Doctors' lives at stake

With reference to 'Doctors targeted'; the horrifying rape and murder of a postgraduate trainee doctor at RG Kar Medical College, Kolkata, in August had sparked a public outrage. Now, a doctor has been shot dead at a hospital in Delhi. It is shameful for the authorities concerned that despite the Supreme Court's directions to take security measures such as installing CCTV cameras, constructing basic amenities such as toilets and rest rooms in hospitals, nothing has been done. It is unfortunate that the SC has to interfere in all matters, be it political or administrative. The lives of doctors are at stake.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROPAR

#### Punjab BJP in trouble

Refer to 'Punjab BJP's woes'; Sunil Jakhar has rightly flagged issues concerning the state with the BJP high command. Jakhar seems to be working without a team. Ever since former CM Capt Amarinder Singh joined the BJP, he has been missing from the political scene. The party fielded Preet Kaur from the Patiala parliamentary constituency, but she lost, even though the PM addressed a poll rally there. Ravneet Singh Bittu joined the BJP just before the 2024 elections, but he lost from Ludhiana. Even then, he was made a minister, only to send a positive message to leaders of other political parties to join the BJP. A captain can achieve success only with the help of a strong team.

RAVINDER KUMAR JAIN, LUDHIANA

#### War is a killer of humanity

The crisis in West Asia is worsening. Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran, and Israel, which enjoys the support of the US, have caused chaos in the region. Hundreds of ballistic missiles are targeting people and buildings. The war is a huge killer of humanity. With each passing day, thousands of lives are being lost. We must be empathic towards the victims of war and take immediate action to halt this humanitarian crisis.

KIRTI WADHAWAN, KANPUR

#### Global repercussions of conflict

Refer to 'Missile strikes, oil shock & threat of war'; the Israel-Palestine conflict remains fraught with peril, particularly as the Iran-Israel rivalry intensifies. The assassination of key Hezbollah and Hamas leaders has further complicated the situation. Israeli PM Netanyahu's failure to secure the release of all hostages has put him in a precarious position. If he halts military operations, he could face serious consequences for causing a humanitarian crisis. By supplying arms and political support, the US-led Western alliance has intensified tensions in the region. The ramifications extend beyond West Asia as rising oil prices threaten global stability and peace. India must maintain a neutral stance while advocating for a two-nation solution, fostering dialogue and cooperation.

HARBINDER S HILLON, UNA

#### A generous initiative

Apropos of 'A generous gesture on the Rhodes front' (*Trusts and Turns*); the article aptly highlights the contribution by the Radhakrishnan and Rajan families to establish the sixth Rhodes scholarship for Indian students. This initiative will enhance the opportunities for talented Indian scholars to pursue studies at Oxford University, one of the world's most prestigious institutions. The gesture honours the legacy of both families and strengthens India's intellectual presence on the global stage. May the number of such good Samaritans increase.

AMARJEET MANN, UNA



# Iran-Israel war takes a dangerous turn



**YOGESH GUPTA**  
FORMER AMBASSADOR

**A**FTER Israel killed Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and other leaders in Beirut on September 27, Iran fired around 200 missiles at Israel on October 1 without warning the USA. While most missiles were stopped by US and Israeli defence systems, a few hit Israel's Nevatim air base, damaging about 30 F-35 fighter jets. No one was killed, but a few people had minor injuries.

Not to escalate the conflict further, the Biden administration is trying to belittle the success of the Iranian attack, urging Israel to be proportionate in its response. Israel, on the other hand, is angry that Iran had the audacity to lob missiles at its nuclear plant in Dimona (producing nuclear weapons) and three critical air bases. It is mulling a tough response.

Iran's attack came after a series of killings by Israel of the senior leadership of

Hezbollah, other cadres in pager explosions, the bombing of Yemeni ports, power plants and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in recent months. Iran realised that its lack of response had whetted the Israeli aggressiveness in killing its proxies in Lebanon, Gaza, Yemen and Syria and it had to act this time.

The Iran-Israel war has taken a dangerous turn as the two countries are now readying themselves for a direct fight, which they have avoided in the past. Iran reportedly looted an Israeli oil tanker in the Persian Gulf recently and Israel is contemplating an attack on its oil installations.

Iran has made it known that it does not want to attack Israel any further, but if the latter destroyed its oil facility, it would destroy oil wells of the pro-American Gulf states and US military bases in Middle East.

Most US allies want a ceasefire and no further escalation of hostilities. Several Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar, have declared their neutrality in the war and assured Iran that they would not allow the USA to use military bases on their soil against her.

Israel does not have the capability to take on Iran and its proxies together on its



**VITAL:** Israel must not attack Iran's oil installations as it could lead to a global disaster. REUTERS

own. Even the attacks on Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon and targets in Yemen and Syria were undertaken mostly by American fighters, with Israeli pilots playing a symbolic role.

The US can't allow Israel to lose and does not want a full-scale regional war at this time when it is readying for the presidential elections next month. Any Israeli loss will affect the support for Democratic candidate Kamala Harris as Republican candidate Donald Trump has promised to solidly rally behind Israel. Also, the US does not want to get involved in a major war in Middle East as it would affect

All major powers must put pressure on Netanyahu to not take any riskier steps as that could take the world to the brink of a huge disaster.

its ability to prepare for a war against China in East Asia.

Israel can't allow Iran to walk away with a victory nor allow its "strategic superiority" against Iran to be weakened as it considers that crucial for the maintenance of peace and stability in the region. Iran has already suffered a huge fall in its prestige and military capabilities with the decimation of the top leadership of its proxies. Israel was keen to destroy Iran's nuclear facility, but that looks difficult as Iran has secured Russia's S-400 air defence system. However, Israel thinks that it has a golden opportunity now to weaken Iran by destroying its prox-

ies and it must not let it go.

Russia is sympathetic to Iran, with the latter having supplied drones and missiles to her, but has its hands full with the Ukraine war. Russia and China will assist Iran to ensure that the USA gets bogged down in West Asia and damage its military capabilities. Russia is considering supplying long-range Onyx anti-ship missiles to Houthi rebels to attack western shipping in the Red Sea.

Prime Minister Modi has been in touch with PM Netanyahu and has supported him in taking strong measures against the terrorist groups. But External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has cautioned Israel against taking any actions which could precipitate large-scale casualties, particularly of civilians. India favours a two-state solution to the Palestinian problem, which even the USA and other countries want, but Netanyahu does not favour ceding any land to them.

India and other developing countries would be worried at the eruption of a full-scale regional war which could play havoc with the supply and prices of oil, gas and other commodities, disrupt travel and transportation of goods, damage environment and lead to the weakening of their currencies. Modi has called a

meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security to discuss the implications of this war.

The USA favours a limited response by Israel, without targeting Iran's nuclear plant or its top leadership. While the Biden administration has done the most to assist Israel by the provision of political, economic, military assistance, Biden exercises little control on Netanyahu. The latter did not listen to Biden in taking ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, Rafah crossing or ground hostilities in Lebanon and it may not listen this time, too.

The only restraining factor is that Israel does not have the military capability to undertake sustained long-range bombing of Iran. But Netanyahu has great ability to get the Biden administration to support him whenever he needs by influencing the all-powerful Jewish lobby in the USA. That introduces an element of unpredictability in the future trajectory of the Iran-Israeli war.

It is important for all major powers and influential leaders in Israel to put pressure on Netanyahu to not take any riskier steps, such as damaging Iranian oil installations, as that could take the world to the brink of a huge disaster.

India and Russia could play a vital role by asking Iran not to take any precipitate steps.

# Looming air pollution crisis beckons urgent attention



**ANJAL PRAKASH**  
RESEARCH DIRECTOR, BIPP, ISB, HYDERABAD

**A**S winter approaches, air pollution is expected to worsen in north-western India, likely arriving earlier and with a stronger impact. This is made worse by bad weather, like low rainfall and weak winds.

This situation is similar to the pandemic period when pollution decreased across most of India due to less economic activity, but pollution levels still rose in the north and central-west regions. Investigations spearheaded by the Aryabhata Research Institute of Observational Sciences highlighted increased ozone, nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide levels in these areas. Notably, when trapped near the earth's surface, these pollutants can exacerbate respiratory conditions.

As winter approaches, air pollution is expected to worsen in north-western India, likely arriving earlier and with a stronger impact. This is made worse by bad weather, like low rainfall and weak winds.

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central-west regions. Investigations spearheaded by the Aryabhata Research Institute of Observational Sciences highlighted increased ozone, nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide levels in these areas. Notably, when trapped near the earth's surface, these pollutants can exacerbate respiratory conditions.

The looming issue of air pollution in north-west India can be traced significantly to farm practices, with the burning of crop residue at the forefront. Punjab and Haryana, crucial contributors to India's agricultural output, commonly burn the leftover stubble after paddy harvests. Although it is efficient for farmers to quickly clear their fields for the next crop, this method has severe repercussions on the regional air quality.

Crop residue burning releases harmful pollutants into the atmosphere, including particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds and traces of heavy metals. These pollutants contribute to smog formation, degrading visibility and posing serious health risks to millions of residents in the Indo-Gangetic Plains. The particles can penetrate the lungs, exacerbating respiratory diseases and other conditions.

The plains are characterised by their flatness and high population density, which facilitate the trapping of air pollutants. The meteorological conditions prevalent in the winter, such as low wind speeds, temperature inversions and reduced vertical mixing, intensify the problem. Temperature inversion is when a layer of cooler air is



**CONSTRAINTS:** The alternatives to stubble burning are too costly or insufficiently incentivised. PFI

trapped near the surface by a layer of warmer air above, effectively acting as a lid that prevents pollutants from dispersing vertically.

As wind speeds drop during the colder months, the dispersal of pollutants is further curtailed, allowing them to accumulate in the lower atmosphere. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in Delhi, which sits close to the source regions and is often blanketed in thick smog during the winter. The city, already grappling with vehicular emissions, industrial pollutants and construction dust, sees a dramatic increase in pollution levels due to these external agricultural activities.

The economic constraints that farmers face play a role in perpetuating this practice. Alternatives to burning, such as mechanical stubble removal and conversion into bioenergy, are either too costly or insufficiently incentivised, leaving many farmers with little choice but to continue with burning. Government initiatives and technological interventions to provide affordable and sustainable alternatives are crucial to

Air pollution in north-west India is expected to exacerbate this year. Establishing a centralised body for collaboration and data integration is crucial for sustainable solutions and improved air quality.

mitigating this issue.

The interplay between agricultural practices and geographical and meteorological factors creates a challenging environment for controlling air pollution. Addressing this requires concerted efforts involving policy reforms, technological advancements and community awareness to transition towards more sustainable farm practices while considering the socio-economic realities of the farmers.

Sophisticated satellite technology has transformed our ability to more precisely understand and analyse air pollution patterns. Researchers can now monitor air pollution with enhanced accuracy and granularity by leveraging data from the NASA and EUMETSAT satellites, complemented by ground-based measurements from instruments like the Compact and Useful PM2.5 Instruments with Gas Sensors (CUPI-Gs). These tools provide a comprehensive overview of the pollution metrics, capturing real-time fluctuations and pinpointing hotspots.

In recent studies, extensive data collection efforts have

focused on the NCR, where pollution levels have been notably severe. The analyses reveal that a significant portion of the air quality issues in this area originates from agricultural residue burning in the neighbouring states. By integrating satellite observations with local sensor data, scientists have been able to map out pollution sources and trace their contributions to the regional air quality.

These advances underscore the critical necessity for monitoring and robust data collection to understand the dynamics of pollution dispersion. Such insights are essential for developing targeted interventions and policy measures. Continued investment in both satellite and ground-based observation technology is crucial for devising effective strategies to mitigate air pollution and protect public health in vulnerable regions.

Delhi and its vicinity endure severe particulate matter (PM2.5) pollution levels, recording significantly higher metrics than other regions. Data from 2023 highlights that the NCR saw PM2.5 levels frequently surpassing the safety limits, with some measurements peaking at 218.4 µg/m³. This emphasises the influence of crop stubble burning and stagnant weather conditions in escalating the pollution levels.

Meanwhile, regions like Bihar and Rajasthan have emerged as unexpected pollution hubs, indicating that smaller cities can rival metropolitan pollution challenges.

The findings and patterns emerging from latest air qual-

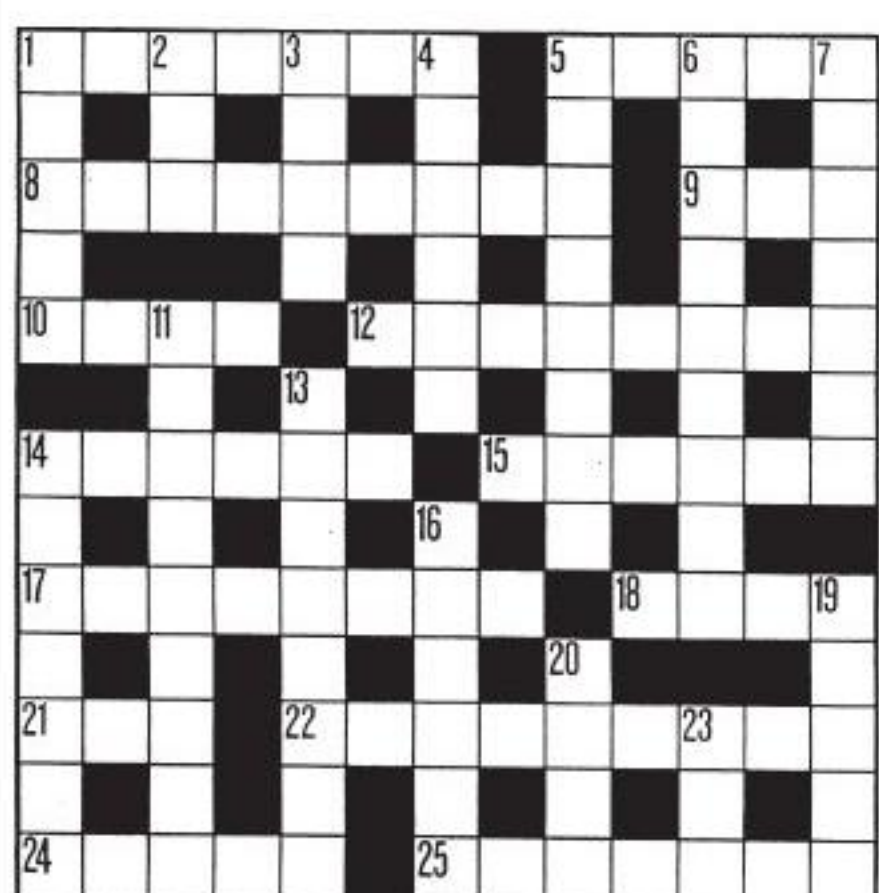
ity studies necessitate a holistic approach to combating air pollution. Various national and international projects, such as the National Clean Air Programme and the RIHN project, AAKASH, have made strides in mitigating pollution.

However, an urgent call remains for immediate, coordinated efforts towards sustainable solutions. Recommendations include stricter enforcement of stubble burning regulations, enhancement of green energy alternatives and increase in public awareness about the health implications of pollution.

Establishing a regional air pollution coordination body is vital for addressing air quality challenges. This entity would serve as a centralised authority to synchronise efforts across states, ensuring comprehensive policy implementation and resource-sharing. It should have representatives from government agencies, NGOs, scientists and community leaders. Its functions would include integrating data from various monitoring networks, facilitating cross-border dialogue on pollution sources and developing unified action plans. The body would also oversee public awareness campaigns and provide funds for innovative pollution reduction technologies. By fostering collaboration and accountability, it would be pivotal in improving the regional air quality.

As we venture into the winter of 2024, the looming air pollution crisis in north-west India beckons urgent attention. The complexities of this issue call for multifaceted solutions. The health of millions hinges on it.

## QUICK CROSSWORD



### ACROSS

- Great pleasure (7)
- German operatic composer (5)
- Improperly (3,2,4)
- Small venomous snake (3)
- Departed (4)
- Mad (8)
- Leave stranded (6)
- Cancel (6)
- Surprising (8)
- Wound with knife (4)
- A social insect (3)
- Any huge or powerful thing (9)
- Linger in expectation (5)
- Clear enough to be read (7)

### Yesterday's solution

**Across:** 1 Magnolia, 5 Stag, 9 Trait, 10 Placard, 11 Up one's sleeve, 13 Seethe, 14 Shower, 17 Object lesson, 20 Skilled, 21 Oidium, 22 Lots, 23 Eyesight.

**Down:** 1 Mute, 2 Grapple, 3 Out in the cold, 4 Impost, 6 Trace, 7 Gadgetry, 8 Call the shots, 12 Espousal, 15 Wyoming, 16 Gladly, 18 Joint, 19 Omit.

### DOWN

- Amusing (5)
- To permit (3)
- Present (4)
- Large-beaked fruit-eating bird (6)
- A Canadian provincial capital (8)
- Diversify one's activities (6,3)
- Drive back (7)
- Much superior (3,6)
- Violence or murder (4,4)
- Allotted an unsuitable role (7)
- A spade-like implement (6)
- Bout of overindulgence (5)
- Long, sharp tooth (4)
- Focal point (3)

## SU DO KU

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

V. EASY

## YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

## CALENDAR

OCTOBER 5, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Aashwin Shaka 13
- Aashwin Parvishte 20
- Hijari 1446
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 3
- Vishkumbha Yoga up to 6.08 am
- Swati Nakshatra up to 9.33 pm
- Moon in Libra sign

## FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	34	22
New Delhi	36	26
Amritsar	34	24
Bathinda	37	23
Jalandhar	34	23
Ludhiana	35	23
Bhiwani	37	23
Hisar	36	22
Sirsa	38	26
Dharamsala	30	18
Manali	25	12
Shimla	26	15
Srinagar	28	11
Jammu	34	23
Kargil	26	08
Leh	22	04
Dehradun	33	20
Mussoorie	26	15

TEMPERATURE IN °C





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## How secular is India?

As India grapples with internal strife and external criticism, the debate surrounding its commitment to secularism intensifies

India, a nation characterised by its rich tapestry of religious diversity, has long championed the values of secularism and pluralism. However, the landscape of religious freedom in the country has come under scrutiny, particularly with the recent designation by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) of India as a "Country of Particular Concern." This designation has ignited a contentious debate, leading to a sharp rebuke from the Indian government, which labeled the USCIRF a "biased organisation with a political agenda." In its 2024 report, the USCIRF highlighted alarming trends regarding religious freedom in India. The commission reported instances of violence against individuals based on their religious identity, citing cases of killings, beatings and lynchings carried out by vigilante groups. It also noted the arbitrary arrests of religious leaders and the demolition of homes and places of worship, characterising these actions as severe violations of religious freedom. The report further pointed to changes



in India's legal framework that, according to the USCIRF, target and disenfranchise religious minorities. These changes include the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the implementation of a uniform civil code. Such measures, the USCIRF argues, contribute to a climate of fear and marginalisation for non-Hindu communities. In response to the USCIRF's assertions, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs firmly rejected the report. Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal described the commission's narrative as a "motivated" misrepresentation of facts aimed at maligning India's image on the global stage. The ministry's statement emphasised that the USCIRF's reporting is unscientific and driven by an agenda that fails to reflect the realities of India's democracy.

It is true that no external agency or country has right to give us lessons in religious freedom and tolerance as we have practiced it since ancient times. Moreover, they have skeletons in their own cupboard which they would better take care first. The trigger happy policemen in the US don't think twice before shooting a black guy for not pulling over his car. But having said that it is time for us to reflect and introspect. To be fair, religious freedom has eroded in the recent years. There have been lynching incidents and that is not a made up thing. We may say that they are isolated incidents but they are enough to send a message to the community. Moreover, the attacks on churches and other religious places have been reported from across the country all this while the police looked the other way or just took mild action. It is time to ensure one and all that India is safe as it has been for ages for people of all religions and castes. And India as a State does not discriminate people for the religion they practice or food they eat. The concerns raised by the USCIRF may be exaggerated and they may make isolated incidents look mainstream but the government must maintain zero tolerance for such incidents so that no outside agency dare raise a pointing figure at us.

### PICTALK



A child looks at dolls depicting scenes from Ramayana during the Dussehra Doll festival, in Bengaluru

## Double-edged sword of social media: Impact on relationships

While it offers the promise of community and instant communication, the allure of curated perfection can lead to unrealistic expectations and strain relationships

Social media has become an integral part of modern life, connecting people from all corners of the globe. While it offers numerous benefits, such as facilitating communication and fostering community, it also poses significant challenges to relationships and mental health. One of the most significant ways social media can impact relationships is by creating unrealistic expectations. The carefully curated images and posts that people share online often portray an idealised version of their lives. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and comparison, as individuals may feel pressure to measure up to the perceived perfection of others. Additionally, the constant stream of information and updates can make it difficult to maintain deep and meaningful connections with loved ones. Social media can also contribute to the breakdown of relationships. The anonymity and lack of accountability that the internet provides



can create a breeding ground for cyberbullying, harassment and online infidelity. These behaviours can erode trust, damage relationships and have a devastating impact on mental health. Furthermore, the constant pressure to be online and connected can lead to feelings of anxiety and stress. The fear of missing out (FOMO) can drive individuals to spend excessive amounts of time scrolling through social media feeds, neglecting their relationships and other important aspects of their lives. This can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness and low self-esteem. The impact of social media on mental health can be particularly severe for young people, who are often heavy users of these platforms. Studies have shown that excessive social media use can be linked to increased rates of depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts. This is in part due to the exposure to negative content, such as cyberbullying and hate speech, as well as

# NATO's eastward march threatens Asian stability



NILANTHA LANGAMUWA

For Asia, aligning with NATO's expansionist policies risks destabilising the region and eroding cultural values of peace and coexistence

NATO's expansion into Asia poses a monumental danger that threatens not only regional stability but also the core values of peace and coexistence that many Asian countries uphold. The recent change in NATO leadership, with Mark Rutte taking the helm, may suggest a potential for new strategies, but the underlying policies and militaristic attitudes of the alliance remain unchanged. The illusion of progress is merely that—an illusion—while NATO's intentions to maintain a prolonged battlefield in Ukraine serve as a reflection of its true objectives. As observed, the US weapons sales surged dramatically in 2023, reaching a record total of \$238 billion as the demand for arms skyrocketed due to the ongoing conflict. Profiting from the sale of weapons on one hand and exploiting the suffering of unarmed civilians across Europe and West Asia is becoming increasingly reprehensible. This reflects a strategic mindset where war is not an unfortunate circumstance but an industry. This is, however, not a new phenomenon. This is how we "civilisations" behave. The history of military alliances has consistently illustrated a paradoxical truth: nations often proclaim peace while simultaneously preparing for war and engaging in it. The recent rise of Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who has advocated for an 'Asian NATO,' is nothing but a sign of a looming storm ahead. Ishiba's call for deeper ties among Asian nations and the establishment of a NATO-like grouping echoes sentiments that prioritise militarisation over diplomacy. This vision stands in stark contrast to the scepticism expressed by India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, who highlighted India's unique historical position and its reluctance to embrace the treaty alliances that such a framework would entail. Ishiba's proposition to station Japanese troops on the US soil and share control of nuclear weapons highlights the extreme lengths to which some leaders are willing to go in the name of security, yet it has not received significant backing from



the US administration, signalling the complexities and limitations of this vision. While NATO presents itself as a bastion of defence, its actions betray a far more sinister agenda. The alliance has not only prolonged conflicts but has also turned them into battlegrounds for competing ideologies and geopolitical power plays. This relentless devastation not only lays waste to nations but also serves the insatiable appetites of the arms industry, which reaps substantial profits from the chaos of ongoing warfare. Evidence reveals that the US government perceives conflicts as lucrative ventures rather than humanitarian crises. Nations that align themselves with NATO risk becoming collateral damage in a power struggle that has little regard for their sovereignty or cultural identity. The allure of NATO's promises can be enticing, but history teaches us that aligning with powerful military alliances often leads to disastrous outcomes. Karl Marx posited that "history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce." NATO's past interventions, from the Balkans to Afghanistan, and today's Ukraine showcase a pattern of destruction that is all too familiar. The question remains: will Asia fall into this trap once again, sacrificing its autonomy



THE HISTORY OF MILITARY ALLIANCES HAS CONSISTENTLY ILLUSTRATED A PARADOXICAL TRUTH: NATIONS OFTEN PROCLAIM PEACE WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY PREPARING FOR WAR AND ENGAGING IN IT

for the sake of Western agendas? Moreover, the political discourse surrounding NATO often ignores the implications of its militarisation on social stability and development. This is particularly relevant as Asian nations find themselves increasingly pressured to align with NATO's militaristic strategies. The focus on military expenditure detracts from addressing pressing social issues, economic development, and environmental sustainability. The growing arms race in Asia, driven by NATO's expansion, threatens to spark regional conflict with catastrophic consequences, echoing the historical precedent set before World War I. The belief that increased military presence fosters stability is fundamentally flawed, often leading to insecurity and competition as nations rush to arm themselves against perceived threats. This environment heightens the risk of miscalculations and unintended escalations, with incalculable costs in human lives and economic stability. Additionally, engagement in militaristic alliances under NATO's banner risks placing Asian nations in a moral quagmire, contradicting the region's philosophies that prioritise peace, harmony, and cooperation, as espoused by Confucianism, Hinduism, Islamism, and Buddhism. The very qualities that were undermined by colonialism, after years of suffering and the sacrifices of millions, must be protected and promoted, as aligning with NATO may ultimately undermine these cultural values in favour of a destructive path centred on military solutions. Moreover, the consequences of such an alignment are not limited to immediate military conflicts. Long-term geopolitical ramifications could destabilise the entire region, further entrenching power struggles that lead to conflict. Embracing a militaristic alliance may offer a temporary illusion of security but ultimately leads to self-inflicted wounds—akin to harakiri. The path toward a more peaceful and stable future lies not in militarisation but in diplomacy, cooperation, and mutual respect. Instead of succumbing to the pressures of NATO's warmongering agenda, Asian countries should seek to forge their paths, grounded in their cultural philosophies and values that prioritise harmony and coexistence. The rhetoric of security and defence masks a more insidious agenda—one driven by the military-industrial complex that thrives on conflict and arms sales. For Asian nations, the choice to align with NATO is a perilous one, fraught with the potential for self-destruction. (The writer is a journalist and author; views expressed are personal)

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### TEN YEARS OF SWACHH BHARAT

Madam — Swachh Bharat Mission, one of the first programmes announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi after he took office in 2014, completes 10 years on October 2. The aim was to equip all households with individual toilets, ensure communities have cluster toilets to eradicate the open defecation system followed in villages, and ensure that schools and anganwadi toilets have waste management systems for both solid waste and liquid waste. To achieve this, the government's assistance was increased from Rs 10000 to Rs 12000 under the SBM scheme. Amazingly, over 10 million toilets have been constructed in rural households in 6 lakh villages till date, benefiting 50 million people, and many of these villages have been designated as open-defecation-free, which is essential for a healthy environment. Before launching SBM, unsafe sanitation caused an estimated 199 million cases of diarrhoea annually, with 3 lakh deaths. Also, a UNICEF report indicates that women in Indian villages feel safer after the installation of toilets in rural households. Also in villages declared ODF, the risk of groundwater contamination due to human waste has been reduced a lot. Though villages benefitted a lot due to the Swachh Bharat Mission, a survey has emphasised the urgent need for action against plastic pollution and air pollution in rural and urban lands. Motivating the communities against air pollution and water pollution for adopting a proper sanitation model for a healthy life is the urgent need of the hour.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

#### LAWRENCE'S FUNERAL CONTROVERSY

Madam—Apropos of the story 'The battle over CPI (M) leader M M Lawrence's final journey', October 3, 2024. The Communists globally are political chameleons with unequal rules for the comrades. Most of the Communists,

#### Indian PhD system needs revamp



The Indian education system, especially the higher and research-oriented education system, has gone through so many structural changes from the past till now. But the research-oriented PhD programme still lacks somewhere to provide ease to the people vis-à-vis their admission to the doctoral program. There exist some of the undoubted systematic flaws in the UGC-NET examination score as a mandatory requisite

for taking admission in a PhD. The research work and PhD are all about deep understanding instead of memory strength of the very field of students' specialisation and interest area, in which root learning from UGC-NET could merely assist. Already, the PhD course demands a minimum of a five-year time period for its completion, and mandating a UGC NET score as a prerequisite to taking admission in a PhD only extends the time period for aspirants interested in becoming research scholars. UGC needs to make either systematic changes in its examination pattern or needs to enhance critical thinking and innovative thinking tests for the students interested in doing PhDs from the reputed academic institutions of India. Otherwise, India will continue to bear the cost of losing some fantastic minds to non-Indian universities that offer research ease, especially at the time of admission.

Dimple Wadhawan | Kanpur

though they claim to be non-believers in God in public, may be passionate believers in God in private. The unfortunate Lawrence episode points to the chaos the Communist ideology can create in a Communist family by vertically dividing its members into two warring factions. It also shows that even the deceased Communist may not be allowed to rest in peace by the comrades merely to accommodate their political ideology, what may be to the grieving family. Once an individual is bitten by the Communist ideology, there is no escape from it, even if she/he desires to change his ideology after being convinced about the utopian Communist goals. If the die-hard Comrades learn a lesson or two from the unfortunate Lawrence episode and the Party's insensitive handling of the entire episode, it would be better for the Comrades.

Bichu Muttathara | Pune

#### STARVATION AMID GROWTH

Madam — India is the fifth-largest economy in the world. At the same time,

the Global Hunger Index-2023 ranked India 111th out of 125 countries, with the level of hunger falling in the serious category. Though the Union government had rejected this index as erroneous, it cannot be rejected altogether, as evidently West Bengal agricultural migrant labourer Samar Khan, 35, died of starvation in Chennai as he reportedly did not have money to buy food. He was admitted to Rajiv Gandhi Government Hospital after he collapsed owing to starvation. He had not eaten for six days. His colleague, another agricultural labourer, Satya Pundit is still in the hospital. Even having a buffer stock; people dying of starvation is a slur on the country, especially when we are talking of the fifth largest economy in the world. Besides, hollow slogans of the government that nobody will be allowed to die of starvation are belied.

SK Khosla | Chandigarh

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DEEBA SALIM IRFAN





## FIRST COLUMN

## THE POWER OF INTELLIGENCE, KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

The human mind should be open to positivity and confidence, to harness intelligence and knowledge



RAVI VALLURI

Two thousand five hundred years ago, a prince from the formidable Sakya dynasty, in the quest for reality and truth, discarded his monarchical apparel to adorn ochre robes and went on to become Gautama the monk. He and his mind incessantly wandered till the attainment of truth and insight. Upon attaining enlightenment after performing arduous tapas, Gautama the monk became Buddha the Enlightened and Compassionate One. The mind of the prince turned Bhikkhu had become hollow and empty from within and without realise the pristine verisimilitude. There is also the story of Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu. Once a young evangelist who cast away the traditions and rituals of the Catholic order, only to serve the poor and infirm (particularly those afflicted by leprosy), she was first to become a sister, then Mother Teresa, after rendering selfless yeoman service to the populace of Kolkata (then Calcutta) and humanity at large. She was the fourth Indian to be canonised on September 4, 2016, and was set in stone as St Teresa of Calcutta by Pope Francis for the phenomenal work and the miracles that have taken place. Buddha and St Teresa were not confined to monasteries and convents respectively to live their lives as ascetics in contemplation, meditation, chastity and poverty. Both were prototypical individuals who transcended boundaries to carve a niche for themselves by providing an alternative ideology.

Meanwhile, way back in the year 1943 a young Swedish national, Ingvar Kampard set up a company called IKEA. IKEA is an acronym for Ingvar Kampard Elmtaryd at Agunnaryd. Today it is one of the largest ready-to-assemble furniture companies in the world. These are individuals, who with their mettlesome moves hold the ordinary traveller's gaze in askance. What differentiates them from the rest of the pack? It is not the opaci-



ty of their thought process, but looking for out-of-the-box solutions. While IKEA sets up furniture in our households, and Jio and WhatsApp provide the necessary seamless connectivity in communication, it is intriguing to decipher the letters of the acronym IKW.

I stand for Intelligence, K signifies Knowledge and W represents Wisdom. Intelligence, Knowledge, and Wisdom need to be harnessed by humans in ample measure to metamorphose our minds and lives to become true achievers. In the wired world today, we are girdled with far superior technology in comparison to a few decades ago and are surrounded by a plethora of gizmos at our disposal. The product and service should necessarily be flexible, adaptable, and positively meant for the public good. Only in such a scenario will the longevity of the article in question be ensured and assured.

Siddhartha with his superior intelligence grasped that he was encumbered by misery and suffering; he gained knowledge through the various techniques of pranayama and meditation and ultimately wisdom dawned on him in the form of enlightenment. Today a seeker without living in the monastic order, living like any ordinary individual could attain and experience bliss and enlightenment by practising the technique of Vipassana.

Similarly, in the Art of Living, through the regular practice of the Sudarshan Kriya, a seeker can live in the present moment by banishing antipathetic thoughts. St. Teresa of Kolkata too possessed enormous intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom to establish the order of the Missionaries of Charity to serve the distressed sections of humanity. The human mind should be developed into a sacred place, which is malleable to embrace positivity and confidence to harness the skills of intelligence and knowledge so that the Gods bestow us with a bounty of wisdom.

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

## Bangladesh's interim Govt's crackdown on secularists



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

Shahriar Kabir's arrest, amid controversial charges linked to his long-standing fight for secularism reflects Bangladesh fundamentalists working behind the interim government



It is important to examine in some detail Shahriar Kabir's arrest in Dhaka on September 17, 2024, and the subsequent related developments, to understand the forces driving Bangladesh's interim government and direction in which it is taking the country. To start with, one must briefly look at who Kabir is. Author, journalist, film-maker and an internationally respected champion of human rights, secularism and democracy, he has also been at the forefront of the struggle to bring to justice those who had collaborated with the Pakistanis during Bangladesh's liberation war of 1971 and were their accomplices in the perpetration of crimes against humanity including mass murder and rape. He played an important role in the formation of the Ekattorer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee (Committee for the Uprootment of the Killers and Collaborators of Seventy-One) under the leadership of Jahanara Imam whose husband and one of whose sons were savagely killed by the Pakistanis in 1971. Kabir, who subsequently became the organisation's president, was, at the time of his arrest, president of its advisory committee. Second, one needs to look at the circumstances of his arrest, the charges against him and his accusers and their ties with the interim government. According to a report in The Dhaka Tribune, datelined September 17, 2024 and carried under the heading "Shahriar Kabir arrested in Dhaka," Mufti Harun Izhar Chowdhury, joint secretary of the Hefazat-e-Islam (Hefazat), filed, on August 20, 2024, a complaint with the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in Dhaka, against Sheikh Hasina and 23 others—one of them being Kabir—accusing them of crimes against humanity and mass murder in connection with a rally by Hefazat on May 5, 2013.

Further, according to a report in The Daily Star, datelined September 18, 2024, and carried under the heading "Shahriar Kabir placed on 7-day remand", Kabir, along with Mozammel Babu, was produced before the court with a 10-day remand plea by the police, in a case concerning the death of a domestic help, Liza Akter, during the quota



TO START WITH, ONE MUST BRIEFLY LOOK AT WHO KABIR IS. AUTHOR, JOURNALIST, FILM-MAKER AND AN INTERNATIONALLY RESPECTED CHAMPION OF HUMAN RIGHTS, SECULARISM AND DEMOCRACY

reform protests. The report cited a sub-inspector of police present in the court as saying that Dhaka's Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, Md Sanaullah, passed the orders remanding him custody for seven days.

A report datelined September 17, 2024, and published in *Prothom Alo* English under the heading, "Shahriar Kabir, Nurul Islam arrested," cited sources as saying that Kabir was an accused in several murder cases filed with Jatrabari and other police stations in Dhaka. According to information available with this writer, seven murder cases have so far been levelled against him besides the one the ICT. The levelling of murder charges against a person of Kabir's stature is not only laughable but suggests, as in a number of other cases, planned and coordinated behind-the-scenes effort.

As seen, the case before the ICT has been filed by Mufti Harun Izhar Chowdhury, joint secretary of the Hefazat-e-Islam (Hefazat) accusing Sheikh Hasina and 23 others, including Kabir, of crimes against humanity and mass murder in connection with a rally by Hefazat on May 5, 2013.

According to a report in The Dhaka Tribune (August 19, 2024) under the heading "Hefazat rally in Shapla Chattar: Odhikar publishes list of killed people," Odhikar, a human rights organisation, published on Monday (August 19) a list of people allegedly killed during the Awami League-led government's crackdown on the Hefazat's rally on May 5-6, 2013, at Shapla Chattar in Dhaka. The list, originally published in 2013, had led to action against the organisation by the Awami League government.

Citing persecution by the latter government, Odhikar, according to the

report, urged the interim government to immediately form an independent inquiry commission headed by a Supreme Court judge and conduct an impartial investigation into the extrajudicial killings committed on May 5 and 6 of 2013 and bring the perpetrators to justice.

The *Dhaka Tribune* report did not mention whether Odhikar had named the perpetrators. As seen above, Hefazat's complaint was filed on August 20, 2024, the day after Odhikar's post. Three questions arise here. What was the number of people killed? Was the rally peaceful?

What was the context in which it was held and what were the Hefazat's demands? Against the Odhikar's figures, a BBC report, datelined May 6, 2024, stated that at least 27 persons had been killed and dozens hurt in the clashes. It also said that at least two of the dead were policemen. Also, the fact that the police, according to the report, "used stun grenades and rubber bullets" to disperse the protestors indicates an effort to keep the casualties to minimum.

The rally was extremely violent. The report cites one witness as saying that the demonstrators "were very aggressive, some people were throwing stones and the situation quickly become violent... the police had no option but to respond". The witness further told the BBC, "Rioters vandalised markets and set fire to bookshops where the Holy Koran is sold. Thousands of Koran and religious books burned. They also attacked the ruling party's political office and national mosque."

The Hefazat's 13-point programme includes the enactment of an anti-blasphemy law with provision for death penalty, exemplary punishment to all bloggers and others who "insult Islam," cancellation of

Bangladesh's policy for women's development, bans on the erection of sculptures in public places, the mixing of men and women in public, candlelight vigils, and "shameless behaviour and dresses," besides declaring Ahmadiyas as "non-Muslims." Nadia Sarmin, covering its rally for ETV, was mercilessly beaten for daring to be a woman "in a men only" event. Grievously injured, she was rescued by other journalists.

It is not surprising if all this reminds one of the Taliban's agenda, a DW report (May 9, 2013) by Graham Lucas under the heading "Bangladesh Chaos," cited Maulana Habibur Rahman, one of the Hefajat leaders, as boasting of his role in the 1980s Afghan war and his support to the former al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

The interim government has close and warm relations with the Hefazat. It has lifted the ban on the organisation. The advisor for religious affairs, AFM Khalid Hossain, is the latter's Nayeb-e-Amir. Chief Advisor Mohammad Yunus had a long and cordial meeting on August 31, 2024, with Mamunul Haque, the organisations head. The Hefazat is holding rallies and processions all over the country.

It is in this context that one has to see Shahriar Kabir's arrest and continued detention, in the teeth of demands for his release by international human rights activists and organisations.

The idea is to send a clear message to people in Bangladesh: do not champion secular democracy and humanism and oppose Islamic fundamentalism. If we can send Shahriar Kabir to jail, we can also send you there.

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

## Legal tussles over EWS quota violations undermine RTE Act in Delhi

The violation of the Economically Weaker Section quota under the Right to Education Act continues to plague India's education system

The consistent violation of the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) quota under the Right to Education (RTE) Act has become a troubling issue across India, particularly in major cities like Delhi. Despite clear legal mandates, several private schools continue to deny admissions to children who rightfully qualify under this provision, creating a barrier to equal educational opportunities for underprivileged communities.

Recent legal proceedings in the Delhi High Court have once again brought this issue to the forefront, highlighting the need for stricter enforcement of the law to safeguard the rights of EWS students. A case in point is Master Ayan



B K JHA

Saifi, a 4-year-old son of Shahid who had been allotted a seat through a computerised draw of lots conducted by Delhi's Directorate of Education (DoE) for the academic year 2024-25. But, a leading private Senior Secondary School in Rohini denied the admission and that ensued a legal tussle. Shahid approached to Delhi

High Court with his plight and sought justice. It is misconception that lawyers are reluctant to take up such cases especially for people coming from lower strata of society. Credit goes to a young Delhi lawyer Aman Sharma who took up the case for the kid and secured provisional admission for Ayan Saifi to the school.

The Delhi High Court, under the guidance of Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma, acknowledged the violation of the RTE Act and in an interim order granted provisional admission to the child, emphasising the school's legal obligation to comply with the EWS quota. The RTE Act 2009 is a landmark legislation that ensures free and compulso-

ry education for all children aged 6 to 14. One of its key provisions mandates that 25 per cent of seats in private unaided schools be reserved for children from EWS and disadvantaged groups (DG). This quota is intended to promote inclusive education and bridge the gap between socio-economic disparities. However, despite the importance of this provision, its implementation has been met with resistance from many private schools, not only in Delhi but schools across the country.

The refusal of admission highlights the ongoing challenge in enforcing this law. It violates a child's fundamental right to education under Article 21-A of the Constitution. "Denying chil-



dren from economically weaker sections the education they are entitled to, despite a confirmed allotment, not only goes against the spirit of the Right to Education Act but also creates unnecessary hurdles for families already facing socio-economic challenges," argues advocate Sharma.

A pattern of non-compliance

can easily be seen and unfortunately, it has become pervasive across private educational institutions. Ayan's case is not an isolated incident. Private schools in Delhi have repeatedly been found guilty of disregarding the EWS quota, prompting legal battles that seek to restore the rightful educational opportunities for

underprivileged children. In March 2024, the Delhi High Court revised the income threshold for EWS admissions, reinforced eligibility criteria and offered clearer guidance. However, schools have continued to evade their responsibilities. A similar ruling in 2022 in the case of Rameshwar Jha v. Principal Richmond Global School set a precedent for punitive action against schools that refuse EWS admissions.

The Delhi High Court had then warned that schools could face severe consequences under the Delhi School Education Act, 1973, for non-compliance with the RTE Act. Yet, schools still engage in tactics that delay or deny admission to EWS

students, forcing families to take the matter to court.

The larger issue at hand is the erosion of trust in educational institutions and the judiciary's role in upholding constitutional rights. Advocate Sharma urges the Directorate of Education (DoE) and the Judiciary to take stringent actions against schools that defy the RTE Act, calling for penalties and stricter enforcement measures.

It becomes imperative for policymakers, educators, and civil society to collaborate in upholding the principles of the RTE Act and to work towards a more inclusive education system.

(Author is a senior journalist; Views expressed are personal)