



## Carry it forward

The BJP government should continue development schemes in Odisha

Odisha's newly sworn-in Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, the first politician from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to occupy the post in the State, will also be making a new record while thwarting a long-standing one. His predecessor, Naveen Patnaik of the Biju Janata Dal, was the Chief Minister for 24 years and 99 days – the second longest tenure for any one in India, after Pawan Kumar Chamling who served 66 days longer in Sikkim. Mr. Majhi is from the Santali tribe and his ascension shows the assiduousness with which the BJP has sought to win the support of the tribal communities in central and east India – also reflected in its endorsement of President Droupadi Murmu when she stood as a candidate. Mr. Majhi has rich experience as a legislator and a political organiser, having begun his political journey as an administrator. He was a village *sarpanch* in the late 1990s. His ascension marks a breakthrough for the BJP, which successfully projected the image of the BJD being rudderless without Mr. Patnaik as well as his dependence on the bureaucracy having steadily eroded the BJD of its second-rung of leadership. As the Achilles heel of the BJD too, this bureaucratic over-dependence was used to not only provide governance and implement policies endorsed by Mr. Patnaik, but also in political outreach. The BJP has steadfastly grown as the alternative to the BJD with the decline of the Congress.

Mr. Majhi's swearing-in ceremony also marked a return to a degree of political bonhomie with the BJD after a bitter and personal campaign targeting Mr. Patnaik's lieutenant, V.K. Pandian, for his Tamil roots. The optics were encouraging and the BJP should focus on bringing continuity to some of the BJD's initiatives in the State that have allowed for faster GDP growth, better delivery of services and welfare measures in the rural areas, and better diversification of an economy that is dependent on agriculture. Yet, for all its successes in reducing poverty and diversifying its economy, Odisha still remains among the poorest States in the country, with an estimated 11.07% of its population below the Multidimensional Poverty Index in 2023, according to NITI-Aayog and only six major States having higher numbers. Mr. Majhi and his colleagues have their task cut out. Odisha rewarded Mr. Patnaik with a long tenure not just for governance but also for bringing peace to a State that has seen communal riots in its tribal regions at a time when his party was in alliance with the BJP. The BJP should not interpret this mandate as one that endorses its ideology of Hindutva and return to those days of communal disharmony. Instead, it must focus on continuing the developmental work in Odisha.

## Singular focus

Science is now too vast to be administered by one Minister

The portfolios of many of the newly sworn-in Ministers of the 18th Lok Sabha signal no significant changes from what they held in the previous regime. The Bharatiya Janata Party continues to retain the 'major' portfolios, from Home to Telecommunications, with the rest distributed among its coalition allies. The 18th Lok Sabha also includes five Ministers of State with independent charge. One of them is Jitendra Singh, whose portfolio spans the Departments of Space (DoS) and Atomic Energy (DAE), the Ministries of Earth Sciences (MoES), Science and Technology (MST), and Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions. Each of these ministries or departments by itself is a handful these days. The DoS is grappling with the entry of private sector players in the national space programme as well as managing the development of the maiden human spaceflight mission and new launch vehicles. The MoES is involved in missions to explore the seabed for mineral resources – an enterprise just beginning to feature in multilateral fora – as well as climate adaptation and mitigation. The MST oversees India's three foremost research departments at a time when the world is haring to test artificial intelligence, build quantum computers, develop and deploy multi-omics approaches in sectors from agriculture to medicine, and invent advanced energy storage solutions. The DAE has announced plans to rapidly advance nuclear power, which includes starting phase two of its reactors programme and commissioning one facility every year. Just the sheer amount of technical divergence in the offing here, and their evolving interactions with society at large, merits more than a shared Minister of State.

The fields these bodies oversee also suffer many persistent problems. To pick a few: the timelines of fellowship and grant disbursements for young researchers are often farcical; facilities that can support interdisciplinary research are largely localised and inimical to collaboration; cutting-edge research is hamstrung by vacillating regulations; intellectual property rights protection is less than airtight, and translational research is bare and restricted to some sectors. Importantly, the gross domestic expenditure on research and development as a fraction of GDP has been declining since 2008-09. While demands for more money should be preceded by capacity building that can productively absorb these funds, the growth of that capacity has been in fits and starts. Among other things, India sorely needs a separate Minister, ideally of Cabinet rank, for each of its major nodal research bodies to escape their long-standing rut, and have their needs met and problems solved in meaningful fashion during the bumpy rule of a coalition government.

# The message in the RSS chief's speech



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Is the much talked about strategic and statesman-like address made by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat akin to the recent example of a juvenile justice board in Pune asking a minor offender to write a 300-word essay on road accidents as a part of his bail conditions? But in this case, who is meant to write the essay?

In a brilliant speech (not the first brilliant speech that the RSS chief has made), Mr. Bhagwat has virtually laid out a road map for the new (old) government and prescribed a model code of conduct, something that people expected the Election Commission of India (ECI) to enforce during the 2024 general election. The similarity between the two lies in what remains unsaid. The ECI put the party on notice; the RSS supremo delivered a sermon to 'whomsoever it may concern'. Mr. Bhagwat's message is loud and clear whereas the ECI's was muted and manicured. Both messages have the potential to hit the target without exposing it.

The ECI examined complaints made to it, asked the political parties concerned for an explanation and then issued a mild reprimand – either convinced by the merit in the complaint or because it was convulsed by adverse public opinion and wanted to salvage its position. The bitterness in its pill was hidden in a multi-layered coat of saccharine. It could have rejected the complaints, as done in 2019, but it attempted to deliver even-handed justice that might have displeased all. In the process it risked denting its image of impartiality which it perhaps believes has been partially repaired by the efficient conduct of the 2024 general election. Possibly, it is the verdict that may have bailed it out and not just the smooth completion of the process.

Mr. Bhagwat's message, just after the verdict in the general election, is in the nature of a post mortem, needed only when an 'unnatural' cause leads to a mishap. Hence, the admission of a 'mishap' due to something 'unnatural' is implicit in his telling address. The 'mishap' could mean losing majority and the 'unnatural cause' identified by him could be the violation of decorum in the frenzy of election campaigning. For good measure he said this was done by "both sides" – by the party in power and the Opposition – thereby enlarging the scope of his reach and the onus of the breach, à la the ECI.

### The key words, their import

The words that stood out in Mr. Bhagwat's speech were 'maryada' and 'ahankar'. He said "Jo vaastavik sevak hai,...woh maryada se chalta hai.

The 'to whomsoever it may concern' sermon has virtually laid out a road map for the government and prescribed a model code of conduct

*Uss maryada ka paalan karke jo chalta hai, woh karm karta hai lekin karmon mein lipt nahi hota. Usme ahankar nahin aata ki maine kiya* (A true worker maintains dignity and does not violate the limits set by tradition while working. He does not have the arrogance to claim credit for himself for the work done). 'Maryada' is an adjective associated with Lord Ram. To the best of my knowledge, Ram is the only Hindu god with whom this attribute is linked as 'maryada' relates to the conduct of a person, and not to his thought. Lord Ram represents the right conduct according to the general perception of duty. Being god, he does what he thinks and vice-versa, and is, therefore, a true amalgam of ideal thought and action. In a mundane sense, that is what the model code of conduct is all about.

'Ahankar' is borne out of self-belief and is reflected in both deed and thought. It may be impossible for a person to be arrogant in action unless he is arrogant in thought. 'Style is the man' and arrogance will seep out in utterance if it exists in the mind. It is a leak that springs in a wall, creating damp spots even if the wall is strong.

The RSS's website, on a page, "Vision and Mission", uses an effective metaphor: "Great oaks from little acorns grow". Although this refers to the growth of the organisation that boasts of the number of the *shakhas* (branches) of the Sangh crossing 57,000, it equally applies to the *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) who are exhorted to be humble. No acorn should think it is the oak even if an oak is inherent in every acorn.

### The dynamics of political contest

The other object lesson in Mr. Bhagwat's message is how to treat one's opponents in a contest. They are opponents only as long as they are in competition (*sparidha*). Once the contest is over, they should be treated as people occupying the benches earmarked for those who did not qualify to sit on the Treasury benches. Where you sit depends on where you belong, and belonging is only circumscribed by the law of defection; not defined by commitment to an ideology. Be that as it may, together they constitute Parliament. Therefore, all opposition is subsumed in the House, where all members are honourable constituents.

Mr. Bhagwat has coined an endearing term for the Opposition – 'praitipaksh', that is those who represent the 'other' side (*pehlu*), which is the essence of any democratic governance. An elected government is expected to treat the Opposition with the respect and the

# The ideology of social peace is still working

In a reaction to the invitation that was extended to the President of the Indian National Congress, Mallikarjun Kharge, to the swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Uttar Pradesh Minister Yogendra Upadhyay is reported to have said: "They (the Congress) rejected [the] Ram Mandir invitation. If they do the same this time, then it will show their shallow mentality."

The comparison between the invitation to the consecration ceremony of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22, 2024 and Mr. Modi's oath-taking ceremony on June 9, 2024 shows, if anything, the same mentality that led Mr. Modi to deny, or at least doubt, while on the election trail, his own biological birth, and claim to be of divine origin.

### Between an invocation and the election

Media orthodoxy has it that the fixation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with Lord Ram is still bringing it huge electoral and political dividends, which has convinced the BJP leadership that this indeed is an inviolable truth. Any amount of empirical evidence to the contrary is dismissed as hypothetical at best, and/or false at worst. The ascendance of the BJP, from a mere two Lok Sabha seats in 1984 to a secular rise to 303 seats in 2019 is proof enough of the link with Lord Ram at its heart. What other proof is required?

The exploitation of Lord Ram for political ambitions was unambiguous in BJP veteran L.K. Advani's famous statement in the middle of the launch of the *rath yatra*, that he was a political and not a religious leader, i.e., aiming at political, and not religious gains. In the timing of the installation of the statue of Lord Ram and the massive fanfare that accompanied it, followed by the consecration of the temple in Ayodhya on January 22 this year, it was clear that the proximity of the 2024 general election was the determinant. The link between the election and the invocation of Lord Ram, whatever the



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occasion, was forever highlighted rather than hidden. Yet, the failure of the link has been loud and clear on several occasions. On December 6, 1992, with the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the BJP's top leadership must have imagined that the path to electoral victory now lay clear and unhindered. Assembly elections held in some of the main States in the Hindi belt, in 1993, led in the opposite direction: the BJP lost in Uttar Pradesh to arch rival of the Samajwadi Party Mulayam Singh Yadav (and Bahujan Samaj Party) and had to wait for a decade to return home. The wave of "liberating Ram Lalla" from the precincts of the masjid was feeble. There were electoral losses in Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh too. Its government in Rajasthan survived the debacle, though with a considerably reduced majority, as Chief Minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat had kept a distance from Mr. Advani's *rath yatra* and the resultant events of December 6. The formation of the first BJP government in 1998 was not due to the Ram Mandir movement but more the result of infighting within the various constituents of the then ruling coalition. But learning a lesson from it and keeping Lord Ram out of politics would have required a rethink of the communal perspective, which is central to the Sangh Parivar. In 2014, there had to be camouflaging of the communal agenda using the more general slogan of *vikas* (development).

### The Ayodhya result

In the 2024 general election, the defeat of the BJP in Ayodhya itself demonstrates the dysfunctional link between electoral politics and the invocation of Lord Ram. It was no ordinary defeat, for the BJP candidate lost by over 50,000 votes. The BJP's Lallu Singh was a veteran, taking on a Dalit rival, Awadhesh Prasad. And this happened after Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Sangh Parivar's investment in the construction of the Ram temple and its location in politics.

The 2024 general election result shows that the

consideration that it deserves as it represents almost two-thirds of those who voted but did not choose the ruling party as it felt that it did not have the right to govern the country. No principle of democratic governance allows those in authority to ignore the will of those who favoured someone else, those who did not or could not vote, and those who do not yet have the right to vote. It is not 272 (the threshold of majority) or 294 (the tally of the BJP and allies, in early June) representatives versus 116 crore Indians. Mr. Bhagwat's plea is for inclusivity and a call for building consensus (*sahmati*), the onus of which lies on those who have the responsibility to govern the country.

### India's diversity cannot be wished away

Inclusivity, however, is not about an absence of differences. India has been, is and will continue to be a land of diversity. Caste, community, creed, religion, and regions are a part of this diversity. Just as the burden of building consensus is on the ruling party, the onus of diminishing the divisions in society is on those who are in power. It will always be the responsibility of those in the majority to alleviate the apprehensions of those in the minority. Fear is a two-way transaction – those who are scared and those who cause a scare. A democratically-elected government should never support the latter and sharpen existing divisions or exploit them for narrow political gains.

Communities have survived in our society due to mutual dependence despite differences. The strength of that relationship is the recognition that not only are their customs, rituals and traditions different but that they also understand each other's culture intimately. Diverse communities have been essential components of our society and the age-old bonds of respect and tolerance have existed among them. Harmony and tension are a part of society's composite psyche. The occasional tension, which boils over like overheated milk, has subsided with the sprinkling of a few drops of water by sagacious leaders. We can do without those who try to ignite existing tinderboxes by twisting the truth and snapping the *dhaga prem ka* (the thread of love) by tampering with technology.

The final exhortation in Mr. Bhagwat's homily is that no superstructure (*shikhar*) can be built on a weak base (*buniyad*), which essentially meant that it is the strength of the foundation on which the stability of the edifice depends, and losing 20% of seats is a sign of the weakening of the base.

Indian voter has expressed a repugnance to the politics of hatred, of divide and rule, and the politics of the Prime Minister himself, whose electoral rhetoric this time was indecorous. Where was the grace reflected in person, behaviour and language that one saw in the speeches of Prime Ministers like Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee?

Will Mr. Modi, or the BJP as a party, or the RSS learn a lesson from Lord Ram? The people of India have made their preferred choices clear. It is very unlikely to happen. After the Supreme Court of India's famous judgment of 2019 on the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute, which, among other things, had forcefully upheld the view that no temple, much less a Ram temple lay demolished under the debris of the masjid (a view advanced by several professional historians and archaeologists) and that the demolition of the masjid was a criminal act for which the guilty should be tried in a court of law, one still hears echoes of "undoing the injustice of 500 years" doing the rounds. Never mind what the historians and the Supreme Court have said.

### A continuing legacy

In placing constraints on the politics of hatred, which is the hallmark of the Modi government, India's millennia-old civilisation has asserted itself. In doing so, salience is due to the civilisation of our medieval centuries that has given us the legacy of numerous saint-poets, the Bhakti *sants*, who brought calm to the strained religious divide of rival gods by conceptualising one universal god where their rivalry gets submerged. For, in the midst of considerable bloodshed on the battlefields, between political and denominational factions extending over five and a half centuries, the first genuine communal riot between common people of different faiths – of which we have recorded evidence – happened in 1714, seven years after Aurangzeb's death. Clearly, the ideology of social peace was working.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Tragedy in Kuwait

A number of us leave our homeland for West Asia to seek a better livelihood. Unfortunately, there can be events that shatter our dreams. The Indian government needs to address the issues reported by Indians working abroad. For example, the Indian Embassy is said to have received over 16,000 complaints from Indians between March 2021 and December 2023, most of which concerned salary delays, harassment, and poor accommodation. It is

imperative that the welfare of Indian citizens working overseas is ensured. **Jakir Hussain,** Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh

While the authorities appear to have pinned the blame on 'greedy real estate developers', the factors for the tragedy go far beyond that. Workers in West Asia undergo a lot of hardships: accommodation in cramped quarters with little to no proper sanitation or safety equipment is one example. In a region (West Asia) that is known for strict law

enforcement and onerous documentary requirements, ensuring compliance with building safety laws should not be a problem. The Gulf States must do more to protect the workers who build and run their smart cities with their sweat and toil. **Gregory Fernandes,** Mumbai

### The general election

It is preposterous to compare the general election of 2024 to that of 1977 (Editorial page, "An earthquake in 2024, as it

was in 1977", June 13). And for the writer to cast aspersions on the fairness of the elections is an insult to the Election Commission of India, which deserves full praise for its smooth conduct. Yes, the electorate gave its verdict and if a party has assumed power, it is only because it was able to get the requisite numbers, with or without outside support. Nobody stopped the Opposition from staking its claim to form a government. The bloc just did not have the numbers. Mud-slinging and

vicious personal attacks during the campaign were equal on both sides. The Indian voter is intelligent and well informed. Let us respect his verdict and move on. **Sharada Sivaram,** Ernakulam, Kerala

The subaltern classes truly deserve commendation for halting the rampaging NDA in its tracks. However, the NDA is only down and not yet out. It can still influence the functioning of the central government and its agencies to its advantage,

and to the disadvantage of its adversaries. Equally important, the BJP is still flush with money from the Electoral Bond Scheme. Considering the havoc that money power has played in destabilising more than one State government in the last decade, it is still too early to conclude that the NDA government will be eager for a course correction by renouncing its old ways. One can only keep one's fingers crossed and hope for the best. **G.G. Menon,** Tripunithura, Kerala

# Do coalition governments slow down the economic reforms agenda?



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**PARLEY**

**U**ntil the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 282 seats and Prime Minister Narendra Modi rode to power, India had had coalition governments for 21 years. Ten years later, the BJP has 240 seats in the Lok Sabha and India once again has a coalition government in power. Fitch had stated that coalition politics and a weakened mandate for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) could make it challenging to pass legislation on the more ambitious parts of the reform agenda. Do coalition governments slow down the economic reforms agenda? K.K. Kailash and Sanjay Ruparelia discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Sobhana K. Nair. Edited excerpts:

**Do coalition governments end up making too many policy concessions?**

**K.K. Kailash:** This question is based on two assumptions which need to be cleared. First, that single-party governments are the natural order of things and multi-party governments are an aberration and will therefore have undesirable consequences. Comparative studies show that this is not necessarily true. Second, that a single-party government behaves as a unitary actor. Once we remove these two assumptions, we will see that differences between coalitions and single-party governments have actually reduce. There will always be competing ideas and interests and as a consequence, we are likely to see policy compromises and bargains in both. The only difference, perhaps, is that in multi-party governments, much of it (compromises) takes place in the public, so in a way they are more transparent. So far, India's experience with coalition governments has not been bad. There have been checks and balances which have helped governments work better as compared to single-party governments.

**Sanjay Ruparelia:** Economic growth requires reform. We often believe that reform requires decisiveness, and that decisiveness, in turn, requires a single-party majority government. But it is more complicated than that, since the form of government is just one of the many factors influencing economic growth. The process of liberalisation of the economy tentatively began under the Janata Party government and was then taken forward by the Congress under Rajiv Gandhi and the National Front government. The minority government of Narasimha Rao introduced it fully. And then it accelerated under the United Front government and since. On the question of social policy reforms, earlier coalition governments, despite their rhetorical commitment to a more social



Prime Minister Narendra Modi in conversation with TDP chief N. Chandrababu Naidu and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar in New Delhi. ANI

democratic agenda, actually had quite a few setbacks. The rights-based welfare paradigm was introduced under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). If you have to negotiate and bargain and compromise in order to settle on a policy, it is true that there can be multiple veto points that coalition partners can exercise. As Montek Singh Ahluwalia once said, "There is a strong consensus for weak reform". But the fact that parties are engaging in negotiations means that there is less radical change and there is more policy stability that facilitates investments over the longer term. The fewest checks and balances are seen under single-party majority governments. That could lead to rather unpropitious policy decisions. We have seen some of those in the last decade.

**How have coalition governments in the past performed on the economic agenda?**

**KKK:** There has actually been a great deal of continuity between governments and their policies, and one has not seen any major reversals. Policy change has been gradual and incremental since 1991. Public bargaining between parties signals that different viewpoints are being heard and accommodated. Coalitions over a period of time have institutionalised certain decision-making mechanisms which accommodate different voices. The V.P. Singh government had six committees to examine the most pressing issues of the time. These evolved and in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, they took the form of 'Group of Ministers', and they continued in the UPA era too.

When it comes to reforms, coalition governments have worked better. In contrast, in a single-party government, there have been decisions, such as the farm laws, which were taken without getting everyone on board. Something like that would not have probably happened in a coalition because there would have been greater dialogue.

**SR:** Institutions that are meant to facilitate and promote Centre-State relations are more



The more people involved in decision-making, the more likely that the policy will be stable and continue for longer.  
**K.K. KAILASH**

activated in coalition governments. That is unsurprising because the allies are often regional parties. You have a more informed policy-making process even if it might be more turbulent.

**Dialogues can also get acrimonious in coalition governments. And have there been examples where reforms have been stalled.**

**SR:** Absolutely. The Janata Party government had an ideological commitment to pro-poor, pro-labour policies, but we did see more industrial de-licensing and an increase in agricultural subsidies to relatively well-off communities and castes. The fiscal deficit drove up again. India suffered a recession at the end of that government. But there was also a worldwide recession then. Overall, I don't think there is something inherently worse in coalition governments. Rajiv Gandhi's government had the largest seat majority in the history of independent India. It tried to pursue economic liberalisation. That agenda ground to a halt because of internal checks within the Congress.

**KKK:** Often we look only at the outcome and not how the decision was arrived at. The more people involved in the decision-making, the more likely that the policy will be stable and continue for longer. The decision-making process is as important as the decision itself.

**In the last five years, the debate has sharpened on the State's share in the divisible pool of taxes. Can States expect to get a larger share now that a coalition government is in power?**

**SR:** The role of State governments is higher in a national coalition. It is also ironic that we have to ask this question considering that when Prime Minister Narendra Modi first took power, he pledged to strengthen Indian federalism by embracing a concept of "cooperative federalism". The government also accepted the 14th Finance Commission's recommendations to increase the State governments' share of the divisible pool of taxes. But over the last decade, the Centre's share of revenue increased because of the introduction of special cesses which were not part of the divisible pool. Second, the Planning Commission was abolished. It was a flawed institution, but it did provide an institutional space for negotiation. Niti Aayog is a

far more technocratic space and much more beholden to the Centre. In the last decade there has been political centralisation of decision-making right up to the Prime Minister's office. There is also a greater control over social welfare benefits and their packaging as directly coming from the Union government. That is what is fueling a lot of the discontent.

**KKK:** The division of taxes between the Centre and State is a complex problem. The amount of funds available to the States is also a function of the way in which the economy is functioning. When the economy does well, there will be more to go around, and vice-versa. At the same time, we also need to take into account, for instance, the regional and income disparities between States. And then there is the vertical imbalance between the Centre and the States. Another source of tension is with regard to sharing of taxes under GST. The negotiations went on for 17 years. But when the system was adopted, not all States were on board. The goods that were taxed at a higher rate in the pre-GST regime was put under a lower bracket, so there was a decline in revenue for the States. The number of commodities that were taxed at a higher rate under the pre-GST regime was reduced. I think either the States' voices were either not heard, or the States did not articulate their voices effectively. Overall, the GST architecture does not favour the States.

**The NDA is just beginning its term. Do you see their constituents have a similar economic vision?**

**SR:** The BJP needs its allies to have a majority, but all the important ministries remain with the BJP. It is an open question whether the style of decision-making and governance that we have seen in the last 10 years will change substantially or not. As far as the economic outlook of the allies is concerned, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu was the earliest liberaliser. The difference is about the distribution of power and the style of decision-making.

**KKK:** I don't see any conflict in terms of economic policies as such as parties across the spectrum are sold on economic reforms. The only possible difference would be the pace of decisions. This also depends on how the decisions are taken and the mechanisms that are used. That might give us a clue to whether economic reforms get stalled or economic reforms are taken forward.



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**NOTEBOOK**

## Chatting with Sunil Chhetri

Chhetri managed to keep the fans and the press happy while helping maintain the sanctity of the athlete-journalist relationship

**N. Sudarshan**

**A**sports press conference is a contested zone. There are, in essence, two interested parties: the journalist who is forever on the lookout for a headline-worthy quote or a slip-of-the-tongue statement, and the athlete who is there as the single access point of the team and with the sole aim of controlling the narrative.

Equally, it is a place where relationships are built and mutual respect established. Routine appearances at press meets often convey your journalistic seriousness and rigour, and the player in turn starts looking at you as a constructive critic and not an adversary. Land a few minutes early, there may even be an opportunity for an informal chat.

In the eight-and-a-half years I have spent covering Sunil Chhetri, as leader of the Indian National football team and as talisman of Indian Super League (ISL) side Bengaluru FC (BFC), I have experienced both facets. He was the beating heart of both country and club, and everyone wanted a piece of him. And Chhetri obliged, making blurb-writers happy, but mostly on his own terms, and with due respect to the fourth estate.

On the day of his retirement from international football on June 6, he even wrote a heartfelt letter reflecting this. "There were times when I had to say a lot less than I would have like to, and others where I responded with long monologues," he said. "There were the answers laced with frustration, the ones that were — much to your annoyance — non committal, and then the press conferences that ended in a hurry.

"But through it all, I'd like to believe that I was always honest with you. And that I always chose to have a conversation, even if it risked making headlines for reasons beyond those that I would have liked. Thank you for the love and adulation and thank you for the times when you have been honest in your assessment. Yours isn't an easy job, but a really

important one."

In mid-2021, when tennis star Naomi Osaka opted out of press conferences at the French Open citing the effects of those interactions on her mental health, many commentators were quick to side with the four-time Major champion and label these exchanges as pointless.

Lost in the din was the fact that a media briefing was the last of the democratic spaces where every reporter, big or small, had an equal right to pose a question. Chhetri, through the years, ensured that it remained that way. He answered every question with utmost sincerity, and treated all those assembled with dignity.

Chhetri was not a wordsmith, à la Leander Paes, the Amritraj brothers — Anand and Vijay — and Viswanathan Anand. But when he spoke, he did with emotions. In contrast to the modern-day habit of loading sentences with generic corporate jargon, he dealt in specifics.

This time last year, during the SAFF Championship in Bengaluru, Chhetri was asked when he would be retiring from football. He replied that he would when he is "not able to sprint with Udanta [Singh] or go for headers with Sandesh [Jhingan] or score against Gurpreet [Singh Sandhu]."

The last few years have been tough for his club BFC, the ISL final appearance in March 2023 notwithstanding. But Chhetri has played a leading role in trying to keep his side's chin up. On each of the last two occasions a new coach has been unveiled at BFC following an unsuccessful period, Chhetri has been by his manager's side, putting a comforting arm around, acting as a cushion and helping set a positive narrative.

To many, it may all have seemed like an elaborate show. But what is sometimes lost is that the player is essentially speaking to the fans through us in the media. Chhetri's smartness lay in the fact that he managed to keep two fickle constituencies happy — the fans and the press — while helping maintain the sanctity of the athlete-journalist relationship.

**PICTURE OF THE WEEK**

## Sunday horror in Jammu



The 53-seater bus which plunged into a gorge following a terrorist attack on pilgrims, in Reasi district of Jammu and Kashmir on June 9, 2024. At least nine people were killed and 33 others suffered injuries in the terror attack on the bus, according to officials. PTI

**FROM THE ARCHIVES**



**FIFTY YEARS AGO** JUNE 14, 1974

## Minimum pay and regulation of higher incomes proposed

New Delhi, June 12: The Union Government is finalising a resolution on a national wage policy following the approval given to such a move by the Political Affairs Committee of the Cabinet in principle a few days ago. The main objectives of a national wage policy as

conceived by the Union Government are to provide minimum wages not below the poverty line in the interest of health and efficiency of workers and to ensure to the workers and employees a due share in the fruits of growth. There will be rationalisation of inter-occupational, inter-industrial and inter-regional wage differentials so as to reduce disparities in a phased manner. At the same time, there will be a progressive elimination of unjustified wage differentials between the organised and the unorganised sectors.

**A HUNDRED YEARS AGO** JUNE 14, 1924

## General election in U.S.

The Republican platform favours the adherence of the U.S. to the World Court of International Justice, endorses the refusal of the Government to become a member of the League of Nations, advocates the calling of a conference on limitation of land forces and use of submarines and poison gas and favours tariff on imports for the protection of labour. With regard to foreign debts, the platform holds up as model Britain's debt settlement and declares the great nations cannot recognise the principle of repudiation.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

**NEWS IN NUMBERS**

**The increase in palm oil imports in the month of May**

**74** in per cent. India's palm oil imports surged to 7.63 lakh tonnes in May this year from 4.39 lakh tonnes in the year-ago period, as the country stocked up the commodity to meet rising domestic demand. PTI

**The amount released by the IMF to Sri Lanka**

**336** in \$ million. The International Monetary Fund disbursed the third tranche from its \$2.9 billion bailout package to Sri Lanka, as it said that Sri Lanka's economy remains vulnerable. PTI

**The rise in mosquito breeding cases in Delhi homes**

**90** in per cent. According to the latest report by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, there are 3.25 lakh cases of mosquito breeding at home in Delhi in 2023, higher than the 1.71 lakh in 2022. PTI

**Number of Myanmar nationals deported from Manipur**

**38** The Manipur government has deported close to 40 Myanmar nationals, including 11 children, to their home country through the integrated check post at Moreh in Tengnoupal district. PTI

**The proposed salary of Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk**

**56** in \$ billion. Tesla shareholders are voting to approve a \$56 billion pay package, one of the largest in U.S. corporate history, for its CEO Elon Musk. REUTERS  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## The allegations over NEET-UG, 2024

Why has the Union government told the Supreme Court that it will cancel the score cards of candidates who have been awarded grace marks? How did the National Testing Agency respond to the various charges against the conduct of the exams?

**EXPLAINER**

Ramya Kannan

**The story so far:**

On June 13, the Union government submitted to the Supreme Court that the score cards of 1,563 candidates who were given compensatory marks in the common undergraduate medical entrance examination, NEET-UG 2024, held on May 5, will be cancelled. Another test will be held for them, likely on June 23. Results would be out by June 30 and the counselling for seats can begin by July 6. These candidates will be informed of the actual score, without the grace marks, and they can choose to take another test. If they opt not to sit for the re-test, their scores, without the grace marks will be the final score.

**What happened?**

The court was hearing petitions challenging the award of grace marks to the 1,563 candidates from six NEET centres in the country, using a "normalisation formula", on the grounds that they were not allowed the full period of 3.2 hours to write the exam, due to technical issues. Based on a Court order, the compensatory marks were awarded to these candidates on the recommendation of a committee constituted by the National Testing Agency (NTA), the body which conducts NEET. It was charged that the grant of grace marks was arbitrary and not transparent.

**What are charges against NEET 2024?**

In NEET, students have to answer 180 questions, (MCQ type), totalling 720 marks. For every right answer, the student will score four marks, with one mark deducted for a wrong answer. Hence, only certain marks can be scored by candidates. It was the grace marks that caused confusion, the NTA admitted.

However, this is not the only charge or case in court against NEET 2024. This



**Exam woes:** Several student groups protesting at freedom park against alleged irregularities in NEET-UG 2024, in Bengaluru on June 11. MURALI KUMAR, K

year there has been a litany of charges that go beyond a question paper leak, including the slow distribution of question papers; providing the wrong question paper; wrong OMR sheets; and technical delays.

Post evaluation, there have been complaints about the unusually high number of students (67) who hit the perfect score, 720/720, and about students who scored "statistically impossible" marks, while some cases of cheating by proxy were also unearthed. Other cases pertaining to the question paper leak are still to be heard by the Supreme Court.

In the past, the exam has been dogged by charges of poor organisation and inadequate planning, besides inconsiderate rules on what candidates

are allowed to wear to the exam hall.

All these charges sparked protests from students and political parties across the country. Political parties called for a fair investigation of the charges and called on the government to conduct a fresh NEET exam. Students had the same demand, to re-conduct the test, on the grounds that the question paper leak had facilitated some students scoring full marks, or, giving them an unfair advantage. Experts and students pointed to how the very idea of starting NEET as a common entrance exam to regulate medical admissions in the country and ensure quality-control of the process would be defeated in the light of all the reported violations.

In response, the NTA had appointed a four-member committee to go into allegations made against the conduct of

the NEET exam in 2024. This panel's recommendations have now found their way into the court also.

**What was the NTA's response?**

NTA officials attributed an 'easy paper' to the unusual number of full scores this year. But the NTA still constituted a four-member committee to go into the truth behind the allegations made this year. The panel found that the compensatory marks awarded to the 1,563 students, resulted in a "skewed situation". Grace marks had to be limited to the attempted questions alone, and while the panel did not comment further on how many marks were granted in compensation, it concluded that it would be best to cancel the test for these students alone.

**What next?**

Students and education experts have already expressed dissatisfaction with the cancellation of the exam only for a few students. Arguing that if the exam can be cancelled for 1,500 students, then that is an admission of error and therefore, they claim that the logical thing would be to cancel the May 5 exam for all candidates and conduct a re-test. It indicates a failure of the system and loss of faith, students complained on social media.

Instead of rendering the pitch even, as a measure of ensuring the quality of candidates entering the medical profession, the way NEET is being conducted has created several additional layers of privilege. For an exam of its size and scale, where over 23 lakh students take the test in about 4,500 centres across the country, in multiple languages, small issues may crop up.

However, the test has been around for nearly a decade, and it is reasonable to assume that its teething troubles are over. Preventing fraud and application of mind (on the part of the invigilators to give extra time to students who did not have adequate time) should be eminently possible, certainly by the government agencies.

**THE GIST**

On June 13, the Union government submitted to the Supreme Court that the score cards of 1,563 candidates who were given compensatory marks in the common undergraduate medical entrance examination, NEET-UG 2024, held on May 5, will be cancelled.

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## China's 'grey-zone' warfare tactics against Taiwan

What are the coercive measures China has imposed on Taiwan?

Anushka Saxena

**The story so far:**

Since the new Taiwanese president Lai Ching-te has assumed office, all eyes have been on the rocky start to his tenure. While China's belligerent response to Mr. Lai's "pro-independence" and "secessionist" statements was striking, it has now resorted to a sophisticated ploy to respond to Mr. Lai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This is often referred to as 'grey-zone' warfare, which comprises elements that frustrate Taiwan in a sustained manner.

**What has China done?**

China's preparedness to invade Taiwan and fight a high-intensity war over the island is a much debated subject. Training drills in the People's Liberation Army Eastern Theater Command (PLA ETC) are targeted precisely at demonstrating China's ability to fight and win. However, a more cognitive tool that Beijing is

deploying to demonstrate this ability is simulated audiovisuals. On May 24, for example, the PLA ETC Weibo account released a 3D animation video depicting how in an invasion scenario, land and warship-based ballistic missile launchers would fire tens of missiles at one go, striking areas in Taipei and Kaohsiung.

Moreover, since 2020, the X account of the Taiwanese Ministry of National Defence has turned into a repository of reportage on daily sorties conducted by PLA fighter jets, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), strategic fighters and early warning aircraft. While such sorties do not engage the island's defence forces directly, they exert sustained pressure on them. Further, these UAVs also conduct intelligence work in the areas surrounding the island. The long term presence of such mobilisation induces wear-out within Taiwanese forces, even before there is kinetic combat.

**What about ideology?**

To build a favourable image for itself,

Beijing often deploys narratives within Taiwanese territory that thrust ideological choices upon its citizens. For example, sometime on May 25, just under a week after Mr. Lai assumed office, internet users in Taiwan observed a Youtube video of a Chinese citizen operating a drone to drop cardboard boxes on Kinmen island. When investigated by the Kinmen Defence Command on May 26, the boxes unveiled fliers written in simplified Chinese, stating "Both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one China, one Chinese nation. Taiwan independence is a dead end. Lai's Taiwan independence is a dead end." Some other fliers warned, "Don't sacrifice your life for Taiwan independence, do you understand?"

The Kinmen Command stated that this was "a typical cognitive warfare tactic" deployed by China, because it initiates public discussions on social media, and garners attention for the Chinese cause.

**What are political tactics China uses?**

In its 'carrots and sticks' approach

towards Taiwan, Beijing deploys sticks for the DPP and carrots for its primary opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT). Well known for its relatively pro-mainland views, the KMT continues to engage with Communist Party (CPC) officials, even as any meaningful communication between the DPP and the CPC has stalled since Ms. Tsai became President of Taiwan in 2016. DPP legislators have often described these engagements as KMT's "collusion" with the CPC. In fact, KMT officials have, in the past, been investigated by the Tsai administration under the 'anti-infiltration law' after their visits to China.

China's 'sticks' against the DPP entail coercive economic measures, which leverage the cross-strait trade and business interdependence to seek concessions. One such example is China's unilateral suspension of preferential tax rates for chemical imports from Taiwan, granted under the only trade agreement to exist between the two sides – the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). Beijing announced that such a suspension, applicable to 134 items imported from Taiwan, is retaliation against Mr. Lai's propagation of "separatist" sentiments in his inaugural speech, as well as Taipei's own restrictions against imports of over 2,000 goods made in China.

As 'grey-zone' warfare tactics become a subject of deliberation, Mr. Lai will have much to grapple with during his tenure. Anushka Saxena is a Research Analyst at Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru.

**THE GIST**

While China's belligerent response to new Taiwanese president Lai Ching-te's "pro-independence" and "secessionist" statements were striking, it has now resorted to a sophisticated ploy to respond to Mr. Lai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

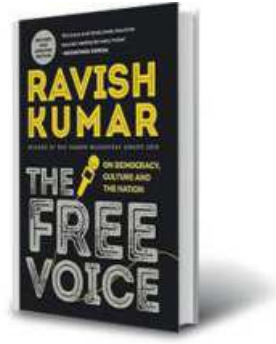
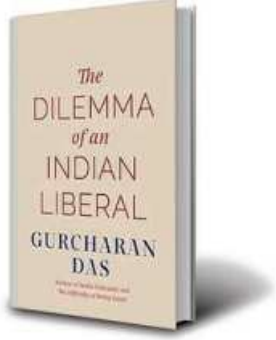
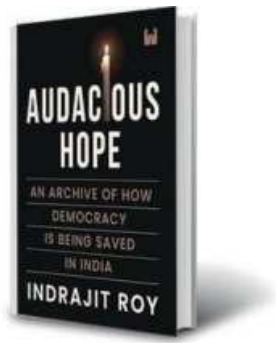
China has unilateral suspended preferential tax rates for chemical imports from Taiwan, in retaliation against Mr. Lai's propagation of "separatist" sentiments in his inaugural speech.

Additionally, to build a favourable image for itself, Beijing often deploys narratives within Taiwanese territory that thrust ideological choices upon its citizens.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**



**In defiance:** Over 500 women hold a sit-in protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) at Jaffrabad, New Delhi on February 23, 2020. FILE PHOTO



**FROM THE ARCHIVES**

**Know your English**

**K. Subrahmanian**

“Disclose, reveal (R. Ravi, Kochi)”  
 “Both words share the meaning ‘to make known to others what was intended to be kept secret, private or confidential’. The secret or confidential matter can be information, or objects hidden from view. Here are a few examples:  
 Mohan revealed the truth to Sujatha.  
 In these examples, it is information that is being shared with others.  
 The mist lifted and revealed the lake.  
 In these two sentences, objects previously hidden are being seen.  
 Although both ‘disclose’ and ‘reveal’ have more or less the same meaning, they are not always interchangeable. You cannot for example use ‘disclose’ with supernatural phenomena – god, ghosts, devil, etc. You cannot for example say ‘The devil disclosed himself to her;’ but ‘The devil revealed himself to her.’  
 God revealed the truth to Moses.  
 The word ‘reveal’ literally means ‘remove the veil.’ So when you ‘reveal’ something, you are removing a veil so that people can see the object. ‘Disclose’ on the other hand means ‘not shut,’ in other words ‘not hidden.’ So when you disclose something, you do not hide it, but keep it in the open for inspection.”

“Descriptive grammar and prescriptive grammar (A. K. Brinda, Chandigarh)”  
 “Both deal with the grammar of a language. Descriptive grammar merely lists the rules the native speaker of a language actually uses. Prescriptive grammar, on the other hand, tells (prescribes) what rules the learner should use. The prescriptive grammarian is more interested in the notion of ‘correctness.’ ‘Correctness’ is not the concern of a descriptive grammarian. He is concerned with facts. The prescriptive grammarian is concerned with value. He sets up a norm based on the writings of distinguished authors and he considers any deviation from the norm ‘incorrect.’ The sentence ‘Each one brought their pen’ will be listed by a descriptive grammarian as such sentences are common. A prescriptive grammarian would consider the sentence wrong and say that ‘each’ in the sentence should be followed by ‘his/her.’ ‘Each one brought his/her pen.’ The prescriptive grammarian’s contention would be that ‘each’ should be followed by a singular pronoun. Modern writers use ‘their’ instead of ‘his/her.’ Descriptive grammarians list innovations and prescriptive grammarians resist them initially but eventually accept them reluctantly when the innovations are accepted and used by good writers. Both serve a useful role. The role of the descriptivist is to see that the language does not become too rule-bound and that of the prescriptivist is to stoutly resist ‘the anything goes’ attitude.”

“He is going to fall, He will fall”  
 “Both are predictions. Both tell us that something will happen in the future. But there is a difference. ‘He is going to fall’ means that his fall is imminent.  
 The child was going to fall.  
 ‘He will fall’ means that he is likely to fall in the future. The fall is not imminent. You can say ‘He will fall unless he is careful.’ But you can’t say ‘He is going to fall unless he is careful.’ There is a near certainty about ‘going to.’ The ‘will’ construction tells us that something is likely to happen.”  
 Published in *The Hindu* on May 19, 1992.

# Writers speaking truth to power: the democratic value of dissent

Writers have always been the public voice of the truths of a time, while striving for a better future. Contemporary critics and writers keep the spirit of democracy alive; as do the common men and women of a country, leaning on constitutional and democratic values

**Nandini Bhatia**

“**T**he writer has taken on more and more of the intellectual’s adversarial attributes in such activities as speaking the truth to power, being a witness to persecution and suffering, and supplying a dissenting voice in conflicts with authority,” wrote Edward Said, Palestinian-American philosopher-critic, at the turn of the millennium. With the rise of writers like George Orwell, Hannah Arendt, Noam Chomsky, and if we look closer to home, Romila Thapar, Anand Teltumbde and Arundhati Roy, this “special symbolic role of the writer as an intellectual testifying to a country’s or region’s experience, thereby giving that experience a public identity [is] forever inscribed in the global discursive agenda.”

Writers have always been the public voice of the truths of a time, while striving for a better future; although it can be a tedious task. Academic Indrajit Roy, in his book *Audacious Hope: An Archive of How Democracy is Being Saved in India* (2024), revives the lost hope of a people-centric democracy and the dissenting voices that advocate for it. Placing India within historical democratic crises across the world – from radical democratic breakdowns in Chile, Germany, South Africa or Pakistan, to a subtle but significant loss of the democratic spirit in Turkey, Brazil or the U.S. – he offers an optimistic view for India’s future, as students, artists, comedians, farmers, women, and other marginalised groups, take a stand against the growing authoritarianism in fields of education,

religion, agriculture, citizenship, art and so on. Some emerge victorious in bringing change or at least in reversing autocratic/capitalist measures; others, get the ball rolling for future generations and future governments. “Not all battles are fought for victory. Some are fought simply to tell the world that someone was there on the battlefield,” Roy quotes the former NDTV news anchor, Ravish Kumar, from his 2019 speech as he accepted the Ramon Magsaysay Award. Either way, “Democracy welcomes, rather than stifles, dissent,” he insists.

**Cost of speaking up**  
 Roy calls Ravish Kumar an intrepid journalist; the latter, however, has written honestly and elaboratively on the fear that entails speaking up, both before and after, and his every day journey from fear to courage, in *The Free Voice: On Democracy, Culture and The Nation* (2018). Where Kumar addresses the personal cost of nationalism that came with the political shift in 2014 – in matters of religion, love, privacy, etc. – Roy reviews the last decade through the collective spirit of dissent. Each offer a positive as well as a negative spin on the strength-in-numbers argument, where mobs attack and resent, and protesters question and dissent. “The power that resides in the people must not be frittered away. Be a film star’s fan, or cricketer’s, but never be a politician’s fan. Respect him, but don’t be so hypnotised by his words that you forget to evaluate his work and hold him to the promises he makes,” Kumar writes, as he urges people to remain, first and foremost, (responsible and duty-bound) citizens of the country. It is in this spirit, and driven by this

power, that the subjects of Roy’s book will be remembered – as virodhi (dissenter) and not krodhi (resentful), as Kumar distinguishes – in history. They could be students from Hyderabad, Allahabad, Manipur, Delhi and many other States, protesting systematic and institutional violence rooted in caste and class discrepancies; or the people from all age-groups, genders, and religious backgrounds, who stood up to fight against the “weaponisation of minorities” as perpetrated by the announcement of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (2019) and the subsequent fear that overwhelmed Assam and other pockets of India. It could also be the humanitarian spirit of the citizens of India as they collected, organised and facilitated the movement of funds and supplies, rebuilding hope in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic. The decisive victory of the farmers’ protests also renews the hope Roy endorses.

**On a lonely road**  
 Where does the Indian liberal stand amid all this socio-political spinning? Gurcharan Das may have some answers, as he deliberates on a dozen or so aspects of the Indian identity, misled by the growing demagogues in politics, buried beneath the lethal (and in hindsight, tragic) cocktail of “identity politics, majoritarianism and nationalism”. In his latest book, *The Dilemma of an Indian Liberal* (2024), he goes back and forth between the paradox of maintaining democracy – as a politician’s responsibility and a citizen’s duty. As an economist, he gives a fair economic hue to his argument, conferring India as a

rising global power, held back by the social decline from within. In this journey, he writes, “the liberal is on a lonely road”. The solution is to stay away from “political association with religion” as Roy calls it – be it in animal rearing, caste sanction or in worship.

**‘Realistic hope’**  
 All three scholars – Indrajit Roy, Ravish Kumar, and Gurcharan Das – show little faith in the opposition and their lack of promising strategy in dealing with the issues that threaten the democratic fabric of the country. Nonetheless, Roy appeals for a “realistic hope” against a radical one. “It is tempting to conflate hope with utopia,” he writes, “...this obsession with perfecting humanity” will not lead us anywhere. As long as we lean on and exercise constitutional values, of which, dissent is one, there is hope. Indian citizens did lean on and exercise their constitutional and democratic values, as is evident from the results of the 2024 general elections. They have kept the “realistic hope” alive by practising “dissent” in its purest form: by voting, by showing up for their democratic right and their role in sustaining it. At a time like this, one is reminded of *The Washington Post* slogan: “Democracy Dies in Darkness”. Contemporary critics and writers alike keep the spirit of democracy alive; as do the common men and women of a country. The lone candle flame on the cover of Roy’s book, enveloped by darkness, spreads light and empowers citizens to pursue it; an undeniable testimony to hope.  
 The author is an independent feature writer. Instagram: @read.dream.repeat

**THE DAILY QUIZ**

## White is a colour often associated with peace and goodness. A quiz on the colour and what it has meant for cultures throughout history

**Vasudevan Mukunth**

- QUESTION 1**  
 The white colour is said to be achromatic because it has no \_\_\_\_\_. Fill in the blank with a property that is used to mean the extent to which a colour can be said to be similar to or different from another colour.
- QUESTION 2**  
 On electronic screens, when the three primary colours of red, green, and blue are mixed, you get white. This process, in which a new colour is created by bringing together multiple other colours, is called \_\_\_\_\_.
- QUESTION 3**  
 The earliest cave paintings, from the

- Palaeolithic era, featured white among a few other colours. Name the carbonate mineral (or rock) with the use of which they were able to obtain this white.
- QUESTION 4**  
 Ancient Rome had two words to describe the colour white: \_\_\_\_\_ and candidus. The former stood for plain white and the latter was for a brighter variety. Fill in the blank. Hint: A famous and popular Harry Potter character has the same first name.
- QUESTION 5**  
 Jainism has two branches. The names of the two branches are \_\_\_\_\_ and Digamber, which in Sanskrit mean “white clad” and “sky clad”, respectively. Fill in the blank.



**Visual question:** Name this man. As the story goes, he created Russia’s flag by reordering the colours of the Dutch flag, which was the first national flag to feature the white colour. PUBLIC DOMAIN

- Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:** 1. The name of the book Anne Frank is known for. **Ans: The Diary of a Young Girl**  
 2. The hiding place where Anne hid from Nazi persecution with her family. **Ans: Secret Annex**  
 3. Anne aspired to this profession. **Ans: Journalist**  
 4. The only person in Anne Frank’s family who survived the confinement. **Ans: Anne’s father, Otto Frank**  
 5. The name Anne called her diary. **Ans: Kitty**  
 6. The location of the Anne Frank House. **Ans: The Netherlands**  
 Visual: This actor played Anne Frank in this 1959 film and this actor won the Academy Award for the Best Supporting Actress. **Ans: Millie Perkins played Anne; Shelley Winters who essayed the role of Petronella van Daan won the award**  
**Early Birds:** Vasudha A. S. | Mouli Pal | Nyasha | Abhinav Raj | Prashant Nain

Please send in your answers to [dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in](mailto:dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in)

**Word of the day**

**Corrigible:**  
 capable of being corrected or set right

**Synonyms:** sort out, discipline

**Usage:** It is a corrigible defect.

**Pronunciation:** bit.ly/corrigiblepro

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /kɒrɪdʒɪbəl/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) with the subject ‘Text & Context’

## Man of the moment

Chandrababu Naidu has his task cut out

**O**n Wednesday, N Chandrababu Naidu was sworn in as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, a well-off State in terms of per capita income and growth of State gross domestic product, but poor in terms of public finances. He has the unenviable task of somehow mending the latter, without derailing basic government functions. It would amount to ensuring that while projects such as Polavaram and Amaravati — the first a large multi-purpose hydel project and the second a smart-city capital — are completed, the State's teachers and other employees also get their salaries (literacy rate is just 67 per cent).

The State is regarded as "broke" — meaning that its flow of revenues does not quite match borrowings. Various assessments have brought the crisis to light. In November last year, CRISIL downgraded bonds issued by the Andhra Pradesh Capital Region Development Authority owing to the "liquidity strain" on the State government's finances. It said that the high revenue deficits (27.6 per cent of revenue receipts in FY23) and high indebtedness (43 per cent of the State's gross domestic product, including off-budget items) were likely to continue on account of the State's high revenue expenditure. The State's capacity to collect taxes is hampered by the fact that its primary sector has a higher-than-national-average share in the State's economy than the secondary and tertiary sectors. Capital outlay has taken a hit. It was reduced by 56 per cent in FY23 and 14 per cent in FY22, CRISIL points out. A fiscal deficit of 3.8 per cent seems rather high, when seen against the fact that it is being driven by revenue spending, with capital expenditure remaining low.

Naidu's task is cut out: he has to build own revenues of the State, while securing the capital assistance of the Centre (whether it is through 'special State' status or otherwise) in completing the ₹47,000 crore Polavaram project and another ₹40,000 crore for Amaravati. It remains to be seen how he reconciles his populist promises with a campaign based on bankruptcy of the State's coffers under the watch of YS Jagan Mohan Reddy's government. Andhra Pradesh's 10-year journey is instructive. A tax base that relies on liquor and sand cannot be very promising. It must have industry and services as tax revenue earners. The State has been handicapped by the loss of Hyderabad and needs an urban, IT complex, for which Naidu is considered by many to be the right person at the helm.

Naidu will have to use his good offices as one of India's most industry-savvy and IT-friendly political leaders to kickstart investment through private capital, even as agri-investment is a driver here. The Singapore government, a partner in Naidu's Amaravati project (in his last term) before it was shelved by the Jagan administration, does not seem to be averse to picking up the threads again. MNCs such as Xiaomi, Isuzu and Kia Motors have set up shop but none is of recent vintage. Attracting industrial investment is crucial to Naidu's plans for turning around Andhra Pradesh.

## POCKET: BIZ DIZRUPTION

RAVIKANTH



VIPIN SONDHI  
MEGHA SINGH CHAUHAN

**T**he global toy and games market is anticipated to touch \$130 billion in 2024, with dominant players like Hasbro, Mattel, Spin Master, and LEGO spanning various product categories such as action figures, dolls, puzzles, among others, according to Statista, a global data and business intelligence platform. These leading companies produce renowned toys and games, leveraging iconic characters like Hot Wheels and Barbie from Mattel and DC Universe collectible toys from Spin Master. These toys often evolve from comics, movies — animated or otherwise — or the development of games around these toys.

At present, India's toy market is estimated to be around \$1.7 billion according to Statista, and largely dominated by imported toys. However, a significant portion of these toys do not reflect India's rich heritage, civilisation and culture. Fortunately, India's indigenous toy industry boasts a diverse array of toys originating from different States, each with its unique characteristics. These indigenous toys have the potential to be transformed into captivating characters that embody Indian tradition and heritage.

This approach can achieve dual objectives: first, by fostering the local production of indigenous toys, it would support Indian craftsmanship and benefit artisans; second, by creating a global cinematic universe centred around Indian culture — akin to the ambition of ToyCathon, an inter-ministerial initiative organised by the Ministry of Education's Innovation Cell — could lead to the export of Indian culture. This parallels the success South Korea has achieved with its K-Pop and dramas, popularity of which on Netflix in India skyrocketed by over 370 per cent in 2020 compared to that in 2019. This has led to a ripple effect in the market, which has facilitated the entry of Korean noodles into Indian households, forcing top FMCG companies like Nestle and HUL to introduce them as well in the form of new products.

**TOY CHARACTER-BASED MOVIES**  
Barbie's nine Oscar nominations serves as a compelling illustration of our point. Originating as a comic character, Barbie evolved into a globally recognised collectible toy loved by children, eventually spawning a lucrative movie adaptation. The extensive exposure through films, along with the widespread popularity of Barbie dolls and characters being referenced in daily life and other



RAJU V

# Indigenous toys can go global

**OPPORTUNITY BECKONS.** India boasts a diverse array of toys. These can be transformed into captivating characters and popularised through cinema

media, has seen Barbie transform into a symbol of — some would say — empowerment, reflecting the evolving demands and export of American culture and in stories over time.

The Marvel and DC cinematic universes offer another parallel example, with superhero characters like Iron Man, Avengers, Thor, Superman, and Batman originating from comics and transitioning into blockbuster movie franchises. This phenomenon has not only fuelled the market for collectible toys and fan clubs but also facilitated the global exportation of American culture. The Marvel Cinematic Universe, in particular, stands as the highest-grossing film franchise in history, amassing \$29 billion worldwide through 33 feature films. Notably, Walt Disney's *Incredibles 2*, became the highest-grossing Hollywood animation in India in 2018, underscoring the global reach of such cinematic endeavours.

**INDIGENOUS TOYS**  
India boasts a rich heritage in toy craftsmanship, with a history dating

**The indigenous toys across States not only offer insights into various aspects of life but also reflect religious influences, with many depicting narratives from revered epics.**

back 5,000 years. Archaeological findings from sites like Harappa and Mohenjodaro have unearthed ancient toys and dolls, such as miniature carts and dancing figures, providing glimpses into the early roots of Indian toy-making. The indigenous toys across States not only offer insights into various aspects of life but also reflect religious influences, with many depicting narratives from revered epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

The various types of indigenous Indian toys could be integrated into the global toys market. While there is a growing emphasis among global leaders on eco-friendly and sustainable toy manufacturing, it is noteworthy that the plastics segment holds the highest market share globally, based on material-type segmentation. However, Indian indigenous toys typically utilise wood as their primary material, augmented with natural colours applied through lacquering and polishing techniques. Consequently, indigenous toys surpass global market leaders in terms of environmentally friendly manufacturing practices.

For example, Bhatukali represents a miniature compilation of household items, offering potential for imaginative play and creativity. Kondapalli toys, inspired by ancient mythological roots, showcase scenes ranging from mythological narratives to village life, animals, and birds, presenting opportunities to capture the interest of both children and collectors alike.

Similarly, Thanjavur dancing dolls are a testament to Tanjore's rich heritage of beautiful handicrafts, with their intricate designs and cultural significance appealing to a global audience. Choppu Saman, traditional role-play toys for kids, feature utensils crafted from fine wood or clay, painted with harmless natural colours, providing avenues for interactive and educational play experiences.

Each of the aforementioned examples presents opportunities for creative minds to craft stories around these characters. With each type of indigenous toy possessing unique features, aesthetics, and clothing styles — many of which are rooted in rural life — there is ample potential to weave engaging narratives that resonate with audiences, especially children, who are the main target groups for such products. Given the pivotal role that franchises and characters from movies, TV shows and books play in driving toy sales and leveraging brand recognition, it is imperative for Indian toy manufacturers to showcase Indian stories and culture on a global stage through character driven cinematic story-telling. This initiative can endeavour to elevate Indian toy characters to prominence and popularity worldwide by exporting Indian ethos and culture.

Sondhi is Chairperson National Board for Quality Promotion and former MD and CEO, Ashok Leyland & JCB India; Chauhan is with the Policy Unit of Quality Council of India

## MFs' trade in credit default swaps, a good move

It can deepen the debt market. However, robust regulation and investor education are vital before implementation

A Paul Williams  
K Kalidasu

**T**he Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), in a landmark decision, has proposed a transformative change that could revolutionise the Indian debt market landscape by permitting mutual funds to actively buy and sell credit default swaps (CDSs). This move, signalling a significant shift in regulatory stance, aims to infuse dynamism into the market by enhancing liquidity, improving risk management tools available to investors, and fostering the development of a deeper and more robust corporate bond market.

By opening up this avenue, SEBI aims to align Indian practices with those in developed markets, where CDS trading is an integral part of financial risk management. This proposal, however, is not without its complexities and potential pitfalls. While offering a plethora of benefits, the introduction of CDS trading for mutual funds also raises concerns regarding the complexity of these instruments, the potential for speculative activities, and the need for stringent investor protection measures.

A credit default swap is a financial derivative that acts as insurance against the risk of a borrower defaulting on their debt. The buyer of the CDS makes regular premium payments to the seller, who, in

return, promises to compensate the buyer if the underlying debt instrument defaults. CDSs are used to manage credit risk, speculate on creditworthiness, and hedge against potential losses. Currently, Indian mutual funds are permitted to buy CDSs only for hedging purposes in fixed maturity plans (FMPs) with a tenor of over one year. SEBI's proposal seeks to expand this, allowing all mutual funds to buy CDSs for all schemes except overnight and liquid funds. This move aligns with RBI's 2022 revised regulatory framework for CDS, aiming to develop the debt market further.

**PROS AND CONS**  
By allowing mutual funds to participate in CDS markets, SEBI aims to increase trading activity and liquidity in the corporate bond market. This could lead to more efficient price discovery and a broader range of investment opportunities for investors. Further, mutual funds can utilise CDS to hedge their credit risk exposures, reducing the impact of potential defaults on their portfolios. This could enhance the stability and resilience of the mutual fund industry. In addition, increased participation from mutual funds could lead to a deeper and more vibrant corporate bond market. This could provide companies with alternative sources of funding and promote economic growth.



**COMPLEX.** Credit default swaps

However, navigating through CDS is not free from shortcomings. CDSs are complex instruments that require sophisticated risk management expertise. Mutual funds might need to invest in additional resources and capabilities to effectively manage the risks associated with CDS trading. While CDSs are primarily used for hedging, they can also be used for speculative purposes. Unregulated speculation could lead to market volatility and systemic risks. SEBI needs to ensure adequate investor protection measures are in place, as retail investors might not fully understand the risks involved in CDS trading. Clear disclosures and investor education are essential. In developed markets like the US and Europe, CDS trading is well-established and plays a crucial role in risk management and price discovery. Mutual funds and other

institutional investors actively participate in these markets. However, regulatory frameworks are robust, with stringent risk management requirements and investor protection measures.

**WAY FORWARD**  
SEBI's proposal marks a significant step towards modernising the Indian debt market. However, the success of this move hinges on several factors. SEBI needs to establish a comprehensive regulatory framework that addresses the complexities of CDS trading, including risk management, margin requirements, and reporting standards. Further, SEBI should focus on investor education initiatives which are crucial to ensure that investors understand the risks and benefits of CDS and make informed investment decisions. In addition, importance should be given to developing a robust market infrastructure, including trading platforms, clearing-houses, and data repositories, which are essential to facilitate efficient and transparent CDS trading. SEBI's decision to allow mutual funds to trade CDS has the potential to revolutionise the Indian debt market. It could enhance liquidity, improve risk management, and deepen the corporate bond market.

Williams is the Head of India at Sernova Financial and Kalidasu is a Ph.D student at Alagappa University, Karaikudi

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### Tackling heat waves

This is with reference to 'Heat wave in Delhi: A clarion call for climate action' (June 13). Prudent use of comfort gadgets such as air-conditioners will go a long way in reducing atmospheric heat. Also, reckless urbanisation should be avoided. The authorities should give permission to build malls and theatres only after taking into consideration the environmental aspects. India has a large number of workers employed in unorganised sectors like construction, farm labour, mining, etc., and are directly exposed to the sun and heat. With the increase in temperatures due to

global warming, these people are at a greater risk of exposure to heat-related adversities. The government should enact laws to reduce working hours during heat waves and make it mandatory that workers be given breaks to take sufficient rest. Employers should provide all basic protective gear like sunglasses, caps, cotton clothes and other gadgets to protect workers from the heat.

**Veena Shenoy**  
Thane

### Granting of patents

This refers to 'Why granting patents is not a numbers game' (June 13).

When there are more patents granted to Indians it will not only increase innovation but also prevent the outflow of foreign exchange if they were granted to foreigners. Foreigners who get royalty payment for their patents used in India will move the money to their home country, and they will also dictate terms for using their patents. The progress of technology in India can be gauged by growth in patents granted to Indians.

**NR Nagarajan**  
Sivakasi, TN

### Towards ease of living

The Finance Minister's statement

that the 'Govt is committed to ensuring ease of living' (June 13) is welcome. But there are areas where things are lagging. While there's been a focus on production in the last 10 years, it has failed to lift employment growth.

This is largely because the investments have not been in labour-intensive sectors. The proposed labour codes are not aimed at strengthening the workforce and making them more productive. Ensuring ease of living may be yet another slogan if the ongoing policies are not modified.

**AG Rajmohan**  
Anantapur, AP

### Involve gram panchayats

Apropos 'Chouhan asks officers to ensure that the impact of agriculture schemes gets reflected on ground' (June 13). This is important as most of the beneficiaries are not fully aware of the schemes. Under the situation the Agriculture Ministry must make gram panchayats accountable to spread awareness of the schemes and their benefits in view of increasing political feud between the Centre and States. However, in the absence of last-mile connectivity, the effectiveness of the schemes gets diluted.

**Rajiv Magal**  
Halekere Village, Karnataka

# Successful negotiations

India is zealously safeguarding its interests in FTAs

Alfya Ansari  
Siddharth Nema

India now negotiates FTAs from a position of strength, leveraging market access and growing global influence.

After a decade-long hiatus following the India-ASEAN FTA in 2010 and its withdrawal from the RCEP Agreement in 2019, India reignited its market integration and liberalization efforts by signing the India-Mauritius CECPA in February 2021.

Expected benefits from earlier FTAs elude India, as imports outpaced exports, thus widening the trade deficit. But this is a New India that the world is now dealing.

As the fastest-growing economy, with a market of 1.4 billion people, India now possesses the bargaining power to negotiate trade agreements on its own terms.

In a historic first for any FTA, the India-UAE CEPA features a government procurement chapter, extending national treatment to UAE companies, but under specific conditions. UAE companies gained access to government contracts valued only over ₹200 crore from 34 ministries and departments, aiming to safeguard MSMEs supplying goods and services to the government. The chapter also allows India to apply a preferential procurement policy for its MSMEs.

Additionally, recognizing the UAE's role as a global trans-shipment hub, India included a sunset clause with a robust safeguard mechanism to counter sudden import surges, thus protecting domestic industries.

Also a legal commitment is being made to promote target-oriented investment and employment creation. The legal framework within the India-EFTA TEPA reveals that for the promised investments and jobs to materialise, India's economy must maintain a growth rate of 9.5 per cent, with annual returns on EFTA investments exceeding 16 per cent over 15 years. If not satisfied, India could pull back tariff concessions proportionately after 18 years.

Stringent Rules of Origin (ROO) using build-up and build-down methods for Regional Value Content and product-specific restrictions have given India an edge in FTA negotiations.

In India-UAE CEPA, goods must have a value content addition of at least 40 per cent for preferential tariff. India has been



TRADE. Tough talking GETTY IMAGES

vigilant in protecting its market, especially in gems and jewellery, by securing lower value addition thresholds — 1.5 per cent under India-Australia ECTA and 3-7 per cent under India-UAE CEPA — promoting jewellery exports.

India has rebuffed a push for data exclusivity in the India-EFTA TEPA, signalling a steadfast stance on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), especially within the pharmaceutical sector.

**LABOUR COMMITMENTS** India is breaking away from its traditional reluctance to include labour standards in regional rules framework and FTAs. This change is evident in its ratification of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework's supply chain agreement and the India-EFTA TEPA.

The former commits members to uphold the International Labour Organization's (ILO) labour rights. Chapter 11 of the latter requires implementing labour laws without using domestic standards to restrict imports from other members. EFTA members agree not to use higher domestic standards to restrict India's labour-intensive exports, acknowledging India's comparative advantage and countering the argument that labour standards could reduce competitiveness.

India is advancing the 'Make for the World' initiative in FTA negotiations. Moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach, India is crafting tailor-made solutions for each partner, prioritising its own interests. MOCI is discussing formulation of SOP for FTAs, aiming to streamline the process and address common challenges, as some of these agreements form part of the Ministry's 100 days agenda.

Underscoring policy continuity under the incumbent government, these developments will be closely watched.

The writers are economists with India Exim Bank. Views expressed are personal.



RK RAGHAVAN

Governing India is an unbelievably tough challenge to any government, what to speak of a coalition. This is a critical time in our history when almost the whole world is watching us while hailing us as a successful democracy. The stakes for quality governance are very high.

One of the key areas of public administration that often invites world attention is the maintenance of internal security and peace. Apart from counterterrorism, the task includes crime prevention and safety for women and other weaker sections of society. A few violent incidents in quick succession are enough for tendentious elements both at home and abroad to label the whole country as unsafe for citizens and international visitors.

Violence in society has a negative impact on our national economy when our focus is on attracting larger foreign investment. The implications for tourism, a major foreign exchange earner, are also considerable.

The new government will have to respond quickly and imaginatively when criminal incidents take place.

This is where Centre-State relations are of great importance. There are unavoidable political nuances to the relationship, particularly when the Centre and States are ruled by different parties. An urgency on the part of both to steer clear of politics should therefore be more crucial now.

What is required is a more careful monitoring of every major happening in the States so that there is objectivity and cooperation in the task of restoring order and sharing of expertise and other resources, when the occasion demands it. Talking of greater State autonomy is impolitic when dealing with dangerous law and order situations and when the Union government is more than willing to share its expertise and resources with States.

The Union Home Ministry (MHA) has a well oiled machinery that has stood the test of time. The ties between the States and the Centre are likely to strengthen. Enlightened leadership at both ends is the need of the hour. This alone will cement the relationship.

The Intelligence Bureau (IB) which reports to the MHA serves as a reliable link between the former and the State Police. This arrangement has worked fairly well till now. This highlights the need for a careful choice of officers to



K RAGESH

# Law and order challenges for the new government

**POLICING INDIA.** The Centre and States need to be on the same page for effective maintenance of internal security

occupy important positions both in the Ministry and State Police and who will take objective decisions. Fortunately there is a continuity here from the previous regime that works to the advantage of the nation.

Terrorism is a major concern for most nations. We in India can be satisfied with the fact that since the 2008 attack on Mumbai by terrorists from across the border there has been no major occurrence. There is however no room for complacency. Infiltration of our machinery by inimical foreign agencies is always a source of concern. The arrest recently of an individual in the Bharuch District of Gujarat accused of passing on sensitive information on our Army to Pakistan intelligence agents may not be sensational. It however confirms constant attempts from across the

**An imaginative policy should be framed to make it attractive for State level police officers to move to Central agencies, where there is a large number of vacancies**

border to breach our security.

Lethal lone wolf attacks at the most unlikely of places is the order of the day. Who ever imagined that two mosques in New Zealand (March 2019) and a Sydney church (April 2024) could be the targets of attack by individual terrorists. Experts believe such aggression on the part of a sole individual can never be foiled.

This highlights the need however for extreme sensitivity on the part of both spy agencies and citizenry to look for abnormal behaviour in public. This is a complicated task with a low success rate. The Central and State agencies will have to work in tandem to keep a constant eye on individuals displaying suspicious behaviour in public.

## RESOURCE SHARING

Finally, an inconclusive debate is on with regard to sharing of the services of Indian Police Service (IPS) officers between the Centre and States. A recent official communication refers to a large number of vacancies in Central agencies in the posts reserved for IPS officers. This has been the situation for several years.

Many officers at the middle level are reluctant to move from the States to

Central government. This has resulted in acute manpower shortage in several Central paramilitary forces.

There are two ways of handling this problem. IPS rules can be tweaked to make a tenure in the Centre mandatory. This requires considerable cooperation from the States which are reluctant to release IPS officers for Central deputation. The MHA will have to devise procedures to eliminate Centre-State conflicts on this issue.

The second way is to make a Central deputation more attractive. A substantial monetary compensation could make it attractive for IPS officers to go to the Centre. An accelerated promotion and an assurance of government housing wherever they are posted could also help.

A more flexible cadre allotment policy at the entry level is an option. At present many IPS officers are posted far from their home States making the IPS less attractive. An assurance of a home posting once in a while could be helpful. The problem needs to be solved quickly to promote an equitable sharing of talent at a time when there is a continual need to safeguard national security.

The writer is a former CBI Director

## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

June 14, 2004

#### MFs start looking beyond metros

Mutual fund houses are branching out into smaller cities and towns in the hope of snagging new customers. Cities such as Indore, Surat, Patna, and Coimbatore already house the branch offices of all leading mutual funds. Some funds have even stationed agents in remote places like Aluva and Agartala.

#### Pakistan rejects India's proposal on private airlines

Pakistan has declined an Indian proposal for allowing private airlines — Jet Airways and Air Sahara — to fly to that country. Instead Islamabad has expressed preference to consolidate the air services now being operated by the national carriers of the two countries, Indian Airlines and PIA.

#### Global edible oil prices crash; farmers may switch crops

The crash in international edible oil prices could not have come at a worse time than now when domestic oilseed growers are in the process of planting for the kharif season, following the south-west monsoon's early onset. If the bearishness continues, there is every possibility that farmers may not go in for large-scale sowing of groundnut or soyabean this time and, instead, opt for castor, cotton, pulses, coarse grains or even sugarcane.

# Global container trade navigating in choppy waters

Jose Paul

It's curious to see container carriers making profits despite being saddled with excess capacity and falling freight rates.

It is a strange phenomenon that when container carriers are saddled with some excess capacity and falling freight rates they are still able to make profits.

Shipping organisations suggest that container trades are expected to grow significantly lower, increasing the demand for ship capacity is likely to grow only by 3-4 per cent in 2024.

During 2022 containerized trade measured in metric tonnes declined by 3.7 per cent and UNctad projections of the UNCTAD suggest that it will increase by 1.2 per cent in 2023 and expand by over 3 per cent in 2024-28. It is to be noted that this rate is below the long term growth rate of about 7 per cent over the previous three decades. On the supply side container shipping seems to have entered an over capacity phase. (UNCTAD Review of Maritime Transport, 2023)

In 2023 world shipyards delivered 350 new container ships with a total capacity of 2.2 million TEUs (Twenty foot equivalent units), beating the previous record from 2015 when 1.7 million TEUs were delivered.

But in 2024, 478 container ships are expected to be delivered with a capacity of 3.1 million TEUs beating the 2023 record by 41 per cent. Thus, the container fleet capacity is expected to grow by 10 per cent in 2024. In other words, the fleet strength of container ships has reached 6,115 ships with a capacity of 27.8 million TEUs as on January 1, 2024 (Clarkson's Research-2023).

A few years ago, many had predicted that liner shipping would run into a massive over capacity situation in 2024-but so far the market has absorbed all the new capacity fairly well. "Alphaliner" noted in its most recent weekly report that vessel diversions via the cape of Good Hope and additional slow steaming due to stricter environmental regulations have "artificially" created fresh tonnage demand.



GLOBAL SHIPPING. Tough times STOCK

To manage over capacity, container ship operators implement many devices like blank sailing, lowered sailing speed, reroute ships and idle some excess capacity. In the first quarter of 2023, the average sailing speed slowed down by 4 per cent year-on-year and could drop by 10 per cent before 2025 (Chambers, 2023).

Lay ups and recycling are also likely to increase. By the first quarter of 2023 idle container ship capacity reached 3.2 per cent of the container fleet, up from 2.2 per cent in the previous quarter (Clarkson's Research, 2023).

The year 2022 began at very high levels for container freight rates — a continuation of the 2021 trends. This

was primarily driven by sustained pandemic-related demand and port congestion which held up container ship capacity and reduced effective supply.

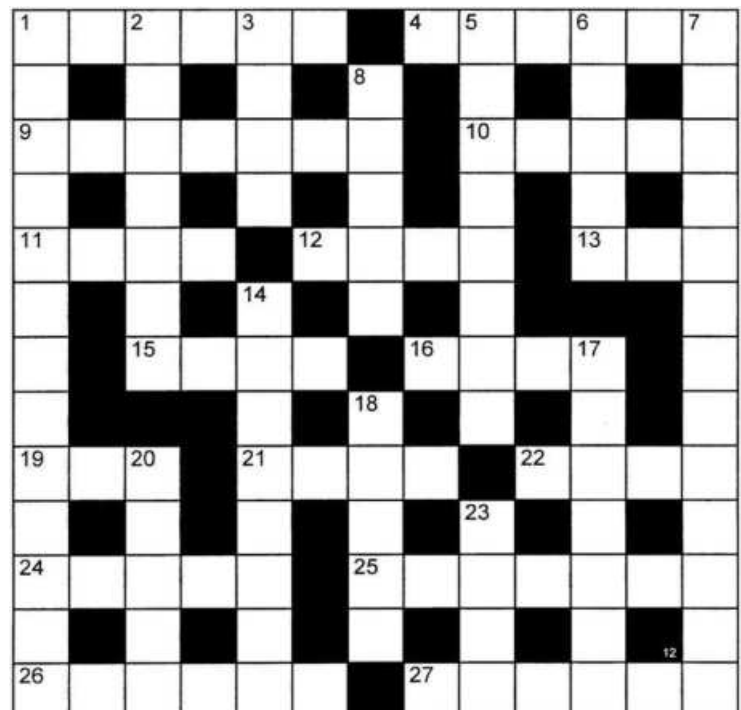
Despite the challenges faced in the second half of 2022 and market weakening, container carriers have generated record breaking profit of \$296.3 billion in earnings in 2022 before interest and taxes due to high freight rates and strong demand in the first half of the year (Drewry Maritime Research 2023).

After a year of high profits the decline in freight rates now is creating financial challenges for carriers. Hyundai Merchant Marine saw revenues drop by 58 per cent to \$1.6 billion in the first quarter of 2023 (Journal of Commerce 2023). Maersk's ocean segment also saw revenues fall by \$5.7 billion to \$9.9 billion in the first quarter of 2023.

The Red Sea crisis and disruption in global shipping seem to have come to their rescue as they are able to deploy their excess capacity.

The writer is former acting chairman of JN Port, Mumbai

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2461



### EASY

#### ACROSS

- 01. Assuredly (6)
- 04. Cancer or Capricorn (6)
- 09. Type of makeup (7)
- 10. Exuberant enjoyment (5)
- 11. Is an oarsman (4)
- 12. Quartet (4)
- 13. Feminine pronoun (3)
- 15. Work-harness (4)
- 16. Swallow (4)
- 19. Faucet (3)
- 21. Pour with rain (4)
- 22. 'Splash' (4)
- 24. Oil tree (5)
- 25. Supply (7)
- 26. Underline (6)
- 27. Make oneself liked (6)

#### DOWN

- 01. With irrational belief in omens (13)
- 02. One who bolts (7)
- 03. Incline (4)
- 05. Unsparring, harsh (8)
- 06. Puts question (5)
- 07. One to devise dance steps (13)
- 08. Yellow fruit (5)
- 14. Captains (8)
- 17. Make ready beforehand (7)
- 18. Seaside feature (5)
- 20. Officer next under abbot (5)
- 23. Grain refuse (4)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

- 01. Of a certainty one can depend on returning us first (6)
- 04. Line on the map provides something to discuss right inside (6)
- 09. It is makeup, and that's flat (7)
- 10. The zest needed to leave when about to be just beheaded (5)
- 11. Arguments given alternative backing two ways (4)
- 12. Number may be coxed and in favour of including banned turn (4)
- 13. Ayesha, said Haggard, executed leaders (3)
- 15. Frame of wood that sounds yellow (4)
- 16. How to swallow record after Guy was cut short (4)
- 19. A cock on which there's a ready supply (3)
- 21. How it will come down for the skin (4)
- 22. Fuss's returned, like so much aerated water (4)
- 24. Ring positive wire a sort of green (5)
- 25. Supply container holding fish? Just the opposite! (7)
- 26. One may be constrained to suffer such an accent (6)
- 27. The men I'd hear without leaders can make themselves loved (6)

#### DOWN

- 01. Believing omens, switches purses with bird and notes of debt (13)
- 02. What aircraft lands on is to include a bolter (7)
- 03. Incline to have very little fat (4)
- 05. It's harsh, right? Is our go wrong, then? (8)
- 06. Assumes an attitude one propounds (5)
- 07. However poor her charge may be, he'll make up the steps (13)
- 08. You'll find them in the capital, both halved, being yellow (5)
- 14. In craft there's smoked fish for the captains (8)
- 17. Quietly drove around with one to 25 (7)
- 18. A boy going down to the sea, perhaps (5)
- 20. Previous man of the church, subordinate to abbot (5)
- 23. The coarser part of prohibition is about right (4)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2460

ACROSS 1. Ask for it 7. Those 8. Violent 9. Elevate 10. Cats 12. Torrent 14. Lighter 17. Span 18. Bullies 21. Torture 22. Lucky 23. Cellists

DOWN 1. Advice 2. Knotting 3. Obey 4. Intent 5. Coma 6. Defect 7. Theorem 11. Petrify 13. Earplugs 14. Labels 15. Rustle 16. Unless 19. Lock 20. Aril

## Decentralising development

Reforms must be initiated to strengthen local bodies

Local governments can significantly contribute to India's economic development by delivering basic infrastructure and services — such as irrigation, roads, sanitation, education, and health care. They are in a better position to align local needs with development projects. It is thus no surprise that several developed and developing countries depend on local governments to provide basic services to their citizens. While India has been familiar with local governments since ancient times, this system was disturbed during the British period. It was revitalised after Independence, and the Constitution was amended in the early 1990s to empower the third tier of government. However, it is still not functioning as intended. Fortunately, the need to empower local governments is well accepted. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party also promised to facilitate fiscal autonomy for Panchayati Raj Institutions in its manifesto.

In this context, a recent working paper published by the World Bank and titled “Two Hundred and Fifty-Thousand Democracies: A Review of Village Government in India” has emphasised a greater devolution of “Funds, Functions and Functionaries” to the local government. With a comprehensive review of literature on the political economy of third-tier governments in India, it proposed measures to enhance the fiscal and administrative capacity to counteract the trend of “re-centralisation” driven by the digitisation of payments. Local governments across the world, on average, receive 10 per cent of total tax revenue. As highlighted in a recent Reserve Bank of India study, in some European countries — Finland, Iceland, and Switzerland — the amount is more than 20 per cent. Local governments in India, however, are severely resource-constrained and depend on grants from higher levels of government. Panchayats' own revenues constituted only 1 per cent of the total revenue receipts in 2022-23. Consequently, grants from higher-tier governments become the principal source of revenue, contributing more than 95 per cent of receipts. Limited revenue-raising capacity curtails their autonomy in expenditure decisions. As the 15th Finance Commission noted, “untied” expenditure constituted only 40 per cent of their total expenditure, indicating they function more as executor of central- and state-government schemes rather than a proactive entity in decision-making and policy formulation.

It is thus imperative to enact necessary legislative changes to strengthen local governments. The Constitution should clearly specify the powers and functions of Panchayats and municipalities, across various subjects. Elections to local bodies must be conducted fairly and at regular intervals. Effective fulfilment of these functions, however, will depend heavily on having adequate financial resources. In this context, the Constitution mandates the establishment of a State Finance Commission (SFC) in each state every five years to facilitate greater devolution from state governments to local bodies. However, there have been significant delays in the formation of SFCs in most of the states. Even when they are constituted, devolution remains inadequate. Therefore, it is important to improve the existing mechanism to ensure states make the necessary devolution. A system can also be evolved to allocate funds directly from the Central Finance Commission.

Besides adequate funding, it is important to build capacity and enhance transparency in local governments. For instance, the absence of a consolidated database for receipts and expenditures of local governments poses a constraint. Proper accounting will not only improve accountability but also facilitate informed decision-making and efficient resource allocation. Further, as recommended by the World Bank paper, an independent and credible mechanism can be developed to evaluate local-government performance. It is time for India to start strengthening local governments to improve developmental outcomes.

## Admission notice

Address infra after biannual intake

Close to four years after the National Education Policy was approved in 2020, more reforms are being introduced. These changes aim to overhaul India's higher education sector, which concerns over 40 million enrolled students and 2 million teachers employed in higher education institutions (HEIs) dotted across the country. The latest change in this regard is the biannual admission system for all higher education programmes — starting from undergraduate level. The University Grants Commission (UGC) recently allowed universities and HEIs to admit students twice a year — once in July/August and then again in January/February. The move must be welcomed because it is intended to benefit students who may have missed the July-August admission cycle due to delayed examination results, health concerns, or personal matters. They can now join their preferred degree programme without having to wait for one full academic year.

The UGC hopes that adopting this model will not only increase the gross enrolment ratio (GER) but also boost international collaborations and student exchanges, thereby improving global competitiveness. This will help align India with international educational standards. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), the all-India average GER in higher education was at 28.4 per cent in 2021-22, which is well above previous years and has been steadily increasing, though there are stark inter-state variations. Transition to a biannual admission system has rightly not been made compulsory. It will be for universities and other HEIs to decide if they want to adopt the new system. Some universities are reportedly considering implementing it from the next academic session as a pilot project for selected courses.

However, there are apprehensions that HEIs adopting the new system may run into several problems. For instance, it is not clear whether these students will fit in with the regular batch and their academic calendar, or whether they will get a fresh start with their academic calendar. If it is the latter, institutions will have students of a particular year with two semesters at any given point in time. Most HEIs do not possess enough manpower, faculty strength, and physical infrastructure like classrooms, libraries, and laboratories to manage the extra intake of students. The UGC recommends a student-teacher ratio of 1:20, but it remains higher at 1:27.

The higher education system in India suffers from a shortage of teachers both in terms of numbers and desired qualifications. Most institutions run by the government also suffer from poor physical infrastructure, including overcrowded classrooms, poor ventilation and sanitation, and unsatisfactory hostel accommodation. For 2024-25, the budgetary allocation for higher education was increased marginally by ₹3,525 crore, or about 8 per cent, compared to last year, but more spending will be needed to increase the overall quality of education. This is necessary if India is to compete in the global market and maintain its edge, particularly in high-tech services exports. Nonetheless, some private universities may be better placed to adopt the new admission system in the initial stage. This would also help them in collaboration with international universities, which have similar admission systems. For public universities, besides admission, the usual issues of teachers and infrastructure need to be addressed for attaining better outcomes.



ILLUSTRATION:BINAY SINHA

# India's competitive politics and outcomes

Fund managers and market analysts must stop fretting about 'big bang' reforms

It wasn't just the exit polls and self-styled poll experts who got their forecasts for the 2024 general elections horribly wrong. Market analysts and fund managers didn't fare much better either.

The investment bank Nomura, for instance, reported the results of a survey of around 150 investors carried out from May 21 to May 27. Eighty-three per cent of those polled expected the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to get a simple majority on its own, with 36 per cent expecting the BJP to fare better than in 2019. On average, respondents expected the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to win 344 seats, not very different from the forecasts of exit polls.

Fund managers and market analysts claim that they now reach out to the Indian hinterland and talk to manufacturers, vendors, consumers and others in arriving at a view on the economy, sectors and companies. If they could go so wrong with their poll forecasts, one can only hope that their judgement of individual companies and sectors is a little better.

Investors' views on election outcomes seem terribly superficial. In the Nomura survey, investors expected the Indian economy to grow at 7-8 per cent if the NDA government returned to power; if the INDI (Indian National Developmental Inclusive) alliance won, growth would dip below 6.5 per cent. Why? Because, as Nomura said in a note that followed the exit polls, “If the BJP returns with renewed majority, it should have the political capital to push through meaningful reform”. In contrast, an INDI government would mean a continuation of the status quo.

How naïve! Investors seem to be blind to the economic record of the past three decades and to the NDA/BJP's own record. They must know by now

that a majority government is not necessarily better placed than a coalition to push through the “big bang” reforms — such as hire and fire in the labour market, aggressive privatisation, easier land acquisition, among others — that are supposed to deliver growth of over 7 per cent. The BJP enjoyed a majority on its own following the 2014 and 2019 elections. Yet, many of the “big bang” reforms that market analysts have been clamouring for over nearly two decades now did not happen.

The record of the NDA government on one item, privatisation, is revealing. In February 2021, the government unveiled a policy of selling off all public sector units (PSUs) except for a few companies in four strategic sectors. Nothing of the sort has happened.

Privatisation targets have been scaled down significantly. In the Budget for 2020-21, the government had targeted a figure of ₹2.1 trillion; it realised a mere ₹33,000 crore. Thereafter, the targets have been modest and even these were not achieved. One issue that worries a large segment of the electorate is that with privatisation, job quotas in PSUs are lost. No government can afford to ignore this concern post the 2024 poll results.

The same can be said of other “big bang” reforms. There has been some moderation of the labour law codes that related to hire and fire but nothing on the scale that would-be reformers have asked for. The one “big bang” reform that the NDA government attempted, namely, farm laws, had to be rolled back. Fiscal consolidation has happened in recent budgets but we are still considerably away from the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management target of 3 per cent.

The 180-degree turn in economic policies, as everybody knows, commenced with the Narasimha



FINGER ON THE PULSE

T T RAM MOHAN

# India's neglected development transformation

The election is done. Now, serious economic challenges loom. Addressing these effectively will be key to the success of India's development transformation.

The first challenge is employment. Four things have worsened since 2014, pointing to the macroeconomic nature of this challenge and the need, therefore, for active government intervention: (1) 100 million people between the ages of 18 and 35 are neither seeking work nor in education or training, (2) 45 per cent of our workforce is now dependent on agriculture for a livelihood, (3) migration from North to South India, and from everywhere to foreign countries remains the most attractive option to secure a stable and secure life, and (4) the second most attractive option is any government job, leading millions to waste their youth trying to secure one.

At the moment, the government compensates those who cannot migrate or enter government service, and those in agriculture who are not learning or working, with a rural employment guarantee scheme, which amounts to little more than welfare. Combined with all sorts of subsidies and cash handouts, the scheme allows these people to acquire the crumbs of things that they would have otherwise got by dint of their own earnings and capabilities. The result is that we continue (enclaves apart) with a dysfunctional agricultural sector, a 90 per cent informal economy, and near zero manufacturing in North and East India, where the majority of the population lives.

The second is consumption: Consumption growth in the fifth-largest global economy has been flagging for some time. Dangerously, an increasing chunk of consumption is now fuelled by debt. At the same time, the growth of luxury consumption continues unabated. Even in a top-tier sector like automobiles, growth is coming from sales of luxury cars, not entry-level models. The railways are rationed as civil aviation booms.

Any housing for minimum wage earners requires subsidy, as does their consumption of fuel and light. The majority cannot afford a better and more economically secure life in the world's fastest-growing economy without resorting to debt, relying on subsidy, or doing with less — a telling indicator of economic failure.

The third is productivity. In my view, this problem is reflective of inequality and has societal parameters that need collective action to resolve. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are poorer than Nepal. Both capital and labour flow out of these states to southern and western India. This means a huge unproductive movement of labour away from their homes to more prosperous geographies due to a comprehensive longstanding inability to locate manufacturing and service jobs where people live. Rather than infrastructure being used to move goods to coastal ports, it is used to move people (remember the pandemic?) like pack animals, destroying families and communities. Caste, ethnic and gender discrimination further hobble productivity, as does the devaluing of skills and education in favour of the competitive exam jobs-ratting racket. A social culture of legitimising cronyism and criminality over accumulation and prosperity further accentuates the malaise.

These are serious, worsening, and longstanding challenges to India's development transformation. But these issues were of peripheral importance during the election, and to its outcomes. The diversity of the electoral verdict shows this clearly: The National Democratic Alliance lost and the INDI alliance gained in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, but the converse happened in Bihar and Telangana. This yet again signals that development transformation is irrelevant to current election outcomes.

If the terrain of electoral politics involves contestation over who can provide a better compensatory state, who can compensate better for the loss of eco-

Rao-led coalition government in 1991. Thereafter, successive governments have opted for incremental economic reforms rather than big leaps because that is what the democratic system will permit. The newly formed NDA government may be expected to follow the same path.

India has a highly competitive political system and an electorate that understands the power of the ballot. To fare well at the hustings, political parties have to address the expectations of various constituents of the electorate. Farmers have to be given subsidies. The poor have to be given subsidies. Public sector employees cannot be alienated. The middle class, too, has to be catered to.

Economic policy cannot be framed simply from the standpoint of boosting corporate profits and the Sensex. It has to factor in the requirements of equity, financial stability, and the need for strategic autonomy. The growth rate that we have now settled at — of 6.5 to 7 per cent — represents the optimal outcome after all these considerations are factored in. No political grouping is exempt from these compulsions. India's long-term economic growth is thus less contingent on the complexion of any particular government at the centre than market analysts are apt to suppose.

Market analysts may chafe at the limitations that democracy imposes on India's economic growth. They need to wake up to its strengths as well. Many commentators have noted how Indian democracy has humbled complacent governments time and again.

There is another strength that is not adequately appreciated. Precisely because the electoral process is so competitive, the system throws up leaders of considerable ability. India's Prime Minister emerges from a pool of 1.4 billion people. Chief ministers emerge from pools of several hundred million in states that are bigger than many leading nations in Europe.

In his book, *The Great Escape*, economist Angus Deaton notes that the two largest countries in the world (China and India) have been amongst the most successful over the past quarter of a century. He attempts a conjecture. “A diplomatic corps, a competent bureaucracy, a few well-trained leaders, and the faculty of a world-class university cannot all be filled with only a handful of people, and larger countries have larger pools to choose from.” Thus, large size translates into high quality in different fields.

In the political realm, we have the equivalent of the IIT/IIM/IAS entrance examinations or the selection of the Indian cricket team. Whoever makes it to the top in India's highly competitive political system can be expected to have what it takes to administer and deliver performance. “After Nehru, Who?” was a refrain heard through Pandit Nehru's long years as Prime Minister. The implied suggestion was that with Nehru's passing, India would face a leadership crisis. The years that followed have seen India march ahead under a succession of Prime Ministers.

So, fund managers and market analysts may stop fretting about political stability, the supposed lack of major reforms, and the prospects for the Indian economy. They might cultivate a little more respect for India's democratic processes.

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RATHIN ROY

## A literary affair



### BOOK REVIEW

SAURABH SHARMA

In the Indian publishing landscape, there hasn't been an occasion where an author has been able to substantially foreground a relationship with an editor in a book as compellingly as noted historian Ramachandra Guha has managed to do in his latest book, *The Cooking of Books: A Literary Memoir*.

It is also a privileged, indulgent endeavour. Who else but someone of Guha's stature would be able to either get commissioned or have managed to pitch a personal history of a relationship he has nurtured for over 40 years with

his editor, friend, fellow Stephanian, and co-founder of an independent press Permanent Black Rukun Advani?

Besides privilege and pedigree, it was the pandemic-induced travel restrictions that made Guha turn towards his “correspondence with Rukun (handwritten or typed from 1986 to 2003, via email thereafter)” instead of allowing him to explore “the archives [he] needed for [his] scholarly work.”

As Guha notes, “In many respects, this memoir also records a vanished world.” Here he is hinting at a world in which while “[a] few writers were much celebrated”, they were not seen as celebrities; where social media didn't dictate the terms of engagement, and the number of the authors' followers didn't automatically make them an authority on their subject. Only their intellect did, and it was intellect that editors such as Advani pursued instead of centralising and bending the publishing process of a book towards its business (read: sales) end.

But where and how did the gregarious Guha meet reclusive Advani? In St Stephen's College, where “in the 1970s, when [Advani] was already deep into serious books while [Guha] was an anti-intellectual sportsman.” He adds, “Apart from being a sports type, I was boisterous and badly dressed. This may have further predisposed Rukun Advani against me.” Reading the fated encounter outside Allnut Court in the college in which Mr Advani didn't reciprocate his “Hello” suggests that the future historian and environmentalist was deeply disappointed.

Anyway, they meet again at a common friend's wedding. Later Mr Advani, who had begun working as an editor at the Indian branch of the Oxford University Press (OUP) in the 1980s, proposed that Guha share his dissertation thesis, publishing another scholarly work for which OUP was increasingly being noted.

That sparked off a long correspondence between the two. Over the years, a relationship of mutual admiration, trust and respect developed. As Dr Guha notes in the Preface to this book: “In an author's life, the person next

in importance to his or her romantic partner is his or her editor.” Interestingly, the book is dedicated to his “second-best editor”, Sujata Keshavan, his wife.

Divided into seven parts, the book begins with describing how Advani “ragged” the first-year history honours student Amitav Ghosh. As someone who studied engineering, the healthy idea of ragging by asking the person to identify a classical composition — Beethoven's Emperor Concerto — doesn't seem as terrifying as the unmentionable things that continue to happen in engineering colleges. The way Guha recounts this incident, calling Advani “the legend”, establishes the kind of effect the latter was perhaps having on the all-male Stephanian cohort.

If you look beyond the adulation, however, this book is culturally important for a host of other reasons.

From recounting the history of Ram Advani Booksellers in Lucknow's Hazratganj to how OUP under its brilliant editors Ravi Dayal and Rukun Advani managed to produce scholarly works like never before, *The Cooking of Books* shines a light on how books are brought to life by a learned, sensitive, and self-aware editor.

Examples of Advani's reflections on submissions are peppered throughout the book, but I particularly enjoyed the following: “Even ‘however’ and ‘so to speak’, placed in the middle of a nicely

fluid sentence, can make it sound pontifical. Quieter, straighter, unbroken sentences are generally a lot more attractive. The need to sound authoritative is an academic ailment that should be replaced by the subtler desire to sound tentatively certain.” Perhaps intellectual historians can

pay heed to Advani's advice to write readable books instead of books that are written to simply signal intelligence and pedigree. Another reflection of his biting wit is the reproduction of a “Swiftian, scatological takedown of the Subalternist descent into jargon” by Advani.

Though the book contains interesting anecdotes and encounters, it also unconsciously reflects how people who studied in great schools and colleges and worked in some distinguished departments remained connected. It must be noted that three years ago, Penguin published a “festschrift” for Mr Guha titled *A Functioning Anarchy: Essays for Ramachandra Guha*. The volume, which included a piece by Advani, was edited by Sunith Raghavan and Nandini Sundar. Mr Guha has paid his debts squarely by offering this glorious eulogy in the form of a book, which could have easily been a handwritten letter of appreciation to Advani.

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## OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
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{ OUR TAKE }

## Time to fix NEET, build confidence

Allegations about irregularities must be probed and NTA held accountable. The careers of young people are at stake

The Supreme Court hit the nail on the head when it observed earlier this week that the sanctity of the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) has been compromised. On Thursday, it cancelled grace marks awarded to 1,563 students. But this is only a small part of the mess that threatens to jeopardise the futures of 2.4 million students who spent years preparing for the examination. After all, as an analysis by this newspaper showed, a majority of the 1,563 students scored less than 300 marks out of 720, and cancelling their grace marks would shave off only six people from the 67-strong list of perfect scores. Evidently, the problems roiling this year's examination are deeper. At the heart of the matter is the unprecedented inflation of marks and the inability of the National Testing Agency (NTA) to offer a cogent explanation.

The body, authorised to conduct multiple qualification exams including NEET and CUET, has given a plethora of reasons for the chaos, including systemic and technology issues, discrepancies between old and new textbooks, and time lost in some centres due to circumstances beyond its control. Yet, as experts have pointed out, not one of these reasons can convincingly explain the large-scale arbitrariness in marking.

Nearly 70 students have scored a perfect 720, compared to only two in 2023 and none in 2022. The unreasonable spike has played havoc with ranks and cut-offs. Someone scoring 600 placed 28,000 last year but 80,000 this year. That six candidates from the same centre in Faridabad scored 720 has also stoked doubts about the integrity of the testing process. NTA has also fended off allegations of question paper leaks and incorrect answer keys in some of its iterations.

The list of anomalies is too long to ignore or chalk up to coincidence. The government may have denied any leak, but the expert panel it has set up needs to delve deep into what went wrong. Cancelling the June 4 results and conducting a new test should not be off the table. Transparency and public course-correction are needed to restore trust in the process. With the rush of aspirants for medical education, NEET has become an elimination test rather than an examination of the skills needed for prospective healers. There are just 110,000 seats available in 706 medical colleges, of which only 56,405 are in government colleges or institutions backed by the government. Students already face an uphill battle. The least they deserve is a trustworthy and scientific process.

## In the Gulf, the need for a healing touch

The fire that killed more than 40 Indian nationals at a building housing foreign workers in Kuwait is perhaps the worst incident of its kind involving migrant labourers in West Asia in decades. Close to 200 workers were living in the seven-storey building and many of them suffocated in their sleep. The preliminary investigations done by the Kuwaiti authorities and the comments of senior officials have pointed to overcrowding in the building and the violation of safety provisions. Kuwait's interior minister has already directed authorities to crack down on all safety violations and to address the overcrowding of expatriate workers in buildings.

Unlike in the past, India's missions in West Asian countries have comprehensive procedures to deal with such contingencies, as well as community welfare funds to meet the immediate needs of the victims of such disasters. A junior minister has also reached Kuwait to oversee relief measures and efforts to repatriate the bodies of the dead. However, the tragedy has irreversibly affected some 40 families, and the Indian authorities owe it to them to ensure that more is done to protect the rights of expatriate workers and their loved ones.

Under the "kafala" or sponsorship system for managing the migrant workforce in Kuwait, the employer has an oversized role in ensuring the rights and working and living conditions of the workers. Several human rights organisations have said that migrant workers do not have adequate legal protections in the country and remain vulnerable to abuse and other factors. They have also raised concerns about their living conditions. India has excellent relations with most members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. It should nudge its counterparts in the region to ensure the well-being of Indian workers. That's the deeper healing touch the country's overseas workforce needs.

{ BEYOND THE BYTE }

Rajdeep Sardesai



## Mandate shows limits of strongman politics

This time, the voter has asked for a humbler government and a more robust Opposition

One of the great joys of watching a blockbuster movie is the intermission which often comes just when the plot is reaching a dramatic crescendo. It is during the interval that you can step out from the darkness into a calmer space for a quick break. Indian electoral politics, too, has entered a much-needed interval phase after a bruisingly polarised decade marked by constant action and high-octane theatrics. Ever since Narendra Modi took over as Prime Minister (PM) in 2014, the news cycle has been on steroids. Now, finally, a fatigued voter has pressed the pause button without a total switch-off.

Which is why it would be a huge mistake to overread the 2024 verdict. The Modi fan club reminds us that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s 240 seats are still higher than any Congress performance in the last 30 years. The Modi baiter club tells you that this is a mandate against the incumbent: A government that boasted of being "char sau par" (400 plus) is well below the halfway 272 mark on its own. The truth, as often is

the case, lies somewhere in between.

The BJP's victory *rath* triumphantly marching from one state to another has undoubtedly been halted. In the country's three biggest electoral states — Uttar Pradesh (UP), Maharashtra and West Bengal — the party has ended second best. Amidst the recrimination over what went wrong, the reality is that a seemingly supreme election machine is no longer invincible. The aura around PM Modi has somewhat dimmed too: A Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) post-poll survey actually puts Rahul Gandhi above Modi in UP on the leadership question, the first time he has edged ahead in a major Hindi heartland state in a decade.

And yet, the Congress itself remains well behind the BJP nationwide in seats and vote share. In direct BJP versus Congress fights, the gap in seats won remains in favour of the BJP: 157 against 51 wins. The only state the Congress dominated was Kerala, where its principal opponent was the Left, not the BJP. In the Congress-ruled states of Karnataka, Telangana and Himachal Pradesh, the party was unable to push ahead.

But electoral arithmetic tells only part of the 2024 story. This election was driven by chemistry, by an unshaken belief that "Modi ki Guarantee" alone would be enough to give the BJP a decisive victory. This is where the BJP campaign managers

erred, forgetting that in a country as diverse as India, no one issue can be bigger than its people. That over 100 BJP candidates were imports from other parties and 132 sitting Members of Parliament (MPs) were replaced suggests an overconfident political strategy that revolved around the "one leader, one nation" chorus in which all other candidates were rendered faceless and dispensable.

This Modi-centric polity has now reached exhaustion point. Three results stand out: Varanasi, where the BJP was talking up the possibility of the PM winning by a record margin, saw a 320,000 drop in the victory count; Faizabad-Ayodhya where the Ram Mandir opening in January was billed as the ultimate Hindutva moment witnessed a fresh-faced leader from a Dalit community defeat a two-time MP; and Banswara in Rajasthan, where the PM first made the elections about identity saw a young tribal leader from the Bharat Adivasi Party emerge triumphant.

Collectively, these results and the overall splintered verdict expose the limits of strongman politics in which institutions and ideology, even religion and society, were subsumed under the looming presence of a king-size persona laced with divinity. Instead, voters have reminded us that they need greater accountability, and yes, more humility from the political leadership.



This may be a 'mili-juli sarkar' but unlike previous coalition arrangements, it has a strong party at its core

But while the domineering personality cult has lost some of its regal splendour, Modi remains in power even if his political authority may be diminished. The Modi era isn't over, it has simply been forced by a disenchanting voter to soften a bit. This may be a *mili-juli sarkar* but unlike previous coalition arrangements, it has a strong party at its core: The BJP actually got 6.9 million votes more than it did in 2019 but lost 63 seats. The unilateral style of decision-making may give way to a more accommodative way of functioning. But for how long is still a moot question.

In a sense, the key to the next political act lies not so much with the BJP's allies, most of whom are relishing the scent of power, but with the Opposition that has been hugely boosted by the mandate. After being battered into submission for 10 years — its parties were broken, leaders hounded and even jailed, and Parliament was often reduced to a notice-board — the Opposition has finally got the numbers, and crucially, a voice that matters. The wise voter just doesn't want a humbler government, she is also

pushing for a robust Opposition that will take up citizens' concerns with greater vigour while being constructive, not chaotic.

The length of this intermission phase in Indian politics is unclear and could well depend on the next round of assembly election results. But what is more certain is that the Indian voter has chosen consensus over conflict, modesty over arrogance, federalism over a unitary State, diversity over uniformity. Embracing this extraordinary verdict requires sagacity on all sides. Or else, the increasingly impatient voter may be forced to speak out again: The second half of an indeterminate political plot is yet to unfold.

Post-script: In the spirit of humility, some of us in the media, too, need to apologise for pitching the exit poll as an "exact" poll. We too need to take time off and rediscover a better way to tell the election story, less driven by sensationalist claims of know-it-all pollsters and more by the common sense of voters.

Rajdeep Sardesai is a senior journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

## Kuwait fire makes the case for a new emigration law

On Wednesday, both Kuwait and India, especially Kerala, woke up to a heartbreaking tragedy — a fire in a six-storey building in Mangaf had claimed the lives of 49 migrant workers, including over 40 Indians, in a Kerala-run Kuwaiti construction company. The Kuwaiti government has initiated a probe and ordered a raid to find violations in buildings housing migrant workers. Mangaf, a 30-minute drive from Kuwait City, is known for accommodating low- and mid-level migrant workers from India, Bangladesh, and Egypt in poor conditions.

The Indian ministry of external affairs (MEA) has set up help desks and hotlines, and the minister of state, Kirti Vardhan Singh, has arrived in Kuwait to assess the situation. The government has also declared a compensation of ₹2 lakh each to the families of the Indians who died in the fire.

However, media attention will shift from the tragedy to other news, and the MEA will become preoccupied with other pressing issues. The fact is that, despite India being the largest sender of migrants with around 13 million Indians working abroad, and the largest receiver of remittances (\$11,100 crore), it has frequently failed to uphold the rights of Indian workers on foreign soil.

The Union government continues to govern migration with the outdated Indian Emigration Act of 1983, despite significant changes in migration worldwide. In 2019, there was an attempt to update the Act, but it failed to get Parliament's approval. Two years later, a fresh version, the Emigration Bill 2021, was put forward. Suggestions were sought from the public and civil society organisations, but not much has been heard about it since then.

The existing Emigration Act lacks standardised Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for assisting Indians in foreign countries. This gap became evident during the Covid-19 pandemic when Indians stranded abroad sought to return home. Then, Indians were repatriated by their employers, mainly from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain,

Qatar, United Arab Emirates), which lack labour-friendly laws. They returned empty-handed. The Indian government lacked an effective mechanism to recover their unpaid wages or end-of-service benefits, amounting to lakhs of rupees for many. Meanwhile, smaller out-migrant countries such as the Philippines actively fought against such wage theft. Similar issues arose in Qatar, when Indian workers involved in building stadiums for the football World Cup were exploited and repatriated without receiving their wages. The Indian government was silent. Similarly, during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Indian students had to take shelter in bunkers, fearing for their lives. India lacked SOPs and an estimate of the number of students stranded, which meant it took days to ascertain the situation.

Now, let's explore another reason why an updated Emigration Act is necessary and how it could prove beneficial during tragedies, including the Kuwait fire.

The Indian government provides insurance coverage of ₹10 lakh in case of accidental death or permanent disability, along with other benefits, for Indians migrating for employment. Unfortunately, this scheme is mandatory only for those migrating to certain countries, holding specific passports, and using the eMigrate system established by the late external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj.

The covered destinations are 18 nations where labour-friendly laws are lacking and there are security risks. Among them are all six Gulf countries, Malaysia, Iraq, and Yemen. The chances of exploitation of migrant workers are high in these countries, including through denial of decent working and living conditions, among other forms.

The existing Emigration Act provides for two categories of passports, Emigration Clearance Required (ECR) and Emigration Clearance Not Required (ECNR).

Passports held by under-matriculate workers are of the ECR category. Such workers must use the eMigrate system and are obligated to subscribe to the insurance scheme if they wish to migrate to the aforementioned 18 countries. If these requirements are not met, families of victims of incidents such as the Kuwait tragedy may not receive the ₹10 lakh compensation. Media reports indicate that the Kuwait fire victims from Kerala were skilled migrants and highly educated, likely falling under the ECNR category — subscribing to the insurance scheme would not have been mandatory for them.

Labour migration activists have been urging the Indian government to update the Emigration Act and address the existence of two passport categories, emphasising equal protection for both. As a labour migration researcher and author of Undocumented: Stories of Indian Migrants in the Arab Gulf. The views expressed are personal.

Rejimon Kuttappan is a labour migration researcher and author of Undocumented: Stories of Indian Migrants in the Arab Gulf. The views expressed are personal.

{ GIORGIA MELONI | ITALY PRIME MINISTER

The G7 is not a self-enclosed fortress... It is a container of values, and we want to open it to the world in order to have shared development and growth

At the opening of G7 summit in Italy



## Developed country goal needs structural reforms

India's impressive growth performance has raised hopes of it becoming a developed country in the not-too-distant future. The Prime Minister has set 2047 as the aspirational target year. However, leaping from being a low middle-income economy to a developed country in the next 25 years requires raising the country's per capita income by more than five times, from \$2,600 to \$10,205. This translates to a per capita income growth of 7.5% per year and an aggregate Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 9%.

This growth has to be inclusive. Creating jobs for four million persons entering the workforce annually in the next 25 years and moving a significant portion of 44% of the workforce languishing in agriculture and another 42% in small enterprises with low productivity and incomes to jobs with higher productivity and income, will be a formidable challenge. Given almost two-thirds of those in the 20-33 age-group have less than higher secondary qualifications, enough well-paying jobs cannot be created in the services sector. The focus thus must be on labour-intensive manufacturing. This requires greater flexibility in capital and labour markets, besides upgrading education and skill levels.

India has made considerable progress in macroeconomic stability, financial sector efficiency, and digital infrastructure. In recent years, it has also increased public spending on infrastructure. But more needs to be done to push the economy on a 9% growth path. The most important reform is to reduce the borrowing costs of businesses by reducing public borrowing. The Union finance minister has promised to reduce the fiscal deficit to 4.5% of the GDP by 2025-26. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI)'s record transfer of ₹2.1 lakh crore will help compress the deficit in current fiscal. Sustained efforts to contain the deficit and debt while maintaining high levels of spending on infrastructure, education and skill development will have to continue. This calls for enhancing the revenue productivity of the tax system and reprioritising expenditures.

Fortunately, the tax system has seen higher buoyancy in recent years. The record Goods and Services Tax (GST) collection of ₹2.1 lakh crore in April bolsters prospects of revenues continuing to be buoyant. However, maintaining high revenue productivity on a sustained basis and reducing distortions require reforms. The time is ripe for the GST

Council to undertake second-generation reforms to broaden the base and rationalise the rate structure. In personal income tax, tax exemptions and preferences should be ended, and the number of rates should be reduced to three from the prevailing five. That apart, the government can focus on some key structural reforms. One, productive jobs must be created in both manufacturing and service sectors. Small-scale enterprises, each with less than 20 workers, employ over 75% of the manufacturing workforce cannot compete in global markets. It is necessary to encourage them to evolve into medium- and large-scale industries. The biggest deterrent to this is the labour laws. To that end, the four labour codes can help. However, imparting flexibility requires effective implementation and the states have an important role in this.

Two, there has to be a greater thrust on exports and avoiding protectionism. Exports are a strong engine for the growth. But, India accounts for just 2.5% of global exports. Tariffs have been steadily rising since 2017, and the share of exports in the GDP has been declining. It is also important to avoid bias against producers in policies on the trade of agricultural commodities. Nine per cent growth cannot be achieved unless the trend is reversed. In this connection, India's withdrawal from joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was disappointing. The recent signing of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Australia and the United Arab Emirates are important, and faster negotiations with the United Kingdom and the European Union should help.

Three, while the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) is a landmark reform, it is important to ensure that the insolvency resolution process is timely and effective.

The three farm legislations that were later withdrawn in the face of protests by the farmers exemplify much required but failed reforms. Unfortunately, failed reforms are difficult to revive. The Centre, perhaps, could collaborate with the state governments to generate acceptability for such reforms — after all, in the case of the farm reforms, agriculture being a state subject, the latter's collaboration becomes vital.



M Govinda Rao

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## OUR VIEW



## Apple: It's late to the AI race but sure and steady

Even as a late entrant to the action in artificial intelligence, the iPhone maker may succeed by using its core strengths in consumer-oriented technology to offer 'AI for the rest of us'

Apple Inc, as we learnt this week, aims to simplify artificial intelligence (AI) for the masses in a bid to keep its users and shareholders engaged and happy. Its goal is billed as "AI for the rest of us," reminiscent of Steve Jobs' strategy of making computers aesthetic and user-friendly. While CEO Tim Cook may lack Jobs' charisma, he kept Apple's allure well polished. At least until the rise of AI, that is, particularly generative AI, a field in which it began to look like a laggard, with its Siri voice assistant outclassed by smarter AI chatbots. As a result, Apple lost its position as the world's most valuable company to AI-focused Microsoft and even briefly to fabless chip-maker Nvidia. That Apple, Microsoft and Nvidia, all currently valued above \$3 trillion, are vying for the top spot underscores just how high the AI stakes have risen. Apple's late but measured response to the AI race includes its launch of Apple Intelligence—a shot at making the 'A' of AI stand for its own name. We can expect a smarter Siri and a renewed focus on user privacy in a world rife with misinformation, scams and deepfakes. Given its consumer focus, Apple is dedicated to enhancing our AI experience even as other tech giants focus on foundational AI models and infrastructure for enterprises. Trying to recast AI as Apple Intelligence is part of this strategy. This tactic is not unique, though; IBM uses 'augmented intelligence,' while Nvidia promotes 'accelerated computing' and Intel speaks of a 'Siliconomy.' That said, Apple's AI announcements have not made tech mavens sit up, let alone rave. Yet, Apple has a history of refining and surpassing useful stuff invented by others. Sony's Walkman preceded the iPod and

Nokia's handsets came before the iPhone. Being a late entrant to a market hasn't mattered, the user experience has. Apple's strength is its consumer orientation, as seen in its aesthetics, quality and intuitive user interfaces. It also has an ecosystem of its own that makes it hard for iPhone users to switch away. Analysts at Morgan Stanley highlight that Apple's strong brand loyalty is driven by its close integration of products and services that keeps switching costs high for users. This loyalty is reinforced by the vast amounts of personal data stored on its iCloud, which tends to keep its users invested. The consumer-tech major's current emphasis on data privacy will only strengthen this loyalty. With OpenAI's GPT-4 integration, Siri will perform tasks like playing movies or scanning emails for information, but will ask for user consent before going online to get more data if needed. On the flip side, users with iPhone 15 or older models might be frustrated as they would need to upgrade their devices to access Apple's new AI features.

Apple's new OS-level features could disrupt tech startups offering basic AI services like grammar checks, copy-writing, summarization and transcription, as these tasks get commoditized. This means startups cannot rely solely on calling themselves AI or GenAI businesses; they will need strong technological differentiation, a loyal user base, robust partnerships and leadership that's comfortable with change being the only constant. Apple's success so far also shows that being a first mover in the tech world is not always an advantage. The company's own challenge will be to keep up its record of innovation in the AI space without losing its feel for—and edge on—the user experience that has been the hallmark of its success.

BLOOMBERG

## MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

## The electoral verdict has a clear message for the BJP-led alliance

It's risky to ignore rural distress, weak employment, rising price levels and quota-policy misgivings



HIMANSHU

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Results of the recently concluded general election for the Lok Sabha have given the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) a clear mandate to form the government for a third successive term, although there is also a message for it in the sharply reduced seats it now holds. The principal party in this alliance, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), won only 240 seats, lower than the required 272 for a House majority, while the BJP had a majority of its own supporting the past two governments. While it may not hamper the smooth functioning of the government, the decline of BJP MPs in the Lok Sabha was unexpected, given that pollsters as well as the party had claimed a likely increase in its tally.

Voting preferences of the electorate depend on many factors and any analysis of the election results must be done with the caveat that economic issues, though important, are only one of the many factors that determine choices. However, given that salient economic issues such as inflation, unemployment, agrarian distress and inequality were raised by almost all parties, election results do offer us some idea of the perceptions of the electorate on these issues. There are four clear messages.

First, rural distress is not just a statistical artefact, but real. The fact that the BJP's seat losses were concentrated in semi-urban and rural areas suggests

that distress played a role. Part of it was in the agrarian economy, which has seen large farmer protests throughout the last five years (10 years in some areas). The NDA lost seats in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, which were the epicentre of these protests. It also suffered losses in Bihar and Maharashtra for it. While multiple data sources confirmed the nature of rural and agrarian distress, not only was it ignored, some of it was aggravated by ad-hoc policy instruments such as the arbitrary trade restrictions that led to losses for the farmer community.

Second, inflation hurts the economy, but disproportionately more the poor. For more than two years, inflation has remained the Achilles heel of policymakers. Not only did over-reliance on monetary policy not yield the desired results, it also hurt the economy. Trying to fight inflation by prioritizing consumer interests at the cost of producers is unlikely to benefit either farmers or consumers. What is needed is a nuanced approach to inflation management and not arbitrary use of restrictive trade and price policies. India needs a price policy that protects consumer interests without compromising those of farmers.

Third, it is now evident that a policy approach to poverty alleviation through

transfers, both cash as well as in kind, is unlikely to resolve structural problems of inequality and unemployment. Claims of high growth are unlikely to have any traction if the nature of growth is not accompanied by improvements in earnings and employment for the majority of citizens. While the NDA government benefited politically in the short-run from cash transfers, which helped various occupational and social groups such as farmers, women and youth, these are unlikely to be enough for a generation eager to prosper from India's economic emergence. The issue of unemployment is not just about getting work, but also about job quality. Government jobs are few and prized by almost everyone, but these won't help tackle our employment challenge.

Fourth, economic empowerment is necessary for inclusive growth. But in a society ridden with disparity based on caste, tribe, gender, religion and region, economic empowerment is also a function of social and political empowerment. This is why issues of reservation and threats to constitutional provisions for empowering disadvantaged groups are as important as the hustings as improvements in material well-being. While this is certainly true for those excluded or marginalized by economic processes based on social identity, women are also emerging as a distinct political group, with most parties aware of the need to empower them.

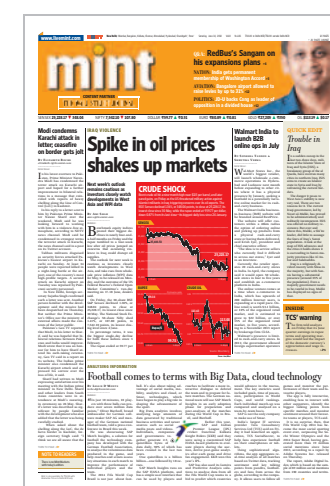
Election results are not a referendum on the economic policies pursued by governments. But they offer citizens an opportunity to voice their concerns over governance. A sound policy environment requires a dynamic information system based on credible evidence from multiple sources. A decline in the credibility of our statistical system is unlikely to help the government grasp the nature of people's problems, let alone respond. With the 2024 election results, the electorate has made its voice heard. The question is: Can the government respond to these challenges?

## QUICK READ

Voting preferences are shaped by a variety of factors, but since economic issues were raised by the opposition, the election results do indicate what the electorate thinks about them.

First, rural distress is for real. Second, inflation hurts, more so the poor. Third, cash transfers won't fix structural inequality. And fourth, empowerment is a must for inclusive growth.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

I do think some digital currency will end up being the reserve currency of the world. I see a path where that's going to happen.

BRIAN ARMSTRONG

## GUEST VIEW

## Can India's digital rupee overcome adoption hurdles?

NIKITA KWATRA &amp; KHUSHI BALDOTA



are, respectively, a principal and an analyst at Artha Global.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has been striving to boost the adoption of its Retail-Central Bank Digital Currency (R-CBDC) or e-rupee. Its latest *Annual Report* highlights initiatives like adding offline functionality and exploring its use for cross-border payments. RBI is also aiming to onboard more non-bank payment service operators and make the e-rupee interoperable with India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI). Earlier this year, RBI met with bankers and fintech officials to work out how to increase consumer adoption and integrate the digital currency with the mainstream financial system. Yet, overall adoption of the e-rupee remains tepid.

As of the week ended 31 May 2024, by RBI data, the e-rupee had ₹323.5 crore in circulation, up from ₹100 crore in December 2023, but still a tiny fraction of the ₹35.4 trillion of banknotes in circulation. Take other indicators. As of April, within 16 months of its December 2022 launch, 4.6 million consumers and 400,000 merchants had been

signed up to use the e-rupee. But transactions remain a tiny fraction of UPI transfers. Notably, RBI Deputy Governor T. Rabi Sankar in April mentioned a downtrend in daily e-rupee transactions.

Launched in 2016, UPI differs. It allows real-time inter-bank peer-to-peer/merchant transfers via mobile phones. In contrast, the e-rupee is a digital alternative to cash which can be exchanged via wallets or the UPI infrastructure. However, notably, from an end-user perspective, the e-rupee offers no obvious added value. With users showing a UPI preference, CBDC volumes have struggled to pick up.

Weak adoption is not unique to India. Retail CBDCs were launched elsewhere too, in the hope of revolutionizing payment systems, but their adoption has been tardy. While country-specific factors contribute to it, several obstacles are common. First, extant online payment systems in countries like China and India weaken CBDC demand, hampering adoption. Second, the absence of robust digital infrastructure hampers seamless CBDC transactions, while regulatory ambiguity further complicates adoption, necessitating clarity and stability to instil confidence among users and businesses. Third, trust within the system is deficient.

Specific examples from other countries with retail CBDCs may offer some lessons.

**Stalled pilot:** The DCash pilot, launched by the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank in 2019, was shuttered in January because of low adoption, with circulation at just 0.16% of total currency. Trust issues were exacerbated by a technical outage in January 2022 that shut down the system for over a month.

**Digital infrastructure challenges:** The Bahamas' Sand Dollar, Nigeria's eNaira and Jamaica's Jam-Dex have some common problems. The Bahamas' Sand Dollar, the first CBDC, was launched in 2020. Despite efforts to promote it through extensive educational campaigns and integration with government payment systems, circulation had reached only \$1.1 million by September 2023, representing 0.19% of the total currency in circulation. Nigeria's eNaira, launched in October 2021 to improve financial inclusion in the country and reduce transaction

costs, has struggled with adoption. Only about 0.5% of Nigerians are found to use it. Jamaica's Jam-Dex, launched in 2022 to decrease cash dependency and serve the financially under-served, saw an initial surge thanks to user incentives, but stalled at \$1.64 million (0.11% of its currency in circulation).

Despite having clearly defined use-cases for their country-specific CBDCs, these pilot projects suffered from weak internet connectivity and poor digital infrastructure, integration problems with traditional banking systems, low public awareness and inadequate incentives for adoption.

## QUICK READ

The Reserve Bank of India has been promoting the e-rupee but adoption has been weak, like in other countries, amid common problems such as incompatible online payment ecosystems.

Digital infrastructure hurdles and the absence of a clear value proposition compared with UPI are also to blame. RBI is making it programmable, but this has its own risks that must be studied.

and explore government-to-person (G2P) transactions and cross-border payments have not yet provided a distinct value proposition for RBI's digital currency. There is a case to be made that the e-rupee is safer than UPI as it is a direct liability on RBI (i.e., like cash, it is not dependent on any commercial bank), but this argument holds an appeal that is far too subtle for most users.

To popularize the e-rupee, RBI is working with lenders to introduce programmability, which allows directions to be set for its use. For example, IndusInd Bank used a programmable e-rupee to pay farmers for carbon credits. The Bahamas and Nigeria are also using CBDCs for government disbursements and welfare programme transfers. Jamaica is exploring the use of its CBDC to make seasonal work payments more efficient, while in China, civil servants in Jiangsu province have been receiving wages in e-CNY since May 2023.

While RBI aims to make the e-rupee as cash-like as possible, programmability could challenge its fungibility and liquidity, which may affect privacy and public trust. Experts warn that programmable money might alter economic behaviour and worsen inequality. Further studies need to be done. In all, RBI must proceed on its e-rupee with care.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Election victory and loss margins show a luckier Congress than BJP

An analysis of Lok Sabha results shows that the Congress had close calls in its wins and the BJP had relatively narrow losses



**YUGANK GOYAL & MAHADEV P. MENON** are, respectively, associate professor and co-author of 'Who Moved My Vote: Digging Through Indian Electoral Data', and a student at Flame University.

Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish religious philosopher once said: "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be loved forwards." The same could be said about elections. With all kinds of poll predictions going wrong this time (like most of the time, frankly), Indian electoral politics has finally come to terms with the fact that we can understand elections only backwards.

Post-poll analysis has been quite interesting indeed. The focus, however, has been on the victory of winners, and not as much on the losses of those who couldn't win. In an electoral democracy with a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, understanding how much one loses by is equally important to understand what really happened. Elections are numerically always about who is liked by the most, and not about who is disliked by the least (the two are not the same, except when there are only two contestants). Similarly, liked by most is not always equivalent to most liked (think about the distance between two preferences).

These variables (least disliked or most liked), even if not captured in a FPTP system, are useful lenses to view election results. They allow us a peep into the minds of voters at the aggregate level and nudge politicians to begin preparing for next elections.

We excavate a very simple metric; in addition to winning margins, we also look at losing margins at the constituency-level to compare the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with the Indian National Congress (INC). For the winning candidate, the margin is decided by her vote share less the vote share of the second-position candidate in that constituency. For the losing candidate (defined as the one in second position or below), the margin is defined by her vote share less the vote share of the winner in that constituency. We plot the distribution of these margins (in percentage points) for the two parties' winning and losing seats across India.

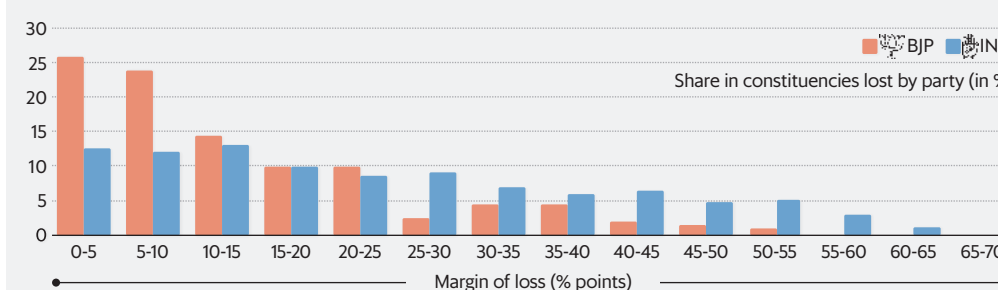
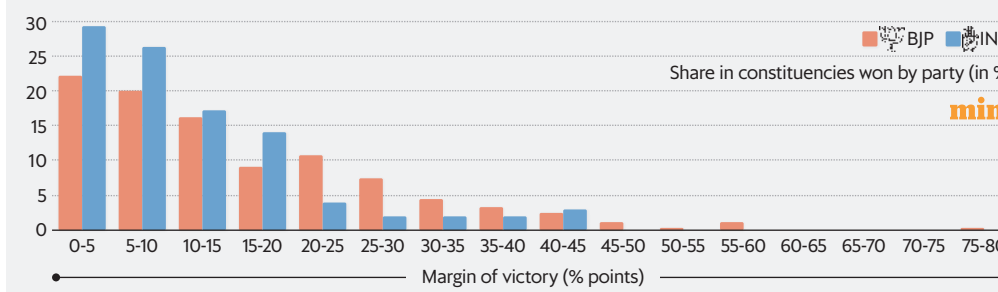
Winning constituencies are graphed against their winning margin. We do the same for losing constituencies, but with their losing margin. The distributions that are shown tell us, for example, out of all the constituencies where the BJP (or INC) lost, how many constituencies did it lose by 5 percentage points, or 10 percentage points, and so on. As one would guess, the distribution basically explains whether a party is 'lucky' or 'unlucky' in the results. The results are telling. The BJP overall seems to have lost thinly and won hugely; the INC, on the other hand, has lost hugely and won thinly.

We find that in 26% of the BJP's losing seats, the losing margin was less than 5 percentage points. For the INC, only 13% of seats had such low margins. In fact, in half of all BJP losing seats (and 25% of INC seats), the loss margin was less than 10 percentage points. Merely 4.5% of losing seats from



## Lucky victories and unlucky losses

The BJP had bigger margins in its Lok Sabha victories and smaller margins in its losses while the opposite is true for the Congress.



## Close fights and big routs

The win and loss patterns of India's two main rival parties differ.

Margin less than	Seats won by party (first rank)		Seats lost by party (second rank or below)	
	BJP	INC	BJP	INC
10,000	8	6	8	4
50,000	47	28	48	28
100,000	90	53	91	49
200,000	145	81	141	96

Source: Author's calculations, Election Commission of India

BJP while 21% of losing seats for the INC suffered a losing margin of up to 40 percentage points.

The same story repeats in winning seats. The INC's winning margin is small on the whole, while the BJP's is high. For the BJP, 40% of winning seats have a margin less than 10 percentage points, but 56% of INC's winning constituencies are won within this margin. Just 3% of the INC's winning seats are won by a margin greater than 40 percentage points, while 6% of the BJP's clock this margin. Consider the absolute margins. The BJP lost 48

seats with margins less than 50,000, while the INC lost only 28 under this margin. The two parties lost 91 and 49 seats respectively with margins under 100,000 and 141 and 96 seats with margins under 200,000. In terms of victories, the numbers show similar patterns, with the BJP winning more with large margins and the INC less. BJP won 47 constituencies with margins of up to 50,000, the INC only 28. The two parties secured 90 and 53 seats respectively with margins of up to 100,000 and 145 and 81 seats with margins less than 200,000.

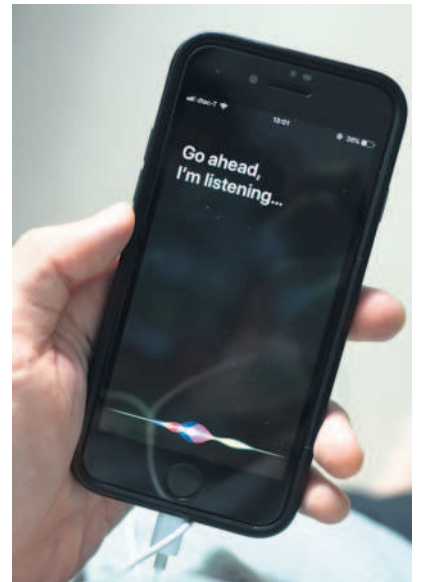
On an aggregate across all constituencies, the average of the BJP's winning margins is 15.8 percentage points and the INC's is 11 percentage points (in constituencies they won). The BJP is winning with somewhat larger average margins. We also notice that the BJP is losing with smaller average margins (13.8 percentage points) compared to the INC (23.9 percentage points) in constituencies they lost. Basically, the BJP had more close calls in its losses, while the INC in its wins. This implies that the BJP was unlucky and destiny favoured the INC. This does not mean that the INC should not celebrate. But this indicates the 'quality' of wins and losses. The margin distribution tells us whether the BJP should be sad or very sad about its losses and if the INC should be happy or very happy about its wins. These emotional responses do not matter, of course, but what matters are their strategies in upcoming elections.

# Apple's ambition: It wants AI to stand for Apple Intelligence

Its privacy focus could be a winner but its strategy isn't free of risk



**PARMY OLSON** is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering technology.



Apple's effort to play catch-up in AI has the tech world's attention

You have to hand it to Apple Inc. After a tone-deaf ad last month that made the company look oblivious to AI's impact on the world, its marketing department has now rebranded AI as 'Apple Intelligence.' It's a feat only the company could pull off. Customers of Macs and the latest iPhones will use it to rewrite emails, transcribe and summarize calls, generate images and cross-reference information from Apple apps. "Will I get to my daughter's play performance on time?" Apple Software Chief Craig Federighi asked in a demo at its developers conference on Monday. Apple Intelligence would consult his iPhone's proprietary Calendar, Maps, Mail and iMessage apps to answer.

After a string of mundane updates to its operating systems, these are the most exciting features in years, but will Apple Intelligence really work as seamlessly as it did in pre-recorded demos when it rolls out this fall? I'm inclined to believe we'll see glitches and latency issues that will make it a tough sell to consumers, at least initially.

The most sophisticated AI tools today process your queries on cloud servers that need an internet link. Apple's iPhone has a fraction of the power of those servers, but to make its AI service private and quick, it will run some AI queries via Siri 'on device,' on a small language model Apple built for iPhones. No net connection needed.

Apple Intelligence will also decide, on the fly, if a query like "Will I get to my daughter's play performance on time?" requires extra computing power. If it does, it'll access a bigger AI model that Apple made, via its 'Private Cloud Compute' (its own servers). Anything more complex will request a query to ChatGPT, via a partnership with OpenAI. Apple, admirably, has gone to great lengths to keep this process private, with query requests being end-to-end encrypted and inaccessible to others.

The price for all of this could be speed. When Apple answers a query using its smaller on-device AI, it'll do so with a latency of 0.6 milliseconds per prompt token, according to an Apple blog post on the subject, or faster than the blink of an eye. But Apple didn't offer corresponding latency times for when the phone has to access its Private Cloud Compute for heavier queries, and that's a noteworthy omission. It'll likely be slower, but by how much? Apple doesn't say.

As shallow as this sounds, consumers hate having to wait a few extra seconds for things they can do themselves, and if it's simply quicker to look something up in their calendar or mapping apps, they might

decide to avoid using Apple Intelligence.

On the other hand, while the on-device AI will be faster, it will also be more prone to errors. According to Apple, the smaller AI model is about as capable as GPT-3.5 Turbo, which OpenAI launched more than a year ago, and which doesn't have a stellar reputation for accuracy. The hallucination rate for GPT 3.5 has ranged from 3.5% to more than 15%, according to different estimates, and that points to another omission from Apple. It didn't offer accuracy rates for either of its new AI models.

Remember that even the most sophisticated models coming from leading players like Google—think about the new AI Overviews—are still laughably error-prone. Apple could have disclosed some decent hallucination rates. Instead, it offered vague stats about how human graders "preferred" its AI over others.

Little wonder then, that Bloomberg's senior Apple reporter Mark Gurman has said the new AI features will be buggy and in 'beta' when they launch this fall.

Apple's role at the centre of the lives of its customers and its access to reams of their personal information could end up being both a blessing and a curse. It's better placed than most tech companies to make AI useful because it is plugged so deeply into our daily existence. But that also means it can't afford to make too many mistakes.

Federighi's example of making it to his daughter's play is a case in point. Were Apple Intelligence to inadvertently make its user 30 minutes late, it wouldn't be easily forgiven. Much the same happened to Apple Maps, where a flurry of mistakes in its early days sent people to competitors like Waze and Google Maps for years afterwards. It doesn't help that Apple has been slow on the uptake with Generative AI, thanks in part to a smaller AI team compared with other large tech firms, and a history of management troubles at its Siri division.

Apple's more private approach is a welcome stance, and the company should be commended for sticking to its guns on using private encrypted servers while others are playing fast and loose with AI in a battle for supremacy. But getting consumers to embrace its ambitious new features won't be easy when the glitzy demos are suddenly made real.

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

# Fasten your seat-belts: We expect climate turbulence

RAHUL JACOB



is a Mint columnist and a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

For most well-off urban residents, the effects of climate change have mostly been viewed from afar as a problem confronted by villagers. The myriad images aiming to highlight the problem include photos from parts of rural Bangladesh evacuated because of the salination of fields where crops once grew, for example. Refugee boats reaching the shores of southern Europe from North Africa mostly carry villagers escaping the effects of heat waves. This year's winner of the Asian College of Journalism's photojournalism award was a photo essay of the starkest kind. Sudip Maiti's photos published in *Frontline* magazine showed the effects of hundreds of villagers displaced because of erosion caused by the Ganga and its tributaries.

We may glance at such disturbing images and quickly look away. I happened to be a judge for the ACJ award and had to resist the urge to do the same. Over the past several months, however, it is urban residents in

India who have felt the effects of climate change up close. This year, there have been record temperatures in Delhi, touching almost 50° Celsius. But, it is the south and east of India that accounted for two-thirds of all heatwave days recorded in 2023.

Last week, a report was released by the Centre for Science and Environment called *Anatomy of an Inferno*. Among its disturbing findings was that "cities are not cooling down at night at the rate they used to" 20 years ago, and that "all cities have registered significant increase in their built heat island effect," a reference to the concretisation of cities and the use of generators and air-conditioners that add to carbon emissions and trap heat. This is worrying. Night temperatures not falling as much as they did has worsened a crisis of heat stress that, in a vicious cycle, requires greater use of air-conditioners, which consume vast amounts of mostly unclear energy.

India's summer-time furnace-like cities aside, the effects of climate change are affecting wealthy developed populations as well. Just as tomato and onion crops as well as cereals were hit in the past year or so in India by either heat waves or deluges of lashing rain at the wrong time, the same

phenomena are affecting crop yields in southern Europe, where wine grapes and olive production have been hit, and in Indonesia and Vietnam, where coffee production has dropped. This week, a *Wall Street Journal* story by Jon Emont, reprinted in *Mint*, charted how prices of olive oil and cocoa have rocketed, while "global wine production (is at) its lowest levels since 1961." Because of the shortfall of coffee from Vietnam, a US-based importer had to resort to quotas even for customers such as Costco.

Now, even the more pampered among us could manage with less wine and chocolate, but the heat stress in Indian cities, especially the lower gap between daytime and night-time temperatures and a rise in humidity, is a looming health worry. Over time, it could lead to many fatalities in the country. And yet, climate change was scarcely spoken about during India's seemingly endless cam-

paign for this year's Lok Sabha election.

Our day-to-day behaviour doesn't change much once the summer passes. Our use of air-conditioning remains akin to that of the *nouveau riche* who want to show off their use of modern machines. If I am invited to anything in an auditorium in any of our metros, I always carry a waistcoat because I am usually freezing. Other Asian metros, including Hong Kong whose offices once had arctic air-conditioning, now issue guidelines that the air-con level in public places be set at about 25° Celsius.

For a country with so much sunshine that aims to reduce the use of fossil fuels, our use of home solar panels is low. While our energy usage has become more efficient, we seem to lag economies smaller than ours on solar panels used residentially. Recently, I was surveying Colombo from the roof I happened to be on. Every rooftop of a large home all the way to a nearby supermarket

The recent Singapore Airlines air-drop has been attributed to the effects of climate change and pilots running into such perils might become more frequent than we can imagine.

glimmered with solar panels till they began to seem like abstract urban art.

By contrast, Bengaluru, where I live, promises to be the *locus classicus* of urban dysfunction and heat stress. Not only have its day-time and night-time temperatures risen considerably—my grandmother's home there in the 1970s boasted a mostly unused, solitary table fan—but its water crisis of a few months ago has been forgotten in a flash. Both the building complex I live in and the club I frequent send messages of one kind or another almost daily. Virtually none, then or now, has had to do with smart usage of water or electricity.

Even when one tries to get away on holiday, it is hard to escape. Flying out last month on the morning every newspaper had reports of the horrific mid-air turbulence—another manifestation of the earth's higher temperatures—encountered by a Singapore Airlines flight from London to Singapore, the pilot on my flight wisely aborted a landing because wind speeds on the ground were unusually high.

Literally and metaphorically, fasten your seat-belts, as the old line goes. Climate change is turning our comfortable lives upside down.

QUICK READ

Urban India is caught in a vicious cycle. Night temperatures not falling as much as they did has worsened heat stress and pushed up the use of ACs that consume mostly unclear energy.

The recent Singapore Airlines air-drop has been attributed to the effects of climate change and pilots running into such perils might become more frequent than we can imagine.



## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# The invisible worker

Indifference lies at the heart of tragic incidents involving migrants, as in Kuwait



S IRUDAYA RAJAN AND VARSHA JOSHI

## A FIRE IN KUWAIT

Workers' deaths underline vulnerability of Indian migrants. Government must step up, ensure humane working conditions

THE DEATH OF 45 Indian workers in a fire in Kuwait is a reminder of the dismal working conditions of a large, and often ignored, section of the Indian diaspora. The labour camp that was gutted on Wednesday was reportedly packed beyond capacity. The rapid spread of the blaze and the high number of casualties indicate that the six-storey building did not have adequate safety provisions, such as fire exits and fire-fighting equipment. The Kuwait government has ordered an investigation and assured that the guilty will be held to account. The country's deputy prime minister has asked the Kuwait Municipality and the Public Authority of Manpower to address similar violations elsewhere, where a large number of workers are crowded into residential buildings. India's Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh has reached the Gulf nation to ensure early repatriation of mortal remains and speedy medical assistance to the injured. But the Centre and state governments must do much more — they should use the growing goodwill for India in the West Asian countries to guarantee the well-being of the migrant labour force.

According to the Ministry of External Affairs data, nearly 8.8 million Indians live and work in the Gulf. The money they send back home makes for more than a fourth of the diaspora's annual remittances. In Kuwait, Indian carpenters, masons, electricians, construction site labourers, factory and domestic workers and food delivery agents constitute nearly a fifth of the country's workforce. Several studies and reports have shown that they are vulnerable to exploitation by employers. Two years ago, for instance, an investigation by this newspaper underlined the precarity of the lives of Indian workers employed in the construction of soccer stadiums in Qatar. While the significantly high salaries in the Gulf continue to make countries in the region a favoured employment destination, at the same time, the availability of a large number of unskilled and semi-skilled workers and footloose labourers reduces the bargaining capacity of the migrants. Many are recruited through the visa sponsorship, or *kafala* system, which binds workers to their employers, severely limiting the capacity of the migrants to seek better housing or occupational safety improvements. Fear of loss of employment or deportation prevents most from complaining about the quality of working or living conditions.

India has signed MoUs with West Asian countries, including Kuwait, to streamline procedures for recruiting workers and providing them with legal protection. However, the course of legal redress is prolonged, court processes are expensive and an already vulnerable community has to contend with the absence of legal assistance and shortage of interpreters in an alien country. The problem also is that India deals with migration through a 40-year-old Emigration Act, which leaves the migrant worker at risk. In the Budget session of Parliament last year, the External Affairs Ministry acknowledged the need for an updated law to deal with migration issues. That piece of legislation is still in the works. The toll taken by the Kuwait fire is a reminder that the new government has to do much more to safeguard the lives of Indians who go abroad to work.

THE MORNING OF June 13, 2024 marred by terrible news for all Indians but especially for the families of over 40 Indian migrant workers in Kuwait. The country woke up to the news of their deaths in a fire in the six-storey building where they lived. As of now, a total of 49 deaths have been reported and at least 50 people have been injured. Among the deceased, 42 were reportedly Indians and 24 of them were from Kerala.

Most of those who died were aged between 20 and 50. Although an accidental blaze — the investigation into its causes and details is underway — this incident has once again brought attention to the lack of safety and deplorable living conditions of migrants in destination countries. Sadly, this is not an isolated event.

Two years ago, during the football World Cup in Qatar, there were several news reports about rising migrant deaths, harsh working conditions and severe violations of human rights. There was similar media coverage during the Dubai Expo, which saw the massive involvement of migrant workers to ensure the rapid development of infrastructure. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health in Saudi Arabia reported that migrants constituted 75 per cent of the total people who tested positive for the virus as of May 2020. The dingy living spaces and cramped dormitories were noted as a major reason for the virus's rapid spread among the migrant community.

The tragic deaths of migrants in Kuwait add to the list of serious risks — sometimes even leading to death — faced by migrants in the short span of the last five years. These crises are a result of a chronic indifference towards addressing migrant rights, safety and working conditions in destination countries. The repetition of the incidents also suggests that we have not learned the lessons

we should have: Migrant issues are only in momentary focus and are topics of debate as long as there is an alarming situation. But considering the strength of the Indian diaspora around the world, especially the migration corridor India shares with West Asia, we need well-thought-out, effective policies to ensure the safety and well-being of migrants from India.

The Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2023 estimates that 2.2 million people from the state have migrated, with 80 per cent of them residing in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The majority of these migrants work in the unorganised sector, such as construction sites and factories, where they often face dangerous working conditions. Additionally, since migrants in Gulf countries do not have the option of permanent residency, they are not adequately protected and have few rights, which can lead to exploitative labour conditions similar to those observed in Qatar in the run-up to the World Cup.

One of the major challenges in addressing these issues is the lack of data on migrants — both at their origin and destination countries. Even when deaths of several migrant workers were reported in Qatar over the last decade owing to involvement in the rapid construction works, neither the country's Ministry of Public Health nor the several embassies of Asian countries — where most workers come from — in Qatar had any concrete data regarding the health status of migrants, the exact reason for their deaths or possible redressal actions sought. The lack of clarity and uniformity in data available from different agencies was indicative of the grave invisibilisation of the migrants, especially those employed in the low-skill, low-paying job profiles. These set of migrants also tend to be the most vulnerable, staying away from home with limited resources and means to

defend themselves.

Although sources of data like the KMS provide regular updates regarding patterns of emigration, return migration and remittances in Kerala and have been replicated in many Indian states, including Jharkhand, Punjab, Goa, Tamil Nadu and Odisha, we still have a long way to go in systematically studying migration from India. There is an urgent need, especially given the large number of migrants from India to various parts of the world, to study the conditions of their migration and their lives in the destination country. A national-level migration database is a necessary step forward to adequately understand the various sections of migrants from India and also the increasing trend of return migration, as observed in the latest KMS figures.

Most Indians migrate with dreams of a better future for themselves and their families. But far too often, they are seen only in a reductive manner, as people sending remittances to the home country. We often fail to look at the people behind the remittance and the human cost of migration. New Delhi has signed Memoranda of Understanding with almost all of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries on mobility and migration. Yet, India has not yet been fully successful in tapping the potential of being one of the strongest migrant-sending countries to ensure the well-being of its people in the destination country. It is high time that India is known as the country with the most efficient infrastructure for ensuring safe migration and life at the destination for migrants, not just the highest migrant-sending country that receives the most remittances.

The writers are Chair and Research Fellow respectively at the International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD), Kerala, India

## STAYING HAWKISH

Fed's restraint gives RBI another reason to desist from cutting domestic interest rates too soon

AS THE US heads for a presidential election in November, the Federal Reserve, the country's central bank, has signaled that it is unwilling to let interest rates soften in a hurry. This may not just be a concern for President Joe Biden and his chances of re-election. Given that the US is the world's largest economy and the US dollar is the most important global currency, actions of the "Fed" (as the Federal Reserve is called) are keenly watched by policymakers across the world, especially among emerging economies like India. That's because higher interest rates in the US strengthen the dollar vis a vis other currencies, and this, in turn, incentivises investors to pull their money out of emerging economies and take it back to the US. In fact, even the mere suggestion of an interest rate hike can derail the macroeconomic stability of emerging economies, as was witnessed during the Taper Tantrum episode in 2013 when the then Fed chair, Ben Bernanke's, hint at monetary tightening led to a flurry of capital outflows from the "fragile five" economies, which also included India.

Unlike India, where the RBI directly tweaks the repo rate (or the interest rate at which it lends to the banking system), in the US the Fed "targets" the so-called Federal Funds Rate. The FFR is the interest rate at which commercial banks borrow from each other. But the Fed can make this rate go up or down by tweaking the overall supply of money. Justifying the decision, current Fed chair Jay Powell said that the Fed does not expect it would be appropriate to reduce the target range from 5.5 per cent until it has gained greater confidence that inflation is moving sustainably to the 2 per cent target. Again, unlike India, where the RBI targets 4 per cent inflation, the Fed targets 2 per cent. In many ways, the Fed's action is similar to the RBI's hawkish stance. Just like the RBI, the Fed also wants to make sure that it does not reverse its policy restraint too soon lest it leads to a spike in inflation.

It is true that over the years, India's economy has become more resilient to the actions of the Fed. The RBI has repeatedly said that its actions are independent of the Fed — that is, it can cut or raise rates even when the Fed doesn't. Still, the Fed's restraint gives the RBI another reason to desist from cutting domestic interest rates too soon, lest it worsens the interest rate differential between the two economies.

## POOR LITTLE RICH BOY

He's richer than the king. That should be reason enough for UK PM Rishi Sunak not to play at being everyman

IT IS UNFAIR, perhaps, to compare suffering. After all, to those who have it all, the slightest inconvenience, the smallest wish unfulfilled, is a tragedy. Besides, as many esoteric thinkers have pointed out, the only inner life a person has access to is their own. Then there's the more real way that people react to those who are, for want of a better phrase, just spoiled brats. As most people struggle at their jobs — and even to find one — it's hard to have empathy for the sufferings of the rich and famous. A politician, more than most, should know that.

He's richer than the king. That's reason enough for Rishi Sunak, prime minister of the United Kingdom, not to play at being everyman. After a career in finance and through his marriage to Infosys founder Narayana Murthy's daughter, Akshata, he is reportedly the 245th richest person in Britain, several places above Charles Windsor. Understandably, his opponents in the Labour Party have sought to paint Sunak as out of touch with the people, and rather than side-step the issue, he has only confirmed their accusation. In an interview earlier this week, when asked to give an example of something he missed out on as a child, Sunak replied "Sky TV... was something we never had actually."

Perhaps it's a unique campaign strategy. Few leaders facing an election — especially one in which their party is widely believed to be on the back foot — have chosen to play the poor-little-rich-boy card. It is more likely, though, that the suave PM put his foot in his mouth. As the healthcare system crumbles, a war rages in Europe and climate change threatens doomsday, Sunak is better off highlighting his economic expertise. The Sky TV trauma is too let-them-eat-cake-ish.



VANDINIKA SHUKLA

## FACT OVER FICTION

Lok Sabha election's experiment with AI offers hope for India's democracy

THE BJP FALLING short of its predicted majority in Parliament was not the only surprise of the world's largest election. Despite widespread fears of an election cycle riddled with AI-generated dis/misinformation campaigns, the deepfake apocalypse did not come to India. The access to cheap and fast synthetic media changed political campaigning in India, but for the most part, campaigns, candidates, and party workers used AI for familiar political activities, including trolling the Opposition, and for targeted communication with their constituencies.

Indian voters received and circulated a variety of synthetic media — voice clones, AI-generated videos, personalised audio messages in different Indian languages, automated calls to voters in a candidate's voice, and AI-generated songs and memes. Most of that content was authorised by political parties who spent an estimated \$50 million. Young AI companies, with their origins in serving the entertainment industry, were quick and proficient to respond to this growing demand.

Hyper-realistic AI-generated content in India was designed to appeal to emotions. Translated to regional languages, particularly to make parties accessible beyond the Hindi heartland, it leveraged relational bonds, especially with the resurrection of superstar politicians. Muthuvel Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa were among the first politicians to be resurrected with deepfake videos and voice clones posted by their political parties. A fellow party member circulated Arvind Kejriwal's message from behind bars through a convincing AI voice clone. Meanwhile, more than 50 million voters received calls from local representatives about the most concerning issues in their area — except the leader on the phone was an AI avatar. Political parties also used AI to bolster

their ongoing meme wars, with cheap fakes, propaganda images, and AI parody videos.

Yet, the rural information ecosystem was not as sophisticated. The fact-checking unit Logically Facts reported that of their 224 fact-checks between February and June 2024, merely four per cent covered AI-generated content. Facebook, Instagram and local content aggregators like Moj and Public featured old-fashioned cartoons, easily recognisable and low-tech face-swaps or doctored content, supercuts of local video footage, or simply text on coloured backgrounds. The content largely mocked or expressed public frustration with the BJP's "400 paar" slogan. In Uttar Pradesh, a viral cartoon rebuked Modi's claim to God-like power with Lord Ram showing him the way out of the Ayodhya temple.

Two trends stand out now: The race to get content to the voter faster and with more targeted relevance in a permissive regulatory environment will place ethics in the hands of small enterprises. AI start-ups like Polymath Solutions (commonly known as The Indian Deepfaker) and Muonium AI have committed to an "Ethical AI coalition manifesto" pledging to protect data privacy and prevent the creation or distribution of harmful content. As the post-election market opens for new clients to leverage these AI tools, other start-ups may not have the same consideration for labelled or ethically produced content or self-regulation.

India's experiment with AI can also open a new chapter for AI in participatory democracy. Consensual uses of AI in the context of renewed competition in the Lok Sabha can have a positive role in making democracy and governance more accessible, deliberative and representative.

Party campaigning showed us new ex-

Party campaigning showed us new examples of using AI for more individualised communication across linguistically, ideologically, and ethnically diverse constituencies, with messages that were more accessible — especially among rural, low-income or low-literacy areas. India can take its recent fluency in AI-led party-people communications and transform it to more than one-way service clientelism.



## JUNE 14, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### NO KHALISTAN

IF ARMY ACTION had not been taken in Punjab, the state would have ceased to exist. The direction of the terrorist movement was towards an independent Khalistan fully supported by neighbouring and foreign powers. The Home Ministry stated this in a document on the army action in the Golden Temple. The movement would have been directed towards full-scale insurgency, if not stopped, he said.

### NEW JNANPITH AWARD

THE BHARATIYA JNANPITH has chosen eminent Kannada writer C K Nagaria Rao for its

newly instituted award named "Moortidevi Sahitya Puraskar". This award of Rs 11,000 will be given away every year to a writer for a work in any Indian language or English which highlights the importance of eternal values cherished in Indian life, according to a press release by the Jnanpith.

### PUNJAB SEDITION CASES

THE PUNJAB POLICE have registered cases against Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the All India Sikh Students Federation, Dal Khalsa, Shahbeg Singh, former major general, and Kuldip Singh Kohla for waging war against the Union of India. The inspector general of

police (law and order), P S Bhinder said an FIR against them was registered at Amritsar on June 10. They have been charged under various sections of the Indian Penal Code.

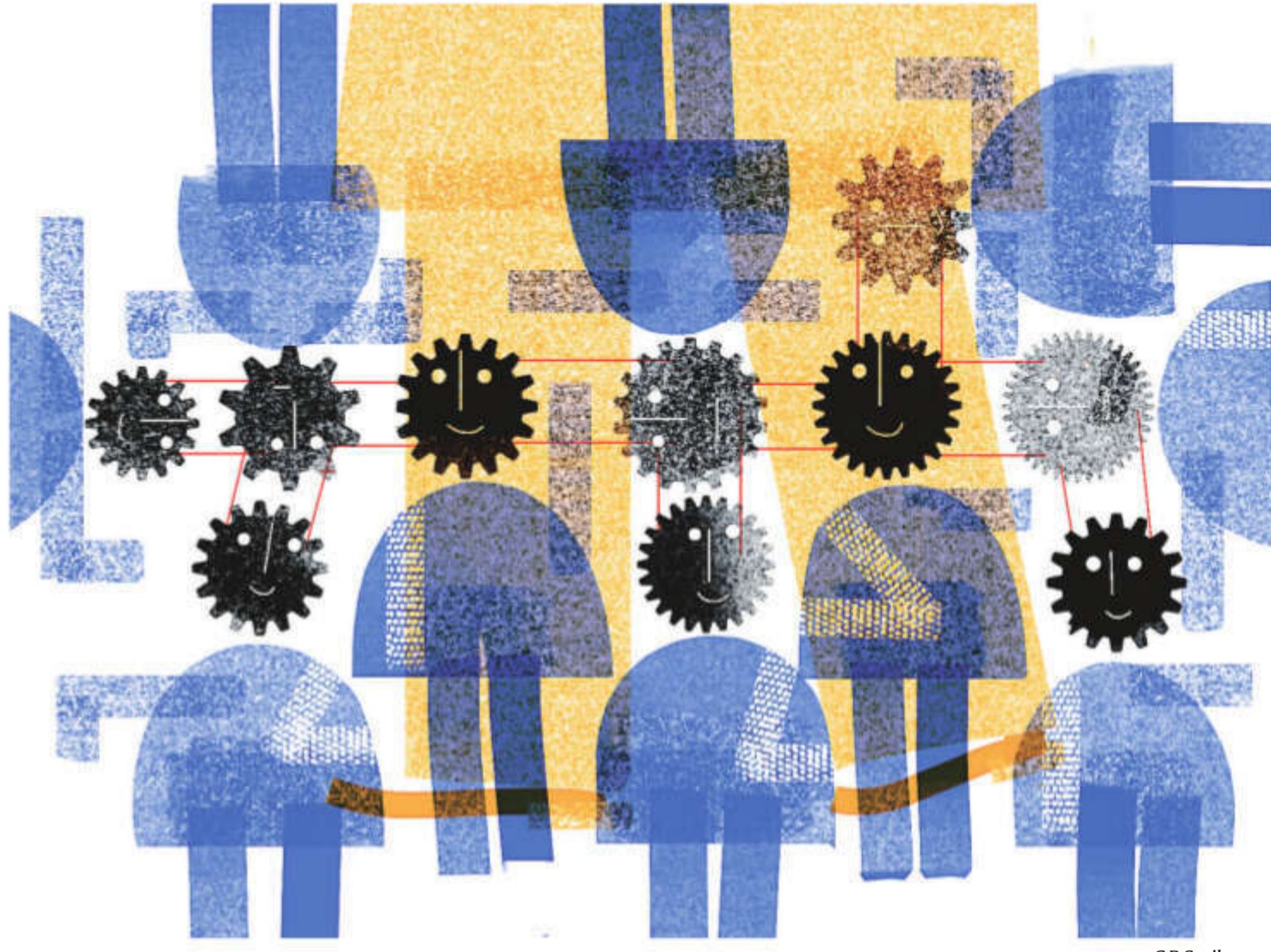
### POONCH CURFEW

CURFEW WAS REIMPOSED at the border town of Poonch. Reports said that there were clashes between the security forces and the Sikh militants and a powerful bomb blast had taken place at the Parade ground area. The spokesman, however, refused to confirm or deny this saying that the only communication that was received from Poonch was about the reimposition of curfew.

# THE IDEAS PAGE

## Rise of the charismatic state

The most fundamental threat to cultures of dissent – fundamental to any democracy – come from it



CR Sasikumar



SANJAY SRIVASTAVA

IN THE QUEUE where I voted on May 25, there was a middle-aged, middle class man talking loudly about, as he put it, the fantastic progress India had made in the field of digital technology led service delivery. He was rapturous about the ways in which a very complex election process was being conducted with efficiency and, indeed, aplomb. The conversation was joined by a slightly older man who spoke of Covid-related vaccination and how he had experienced a seamless process via Indian apps whereas, stranded in London for some time, he had “experienced incredible inefficiency in their (NHS) medical system”. The younger man concluded by adding that “I tell my US-based sister not to lecture us in India as we are far ahead in all these matters. We have a focussed leader”.

The day after the vote, I was in a chemist shop, not far from my voting booth. Among all the post-voting banter, a customer was asking others there if they are prepared for “another terrible five-years of Modi”. There were smirks around the counter and the man, straightening his crumpled and slightly soiled kurta, added that he cannot believe that “in a country with a 85 per cent Hindu majority, there is fear of being swamped by a minority of the population. People believe anything”. Shaking his head, he walked out of the shop.

Though diametrically opposed in their political stance, these two comments have something to tell us about the chronicle of the 2024 election result.

Both comments puncture the persistent myth about India that conflates the idea of “society” with that of the “nation”. One aspect is common to almost all countries that were subject to European colonialism: Their political leaders pinned their hopes for emancipation – political as well as cultural – on the idea of the nation.

The nation was a holdall of emotions about togetherness, fellow-feeling, commonality and striving together for the common good of all who belonged to it. From the voting queue to the chemist shop, there is, however, now a strong sense that it is not the nation that is central to Indian life but, rather, the state. It is the state that influences the life of a society and, most significantly, the state has been made visible as a human figure of both veneration as well as fear. In effect, there is both enthusiasm and resignation that it is now the state, which is the nation. The state, as distinct from the nation, is – in its most fundamental and unavoidable form – a mechanism. It has the capacity of enforcement through its bureaucracies, policing bodies and, perhaps most importantly, vast financial resources.

It is conversations on the ground – rather than academic arguments about the centrality of “constitutional” values – that tell us something about a fundamental shift in how Indians imagine democracy at home. It is imagined as a situation where what is good for the state – a mechanism for ruling – is seen to be good

for society. There are two aspects to this. First, if the state says that society is threatened by “internal enemies” it identifies, then it becomes an accepted fact. And, second, there is acceptance that the mechanisms of the state – its capacity for enforcement of its will – must be utilised to thwart the objectives of the apparent enemies of society. The grounds on which the 2024 elections were conducted by the party in power were prepared through imagining the Indian state as society itself: Unquestionable because it represents the “genuine” interests of the entire population. However, the party that most strongly represented itself as the state was not as successful as it had imagined because of strong resistance to the idea that state equals society and that its claims in the name of doing unequivocal social good cannot be questioned.

The collapse of the society-state distinction has been assiduously nurtured over a decade and a half. This has produced a particular danger as far as genuinely democratic politics is concerned. The latter depends on not accepting that what is good for the state is unquestionably good for society: Indira Gandhi's defeat in the 1977 general elections demonstrated an awareness of this distinction. However, in the current scenario, the state has acquired a charismatic personality. Charisma is the capacity to undermine independent thinking and the suspension of disbelief. It is fundamental to the career of “heroic” figures across a number of contexts, including films, religious veneration and political life. When the state comes to be accepted as charismatic – rather than a mechanistic device for public welfare – we are truly in the realms of passive national life.

When a state is treated as charismatic – a machine becomes a personality – it has the

Beyond ‘voting patterns’ and ‘exit polls’, we also need an understanding of how voters relate to the most fundamental aspect of Indian society – the state. Threats to the democratic culture do not come from hyper or bigotry-inspired nationalism, for these are frequently countered by dissenting voices. The most fundamental threat to cultures of dissent – fundamental to any democracy – derives from the rise of the charismatic state, for this impairs our capacity to object to its actions by believing that whatever it does is for the benefit of society.

effect of producing unquestioning admiration and support for centralised forms of power and those who promise centralised forms of power. This is the demonic beauty of the charismatic state: All ideas of freedom, autonomy and the public good come to be seen as deriving from the state. Even the individual is no longer an entity separate from the state, it is the state. This is a fundamental aspect of the political processes of the immediate past that were contested – and discarded in the elections.

Beyond “voting patterns” and “exit polls”, we also need an understanding of how voters relate to the most fundamental aspect of Indian society – the state. Threats to the democratic culture do not come from hyper or bigotry-inspired nationalism, for these are frequently countered by dissenting voices. The most fundamental threat to cultures of dissent – fundamental to any democracy – derives from the rise of the charismatic state, for this impairs our capacity to object to its actions by believing that whatever it does is for the benefit of society. Electoral victories that are achieved on the basis of blurring the distinction between the state and the society are the most significant dangers to a national life of genuine public welfare. The question isn't so much about “why don't Indians subscribe to constitutional values?” Rather, we should ask: Under what conditions, and through which means, are the values of constitutionalism undermined by those of statism?

For now, independent thought – in favour of genuine social and public welfare – has triumphed over the dangers of statism.

The writer is British Academy Global Professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS University of London

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“The challenge extends beyond the green agenda. It requires overcoming the radical polarisation that has reshaped politics from New York to Brussels, to convince voters of the legitimacy and fairness of government action.”

– THE WASHINGTON POST

## Ineffective dispute resolution

Decision to prioritise settlement over arbitration process is short-sighted and damages long-term economic interests



SUMEET KACHWAHA

ON JUNE 3, the Finance Ministry announced a surprising policy decision. After trying to promote India as a hub for arbitration for decades, the Government of India now feels that arbitrations do not work for them and that the arbitration clause should be dropped from all future government/government-controlled entities' contracts (except in relation to minor disputes of a value of Rs 10 crore or less).

The new policy is set out in the form of an Office Memorandum and provides that the government departments/entities/ agencies should, “... amicably settle as many disputes as possible... in overall long-term public interest, keeping legal and practical realities in view, without shirking or avoiding responsibility or denying genuine claims of the other party.”

To facilitate amicable settlement, the government agencies will constitute “high-level” committees composed of former judges/retired senior officials to vet or approve such settlements. If settlement efforts do not work out, the dispute will be left to the courts for adjudication.

The core reason given for this dramatic shift in policy is the government's perception that arbitrators often lack integrity and collude with private parties and the resultant award becomes difficult to dislodge (given the limited grounds available in law to challenge an arbitral award on merits).

The government's change of stance in abandoning arbitration and pitching all its hope in its ability to settle disputes “without shirking or avoiding responsibility or denying genuine claims” is fundamentally flawed and rests on misplaced wishful thinking. It will also prove to be a costly mistake and a major impediment in bridging the infrastructural gap, rendering projects bankable and achieving the five trillion-dollar economy aspiration.

One may start with the government's perceived lack of trust in arbitrators. First, arbitrators are meant to be independent and impartial and decide disputes on merits. They are not there to toe the government line or do its bidding. If the government is looking for “yes men”, it is looking for biased arbitrators and destroying the sanctity of the arbitral process. The government should be insightful enough to recognise that adverse orders do not necessarily mean that the tribunal has been compromised. The correct conclusion to draw is that the government, its agencies and officials have fallen short in meeting their legal obligations and must, therefore, face the legal consequences. The government's alleged inability to find men and women of integrity and trust them to do the right thing cannot be a reason to abandon a widely accepted dispute resolution method and replace it with a dysfunctional one.

Moreover, if the government does not trust arbitrators as such (though it usually nominates former Supreme Court or High

Court judges as arbitrators), why would it repose greater trust in its officials in negotiating a settlement? It matters little that the settlement is approved by a “high-level” committee (comprising inter alia of former judges) as it is and will remain a voluntary, administrative decision. A mediator (if involved) cannot advocate any particular position. He or she can only facilitate (and not recommend) any settlement. In terms of transparency and accountability, a settlement can never rest on an equal footing with an award which is issued following a judicial process and by a process known to law (failing which it is liable to be challenged, including on the grounds of bias, fraud or corruption).

Further, the government is surely overestimating its ability to settle disputes anything close to the scale and extent required. The government is rule-driven and its officials are answerable to multiple (internal and external) authorities. It is also answerable to courts for any arbitrary or discriminatory decision. The decision-makers are not immune to any later questioning by criminal investigating agencies. It is naive to imagine that the decision makers (no matter how senior in the hierarchy) will fearlessly sign off and agree to liability which can run into several hundred crores. This will be a road to nowhere.

The government's current attitude can be seen from its 2023 Vivad se Vishwas - II scheme for contractual disputes, which stipulates that even when an arbitral award is rendered, the government may, instead of honouring the award, agree to a 35 per cent discount on the sum awarded by way of a settlement. It is anybody's guess what its attitude would be when it is on a clean slate and there is no pronouncement of liability by an independent tribunal authorised by law to settle the dispute.

Finally, if there is no settlement, the aggrieved party is left to the mercy of the courts. There can be no two opinions that the courts are not equipped to handle heavy commercial disputes in any sensible way. The courts are so overworked that they are barely able to deal with the award challenge proceedings (where the scope of judicial review is minimal). The 2015 Amendment to the Arbitration Act, prescribes that award challenges shall be disposed off expeditiously “and in any event” within one year. The reality is that these challenges linger for around five years or so in the court of first instance alone. What would be the fate of an original suit with substantial stakes, voluminous documents, intricate facts and expert witness testimony (and where witnesses need to be directly questioned by the judge)?

Arbitrations may not be perfect, but they are clearly more workable than court litigation. To ask the private party to take its dispute to court is to turn a blind eye to reality and throw the litigant under the bus. Effective dispute resolution methods are a necessary adjunct to economic growth.

It is clear that the government has not thought this through, including how it can better address its concerns and what it can do to improve arbitrations.

The policy change is short-sighted and needs a swift reversal.

The writer is an advocate and specialises in arbitration cases

## Tales from high office

When a civil servant like D Subbarao looks back, we get a larger view



K P KRISHNAN

THERE IS A tradition in India of civil servants writing books. As a former civil servant, I value these for their contribution to the historical record, and for helping improve the intellectual climate through post-mortem debate. Duvvuri Subbarao represents the best combination of intellectual and professional prowess, and humility that the Indian civil services display. All his books are special – his latest, *Just A Mercenary: Notes from My Life and Career*, is no exception.

Three ingredients make up this well-established genre. First is the first-person view of life and events. Here, the author has to make difficult judgements on how much she would like to share, especially when she gets privileged access to confidential and inside information on account of the office she held. Every civil servant should carry some stories to her grave, and there has to be a sense of propriety with the stories told.

The second ingredient is a window into the deeper strategy at play, which generally cannot be fully articulated at the time. It makes room for an omniscient reader watching the events unfold.

Finally, the third ingredient is reflection. With the passage of time, the best civil servants are able to look back and reflect dispassionately. They are able to discuss the problems of India through a frame larger than themselves or the organisations they served. They show their regrets for the paths not taken, and the strategic thinking which failed to take root in the din and fury

of execution and fire-fighting.

Every book by a civil servant can be weighed against these three ingredients. Many write multiple books. Each can have differing ratios of the three ingredients, and an author's collection represents the full picture of all of them.

Autobiographies can be ego trips, a combination of truth and embellishment that makes the author look good. Subbarao has avoided falling into this trap and has been open and self-critical. I found the last chapter, his letter to his late mother, the best part of the book. This chapter, like the rest, shows us the Subbarao that we admire and love: The self-effacing, caring, shy and non-demonstrative person.

With two books published, Subbarao has amply engaged in the first two ingredients. As readers, we are now thirsty for the third ingredient, of reflection, of his journey of ideas with the benefit of hindsight.

A fascinating chapter describes his attempt as collector of his first district to restore land to the tribal communities as mandated by the land related legislation/regulations in the “agency areas”. Governments of the newly independent India attempted serious land reforms and redistribution of ceiling surplus land as an important component of development and poverty alleviation. Three or so decades later, in what may be loosely called land reforms round two, many states had passed legislation of the kind described by the author in this chapter. These laws essentially

undid registered market transactions in land with retrospective effect. We now have reasonable evidence to show that these land reforms did not lead to serious poverty alleviation or economic development.

The author recounts the transactional part of the tribal-land story in a lively manner. Soon thereafter, the author was a participant and witness to the more market-oriented reforms of the early 1990s where the attempt was not redistribution of a limited-sized cake – it was making a bigger cake. There is a natural springboard to a deeper discussion on law as an instrument of asset redistribution and economic change, the failure of land reforms and ceiling surplus legislation, etc.

We have a great discussion of the state takeover of the liquor trade, and are thirsty for a greater discussion of one of the messiest areas of policy in India – excise laws. Complete prohibition, state monopolies and combinations thereof have all failed. For India today, what would be the ideal way forward to balance freedom and responsible individual choice?

Subbarao knows the Ministry of Finance deeply. This can be a great foundation to discuss its organisational structure. For example, he wrote the cabinet note for the re-creation of the Department of Financial Services (DFS) which was undone by the reforms of the early 1990s. With the strengthening of regulation and supervision of banks in the RBI, it was felt then that a government department for banks would

create conflict with the regulator and lead to greater and needless political and bureaucratic interference. The recreation of DFS indeed led to all these. Subbarao has a unique opportunity to view these experiences from the vantage point of creating the DFS and then leading the RBI.

In his years in office, Subbarao carried cudgels for the RBI, championing its sprawling role as “a full service central bank”. Montek Ahluwalia's memorable turn of phrase, RBI is the “serpent guarding a hundred eggs”, comes to mind. Loyalists have to often defend the indefensible. Subbarao has been the upright IAS official. But as RBI governor, he wrote in opposition of the “examination of concerns around the rule of law” in the terms of reference of the U K Sinha Working Group on Capital Controls. He inherited an RBI that performs regulatory roles while violating constitutional principles in myriad ways. To protect the RBI's conflicts of interest with monetary policy and debt management functions, his institutional role involved portraying the Ministry of Finance in a one-sided way, as intruding upon the monetary-policy independence of the RBI.

There is a role memoirs play within a paradigm where structural problems are treated as a given. But we know that Subbarao is a deep-thinking economist and not just a mercenary. We are thirsty for a third book – of reflection.

The writer is honorary professor, Centre for Policy Research. Views are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### FAILING AT PEACE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Remember Manipur’ (IE, June 13). In his interview with *The Indian Express*, Manipur CM N Biren Singh insinuates that he is getting little support from the Centre. The interview highlights his failure to rein in thugs in the state for more than one year. The defeat of the BJP made him realise his duty to restore peace. Even now, he tries to escape responsibility by blaming “outsiders” for the trouble. This shows that he belongs to the tribe of the politicians who raise the bogey of a “foreign hand” to hide their incompetence. Manipur is a classic case study of the BJP's double-engine sarkar. **SH Quadri, Bikaner**

### TROUBLE IN EUROPE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Far right moves in’ (IE, June 13). EU President Ursula Von Der Leyen cobbled together a coalition for another term in office, but the issues that led to the support for ultra-right parties require study. These include a backlash against immigration, economic slowdowns, and a pushback to environmental reforms. The EU has been India's third largest trading partner, and any protectionist shift in posture in Europe now could derail the sensitive India-EU Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement negotiations. **SS Paul, Nadia**

### FOR THE CHILD'S PRIDE

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘My friend Jiten’ (IE, June 13). The article gives an insight on the consequences of a homophobic society and the impact that has on a child. Though NPOs like the Centre for Social Research in India have taken initiatives such as setting up helpline numbers for the victims of bullying, children may not have any knowledge of or access to such helplines. Peer-support groups at school are essential for a sense of belonging for each child. Further, absenteeism and drop-out rate can be used as a factor to evaluate the need to put in place anti-bullying programmes. **Aerika Singh, Chandigarh**

### SAVING FACE

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘The importance of Bhagwat’ (IE, June 13). RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat ought to have counselled the BJP about hate speeches long ago. His sporadic muted criticism lends itself to acquiescence, if not overt support. Even while sermonising on the traits of a true *sevak*, Bhagwat remained ambivalent by not naming any leader. His advisory before election would have been more impactful for national unity, but it would have done more damage to BJP's prospects. Bhagwat is merely doing post election damage control and restoring the RSS's image. **LR Murmu, New Delhi**

# Opinion

FRIDAY, JUNE 14, 2024



SYNERGISING GLOBAL OUTCOMES

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

During the discussions at the outreach session, the focus would be on artificial intelligence, energy, Africa, and the Mediterranean. It will be an opportunity to bring greater synergy between the outcomes of the G20 Summit held under India's Presidency and the forthcoming G7 Summit

## The heat is on

There is a need for city-specific management plans as there can be no one-size-fits-all solution

**INDIA IS WITNESSING** the longest heatwave that is showing no signs of abating in several parts of the country even as an early monsoon has weakened and threatens to be delayed in reaching the central and northern states. Studies on the high temperatures — several cities have recorded over 50 degrees Celsius this summer — and their repercussions are worrying. A recent World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) report predicts even higher mercury levels globally in the five years till 2028. The mean temperatures are 90% likely to be warmer for this five-year period than the previous one, because of which Indian agriculture could be further hit. In 2023, which was the hottest year globally in terms of data available since 1850, the WMO reported record levels of greenhouse gas emissions, ice cover loss, and climate challenges. In India, heatwaves have led to decline in crop yields in the pre-monsoon season. The sobering predictions imply that the central and state governments will have to help farmers combat climate threats, including interventions in tweaking farming methods.

Mrutyunjay Mohapatra, the chief of the India Meteorological Department (IMD), recently said that heatwaves will be more frequent, durable and intense, if precautionary or preventive measures are not taken. A business-as-usual approach at this juncture would come at a cost of human lives as well as productivity. According to one study that looked at data since 1990, more than 153,000 deaths annually around the world are linked to heatwaves, with India accounting for the highest share with over one-fifth. A study published in *One Earth* found that if the tropics heat up by another 1°C, it would lead to a loss of half the working hours for nearly 800 million people. In such a scenario, India has to mull over novel approaches to work and include flexible hours for outdoor workers who face the brunt.

It is also true that urban areas everywhere are affected much worse by heatwaves than rural. Last month, a study by the Centre for Science and Environment on six megacities in India pointed out that they were not cooling at night at the rate they did earlier. Its analysis showed that a lethal combination of air and land surface temperatures, and relative humidity adversely impacts heat stress in cities. It observed trends like increase in relative humidity in all climate zones, and significant increase in the built-up areas in all cities, which also has a direct co-relation with rise in urban heat stress. In Indian cities, this summer has worsened the heat island effect — the higher temperatures experienced by urbanised areas, as physical infrastructure traps the sun's heat and releases it more than natural landscapes do.

The way ahead is adapting to the challenge and mitigating it. As of December 2023, heat action plans have been prepared in 23 states, but with varying quality and degree of implementation. There is a need for city-specific management plans as there can be no one-size-fits-all solution. One initiative that can be scaled up across cities is cool roofing solutions, which Ahmedabad and Telangana have already introduced. As cities worldwide tackle extreme heat, some have adopted ingenious cooling solutions such as installing more awnings, increasing green canopy, painting streets with reflective coating, creating "cool island" spaces, green corridors, and green rooftops. Besides considering such immediate measures, it is time to rethink how we build cities and live in them.

## POLICY REWORKING

GOVT'S NEW POLICY ON ARBITRATION IS SHORT-SIGHTED, NEEDS SWIFT REVERSAL

# An arbitrary decision

**ON JUNE 3, THE** finance ministry announced a stunning policy decision. After trying to promote India as a hub for arbitration for decades, the government of India now suddenly feels that arbitration does not work for them and that the arbitration clause should be dropped from the contracts of all future government/government-controlled entities (except in relation to minor disputes of a value of ₹10 crore or less).

The new policy is set out in the form of an office memorandum and provides instead that the government departments/entities/agencies should, "...amicably settle as many disputes as possible...in overall long-term public interest, keeping legal and practical realities in view, without shirking or avoiding responsibility or denying genuine claims of the other party".

To facilitate amicable settlement, the government agencies will constitute "high-level" committees comprising former judges/retired senior officials to vet or approve such settlements. If settlement efforts do not work out, the dispute would be left to the courts for adjudication.

The core reason given in the office memorandum for this dramatic shift in policy is the government's perception that arbitrators often lack integrity and collude with private parties, and the resultant award becomes difficult to dislodge (given the limited grounds available in law to challenge an arbitral award on merit).

The government's change of stance in abandoning arbitration and pitching all its hope in its ability to settle disputes "without shirking or avoiding responsibility or denying genuine claims" is fundamentally flawed and rests on misplaced wishful thinking. It will also prove to be a costly mistake

## SUMEET KACHWAHA

The writer is an advocate and specialises in arbitration cases



and a major impediment in bridging the infrastructural gap, rendering projects bankable, and achieving the \$5-trillion economy aspiration.

One may start with the government's perceived lack of trust on arbitrators. First, arbitrators are meant to be independent and impartial and decide disputes on merit. They are not there to toe the government line or do its bidding. If the government is looking for "yes men", it is looking for biased arbitrators and destroying the sanctity of the arbitral process. The government should be insightful enough to recognise that adverse orders do not necessarily mean that the tribunal has been compromised. More often than not, the correct conclusion to draw is that the government, its agencies, and officials have fallen short in meeting their legal obligations and must, therefore, face the legal consequences (as in any law-abiding jurisdiction). The government's alleged inability to find men and women of integrity and trust them to do the right thing cannot be a reason to abandon a widely accepted dispute resolution method and replace it with a dysfunctional one.

Moreover, if the government does not trust arbitrators as such (though it usually nominates former Supreme Court or high court judges as arbitra-

tors), why would it repose greater trust in its officials in negotiating a settlement? It matters little that the settlement is approved by a "high-level" committee (comprising inter alia of former judges) as it is and will remain a voluntary, administrative decision. A mediator (if involved) cannot advocate any particular position. He or she can only facilitate (and not recommend) any settlement. In terms of transparency and accountability, a settlement can never rest on an equal footing with an award which is issued following a judicial process and by a process known to law (failing which it is liable to be challenged, including on the grounds of bias, fraud or corruption).

Further, the government is surely overestimating its ability to settle disputes anything close to the scale and extent required. The government is rule-driven and its officials are answerable to multiple (internal and external) authorities. It is also answerable to courts for any arbitrary or discriminatory decision. The decision-makers are not immune to any later questioning by criminal investigating agencies. It is naive to imagine that the decision-makers (no matter how senior in the hierarchy) will fearlessly sign off and agree to liability which can run into several hundred crores of rupees. This will be a road to nowhere.

**To ask the private party to take its dispute to court is to turn a blind eye to reality and throw the litigant under the bus**

The government's current attitude can be seen from its 2023 Vivad se Vishwas II scheme for contractual disputes, which stipulates that even when an arbitral award is rendered, the government may, instead of honouring the award, agree to a 35% discount on the sum awarded by way of a settlement. It is anybody's guess what its attitude would be when it is on a clean slate and there is no pronouncement of liability by an independent tribunal authorised by law to settle the dispute.

Finally, if there is no settlement, the aggrieved party is left to the mercy of the courts. There can be no two opinions that the courts are not equipped to handle heavy commercial disputes in any sensible way. The courts are so over-worked that they are barely able to deal with the award challenge proceedings (where the scope of judicial review is minimal). The 2015 amendment to the Arbitration Act prescribes that award challenges shall be disposed of expeditiously "and in any event" within one year. The reality is that these challenges linger on for five years or so in the court of the first instance alone. What would be the fate of an original suit with substantial stakes, voluminous documents, intricate facts, and expert witness testimony (and where witnesses need to be directly questioned by the judge)?

Arbitrations may not be perfect, but they are clearly more workable than court litigation. To ask the private party to take its dispute to court is to turn a blind eye to reality and throw the litigant under the bus. Effective dispute resolution methods are a necessary adjunct to economic growth including rendering projects bankable and attract investment.

It is clear that the government has not thought this through, including how it can better address its concerns and what it can do to improve arbitrations.

The policy change is short-sighted and needs a swift reversal.

# Securing privacy of data shared by govt



## RAMEESH KAILASAM GT VENKATESWARA RAO

Respectively, CEO, Indiatech.org and MD, Posidex Technologies Private Limited

The answer lies in implementing a concept called zero knowledge proof data vault, which can ensure analysis of sensitive data sets without direct exposure

## I'm afraid we still need to listen to Elon

**AFTER MONTHS OF** will-they-or-won't-they, the hotly anticipated cage match between Elon Musk and Sam Altman has been cancelled...wait no, hang on, that's not right. What's this one about? Oh. A boring, old-fashioned lawsuit about the future of humanity. Whatever — it's over.

Musk, it seems, has had a change of heart — he's dropped his case that accused Altman's OpenAI of renegeing on its promise to be an "open" AI platform in exchange for some of Musk's money. One explanation might be that it was a spurious waste of everyone's time. I'll leave the detailed forensic legal analysis to others.

Instead, this seems like a good opportunity to discuss a growing sentiment in journalism about the presence of Musk and his every waking thought in the news agenda. On Monday, Musk effortlessly hijacked at least some of Apple Inc.'s press attention for its new AI announcements by having a bit of a meltdown on X, during which he said he would ban Apple devices from his companies. He surely won't do it, you'd think: His understanding of what Apple is doing with OpenAI was wrong on its face and, besides, it's an extremely impractical suggestion. Still, the media duly took down what he had to say. Hundreds of headlines were written.

Two notable corners of the tech press in the past day or so suggested the media should show more restraint. "Hey Journalists: Not Every Elon Musk Brain Fart Warrants An Entire News Cycle," read the headline atop a piece by *Tech Dirt's* Mike Masnick on Tuesday. Masnick, a well-regarded journalist on tech policy, argued that news organisations scrambling over one another to cover his latest "hissy fit" were engaging in "engagement infotainment", not journalism.

Meanwhile, Jason Koebler, co-founder of the thriving new tech news outlet *404 Media*, said these reports were written "primarily for the purpose of winning a Google lottery" for those searching for the story, or for anything on Musk himself. "Elon Tweeted a Thing," has become a tried-and-tested template, Koebler argued, one which mainly consists of embedding Musk's tweet and publishing as soon as possible.

It's hard to disagree with these points. The Musk bump looks a lot like the Trump bump — a flood of traffic from people who can't look away from the subject matter, whether out of admiration or disgust.

The problem, however, is this: Just about everything Musk says and does is newsworthy. He is, it needs no reminding, the third-richest person in the world. He has unparalleled influence over media, autos, telecommunications and space exploration (among other things). The fact that he acts like a petulant child at times doesn't make this any less true. If anything, it demands more attention.

Sometimes his inane tweets amount to nothing, sure, but sometimes a good joke ends up costing him \$20 million and his Tesla chairmanship. There's no question media coverage amplifies his hatred, but it also helps pave the way for those attacked to have their day in court (albeit with little success). And while Musk has for sure used media coverage to boost Tesla's stock price over the years, the same attention has drawn important scrutiny to his dangerous bogus claims around self-driving technology and other ethical lapses. Thursday's shareholder vote on Musk's pay will be a lot closer thanks to the media's probing of Musk's behaviour.

Do these examples absolve the follow-the-pack media? Not entirely. And one pushback would be that the investigative efforts I outlined above are a different beast to the quick-take, cookie-cutter traffic-juicing from outlets with less inclination (or resources) to do harder work. But I'm not sure you can have one without the other. The suggestion that the media can be held back from covering Musk's outbursts until they become more "real" or substantial is wishful thinking in the extreme.

So as much as the constant stream of every Musk utterance might be an irritant, I'm afraid all this must continue. Is Musk's threat to ban Apple devices from his companies daft, impractical, petulant and pointless? Absolutely — but since when has that ever stopped him from following through? I doubt even Musk knows when he's serious. Regardless, we're stuck with him.

**IN AN ERA** where data is a critical asset, government departments and regulators collect and manage vast amounts of personally identifiable information (PII) from citizens. Agencies such as the income tax department, ministry of corporate affairs, Securities and Exchange Board of India, Financial Intelligence Unit, and National Intelligence Grid, to name a few, gather such data to fulfil their statutory responsibilities. Despite the significant potential for cross-departmental insights, the current system of sharing information on a case-by-case basis limits the effectiveness of inter-agency collaboration.

Each government department currently operates in silos, collecting and safeguarding PII data based on its specific operational needs and legal mandates. This includes data such as names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, gender, and identification markers like PAN, CIN, and demat account numbers. The existing framework of data sharing is limited, with departments and regulators only exchanging information when absolutely necessary, often requiring formal requests and justifications. This approach is not only time-consuming but also inefficient, preventing real-time analysis and timely interventions.

To combat issues such as tax evasion and stock market manipulation, as well as to ensure the prevention of crimes more effectively, there is a pressing need for seamless data sharing among government bodies. These

challenges are complex and multifaceted, requiring concerted and coordinated efforts. However, the sensitivity of PII data and the legal obligations to protect it create significant barriers to open data sharing. This necessitates a secure, privacy-preserving framework that allows departments to share insights without compromising data integrity or individual privacy. The solution lies in the implementation of a concept called zero knowledge proof (ZKP) data vault for managing PII data.

The ZKP data vault leverages blockchain technology concepts to create a secure environment where sensitive data sets can be analysed without direct exposure. The ZKP mechanism allows one party to prove possession of certain information without revealing the information itself. This revolutionary approach ensures that data privacy is maintained while allowing comprehensive data analysis and insights. The entity requesting data insights receives the necessary analytics — such as a yes/no answer or a specific value without accessing the plaintext data. This means that a department can obtain the information it needs to make informed decisions without directly handling sensitive data. The entity responding to the request remains

unaware of the contents of the request or the response details, ensuring data privacy and security. This approach ensures that even the department holding the data does not gain additional insights into what other departments are investigating. Audit logs track all requests and responses to maintain transparency and accountability. These logs are crucial for ensuring that all data requests are legitimate and there is a clear record of who accessed what information and why.

With a ZKP data vault, data remains isolated within each organisation's infrastructure which prevents leakage and ensures that each department retains control over its data. Data also resides in the respective organisation's local data centres, which help them comply with national and international data protection laws. PII data undergoes one-way irreversible anonymisation, which is crucial for ensuring that data cannot be reverse-engineered to reveal personal information. Data is processed using probabilistic search with fuzzy logic in a federated manner that enables departments to perform complex queries and analyses without compromising data privacy. The ZKP data vault also does not allow access to plain PII data, which ensures that sensitive informa-

tion remains protected at all times. Accountability, transparency, and trust in this data-sharing framework are also maintained through comprehensive logs of requests and responses.

For the ZKP data vault to succeed, it requires a robust, proven anonymisation platform that can handle the challenges of data volume, velocity, and variety with high accuracy and minimal false positives. While the concept of ZKP data vaults for PII data is relatively new, there are several examples of their successful application in non-PII contexts.

The introduction of ZKP data vaults would represent a pioneering approach in India for enhancing inter-departmental collaboration while maintaining stringent data privacy and security standards. By enabling secure, real-time access to anonymised data, government departments can work together more effectively to address critical issues. This innovative approach not only ensures compliance with data protection laws but also fosters public trust in government data practices.

The journey towards implementing ZKP data vaults will require sustained effort, investment, and collaboration among various stakeholders. However, the potential benefits in terms of improved governance, enhanced security, and better public services make it a worthwhile endeavour. By embracing this cutting-edge technology, India can lead the way in secure and effective data sharing, setting a global standard for other nations to follow.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### New commands in Andhra and Odisha

With Telugu Desam Party leader N Chandrababu Naidu having taken oath as Andhra Pradesh's chief minister for a record fourth time, the expectation is that this will bring to an end the vacillations over several policy decisions that have plagued the state and its economy. Naidu is viewed as a pro-corporate urbaniser, focusing on building cities and largely neglecting

agriculture sector, which, much like the rest of the country, requires a systemic approach to increasing farmers' incomes, generating sustainable livelihoods, and increasing output efficiency by implementing climate-smart farming practices. Odisha also stepped into a new political era on Wednesday with four-time tribal legislator Mohan Charan Majhi being sworn in as the state's first Bharatiya Janata Party CM along with 15 ministers at an event made extra

special by the presence of Naveen Patnaik, whose uninterrupted 24-year stint at the helm of successive Biju Janata Dal governments the saffron party ended. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### An optimistic outlook

Recently, the World Bank reported that India remains the world's fastest-growing major economy, with a robust GDP growth projection of 6.6% for FY25. India is expected to maintain

an average annual growth rate of 6.7% over the next three fiscal years. This sustained growth momentum is driven by strong public investment, increased private consumption, and a recovery in private capex. The World Bank's outlook underscores India's economic resilience and potential for continued growth on the global stage. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



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

— Rammath Goenka

## NAIDU NEEDS TO EXPLAIN REVENUE PLAN, REIN IN TDP CADRE

THE overwhelming mandate for the NDA has changed the political landscape in Andhra Pradesh in a way that none may have expected. Winning 164 out of the 175 seats in the assembly is unprecedented and, for this reason, the TDP-Jana Sena-BJP dispensation has a far greater responsibility on its shoulders. TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu, who assumed the chief minister's mantle for the fourth time, must be conscious of the sky-high expectations that the people have from his government. As promised, on his first day in office, he signed files pertaining to the recruitment of 16,347 teachers, scrapping of the controversial Land Titling Act, raising social security pensions to ₹4,000 a month and conducting a 'skill census' to help the unemployed youth.

The real challenges lie ahead. Andhra has close to ₹5 lakh crore debt, excluding loans raised through state corporations. Though the economy is recovering well after the pandemic, the previous government had difficulty in implementing its welfare schemes. The new government will face the same problem, more so as the TDP has promised 'Super Six' guarantees—which are sure to cost the exchequer much more than the ₹2.7 lakh crore the YSRC government spent on welfare. During the campaign, the TDP didn't spell out how it would mobilise the funds except reiterating that Naidu knows how to create wealth. Now that the party is in power, it needs to get into the nitty-gritties. The TDP has also vowed to resume the development of Amaravati, the capital. The new city will surely cost much more than the ₹1 lakh crore originally earmarked. As a key partner in the NDA government at the Centre, Naidu might be able to secure grants more easily than the earlier government. But that might not be enough. Though Amaravati will be developed in phases, the scope for borrowing is limited due to the mountain of debt already incurred. Naidu would require all his administrative and marketing expertise to generate revenue without burdening the public.

This apart, the post-poll violence in the state is disconcerting. It is good that Naidu has ruled out vindictive politics, but his message needs to percolate down to the TDP grassroots. If corruption is unearthed in any department, the government is duty-bound to tackle it as per the law. But a witch-hunt of political opponents could backfire, as we saw in the elections.

## ODISHA FACES TIGHTROPE ON OLD WELFARE SCHEMES

THE first BJP government in Odisha has started off with a bang. All the four gates of the Shree Jagannath Temple, shut to devotees for about four years, were thrown open early Thursday, within hours of the Mohan Charan Majhi government taking oath. It was a top poll promise and figured in the government's first cabinet meeting, which also ratified proposals for raising the minimum support price for paddy and implementing Subhadra Yojana, two key agendas of the saffron party. The 53-year-old chief minister, after he was elected leader of the party in legislature, went out of the way to meet common people and seek feedback on their expectations from the new government. The BJP wants to show its government will be nothing like the previous, 24-year-old BJD government. First, it surprised all by picking Majhi, a four-time MLA from Keonjhar district, to head the government. An RSS *swayamsevak*, Majhi's elevation is symbolic in its representation of the aspirations of marginalised communities. Of his two deputies, one is a royal, and the other a debutant MLA whose name will be on the honour rolls for being the state's first woman deputy CM. The government bears the signature of the Narendra Modi-led BJP, which is broad-based, inclusive and gender-responsive. So far, all the right boxes have been ticked.

For the future, the government has its task cut out. It has come to power riding huge expectations of change from the youth, which is why employment will be a major challenge. Odisha, according to a recent ILO report, was among the lowest-ranking states in employment condition, which saw little change between 2005 and 2022. The BJP's promise of creating 3.5 lakh new jobs in five years and filling up 1.5 lakh government vacancies would require considerable work. So would the promise of building an additional 75,000 km of rural roads and state highways and adding 36,000 beds in primary and community health centres. As the initial euphoria settles, the BJP will have to deal with a huge bouquet of welfare schemes the BJD government has left as its legacy and it can barely afford to irk the large groups of beneficiaries. While it will always be drawn into comparisons with the older dispensation, the Majhi government will have to walk a tightrope all on its own.

### QUICK TAKE

#### HELP FOR EMIGRANT WORKERS

THE tragic loss of 49 lives—including of at least 41 Indians—in a fire in Kuwait should remind us of a solemn responsibility. They were migrant workers who are often packed into tenements with little care for health and safety concerns. At the end of 2022, there were 87.5 lakh Indians working in six Gulf countries, including 9.2 lakh in Kuwait. As a society, we are thankful of the billions of dollars in remittances they send back. But we remember them mostly in such tragic circumstances. The government must use its good offices to ensure a transparent probe and ensure the workers are housed habitably in the future.

ONE of the more interesting possibilities thrown up by the recent election results is the prospect for a change in the functioning of parliament. In the days when PM Narendra Modi's BJP enjoyed an absolute majority, the institution had been reduced to little more than a notice board for the government's announcements and a rubber-stamp for its decisions. The expectation that it will now instead be run according to parliamentary rules, conventions and practices established worldwide and honoured in the past in our own nation too, suddenly looks more likely in a Lok Sabha in which nearly 45 percent of members are from the opposition.

Whereas, in the days of the UPA government, 86 percent of all Bills were first referred to a parliamentary standing committee, the BJP/NDA government just sent 14 percent of Bills to committees for scrutiny. This has deprived MPs of all parties the opportunity to examine proposed Bills in detail and offer suggestions the government should take into account before the Bill is brought to the House for a vote. As it is, Bills arrive on the floor untested by such a parliamentary process and, since the BJP has so far enjoyed a brute majority, are passed without a single opposition comment or criticism being taken into account. This must change, and the new reality might help bring it about.

The composition and chairmanship of parliamentary committees must also be modified to reflect the strength of the opposition and the convention of inviting senior opposition MPs to chair committees on substantial issues restored. The BJP behaved disgracefully in ending the long-established practice, since the very inception of the committee system in parliament, of having the External Affairs Committee always chaired by an opposition MP to show that the nation was of one mind on foreign policy. Currently, all major parliamentary committees dealing with sensitive issues are chaired by MPs of the ruling party or its allies—and this must change.

The rules of business in parliament, in theory, permit the opposition to raise issues of importance through an assortment of techniques under various provisions. But, especially during the second term of the BJP government, most of the burning issues raised by the opposition in the Business Advisory Committee of the Lok Sabha were not brought to the floor for discussion. Instead of debating such vital but contentious issues raised by the opposition as unemployment, inflation, the farm crisis or the Agniveer scheme, let alone the border situation with China during the mon-

With a higher proportion of opposition MPs in the new Lok Sabha, one hopes the House would no longer be treated as a mere notice board for the government

## FOR HEALTHIER DEBATES IN NEW HOUSE OF PEOPLE

SHASHI THAROOR



Fourth-term Lok Sabha MP from Thiruvananthapuram and Sahitya-Akademi winning author of 24 books, most recently *Ambekar: A Life*



SOURAV ROY

soon and winter sessions, the lower house was assigned an innocuous and inconsequential discussion on sports, which occupied the entire time available for such discussions (unrelated to the passage of Bills). Again, a weightier opposition should be able to bring up major issues for discussion without being steamrolled in this manner.

The strongest method available to an opposition MP to force a discussion or debate is the adjournment motion. This well-established parliamentary technique permits a member to move a motion to adjourn the proceedings of the House in order to discuss a matter of urgent public importance. So far in the BJP's ten-year tenure, every single adjournment motion submitted to the Speaker has been rejected. This is almost unprecedented in any parliamentary

democracy elsewhere. One would hope that a more receptive Speaker could change this habit of rejecting every single adjournment motion moved by an opposition MP, and admit at least one per session to permit the kind of healthy debate that is the essence of our democratic system.

Another unparliamentary practice that has been resorted to by the Speaker during the second BJP term is to club all proposed amendments to Bills into one lot in order to reject them collectively by voice vote without discussion. This is a travesty, since the outcome of the vote is anyway a foregone conclusion and introducing each amendment individually is the only opportunity for an opposition MP to place his or her concerns about a Bill on the record.

A similar parliamentary technique giv-

en short shrift in recent years is the right of MPs to record their dissent on an issue—even a Bill that has just been passed by the government with an overwhelming majority—through calling for a "division". Though traditional practice just requires an MP to call out the word "division" to oblige the Speaker to record the votes of all MPs present, the current Speaker has in fact systematically refused even to notice requests for division. These parliamentary techniques are essential for the opposition to feel they are valued members of an institution rather than irrelevances who can always be disregarded and outvoted.

Equally important is the attitude of the government and the spirit in which it conducts parliamentary affairs. It used to be said in the UPA days that the parliamentary affairs minister spent more time on opposition benches than in his own seat, consulting with the other side on every initiative. During the BJP's recent tenure, the ministers concerned not only stayed in their seats but issued diktats to the opposition with the air of schoolmasters chastising errant delinquents. A different approach will now be required. No BJP scheme requiring a constitutional amendment, for instance—as would be the case with the Uniform Civil Code or the 'one nation, one election' scheme—should be introduced without detailed prior consultation with the opposition. Similarly, proposals affecting states' rights, the federal system, the allocation of funds and other national resources to states, or matters requiring implementation by state governments will have to be introduced only after prior consultation—especially given the new government's reliance on regional parties within its own coalition.

One might well ask whether my optimism that these changes will occur might not fall afoul of the BJP's preference for "bulldozer justice" and the PM's own well-established instinct to dispense with the niceties of parliamentary consultation. The reason I am confident the government will have to mend its ways lies in the capacity of a robust opposition to thwart the work of parliament if denied a fair hearing. During UPA-2, the BJP, with just 116 MPs, frequently brought the Lok Sabha to a standstill by disrupting proceedings. The INDIA bloc has twice that number. Better to work with them across the aisle than wreck the system by failing to acknowledge their strength. One can only hope the newly-chastened NDA government understands that in democracy, conciliation is always preferable to confrontation.

(Views are personal) (office@tharoor.in)

## A DEMOCRACY OF TRIVIALITIES

CURRENT events are at once mind-bending and utterly commonplace. In the recent Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak-Anshul Kumar controversy, we witness a competitive shaming and a contest grounded in the discourse of marginality. Neoliberal education is crisscrossed with the contradictions of promoting social mobility to the marginal, alongside an acculturation full of discipline and punishment, putatively granting access to the subtleties or trivialities of socio-cultural correctness.

These contradictions become even more fraught when the interlocutors straddle different cultural iterations of diversity. While Spivak is one of the most iconic Brahmin-born American academics committed to the figure of the 'subaltern', Kumar is a Bahujan-Dalit studying at one of the most prestigious public universities in India.

The neoliberal discourse of accommodation of minorities in India is relatively recent, coinciding with a cunning overlap between the entry of Bahujan-Dalits into the public university (the Mandal Commission education quota implemented in 2006) as well as of private players in the higher education market. Despite the significant contribution of reservations in creating a measure of inclusivity, social diversity was never a part of a self-conscious rhetoric or branding.

The Spivak-Anshul Kumar exchange evinces this more commodified language of diversity. The Bahujan-Dalit's refusal to learn "trivialities" could be read as dramatising the practical difficulties faced by the neoliberal model of education, which simultaneously promises standardised outcomes as well as unbridled self-expression. Kumar's style of interrogation shows that the two don't go together. Spivak finds him rude and demands he pronounce sociologist William Du Bois' name correctly. While her insistence on correct pronunciation may be justified, correcting him again and again in a manner that forestalls the question he is clearly intent on asking suggests the use of academic protocols for an *ad hominem* attack on his credibility.

Nor was it a mere correction. Spivak was clearly weaponising their status-asymmetry to shame him. While marginality and exclusion are the most fashionable topics of research today, these bitter encounters reveal that the living form of democracy goes unaddressed; Bahujan-Dalit styles of intellectual exchange remain at odds with a traditional academic code of conduct.

The question is really about the nature of intellectual labour and the possibility

of transcending its alienating character. Is the matter of correct pronunciation mere nitpicking, or should we read Kumar's 'trivialities' comment as a sign of academic laziness? Bahujan-Dalit pedagogy has consistently rejected the use of Brahminical ideas of merit and punitive methods of learning, recognising a long history of abjection to have served their oppression.



The recent exchange between Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an iconic US-based academic, and Anshul Kumar, a Dalit student from a public university in India, laid bare deep faultlines in neoliberal academia and the discourse on marginality

As representatives of diversity, Bahujan-Dalit students and academics must perform surplus labour in the form of demonstrating difference, or even proving their abjection. This sharing of lived experiences is rooted in feminist standpoint theory's privileging of an alternative pedagogy. The proliferation of 'marginal' identities coupled with the rise of postcolonial theory has tended to generalise cultural studies' emphasis on lived experiences, paradoxically turning the performative labour of cultural difference into a universal imperative.

My point here is that the lament over students' inability to listen and learn has to be seen from the perspective of a general milieu of performance in which the silent and unquantified intellectual work becomes less relevant. At the same time, the neoliberal reversal makes the standpoint

epistemology—intended for creating solidarity between the oppressed—into a competition over who will get the award for the most authentic performance.

The videos in which students hit back are not a pretty sight. They showcase both suffering through re-living the moment of trauma and the enjoyment of it afforded by the triumph of shaming the shamer. The currency of shaming is nothing but a weaponised form of cultural difference. If modernity and the classic liberal university were about developing a capacity for guilt—an inner conscience, an ethical framework—then the new language of diversity is about reclaiming tools of a shame culture by subjecting the privileged to an un-forgiving and permanent gaze. This is not class war, but a politics of resentment.

While the shame culture is a debased currency, shame itself has liberatory potentials. In a brilliant essay called *The Descent into Shame*, Joan Copjec clarifies that shame is not about a plurality of cultures, but a singular relation to one's cultural inheritance, allowing one to split off, however painfully, from a familiar image of oneself. The cringe effect of shame can force us to confront something alien within ourselves, "something in us more than us", thanks to a sudden awareness of the other's gaze. Progressively, the university has erased all avenues for feeling this unease in the name of safe and empathetic spaces, while failing to explore the conditions of creating real safety in an unequal world.

Yet, despite the fireworks, the final takeaway of the drama is quite banal: an illustration of how we are always talking at cross purposes. Spivak scoffed at his aggressivity, not mindful at all of the courage it takes for a subaltern student to ask a hostile question of an academic of her stature.

It is no surprise institutionalised cultural difference should end up "talking, but not listening"; what is surprising is that these performances are expected to serve the aims of empathy, ethics and greater democratisation. It brings to mind the risible dialogue from *Dabang* about the symbolic Other's love being more terrifying than their slaps: "*Thappad se dar nahi lagta hai sahab, pyar se lagta hai* (Not afraid of your slaps, sir; but afraid of your love)." (Views are personal)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Miraculous win

Ref: *The BJP's mistake of misreading Bengal* (Jun 13). It was a miracle even for those admiring Mamata Banerjee that she won 29 out of the state's 42 seats independently. The author spent out the strategies the CM followed. Added to that PM Narendra Modi's anti-Muslim, pro-Hindu approach worked negatively on the Bengali people, who have learnt to coexist.

Jayachandran C, Chennai

#### Great expectations

Ref: *Govt continuity spurs markets, but inflation, growth will be key* (Jun 13). With the Indian electoral game over, the PM indicated a big bang schedule to achieve what he calls the Viksit Bharat 2047 goals. This has understandably raised great expectations among investors mainly because they believe stability would spur indices to new highs. The election results and the quick formation of a coalition regime with a little under 300 MPs on board have also revived hopes for the nation to set its feet on the path towards growth.

R Sampath, Chennai

#### Late reaction

Ref: *Close to 50 Indians dead in Kuwait building blaze* (Jun 13). Kuwait says it will start acting on buildings that violate safety regulations. Why does that country also want to act only after tragedy has struck? Was it waiting for something like this to happen?

V Suresh, Coimbatore

#### Adequate compensation

Kerala is startled by the devastating fire in Kuwait, as the majority of Indians there are Keralites. It is a purely man-made calamity. What is needed is adequate compensation to the family of victims and fool-proof arrangements to ensure such mishaps never recur.

BV Thampi, email

#### Help homeless

The new ministry has decided to expand the PM Awas Yojana and construct 3 crore houses for the down-trodden. But what are the steps taken to help the people living on the streets and footpath sleepers? It's time the government tackled poverty by taking measures from the very bottom.

Appan Masillamani, Tirunelveli

#### Temple gates

Opening of all the four gates of the Jagannath temple would be a remarkable step by the BJP government of Odisha. Apart from other reasons, the closing of three gates and mismanagement of the government regarding the temple saddened the people and it was reflected in the election.

B Chandra Sekhar Achary, Kesinga

# Paying for Numbers Is a Crank Call, TRAI

10-digit no. should be good even in finiteness

Trai has reportedly suggested charging for telephone numbers because these identifiers are a finite resource. This may seem difficult to fathom, because the moment you add an extra digit in a telephone number, 10 times as many people can join the network. That should suffice if it were only people, though. Telecommunications is increasingly between machines, and a tenfold increase in connections may not be enough. So, how about adding six digits, an increase of a million times? But there are costs in moving from one numbering system to another, which makes telephone identifiers a finite resource over a certain period of time. And as with all finite resources, people could learn to pay for the use of phone numbers.

But people aren't causing 'finiteness' of numbers. Large parts of the world are depopulating and 10-digit numbers should see humans through if these numbers are recycled well. Which is why most people

who have become accustomed to their own non-special and not-used-previously telephone number will find it difficult to comprehend why they must now pay for it. If the machine population explosion is the culprit, the argument would go that they pay. Only, it's

not that simple to charge differently from, say, a bulk consumer of telecom services, who is driving data traffic on cellular networks. The market for telecommunications would not be able to sustain such differential pricing without continuing government intervention.

The choice is free, or pay for all. If the machines are going to be stacking up telecom subscription numbers, their owners will end up shouldering the burden of making telephone numbers finite. Machines could find it easier to recycle telephone numbers without being hung up over prior use. A numbering system can be replaced by some form of randomisation to increase its finiteness. The internet uses this approach and hasn't run up against a shortage of suitable identification. The tech has been around, and can be adapted to telephone numbering to make it easy for new subscribers.

# Third Worldisation Of the First World

Twenty-four people collapsed, six of them hospitalised, in an election rally from excessive heat, with temperatures touching 40°C. A few days earlier, nearly a dozen others had a similar experience. Familiar incidents from India's election campaign grounds? Not quite. The first incident took place in a Donald Trump rally in Las Vegas, the latter, a few days earlier at another gathering in Phoenix. For those of us with the opportunity or affordability, the First World is seen as where one can experience better outdoors, pleasanter and safer climate. But, now, we may have to get picky when it comes to seeking greener pastures.

The 'Third Worldisation' of climate in the First World may give us a dose of schadenfreude. But at the heart of this reality change—and reality check—is signs of First World countries not taking 'First World problems' seriously. Even as a heatwave gripped southwest US, Trump promised more runaway oil and gas extraction. In the recent European elections, too, voters prioritised economic and cost-of-living concerns over environmental worries,

even though rising temperatures are making living increasingly uncomfortable, especially in southern European countries.

Temperature records are being set and broken at a rapid pace. Excessive heat over longer periods, along with extreme weather conditions, are no longer an oddity in traditional 'temperate climates' but are becoming the 'new normal' across countries not known for disaster relief photos in the media. Last week's floods in Germany, and down the Danube in Austria and Hungary, have started to paint a different picture of 'foreign climates'. Unless there's a transnational mitigation effort, even the more fortunate among us will run out of places to 'hide'.

# JUST IN JEST

Calling for polls is a subtle craft, unless you have nothing left to lose

# Right Time to Call Peeps, It's Elections!

These days, PMs and presidents must be asking that age-old question, 'So, when do I call for elections?' to Alexa, Siri, ChatGPT, or even their trusted band of advisers (read: reach-out groups). Rishi Sunak recently called for elections in Britain on America's Independence Day, while Emmanuel Macron snapped his fingers (thus the term 'snap polls') to call for the first round of elections on June 30 and the final run-off on July 7. Both gentlemen have called it from a position of weakness, the Brit almost certain to lose and the French likely to. So, why call for polls now? Getting the 'right time' to call for elections is much like deciding when to serve dessert at a dinner party. Too early, and you risk spoiling the main course. Too late, and your guests might be dozed off. And, remember, when Indira Gandhi called for elections even before the Emergency officially ended on March 21, 1977, she thought she was calling it from a position of supreme advantage. Well...

During normal times, call for elections too soon and you may be accused of rank opportunism. Wait too long and the public, with their notoriously short corgi tail memory, may forget your achievements, focusing, instead, on the latest crisis. But, sometimes, as with Sunak'n'Mac, it's like, 'What the hell, let's just get over it!' Unlike here where we just call the astrologers.

Strong ex ante laws can prevent Big Tech dominance, protect privacy and ensure fair competition

# Don't Sleep with the Fishes



Ateesh Tankha & Syagnik Banerjee

In 2008, YouTube ran an animation video in which a man who signed up for a free service called 'Google Toilet' is seen sitting on a commode, while the smart

pot projects ads on the wall in front of him by detecting his food preferences from his excreta and displays his social media status based on his toxicology report. Ultimately, paramilitary forces storm the lavatory and arrest him because the government has taken exception to his deviant food habits. When he protests against this invasion of his privacy and invokes the Bill of Rights, confirming that the scene is set in the US, he is told that he has nobody to blame but himself because by signing up for a free smart commode, he joined the Google Toilet network embedded with secondary disclosure agreements.

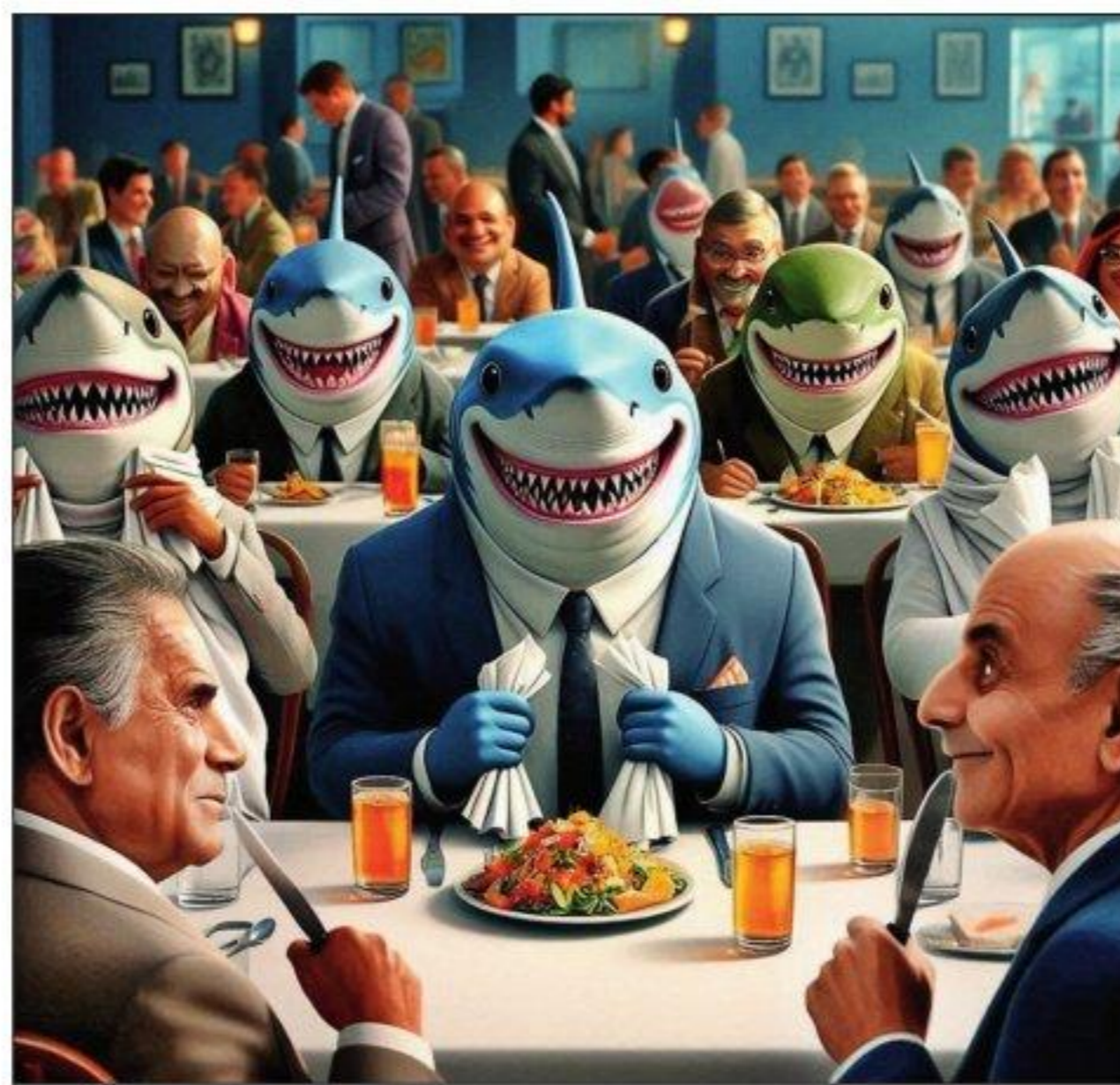
India's 37-page Draft Digital Competition Bill elucidates the moral of this prescient video:

- ▶ That unchecked access to personal data can facilitate total dominance.
- ▶ That without clear regulations focused on collection, storage and usage of sensitive data, privacy is sacrificed for commercial consideration and targeted advertising.
- ▶ That without clear penalties enshrined in ex ante—based on anticipated downsides before an event—legislation, any ex post—after the fact—actions may be moot because the market already favours the dominant incumbent.

Counter-arguments, on the other hand, presented by SSDEs (systemically significant digital enterprises)—Alphabet, Meta, Amazon, et al—opposing the Bill are not particularly credible. These include the following notions:

- ▶ That removing self-preferencing—an online platform's ability to promote its own products, or those of a related party, above that of others—creates customer dissatisfaction.

This may have warranted due con-



There's nothing called a free lunch

sideration if SSDEs were in the business of selling shaving foam. But the dominance of online platforms like Meta and Google in India is such that ex ante regulations become necessary to curb the existential threat posed by Big Tech with regard to the non-dominant and nascent digital ecosystem.

Self-preferencing and exclusive tie-ups with shell entities improve user engagement and retention, but act as an addictive content loop the user cannot escape. This creates a restrictive trade practice that is difficult to reverse over time.

- ▶ That explicit user-verification measures drive consent fatigue and adversely impacts innovation.

This argument favouring innovation over authorisation is outrageous. Current opt-in permissions don't work. Studies show that, at 250 words per min, it would take at least 30 days each year to pursue end-user licence agreements.

Thus, users provide consent without understanding future data utilisation objectives, while digital platforms con-

tinue to synchronously harvest personal data. This has forged many unfortunate, and irreversible, outcomes.

Recently, New York City filed a lawsuit against Meta, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube, claiming that their platforms were addicting and endangering children, and promoting unsafe behaviours. Litigation against Meta in 40 other US states alleges the same. The magnitude, scale and speed at which such platforms operate demand ex ante regulation, if the real interests of consumers are to be protected.

- ▶ That the Competition Act of 2002 provides sufficient oversight power to check violations.

This argument is also without merit. Section 4 of the Competition Act suggests that actions are anti-competitive only if carried out by 'a dominant entity in its relevant market'. Since the onus of proving dominance and identifying the relevant market rests with the regulator, enforcement proceedings are invariably delayed. In one instance, filed before CCI in 2018, involving abuse of dominan-



Self-preferencing and exclusive tie-ups with shell entities improve user engagement and retention, but act as an addictive content loop the user can't escape

ce 'by a licensable operating system ('OS') for smart mobile devices', the case is yet to reach the Supreme Court. In another, the case has been in limbo for 11 years. In such cases, ex post redressal is untenable.

And if these reality checks on what constitutes efficient 'customer satisfaction' and 'customer convenience' are not convincing enough, something more fundamental could make ex ante regulation necessary. As sole providers of public digital infrastructure, SSDE dominance can cause chaos through a single disruption. Meta's deleterious effect in this regard is well known: its intentional blocking of social media in Australia, and disrupting fire services, health services and vaccine rollouts during the pandemic; its disruption of newsfeeds in 2018 in Bolivia, Slovakia, Sri Lanka, Serbia, Guatemala and Cambodia; and its part in precipitating the exodus of 70,000 Rohingya people, tantamount to subverting the machinery of law and order.

As recently as April 2024, Google received authorisation to work with US intelligence and defence agencies, enabling them to use Google's air-gapped cloud platform 'to process top-secret workloads'. Given Google's status as a foreign defence contractor that manages millions of records of sensitive data, can India really afford to oversee SSDEs by initiating the process of discovery and action after the fact?

Protecting the welfare of citizens is the essence of national security. Protecting public interest, that of national sovereignty. Often at the expense of accelerated short-term growth. The Digital Competition Bill, which aims to contain matsyanavyaya—a law, or absence thereof, which allows big fish to eat little fish—is the first step in this direction.

Ultimately, GoI will need to decide if a billion 'free smart toilets' are worth any sort of compromise.

Tankha is founder-CEO, ALSOWISE Content Solutions, and Banerjee is professor of marketing, University of Michigan, US



THE SPEAKING TREE

# Actors Good Meditators

OSHO

Actors can be meditators very easily, because they are always acting somebody else's role, so they can witness that it is not their identity. They may become Jesus Christ in a film, but they know they are not Jesus Christ. So, to recognise that their performance is not their being, is easy.

To me, acting is one of the best professions for meditators because it will teach you that your identity can change every day. An actor is moving from one film to another. In one film he is one thing, in another film, he is something else, in a third film, he is somebody else. So, slowly, he can become aware—that identities come and go. Finally, he can recognise that his own personality is nothing but an act taught by his parents, and the priests, and the politicians, and the professors.

All these people create a certain personality around you that is not your real being; it is just for convenience's sake. They are creating a social being out of a spiritual being. A social being is an ordinary thing. Your spiritual being is vast and immense...

A meditator does his work even more efficiently than others; meditation breaks your connection with the world deep inside you, not on the outside. On the outside, the show goes on as always, but now it becomes just a play.

Abridged from Zen Manifesto and Bliss; Courtesy: Osho Times International; www.osho.com

# Chat Room

# No Pot of Gold at End of Rainbow

Apropos the news report, 'Over 40 Indians Among 49 Killed in Kuwait Fire' (Jun 13), I have lived in a West Asian country for more than two decades. The news of a blaze in Kuwait building killing 40 Indians is only the tip of the iceberg of the living conditions of many Indian workers in West Asia. Many Indians who go to these countries in the hope of earning a fortune not only have to live in inhuman conditions but the quality of work they are asked to perform too is different from what was promised. Many are not even paid for months, and they cannot return to India as their passports are held by their employers, even though it is unlawful. GoI must ensure our citizens get a dignified life as per the international labour laws.

GOPALASWAMY J  
Chennai

# 10-Sec Loan No 10-Min Grocery

This refers to the news report, 'SBI Launches Digital Business Loans for Small & Medium Cos' (Jun 12). PSB Loans in 59 Minutes sanctions loans in less than an hour. SBI's 10-second loan approval will lead to a race. In the

haste, the bank may be lax in underwriting and sanction loans to high-risk borrowers. It's misleading too as the sanction is just an in-principle approval, not loan disbursement. Such schemes create undue pressure on the bank staff, first, to underwrite it hurriedly, second, accountability in case of default, and, third, to initiate recovery process of these NPAs.

PALLAVI UB  
Bangaluru

# When Antihero Turns Villain

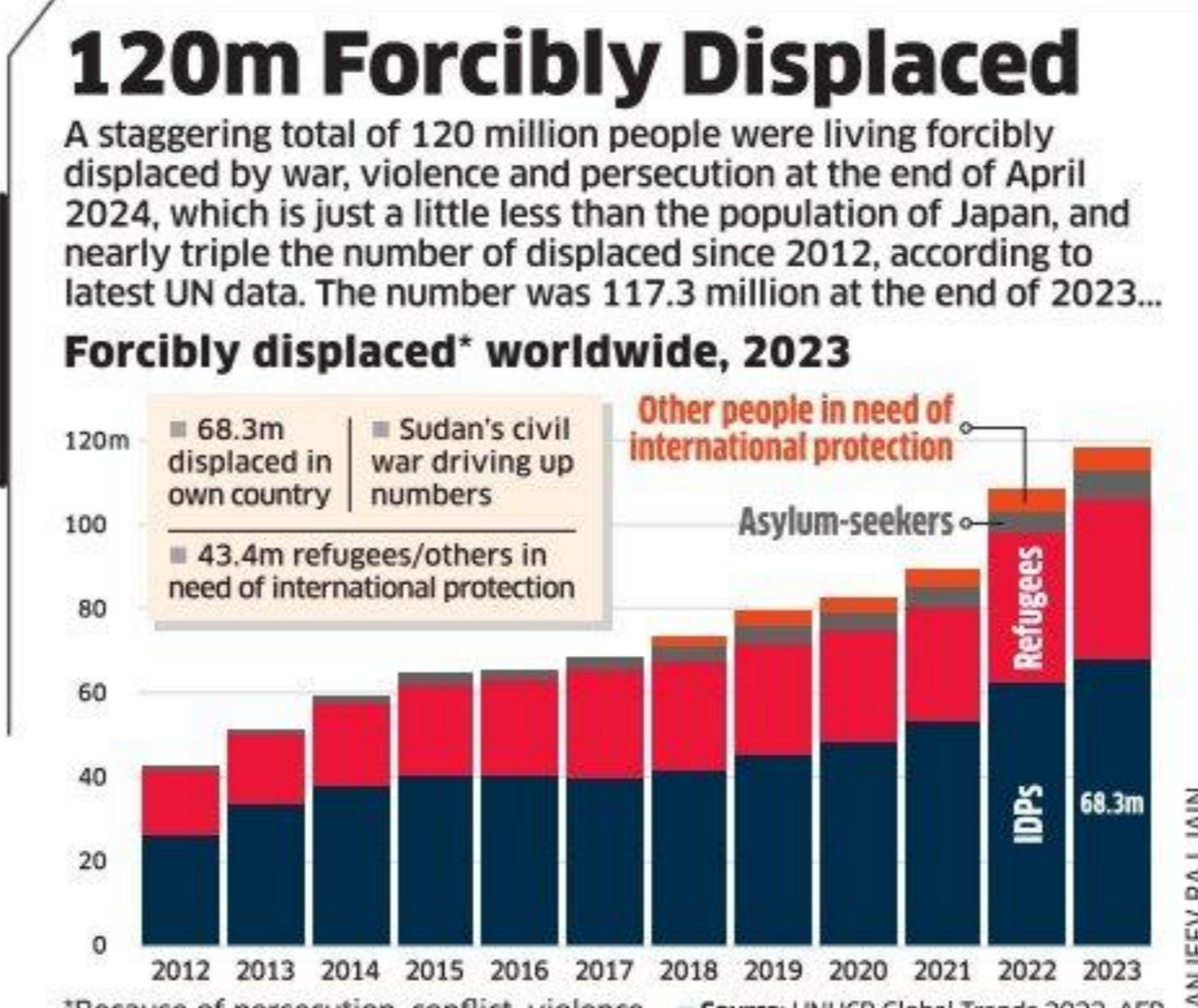
The indictment of Muhammad Yunus, microcredit pioneer and Nobel laureate, by a Bangladesh court on charges of embezzlement of \$2 million is shocking and saddening. Sure, the rule of law must prevail. However, it is instructive that 'selective (in)justice' or 'selective punishment' is at play globally, including strong democracies. In fact, we are at a sad inflection point where icons and legends have much shorter life cycles, just like brands, and heroes become villains even before we begin to understand what's happening. Ditto for macroeconomic philosophies. Has the theory of 'maximising societal wealth by focusing on the bottom of the pyramid hit its expiry date?'

ANGARA VENKATA GIRIJA KUMAR  
Chennai

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

**ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY**

There once was a test quite defective,  
Its errors were truly reflective.  
Students groaned with dismay,  
'It's a glitch!' they would say,  
Now, re-exams are the new directive.



## Bell Curves

R Prasad

Shouldn't it be Grace Anatomy?

# Bets Spread Beyond Tech



Samidha Sharma

A big trend in venture investing is emerging, something that's been simmering for a few years now in the post-Covid era. This trend surfaces each time a downturn hits this buzzy asset class, which is far more in the news than its PE peers.

Indian venture investors, focused on spotting the hot fledgling tech startup that will yield the next significant outsized return, are turning to safe havens. Think of non-tech, consumer, public markets, multi-stage vehicles, and whatever it takes to get exits and show money to their sponsors—'limited partners' in the investing world. As early-stage VCs who pride themselves in being risk-takers broaden their bets, this cycle will forever change how the venture industry functions in India.

Direct-to-consumer luggage brands seem to be catching the interest of these 'risk investors'. Handbags, beauty and apparel brands are all finding takers. But these don't give VC-type returns. The lure of backing scrappy tech startups is what makes this business what it is.

Larger fund sizes, focus on profitability, and slower growth in these companies will make venture capital funds look similar to what we used to call mid-market private equity earlier. Their portfolio will include companies in manufacturing, offline consumer, health-care services and lending business-

ses... an investor told me recently. VC focus is moving towards diversifying their bets beyond tech, such as backing successors from old business families, and a rush in the food sector.

With a corpus of \$2.8 bn to deploy, Peak XV Partners (formerly Sequoia Capital India) has stated that it wants to allocate funds into an 'evergreen' pool of capital consisting of partners' funds. This, the firm said, will invest in companies beyond the typical remit of a pure-play VC firm. It may even include public markets, possibly. One of the country's oldest VC outfits, Nexus Venture Partners MD Sameer Brij Verma left a few months ago to launch a multi-stage and multi-sector investment platform with a diversified approach.

This isn't the first time that Indian venture capitalists have taken PE-type bets to tide over tough market conditions. These tend to be in traditional sectors, as evidenced in any downturn. In 2016, when the markets turned, a similar trend played out. VCs were lining up to back non-tech companies after a tech gold rush.

But that period was short, for most of the past decade, barring some small blips, gobs of VC money has flowed into tech startups with few exits to show in India.

What's unfolding

now is a continuation of two years of cautious unravelling, and the kind of tech reset not seen before.

▶ **AI to the rescue:** So, while AI investments have been the go-to in Silicon Valley, in India, VCs have moved to the offline space and spread themselves in the PE territory due to a lack of local AI innovation.

While things may not be dire, what's going to start happening is Indian VCs will go back to smaller-sized funds in the \$300-350 million range, build more diversified portfolios, which include a big chunk of non-tech companies, and back entrepreneurs beyond the top cities.

Indian VCs had it easy in the zero-interest era. Massive funds meant indiscriminate spray and pray, especially in the Covid years. While most of the actors involved in that drama have disappeared from India, the venture firms with dedicated teams here have seen a surge in people movement. Many partners have left to start their funds, while others have very little to show on their scorecards of exits or wins.

Deal flow has not picked up for almost two years, making it hard to keep the momentum going for an industry that thrives on pace.

There is a sense of existential crisis that refuses to go away. The answer, therefore, lies in finding a unique India VC model different from what has worked in the past decade. Each time this is a possibility, a new funding blitz takes the industry back to its not-so-great ways of investing. Hopefully, this time will be different, a cliché so widely used by VCs themselves.



Best to move it offline

samidha.sharma@timesgroup.com



CONTRAPUNTO

Paradise is too perfect for humanity  
-DARIO ARGENTO

# Securing Kashmir

Terror attacks in J&K part of strategy to disrupt peace. GOI must rise to the challenge & hold assembly polls

Terrorists attacking four places in four days in the Jammu region of J&K have brought back bad memories. It's no coincidence these attacks come at a time when a new govt is taking office in New Delhi - Modi yesterday chaired a J&K security review meeting. Terrorists and their handlers in Pakistan want to send out a clear message: they can disrupt peace in J&K at any given time and that nullification of Article 370 hasn't mitigated the strategic objectives of the Pakistani deep state.

**Changing terror tactics** | It's clear that terrorists are trying out different tactics to try and outfox security forces. In 2022, targeted killings were their modus operandi. However, since last year, terrorists have reverted to conventional manoeuvres, especially south of the Pir Panjal - an area that has seen relative calm for almost two decades. This will force security forces to once again reorient their strategies.

**Threat to normalisation** | Terrorists are desperate to undermine the normalisation process and the "naya Kashmir" narrative. This is precisely why the Reasi ambush of a bus carrying pilgrims that killed nine and injured 41 is worrying. Around 2.1cr tourists visited J&K last year - a big win for local tourism. Terrorists want to disrupt these stakeholders in peace.

Plus, the successful conduct of Lok Sabha elections in J&K - the first since nullification of A370 - hasn't gone unnoticed across the border. Terrorist handlers now want to subvert J&K assembly polls, slated to be held by Sep 30. Under no circumstances should GOI and EC cave in. They must hold those polls on time.

**Pak factor** | GOI needs to be wary of Pakistan too. While Nawaz and Shehbaz Sharif have been sending conciliatory messages, Gen Asim Munir has just aced his biggest test by establishing his choice of govt in Islamabad. He is yet to fully reveal his strategy vis-à-vis J&K. Also, India has quietly made connections with Afghanistan's Taliban amidst problems in Kabul-Islamabad ties. Pakistan's ISI-military complex will see this as a big threat and might have plans to create trouble in J&K as a counter-strategy. GOI must keep its guard up, hold J&K polls, and tighten its security dragnet in the region.



# Those Ten Digits

Assigning mobile phone numbers is not costless. Telcos or users should pay for them

Trai's proposal to levy a charge on phone numbers it allocates to telecom companies should go through. Pointing out that phone numbers are an "exceedingly valuable public resource which is not infinite", the regulator is giving telcos the option to pass on the cost to consumers. Telecom has been one of India's success stories. As of March 2024, there were as many as 1.16bn mobile subscribers in India, next only to China. But, as a Trai consultation paper has highlighted, just over 19% of the total numbers (219mn) fall under the 'service suspended pending disconnection' category.

**System has its limits** | Telcos are holding on to phone numbers with low or zero utilisation, fearing a loss of user base. With SIMs cheap to procure, it is common for consumers to own more numbers than they need. Forgotten amidst this waste of resources, is the reality that there's only so much demand the telecom system can meet. India has a 10-digit series number system. This imposes a limit on the number of connections that can be allotted. For a mobile number is more than just a number. It is formatted in a certain way that syncs with the larger system. And moving to a different series is not easy and would entail problems and costs. It is not for nothing that telcos/consumers are charged for mobile connections in a host of countries around the world.

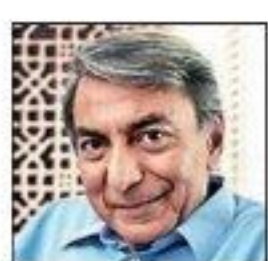
**Demand will only rise** | In an age of hyper-connectivity, the pressure on telecom's system capacity can only grow, whether it is from IOT and M2M, or cars and gadgets with chips. There are other costs this imposes on the system. Authorities have a responsibility to keep tabs on how connections are used, especially given the rise in cyber crimes. Charging for phone numbers is particularly justified for 'vanity numbers' telcos auction at high prices. The quantum of the charge Trai has proposed can always be worked out - a 'nominal' fee is what it has in mind. But putting a price on the resource would ensure both telcos and consumers value it more.



# Mahatma memories

Like a jack-in-the-box Gandhiji has had a way of popping up for us in the most unexpected places

Jug Suraiya



In 1973, Bunny and I were on a shoestring trip through Europe. In Rome we stayed at the least expensive accommodation we could find, Pensione Katy. Our room could have passed muster as a walk-in closet. The bathroom was down the corridor.

We had our meals at a nearby Tavola Calda - Hot Table - an eatery serving no-frills food at no-frills prices. On our first visit, the waiter asked, Vino? Wine in Italy being as much a part of a meal as food.

Regrettably we shook our heads; our thrifty daily allowance permitting only free tap water. Looking quizzical, the waiter in an admixture of tourist-English, Italian, and the dialect of gesture, enquired where we were from.

When we said India, his eyes lit up in a combination of delight and comprehension. Ah, India! Gandhiji! Gandhiji! Si, si! he exclaimed, obviously familiar not only with the name of the Sabarmati Sant, but also aware of his principle of temperance.

After that, each time we came in, he would greet us with cries of Gandhiji! and bring us a carafe of suitably abstemious water.

In 1991 Bunny and I were in Moscow, which was basking in the morning sun of glasnost and perestroika, with Boris Yeltsin having succeeded Mikhail Gorbachev as the country's president.

We went to see a performance of Swan Lake. During the interval Bunny went to the washroom. The venerable lady attendant asked where she was from. When she heard India, her eyes glowed with a rapturous fervour. Gandhiji! she said and then, indicating her eyes, in halting English she continued in an awed voice: When I was little girl, these eyes have seen him.

In Buenos Aires in 2001 we were in a restaurant specialising in Argentina's famous steaks. India? said our server, having asked from where we were, Gandhiji, yes?

He asked us how we'd liked our steaks, knowing the name but, unlike the Roman waiter, ignorant perhaps of the dietary dos and don'ts of the Mahatma and, by extension, those of his countryfolk.

David Attenborough? Ben Kingsley? Don't ring too many bells.

# 8%: Why Some Muslims Voted For Modi

A tiny proportion of the community accepted BJP, for different reasons. State-level factors dominated. Labharthi card worked. Class was a determinant as well

Hilal Ahmed



There is a popular argument that Muslims always prefer to support anti-BJP forces, to keep BJP out of govt. This argument has been evoked rather assertively this time to explain the success of INDIA bloc. It is claimed that Muslims decided to do strategic voting to defeat BJP candidates at the constituency level. This explanation is not at all incorrect.

CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey shows that an overwhelming majority of Muslims at the national level enthusiastically voted for non-BJP parties. It does not mean, however, that BJP did not get Muslim votes.

The survey shows that the party managed to get around 8% of Muslim vote at the national level. This figure is almost insignificant. Yet, there is a need to discover the crucial factors that led a section of Muslims to vote for Modi-led BJP in this election.

There are two very different aspects of BJP's Muslim policy, at least in an electoral sense.

**Hindutva's othering function** | First, the party does not deviate from its Hindutva-driven narrative of cultural nationalism. In this framework, Muslims are either projected as a problematic entity or they are almost invisibilised to assert nationalism in overtly Hindu terms.

This narrative of cultural nationalism is always invoked to reach out to the core, committed and loyal Hindutva voter. Derogative and anti-Muslim remarks made by a section of senior BJP members during the election campaign are a good example in this regard.

**BJP's inclusive campaigning** | Secondly, and almost paradoxically, BJP under Modi's leadership has presented the slogan *sab ka saath sab ka vikas* as a reference point to reach out to all sections of society, including Muslims.

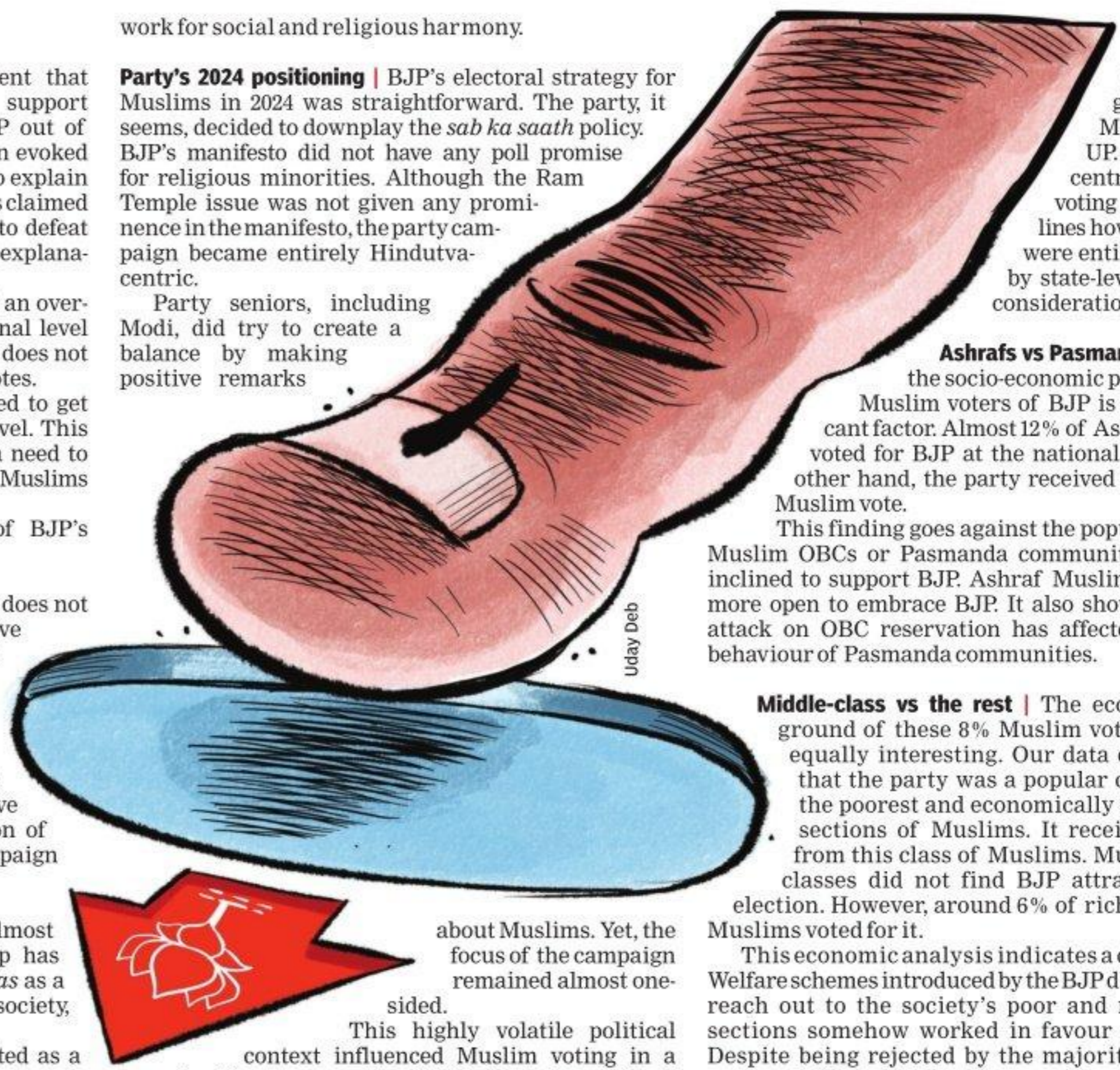
Banning of triple talaq has been presented as a political achievement. Similarly, the party has made efforts to reach out to Pasmanda Muslims, which also supports the claims of its *sab ka saath* policy.

In fact, an impression has been created that BJP has managed to influence the political choices of Muslim women and Pasmanda groups in its favour. Interestingly, this expression of inclusiveness has certainly helped BJP to satisfy a significant section of its Hindu voters, who expect the party to

work for social and religious harmony.

**Party's 2024 positioning** | BJP's electoral strategy for Muslims in 2024 was straightforward. The party, it seems, decided to downplay the *sab ka saath* policy. BJP's manifesto did not have any poll promise for religious minorities. Although the Ram Temple issue was not given any prominence in the manifesto, the party campaign became entirely Hindutva-centric.

Party seniors, including Modi, did try to create a balance by making positive remarks



Hindi belt remained very poor. It got only 2% Muslim votes in UP. This state-centric Muslim voting pattern underlines how LS elections were entirely governed by state-level issues and considerations.

**Ashrafs vs Pasmandas** | Second, the socio-economic profile of these Muslim voters of BJP is also a significant factor. Almost 12% of Ashraf Muslims voted for BJP at the national level. On the other hand, the party received only 5% OBC Muslim vote.

This finding goes against the popular view that Muslim OBCs or Pasmanda communities are more inclined to support BJP. Ashraf Muslims seem to be more open to embrace BJP. It also shows that BJP's attack on OBC reservation has affected the voting behaviour of Pasmanda communities.

**Middle-class vs the rest** | The economic background of these 8% Muslim voters of BJP is equally interesting. Our data demonstrates that the party was a popular choice among the poorest and economically marginalised sections of Muslims. It received 11% vote from this class of Muslims. Muslim middle-classes did not find BJP attractive in this election. However, around 6% of rich and well-off Muslims voted for it.

This economic analysis indicates a clear pattern. Welfare schemes introduced by the BJP dispensation to reach out to the society's poor and marginalised sections somehow worked in favour of the party. Despite being rejected by the majority of Muslim voters, BJP was able to secure the vote of poor Muslims. These Muslims, it seems, behaved like other *labharthis* of welfare schemes. The changing attitude of rich and elite Muslims is also understandable. These groups always remain open to political bargains.

Overall, this brief assessment of BJP's Muslim vote underlines how the party could not produce a clear, workable electoral strategy to mobilise effective Muslim support in this election.

The writer is Associate Professor, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

ALL-INDIA MUSLIM VOTE FOR BJP			
Class-wise		Caste-wise	
Poor	11%	Upper Caste	12%
Lower	7%	(Ashraf)	
Middle	5%	OBCs	5%
Rich	6%	(Pasmanda)	

Source: CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Survey 2024

about Muslims. Yet, the focus of the campaign remained almost one-sided.

This highly volatile political context influenced Muslim voting in a significant manner. The 8% Muslims who preferred to vote for BJP this time, were almost one percentage point below the 2019 Muslim vote share for the party.

CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey is also useful to unpack this category of BJP's Muslim voters. Two points are crucial.

**Gujarat vs UP** | First, Muslim support for BJP is a state-centric phenomenon. For example, BJP received around 29% Muslim vote in Gujarat while its performance in

# Opposition Needs An Economic Plan. Here's One

Politicians opposed to BJP can't only rely on the latter's mistakes. The best proactive approach would be to form cooperatives for farm produce. It will increase supply, incomes, credibility & stable voter support

T K Arun



Can the opposition do anything more than exploit the mistakes and weaknesses of the governing party and its govt? Can it position itself as an agent of redemption, while fervently hoping voters would not recall its own less-than-stellar performance while in office? Yes, it can. It can form cooperatives.

Sardar Patel led the formation of Khaira District Milk Producers' Union, which became the kernel around which the Amul ecosystem grew. Senior communist politician AK Gopalan led the dismissed workers of India Coffee Board to form different cooperative societies of coffee workers, and these set up a string of Indian Coffee Houses across the country. There are many other such tales.

**Huge food processing industry a dire need** | Why recall such tales now? Because India desperately needs a revolution in food processing to bring down inflation. Its economy is subject to the consumer price index's vagaries, even as RBI tries to contain the index within the 2-6% band. The most volatile item in CPI is vegetable prices. The only way to stabilise vegetable prices is to create a massive food processing industry that would ensure a steady supply of vegetables - frozen, processed or fresh - round the year. And the most viable channel to build such an industry is to create a cooperative network that replicates the magic of milk cooperatives.

Can this be done by govt? It could, if it somehow conjured up another Verghese Kurien. But it is not sufficient to come up with another Kurien. It is also necessary to provide that person with unstinted political backing against local vested interests, of the kind India's Milkman got.

That looks as easy as getting the Mumbai municipal authority to build roads without potholes. The alternative is to get political parties to form cooperatives,

which would directly enhance people's livelihoods and incomes, increase the supply of vegetables, and help parties establish their credentials as pro-people, pro-growth agents of change. A laughable suggestion, you would think. But politicians have done things to change life for the better in the past. And they still can.

**State of co-ops in India** | Why did our political class move away from forming cooperatives? Actually, they have not. They run sugar cooperatives in Maharashtra, milk cooperatives in areas with motorable rural roads,



credit cooperatives in many states, handloom cooperatives, cooperative banks, and so on.

But few of them are genuine cooperatives. Most states have laws that subordinate co-ops to the state registrar of cooperatives if they owe money to state govt. This makes most cooperatives appendages of state govt, and they function as bureaucratic bodies, answerable to politicians, rather than to their members. The only exceptions are Amul-type co-ops, which are outside the control of state bureaucracy.

In India, co-ops are seen as part of the public sector, whereas they are a part of the private sector in the rest

of the world. According to World Cooperative Monitor, the top 300 co-ops have a combined turnover of \$2.4tr. These span sectors like farming, finance, retail, health-care, and education.

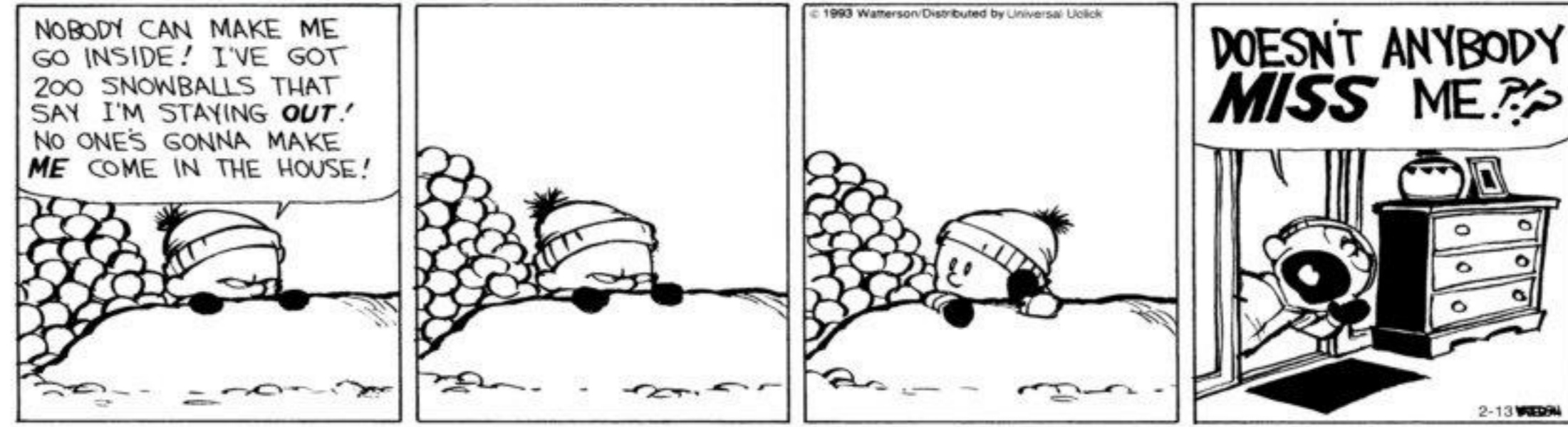
**Co-ops vital part of EU's economy** | According to European Commission, EU has 250,000 cooperatives, owned by 163mn citizens or one-third of EU population, and employing 5.4mn people. They account for significant shares of several sectors of the economy: agriculture - 83% in Netherlands, 79% in Finland, 55% in Italy and 50% in France; forestry - 60% in Sweden and 31% in Finland; banking - 50% in France, 37% in Cyprus, 35% in Finland, 31% in Austria and 21% in Germany; retail - 36% in Finland and 20% in Sweden.

Nor are co-ops only a European favourite, although 166 of the world's largest 300 co-ops by turnover are in Europe. Of the rest, 73 are in US, 12 in Brazil, and 41 in Asia-Pacific, including 21 in Japan, 5 in New Zealand, 4 in South Korea, and 3 in India.

**Rural infra ready for co-ops network** | India today has a decent network of rural roads, and rural electrification has brought power connection to a good many villages, even if not all. Stable power supply from the grid during the day is essential for a food processing industry to work. Mini- and micro-grids running on solar/wind power and connected to the main grid for evacuation of surplus power and to make good any deficit during the plant's working hours can be devised.

To realise economies of scale, food processing plants will need to source fruit and vegetables from scores, if not hundreds, of villages in a region. Organising people is the natural forte of political parties. Instead of organising them only to agitate, parties can and should organise them to produce, as well. Prosperous co-ops would give political parties that set them up credibility and stable support, while increasing production and stabilising supply. What are the politicians waiting for?

# Calvin & Hobbes



# Sacred space



I sent my Soul through the Invisible, Some letter of that After-life to spell: And by and by my Soul return'd to me, And answer'd: I Myself am Heav'n and Hell

Omar Khayyam

# Haj Is Akin To Visiting The Almighty

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

**H**aj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is a profound act of worship in Islam. It is obligatory only for those in good health and who can afford the journey. Those who are indigent, sick, or disabled are excused from this duty.

To perform Haj, a pilgrim leaves their home and travels to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Upon entering Mecca, the pilgrim first goes to the Kaaba to perform the Tawaf, which is the circumambulation of the Kaaba. Next, the pilgrim performs Sa'i, a brisk walk between the two hills of Safa and Marwa. The rites also include a halt at the plain of Arafat, where pilgrims stand in prayer and reflection. Additionally, pilgrims cast stones at a pillar in Mina, symbolically stoning Satan. The culmination of these rituals is the sacrifice of an animal.

These essential rites of Haj are performed during the month of Dhul Hijjah, the twelfth month of the Islamic lunar calendar.

What is Haj? It is a journey undertaken for God. It involves spending one's time and wealth to reach those places associated with the memories of God and His true servants. All the rituals of Haj are a practical demonstration that a person is striving for God, centring his life around Him.

Haj is akin to visiting the Almighty. It represents the highest form of nearness to one's Lord during worldly life. If other acts of worship are reminders of God, Haj itself reaches directly to God. Haj has always held extraordinary significance among Islamic acts of worship. In one hadith, it is referred to

as the most virtuous act of worship. It encompasses all acts of worship and invigorates all of them. However, its true importance lies in its spiritual essence, not merely in the external rituals and ceremonies.

In other words, Haj is not just about going to the sacred land, performing certain rituals, and returning. Regarding the essence of Haj, the Quran states: The pilgrimage is in the appointed months. Whoever intends to perform it during them must abstain from indecent speech, wicked conduct, and quarrelling while on the pilgrimage. Whatever good you may do, God is aware of it. Make provision for yourselves - but surely, the best of all provision is God-consciousness. Always be mindful of Me, you that are



THE SPEAKING TREE

endowed with understanding. (2:197)

Whenever a few people gather or live together, some grievances inevitably arise. This situation manifests on a much larger scale during Haj as people of various kinds gather in vast numbers at a single location. Consequently, during Haj, people frequently cause discomfort to each other. If individuals start quarrelling over personal grievances, the spirit of worship would be lost, and the purpose of Haj would not be fulfilled. Therefore, quarrelling and losing one's temper are strictly prohibited during Haj.

This prohibition makes Haj a means of training for a significant aspect of life. Just as fighting nullifies Haj, it also distances a believer's ordinary life from Islam.

The writer was an Islamic scholar and founder, Centre for Peace and Spirituality International





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Looming catastrophe

The ongoing heat and water crisis across north India is claiming lives, and there is no relief in sight

A serious heat and water catastrophe that has already claimed lives and is threatening many more is plaguing the northern parts of India, including the Capital. An unfavorable weather pattern marked by extreme heatwaves and weak rainfall is making it worse. For millions of people, the situation is getting unbearable as temperatures rise and water supply becomes scarce. North India is experiencing one of the worst heatwaves in recorded history. Many locations have regularly seen temperatures above 45 degrees Celsius, with some recording considerably greater values. Many occurrences of heatstroke, dehydration and other heat-related ailments have been reported. There is an increased danger for vulnerable groups, especially for youngsters and the elderly. The number of people enduring the heat in hospitals is overwhelming, and the availability of healthcare resources is limited. Compounding these problems, the monsoon season has started abnormally slowly. Rain, which usually provides much-needed relief, has been irregular and delayed. There are serious ramifications for both urban and rural communities from this delay. The lack of rain in cities like Delhi makes the heat unpleasant and living conditions nearly intolerable. The delayed monsoon in rural areas is disastrous for agriculture as it greatly depends on timely rainfall. Food security and livelihoods are expected to be threatened by crop failures and lower yields. There is severe water deficiency in northern India as a result of the heatwave and delayed monsoon. The levels of major rivers and reservoirs are perilously low, and groundwater has fallen.



Delhi's water supply is significantly impacted by the historically low levels of the Yamuna river; in fact, some areas get water for only a few hours a day. Concerns over water-borne illnesses have been raised, which has led to disputes over access to water and forced many people to rely on contaminated sources. Water rationing, the establishment of cooling facilities and the distribution of drinking water to communities badly impacted by the problem are just a few of the steps the administration has taken. However, because of the situation's seriousness, these actions have not seen much success. Long-term fixes are necessary to preempt disasters. This entails making investments in infrastructure for water conservation, such as effective irrigation systems and rainwater collection, as well as encouraging the groundwater resources to be used sustainably. To counter the urban heat island effect, green spaces and cooling strategies must be included in urban planning. Furthermore, raising people's knowledge of climate change and its effects helps promote a resilient culture. Millions of people are starkly reminded of their vulnerability in the face of climate change by the heat and water crises in north India. The people of this country continue to be its greatest strength as it fights this humanitarian and environmental crisis.

### PICTALK



A boy follows the cooling water mist released by an anti-smog gun, in New Delhi

## AI's influence on India's e-commerce industry

AI reshapes Indian e-commerce with personalisation, efficiency, security and stronger customer bonds, revolutionising shopping

In the bustling landscape of Indian e-commerce, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a transformative force, reshaping the industry in profound ways. From personalised shopping experiences to efficient logistics, AI has emerged as a cornerstone of success for online retailers in India. AI has a multifaceted impact on e-commerce and has implications for businesses, consumers, and the overall economy. One of the most noticeable effects of AI in Indian e-commerce is the enhancement of the shopping experience for consumers. Through advanced algorithms and data analytics, online retailers can now offer personalised product recommendations tailored to individual preferences and purchase histories. This level of customisation not only increases customer satisfaction but also drives sales and fosters brand loyalty. Moreover, AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants provide round-the-clock customer support, addressing queries and concerns in real time, thereby improving overall customer



engagement and retention. AI has also revolutionised the way products are discovered and marketed in the Indian e-commerce landscape. Sophisticated search algorithms powered by Natural Language Processing (NLP) enable users to find products more efficiently, even with vague or misspelt search queries. Additionally, image recognition technology allows consumers to search for products using images, streamlining the search process and enhancing the user experience. Furthermore, AI-driven targeted advertising helps businesses reach their target audience more effectively, maximising the return on investment for marketing campaigns. In the realm of supply chain management, AI has emerged as a game-changer

for Indian e-commerce businesses. By analysing vast amounts of data, including sales trends, inventory levels, and external factors like weather and transportation conditions, AI algorithms optimise inventory management, forecasting, and logistics operations. This results in reduced costs, minimised stockouts, and faster order fulfilment, ultimately leading to improved operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. Moreover, AI plays a pivotal role in enhancing security and mitigating fraud risks in Indian e-commerce transactions. Advanced fraud detection systems leverage machine learning algorithms to identify and prevent fraudulent activities in real time, safeguarding both businesses and consumers from financial losses. Additionally, biometric authentication technologies, such as facial recognition and fingerprint scanning, provide enhanced security for online payments, bolstering consumer trust and confidence in the e-commerce ecosystem. Despite its numerous benefits, the widespread adoption

of AI in Indian e-commerce also presents certain challenges and concerns. Data privacy and security remain paramount, with the need for robust regulatory frameworks to protect consumer information from unauthorised access and misuse. Moreover, the increasing reliance on AI-powered systems raises questions about algorithmic bias and fairness, highlighting the importance of transparency and accountability in algorithm development and deployment. In conclusion, the impact of Artificial Intelligence on Indian e-commerce is undeniable, revolutionising the way businesses operate and consumers shop in the digital age. As AI continues to evolve and permeate every aspect of the industry, it is essential for businesses to embrace innovation, adapt to technological advancements, and prioritise ethical considerations to harness the full potential of AI while ensuring inclusivity, fairness, and security in the e-commerce ecosystem. (The author is BU head at Snapdeal; views expressed are personal)

# Time for BJP to set its house in order

The party must ponder Venkaiah Naidu's advice and start working towards repairing its ties with the RSS, besides looking for a proactive president



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

The swearing in of Narendra Modi 3.0 is over and it is now business as usual. But there is an eerie uncertainty pervading across India as the BJP Government is dependent on the life-support system provided by the TDP's Chandrababu Naidu and the JD(U)'s Nitish Kumar. The BJP had won 282 seats on its own in the 2014 elections (31 per cent) while the party had a dream run of scoring 303 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls (37 per cent) despite Naidu's best efforts to defeat the party. This is the first time in his tenure that Modi is dependent on allies for Government survival. The old slogan "Minimum Government and Maximum Governance" has been dusted out of the cupboard. The BJP's mission to enact the Uniform Civil Code, 'One Nation, One Poll' and its dream Agniveer project too would come a cropper without the support of Naidu and Nitish. The speech delivered by M Venkaiah Naidu, former Vice-President, at the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) should be noted seriously. "There is a message in the election. I hope people understand the message. The ruling BJP failed to reach the majority mark in the Lok Sabha on its own though it emerged as the single largest party while the Opposition put up an impressive performance," Naidu said. A discernible feature of this election was the absence of RSS volunteers from the campaign. What upset the RSS was the declaration made by party president JP Nadda that the BJP has no relation with the Bhagwa Dhvaj, the saffron flag that is emblematic of Sanatana Dharma. "Our flag was apparently created by lord Indra himself. The flag carries the saffron color of the lord. We chose the flag for our kingdom. The flag represents humanity and we need to ensure that we live up to its representation," Shivaji, the great Maratha emperor, told his ministers and commanders. It is time for Nadda to move out of party presidentship. He has neither inspired nor enlightened



people through his words or actions. Nadda should read and learn about two gentlemen from south India, K Kamaraj and S Nijalingappa, both former presidents of the Congress who were rated as titans of Indian politics. Public memory is not that short as they remember the efforts undertaken by Naidu to topple Modi in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. The nation saw Naidu holding hands with Sonia Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, MK Stalin and, above all, the two most intelligent persons in the world; viz, Sitaram Yechury and D Raja as a prelude to oust Modi and Amit Shah. No political parties have absolute majority of their own to form the Government though the National Democratic Alliance (also termed as Non-Dependable Allies) has nearly 300 MPs, 27 more than the half way mark. Though the Congress, the main player in the Opposition, could not touch the three-digit mark, together with its allies, the party has emerged as a striking force. This year presents an entirely different scenario. The charismatic, uncompromising and powerful Modi is at the mercy of two satraps

with national ambitions. Even before the NDA held its first meeting, Kumar and Naidu have put forward a set of demands, including conducting the caste census and scrapping of Agniveer scheme. It was Jagan Mohan Reddy, leader of YSR Congress and the outgoing Chief Minister, who forced Naidu to take refuge in the BJP camp. Reddy had launched a thorough probe into the charges of corruption against Naidu, for which he was arrested and imprisoned. When it was time for the 2024 Assembly elections, Naidu felt the need to cast his lot with BJP and Modi. Having got more than what he aspired for, Naidu is eyeing bigger rewards. We cannot expect anything better from a person who backstabbed his father-in-law NT Rama Rao, the founder of the TDP, and usurped the party proprietorship. Nitish is no different from Naidu. He is a living example of the Aaya Ram, Gaya Raam politics. Naidu and Nitish are two deceiving crutches and can lead Modi to "no-man's land". The current political imbroglio is BJP's own making. How many of us remem-

ber the five-day long crisis in Maharashtra when Devendra Fadnavis, the then leader of the Opposition, was sworn in as Chief Minister in 2019 with Ajit Pawar (NCP) as his deputy, only to make an ignominious exit after two days. Fadnavis and the other senior BJP leaders had termed Ajit as the embodiment of corruption but they found no qualms in forming a coalition Government with him. Despite Ajit returning to the Pawar Parivar within two days of swearing in, Fadnavis solicited him again and the former is now back in the Hindutva fold. How come BJP, which claims from rooftops that it is always against dynasty politics, forge an alliance with a purely family-run enterprise? Fadnavis' hurry forced him to commit the political harakiri. His case reminds us of the kamikaze by Chaudhary Charan Singh in 1979, ostensibly to teach the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai a lesson. Chaudhary Saheb went down with the Janata ship and could not stage a comeback even at a later stage. (The writer is a special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)

THE BJP'S MISSION TO ENACT THE UNIFORM CIVIL CODE, 'ONE NATION, ONE POLL' AND ITS DREAM AGNIVEER PROJECT WOULD COME A CROPPER WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF CHANDRABABU NAIDU AND NITISH KUMAR

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### INADEQUATE PENALTIES FOR CRUELTY

Madam — Apropos the news story "Animal laws need more teeth say activists," published on June 12, this is my response. Reading about the brutal beating of a dog in Pune, resulting in a mere ₹50 fine, is both disheartening and infuriating. This case, alongside similar instances in Mumbai and Delhi, highlights the urgent need for stricter laws against animal cruelty in India. The proposed Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Amendment) Bill, 2022, seeks to address these issues by introducing harsher penalties, including fines up to ₹75,000 and imprisonment for severe offences. This amendment is crucial, as the current laws are woefully outdated and ineffective. Strengthening these laws is not just about protecting animals; it's about fostering a compassionate society where brutality is not tolerated. It's high time for the government to act, ensuring that offenders face appropriate consequences and that we cultivate a culture of empathy and respect. Our future generations deserve to grow up in a world where cruelty to animals is met with swift and severe justice. Devansh Khatri | Jaipur

#### SURGE IN GREEN ENERGY

Madam — Apropos the news story "India's green energy rise, including 'Green Coal,'" published on June 12, this is my response. Reading about the Reserve Bank of India's latest report brings a sense of optimism about India's economic future, particularly in the energy sector. With green energy projects worth Rs 700 billion set to start this year and projected investments reaching Rs 765.2 billion by 2025-26, it's clear that sustainable energy policies are paying off. India's achievement of full electrification, with significant hours of power for rural and urban areas, coupled with its position as the third-largest renewable energy producer, is commendable. The innovation of green coal, which reduces CO2 emissions significantly, exemplifies India's commitment to sustainability. NTPC's ini-

#### Lansdowne's rich military legacy



Apropos the news story "The Garhwal Regiment's glorious military heritage," published on June 12, this is my response. The still air of Lansdowne's Bhawani Dutt Joshi Parade Ground reverberates with the historic war cry "Jai Badri Vishal Ki Jai" from the Agniveers of the Garhwal Regiment. Established in 1887, the regiment boasts a legacy of val-

our, earning numerous military honours, including Victoria Crosses and Ashoka Chakras. Lansdowne, named after a British Viceroy, remains a testament to colonial heritage with its scenic ridge-top cantonments and hill stations. Colonel Mianwaring's bungalow, now MES property, and the Darwan Singh War Museum reflect the regiment's storied past. The Garhwali Officers Mess, with its Victorian charm and unique artefacts like the Sun Dial and the billiards table, epitomises the regiment's historical opulence. Despite attempts to rename Lansdowne, locals cherish its colonial past and its connection to military excellence. The Garhwal Regiment's symbols—Lord Badrinath, the Unknown Soldier, and the Royal Rassi—continue to inspire courage and pride among its soldiers. Aadhya Chawla | Chandigarh

tiatives, especially the Varanasi Harit Koyla Pariyojna, showcase impressive advancements. The green coal project, part of the "Make in India" initiative, symbolises a major stride towards the "Atmanirbhar Bharat" mission. MBL's success in converting municipal waste into eco-friendly coal is not just a technological breakthrough but also an effective solution to waste management, marking an important milestone in India's green energy journey. Arya Sundaram | Chennai

#### DREAMS OF A BETTER WORLD

Madam — Apropos the news story "Blueprint for a Better Society," published on June 12, this is my response. We all envision a world filled with peace, happiness, and harmony. Nobody desires environmental degradation, the loss of lives through violence, or the erosion of the human spirit due to crime, corruption, and poverty. Instead, we seek a life defined by health, wealth, and happiness. To achieve this, we must identify the values necessary to create a socio-politico-

economic system that fosters such a society. Most would agree that reducing wars, violence, poverty, unemployment, pollution, corruption, crime, and social injustices is crucial. Additionally, fostering freedom, reducing hunger, and promoting love and cooperation are essential. A survey would likely reveal that people expect scientists to embrace spirituality, religious leaders to adopt a scientific approach, and doctors to treat both body and soul. Education should include moral and spiritual development and societal attitudes towards women and children need to improve. Achieving these goals requires each societal segment to fulfil expectations and contribute time and talent. Global cooperation is essential, possibly through a new kind of bank where individuals and institutions can contribute towards building a better world. Rohit Kapoor | Kolkata

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



## FIRST COLUMN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER MODI 3.0

Modi's G7 debut amidst global turmoil underscores diplomatic finesse



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

In less than a week of assuming office as the Prime Minister for the largest democracy in the world, Mr Modi is back where he excels. He was in Italy this week, meeting the leaders from the powerful group of nations also known as the G7. On the sidelines were several bilateral meetings with leaders of African, and Arab nations, besides several clear messages to the primarily American and European groups leaders.

This was PM Modi's first trip abroad, after assuming office for a third time (a remarkable feat in itself), where nearly 670 million voters patiently waited in queues under an extremely harsh summer sun over a period of nearly two months to choose the leader of the largest democracy. PM Modi and his party, despite setting ambitious expectations, could not manage a majority by themselves and are now dependent on a bunch of pre-poll alliance political parties to lead the National Democratic Alliance government. This assumes significance at a time when several parts of Europe, not to mention the US are going their own set of democratic churns. The US goes to poll end of the year, and voices on either side of the aisle, are getting harsher and louder. Similarly, the elections to the European Parliament have thrown a resurgence of far-right parties, which is likely to have an impact on the geopolitical dynamics for a long time. What Mr Modi may be comforted by is the fact that he may not need to look around for carefully worded diplomatic statements while explaining the state of Indian democracy to the Western nations.



In the past few years, several questions have been raised across the Western nations and in the US regarding the health of the Indian democracy, its report card on minority rights, religious freedom, the existence of the press etc. The near majority verdict, by the Indian electorate, with ample scope of checks and balances to keep the party with the highest seats under leash, a robust opposition presence in the parliament would be a clear talking point for the PM and his set of diplomats to set out a gold standard for democracy when engaging with several nations. Mr Modi, with his nearly three decades of experience as head of the state and nation, is not new to diplomacy and in several interviews, leading up to the general elections, has articulated his target of enhancing India's global image. The grand spectacle around G20 (not to forget backroom diplomatic negotiations to arrive at a joint statement), several high-level state visits, a bunch of rescue operations carried out for citizens and neighbours from war-torn areas, supply of emergency medicines during COVID are all pointers towards the focus the Prime Minister's Office attaches to global reputational management. PM's third-term visit to G7 assures continuity and explores fresh engagement strategies with current and potential allies, emphasizing continuity and innovation.

Mr Modi's visit to Italy comes at a time when the Ukraine war is unrelenting, and despite severe reluctance, there seems to be chinks in the united European approach towards the aggressor Russia. Many of them, would have, similar concerns regarding Israel's war on terror, which has refused to die down in months. It may be recalled that both Israel and Russia are close allies of India, and India has so far walked a tightrope when commenting on both of these volatile situations. The dynamics of the past relationship, while building deeper relations with recent allies such as the US are likely to be a sensitive diplomatic trope. It is no wonder, that PM Modi has picked up S Jaishankar, a seasoned diplomat as the External Affairs minister for a second term, to retain the continuity and foreign policy focus achieved during his last term. The evolving geopolitical landscape and India's role in global affairs would continue to be tested and chiselled in days to come.

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

# Populism cripples revival of discoms

The twin problems of AT&C losses and under-recoveries on sale to certain households or farmers in some States have existed for close to a quarter century



UTTAM GUPTA

The Centre is planning to launch 'another' scheme to enable public sector power distribution utilities (discoms) to cut technical losses via "transition financing" of the required capital expenditure. The discoms stand at the core of the power supply and distribution network in the country. Mostly owned and controlled by State Governments, they buy electricity from the generating companies (call them gencos) in the public sector such as National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) etc and gencos in the private sector commonly referred to as independent power producers (IPPs) and supply to the consumers.

Technical losses to be more precise, the aggregate technical and commercial (AT&C) losses are a sophisticated nomenclature for leakage from the system or power theft. According to Union Power Minister RK Singh, AT&C's losses used to be high at 27 per cent. When, out of say 100 units of electricity that leaves the generating stations/power dispatch centre, 27 units are stolen and hence not paid for, this is bound to have a debilitating effect on the discoms' operations.

The discoms could charge more on sale of the balance 73 units to compensate for the 'nil' revenue on the 27 stolen units. But this is theoretical. So, the discoms would end up making a loss to the extent of revenue lost on stolen units. There is another potent factor that exacerbates their losses.

The Electricity Act (2003) and the Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Power require the discoms to fix the tariff on electricity supplied to consumers in a manner such that the average revenue realisation (ARR) from its sale is equal to the average cost of purchase, transmission and distribution (ACS). Yet under dictat from the State Government, either they don't bill certain households (HHs) at all (on consumption up to 200/300 units a month in Delhi/Punjab) or a flat subsidy of ₹800 on consumption (between 201 and 400 units a month in Delhi), besides free supply to farmers as in Punjab.

The discoms seek to make up for the resulting under-recoveries by charging more from industries and businesses for which the tariff can go up to a high of ₹16 per unit (this indeed is a major reason for making Indian products and services uncompetitive in both the domestic and international markets). While the States also promise to compensate for a good portion of the under-recoveries, most of them make only partial reimbursement and that too after considerable delay. This further adds to discom losses.

The twin problems of AT&C losses and under-recoveries on sale to HHs/farmers have existed for close to a quarter century. Since the beginning of 2000, the Centre has come up with four financial restructuring packages (FRPs) to help discoms. While, the first two (2002, 2012) merely sought to condone their losses, the third namely Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana (UDAY) launched in November 2015 required discoms to set their house in order and achieve certain milestones in exchange for financial assistance.

Under UDAY, discoms' staggering debt of about ₹400,000 crore was condoned. Of this, while 75 per cent was taken over by the States, for the balance, they were allowed to issue bonds at a concessional rate of interest. In lieu of the FRP, discoms



WHILE STATES ALSO PROMISE TO COMPENSATE FOR A GOOD PORTION OF THE UNDER-RECOVERIES, MOST OF THEM MAKE ONLY PARTIAL REIMBURSEMENT AND THAT TOO AFTER CONSIDERABLE DELAY

were required to reduce AT&C losses from 20.7 per cent during 2015-16 to 15 per cent by 2018-19. Further, they were to reduce the ACS-ARR gap from ₹0.59 per unit of electricity during 2015-16 to 'zero' by 2018-19. But, the discoms failed to deliver.

During 2019-20, their AT&C loss were 18.9 per cent against the 15 per cent target for 2018-19. The ACS-ARR gap during 2019-20 stood at ₹0.42 per unit against target of 'zero' for 2018-19. During 2020-21, even these limited improvements were reversed as ATC losses zoomed to 22.3 per cent and ACS-ARR gap ₹0.69 paise per unit. As a consequence, discoms losses which had decreased from ₹52,000 crore during 2015-16 to ₹17,000 crore during 2017-18 (courtesy, FRP) increased to about ₹30,000 crore during 2019-20 and further to ₹58,000 crore during 2020-21.

Correspondingly, this has led to their ballooning debt which at the end of FY 2021-22, stood at ₹620,000 crore.

This prompted the Centre to come out with a fourth package called 'Reforms-Linked, Result-Based Scheme for Distribution' (RLRBS-D). The scheme was unveiled by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her Budget speech for FY 2021-22. Involving an outlay of ₹300,000 crore, it was aimed at trimming discoms AT&C losses to 12-15 per cent and gradually narrow the ACS-ARR gap to 'zero' by March 2025. This was to be achieved by upgrading the distribution infrastructure and capac-

ity building, thereby improving the reliability and quality of the power supply. It had a provision for compulsory pre-paid and smart metering component to be implemented across the power supply chain, including in about 220 million households.

Apart from gross budgetary support (GBS) of close to ₹100,000 crore by the Centre, implementation of the Scheme involves funding by State-run sector-specific lenders; viz, Power Finance Corporation (PFC) and Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) under irrevocable State Government guarantee. The funds release is subject to discoms meeting the pre-qualifying criteria and achieving the basic minimum benchmark in reforms.

The RLRBS-D launched in FY 2021-22 talks of achieving the targets, which should have been achieved by 2018-19, by March 2025. This by itself is laughable. What about the progress? According to the Power Ministry, the Government has so far identified 57 discoms from 32 States and Union Territories under the scheme and has prepared detailed project reports (DPRs) for these. Further, in reply to a question in Parliament given by then Power Minister RK Singh in December 2023: "Till today, DPRs having total outlay of ₹120,000 crore has been approved for loss reduction works and ₹130,000 crore for smart metering works."

Beyond this paperwork, as of January 2024, the total loan disbursed by PFC-REC under the

scheme was ₹112,000 crore for 16 States, while sanctioned amount was ₹133,000 crore.

As for the gross budgetary support, the release of funds by the Centre during FY 2023-24 was a mere ₹6,000 crore against budget allocation of ₹12,000 crore. That things are moving at a snail's pace may be seen from the fact that 'against the sanctioned smart meters of around 220 million, only about 0.8 million have been installed so far'. One wonders whether the money is being used by discoms to merely pay back the loans taken earlier to fund their recurring losses --- as happened under UDAY.

Now that the tenure of this scheme (launched in 2021-22) will end in just about 10 months on March 31, 2025, the Government is keen to launch its second version call it RLRBS-D-II with similar aggregate outlay of ₹300,000 crore. Who knows, even the funds garnered under this scheme could end up being used to clear the continuous pile up of discoms' debt. The vicious cycle continues.

The problem is entirely political. In a bid to win elections (these are held round the clock), almost every political party promises sops which include, among others, power supply to farmers and poor households at throwaway price or even free; they even ignore theft happening in slums/jhuggis that promise votes en masse. They use discoms as guinea pigs for achieving these populist goals.

(The writer is a policy analyst, views are personal.)

# Govt must reboot its 'Neighbourhood First' policy

Modi's top priorities should include strengthening of bilateral ties with neighbours and herald a new era of dialogue to counter China's influence

The Narendra Modi Government must give priority to wean away neighbours who have drifted towards China. The presence of leaders from the neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean region at the inauguration of Narendra Modi's third term as Prime Minister highlights the significance New Delhi accords to these countries. Notable attendees included Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe. The swearing-in ceremony also witnessed the participation of Bhutan Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, Nepal Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Mauritius Prime Minister Pravind Kumar Jugnauth, Seychelles Vice-



KS TOMAR

President Ahmed Afif and Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu. The inclusion of President Muizzu is being interpreted as a good diplomatic move, especially when both nations currently have strained ties. It may be recalled that Modi invited leaders from the eight member States of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014. For his 2019 inauguration, the guests included leaders from the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIM-STECC), along with Mauritius and Kyrgyzstan.

The Modi-led Government will have its plate full of national and international issues, which will warrant



immediate attention and formulation of strategy and action plan. Experts feel that India must resolve the US threat to impose sanctions if the Chabahar Port deal with Iran was not scrapped. Interestingly, the US did not raise any objection when India took up the construction of the port because it suited the US owing to its occupation of

Afghanistan. But now that the US has moved out, it has no interest in the port. Former Prime Minister Pt Jawaharlal Nehru's Indian National Congress achieved a remarkable victory, securing 44.7 per cent of the vote and winning 361 out of 494 seats in 1962. In contrast, the BJP, under Narendra Modi, won 238 seats out of 543, with the

NDA collectively securing 294 seats. Unlike the BJP, which relies on coalition partners like the TDP and others, the Congress under Nehru stood strong on its own. This scenario isn't unique to India. In Britain, leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair also managed to secure three terms. However, managing a coalition Government with a thin majority presents its own challenges. The reduced strength can increase the bargaining power of smaller coalition partners.

The Modi Government's foreign policy has alienated neighbours like the Maldives, Nepal etc. Hence it needs a 'relook' as they have drifted towards China, which is using them to expand its influence. Regarding Pakistan,

India should respond to its initiative to have trade ties by keeping the political issues aside. The Sharif brothers may not be averse to it. China's expanding ties in the region are evident, and India needs to tread cautiously to counter its influence, as seen in the case of Nepal. The recent political shift in Nepal towards a communist Government ideologically aligned with China is concerning, especially considering China's 'Debt Trap' strategy.

Pakistan serves as a stark example, with China extending a massive debt of \$23 billion, a substantial portion of which is tied to the Belt and Road Initiative. Pakistan's mounting debt to China, totalling \$67.2 billion from

2000 to 2021, underscores the risks associated with this debt dependency. Regarding neighbours, India needs to be worried as Maldives has already moved in the lap of China, and Nepal has also shown red flag as the communist Government led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' has moved closer to China. Modi will govern India for the next five years with a relatively weakened position but he has shown resolve to carry on economic reforms to make India a world power. In this backdrop, the Opposition is expected to play a constructive role in the interest of people of the country. (The writer is a political analyst and senior journalist based in Shimla; views are personal.)

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Kuwait tragedy

Workers' wellbeing should be Delhi's priority

**T**HE death of 49 people, mostly Indians, in a fire that engulfed a building housing foreign workers in Mangaf, Kuwait, has turned the spotlight on the conditions under which these employees live and work not only in this Gulf nation but the region as a whole. Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Fahad Yusuf Saud Al-Sabah, who visited the site, has blamed the greed of real-estate owners for such incidents, even as an investigation has been launched to pinpoint the lapses and fix accountability. India's immediate focus is on the identification of the bodies and bringing back the mortal remains of the victims, besides granting ex gratia relief to the families of the deceased. At the same time, New Delhi needs to be actively involved in the probe to ensure that those responsible for the tragedy are dealt with strictly.

Those under scrutiny include the companies that hire foreign workers and the realtors who provide accommodation, besides travel agents who facilitate recruitment. According to reports, India's embassy in Kuwait received over 16,000 complaints from Indian citizens working there between March 2021 and December 2023. Most of them pertained to delays in the payment of salaries, below-par accommodation and harassment by employers. Alarming, over 1,400 Indians, mostly migrant workers, died in Kuwait in 2022 and 2023, according to information shared by the Ministry of External Affairs in Parliament earlier this year. All this suggests that the Indian authorities have been lax in addressing the workers' concerns.

India is the world leader in terms of remittance receipts, with a total of \$125 billion being sent by Indians living across the globe to their families back home last year. Gulf Cooperation Council countries are among the biggest sources of India's remittance inflow. New Delhi must press these nations to crack down on unscrupulous employers who compromise the safety and wellbeing of workers.

## Gender gap

Low ranking must spur policy relook

**T**HE World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap index has ranked India 129th out of 146 nations on the list. The data reflects a troubling reality in stark contrast to the India growth story. The methodology of arriving at the conclusions may be open to debate, but numbers don't lie. It would be prudent to heed the larger message. As the results of the Lok Sabha elections have shown, the distress on the ground is real. Continuity in the governance model is all very well, but the developmental strategies need comprehensive evaluation, with rebooting of policies and plans, if required. Change is visible, but it is skewed and too slow.

According to the report, India's economic parity score has been on an upward trend for the past four years. That said, in the economic parity and opportunity sub-index, it finds itself at the 142nd position, one of the lowest globally. India is ranked 120th on wage equality for similar work. Women in India on an average earn Rs 39.8 for every Rs 100 that men earn. The country maintains its 142nd slot on the health and survival index. A notable positive is India's high ranking on gender parity in secondary education enrolment. Ranked 65th in the parameter of political empowerment of women, it is 10th on parity in the number of years with female and male heads of state over the last 50 years. The women's reservation legislation could be a transformative moment, provided the political leadership accords the issue the seriousness it deserves.

Globally, 68.5 per cent of the gender gap has been closed, says the report. Achieving full gender parity will take 134 years more, equivalent to five generations. This is India's century, we are constantly reminded. No excuse would suffice.

## ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JUNE 14, 1924

## The memorandum

IF the preamble to the memorandum which some of our distinguished countrymen, now in England in one capacity or another, have prepared for presentation to the India office, is unexceptionable, so is the actual demand made in it. To the first and most important part of it, that India should draft her own Constitution in the same way as the Dominions and the Irish Free State did, we have already referred. It must be plain to the meanest understanding that this part of the demand lies at the basis of all other parts, and that if this part were conceded, all other things would follow as a natural consequence. It was as regards this part of the nationalist demand, moreover, that the Liberals at one time were either undecided or equivocal in their attitude. They had accepted the Government of India Act with all its implications, they felt, and it was not for them to go behind that Act and say that not the British Parliament but the Indian people were to be the ultimate authority in this matter of drafting the Indian Constitution. Recent events have, however, disillusioned our countrymen, and the memorandum is the latest and most conclusive evidence of the fact that in this as in so many other matters, the Liberals and the Nationalists are of virtually one mind today. The rest of the demand has, subject to one important reservation, been a part of the Liberal platform now for many months. "The central civil Government of India," says the memorandum, "should be carried on by the Viceroy with a cabinet responsible to the Indian Legislature, the defence of the country remaining in the hands of the Viceroy, subject to agreed reservations, until a responsible Government of India is ready to take it over."

## The PM has his work cut out

The govt may have to revisit policy in the light of victory of some separatists in Lok Sabha polls

TRYSTS AND TURNS  
JULIO RIBEIRO

**T**HE Modi 2.0 government adopted a no-holds-barred stand against individuals who were perceived to be a security threat. The new government led by Narendra Modi may have to revisit this policy in the light of the victory of some separatists in the recent Lok Sabha elections.

The election of imprisoned Khalistani activist Amritpal Singh from Khadoor Sahib and Indira Gandhi assassin Beant Singh's son Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa from Faridkot should make the government sit up and take notice. The Surjit Singh Barnala-led Akali government, which worked in close association with the ruling Congress at the Centre in the 1980s, had got the Sikh masses to reject Khalistan. In the early 1990s, Jat Sikh farmers assisted the government in curbing terrorism. Without their active help, terrorism could not have been wiped out.

The allegations made by Canada regarding the murder of Khalistani separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar and the US claim about an India-sponsored plot to eliminate Gurbatwant Singh Panun, a US national spearheading the Khalistan demand in the West, must have influenced the people who voted in favour of Amritpal and Sarabjeet.

So, in a manner of speaking, the Modi-Shah policy of stern action against anti-nationals may become the trigger for a recurrence of the troubles Punjab faced in the 1980s. Policymakers should keep such factors in mind before taking hard decisions.

The defeat of moderate leaders like Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti in Kashmir and the vic-



MOOT POINT: The key question is whether Modi can be convinced to adopt softer policies. ■■■

tory of a hardliner like Engineer Rashid are signs that the Modi-Shah duo needs to ponder over. The swift and decisive action they took in the troubled state of Jammu and Kashmir to abrogate Article 370 had the approbation of the BJP's core supporters in the Hindi heartland and even beyond, but the fallout is becoming alarmingly clear in the aftermath of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Muslim voters of Kashmir are turning away from their own mainstream political parties and opting for the more defiant opponents of the Modi regime. This is another cause for concern.

The election of two Khalistani Sikhs and a radical Kashmiri Muslim to the Lok Sabha underlines the need to consult sage and moderate voices like Gurbachan Jagat and Amarjit Singh Dulat, the latter for dealing with Kashmiri malcontents. Should the elected MPs be allowed to enter and speak in Parliament and vent their feelings instead of silently inciting their co-religionists against the Indian state? Whatever steps the government had taken or planned against these rabble-rousers have not worked. Their respective communities have to be won over to our side.

Parakala Prabhakar is a

Modi should be told that Netanyahu is only creating more terrorists by killing Hamas fighters and bombing hospitals and civilian localities in Gaza.

thinker who describes matters in befitting words. He doubts if Modi can be convinced to adopt softer policies. Prabhakar reminds us that a wolf that wears sheep's clothing will continue to be a wolf. In the constitution of his Cabinet and distribution of portfolios, Modi has already shown that he is the sole decision-maker. He continues to rule in the same manner as before.

Modi should be told that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is only creating more terrorists by killing Hamas fighters and bombing hospitals and civilian localities in Gaza. We had that experience in Punjab during our struggle with Khalistani terrorists. Listing and then eliminating culprits only resulted in their replacement, sometimes by two men for the one lost.

The only way to end terrorism is to deprive the terrorists of the oxygen that is provided by their own co-religionists in the shape of logistical support or even tacit approval of their madness. It is only when the community is won over that you can hope for closure. The experience of the police in Northern Ireland was exactly the same as ours in Punjab. Of course, the figures of civilians and security personnel killed in the war against terrorists were five times larger in Punjab. When I pointed this out to the Chief Constable of Northern Ireland, he, in turn, was kind enough to point out to me that Punjab's population was five times that of Northern Ireland.

If the entry of three anti-government MPs into the Lok Sabha is a matter of concern, the re-election of Mahua Moitra from West Bengal will ensure that the proceedings in Parliament will be lively. Smriti Irani will not be around, but Kangana Ranaut could be her replacement. If Mahua and Kangana get into a verbal duel in Parliament, I would hate to miss it.

The re-election of Shashi Tharoor was most welcome. He has established himself as a seasoned debater in Parliament. And now that Rahul Gandhi has

come out of the 'reluctant politician' mode, Rahul and Shashi should make a good pair for the Congress in the INDIA bloc. Supriya Sule is a young woman whom I admire for her poise and equanimity. It was gracious of her to call on her vanquished opponent's mother to soothe ruffled feathers in her own family, now that her cousin, Ajit Pawar, has been cut down to size.

The inauguration of the new Parliament building was presided over by the Prime Minister and the Speaker last year. Its inauguration for its actual intended use as a place where governance decisions are debated and approved — and sometimes (rarely) discarded — should take precedence over gimmicks. The people of India will be extremely unhappy and disappointed if they do not get to hear and see democracy at play in the new Lok Sabha.

The way Parliament was run in the 17th Lok Sabha was an insult to democracy. Walkouts, suspensions and adjournments were the norm. Even laws meant to curb crime were passed without a debate. We did not get to learn why the government took radical decisions like demonetisation, the nationwide Covid lockdown and even the farm laws — which Modi was forced to repeal — without discussions in Parliament.

The normal parliamentary procedures of scrutiny of Bills by committees should be restarted now that one party and its supreme leader have been forced to share power with its allies. As Modi himself has admitted, there has to be consensus on critical decisions. Just one man or a cabal does not constitute a democratic decision-making body. If Modi wants the NDA to rule for the next 10 years, he will have to prove Prabhakar wrong.

If the NDA constituents were not able to influence Modi in the formation of the coalition Cabinet, they should stand firm on contentious issues like the National Register of Citizens and the treatment of minorities.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Peace is not absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means. — Ronald Reagan

## The money order and chaos

SV VENUGOPALAN

**T**HE postman hadn't expected such a response to his call 'amma... money order!' at our doorstep. All through his career, he would have only received a warm reception while handing over cash. My grandmother had every reason to express shock and disbelief. Time and again, it was she who had been sending money to her brother-in-law at Bengaluru on receiving his letters for financial help. None had ever sent her money.

'Where has this money order come from?' she enquired. The postman's reply compounded her confusion. The money order was from her brother-in-law.

'Is it for 300 rupees?' she asked. The postman nodded. 'Oh oh... what the hell is happening! That was the exact amount I sent to Bengaluru yesterday by money order... How dare you come here to return it to me?'

The postman was puzzled. Grandma looked at me and my elder brother. She snatched the money order form and quickly identified the handwriting. It seemed she had solved the riddle. She started yelling at my brother: 'You mixed up the addresses of the sender and the recipient... oh my God... what will I do now?'

She told the postman that the money was intended to be sent to Bengaluru and not the other way round. He firmly told her that it was his duty to deliver the cash to her as per postal rules. An irrepressible woman who had faced innumerable challenges courageously, my grandma told the postman that she had asked her grandson only the day before to send a money order and she would not accept that cash in return from the postal authorities. The poor postman couldn't do anything further and calmly left the place, advising her to take up the matter with the post office.

We followed our grandma, who marched towards the post office near our house. It was amusing to hear her argue with the postmaster. She narrated her travails — the loss of her eldest daughter (my mother) two decades ago, the struggle to bring up her grandchildren, the death of her husband, a headmaster, and her ongoing fight for his pension.

The postmaster convinced her that it was her grandson who had erred in filling the money order form and the post office had no option but to return the money. Ultimately, she accepted the cash with tears in her eyes and made a special request to the postmaster that the acknowledgement shall not be sent to Bengaluru, for it would convey the wrong message. With great reluctance and after my grandma's repeated pleas, he relented.

Then, a new money order form was filled to send the money to her brother-in-law, and the commission had to be paid once more. My grandma glared at my brother, who promptly and apologetically bowed his head.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Need to redefine merit

The Supreme Court's observation on the sanctity of NEET being affected amid allegations of a paper leak highlights a deeper issue: the test fails to ensure a level playing field. The concept of 'one nation, one test' needs urgent reconsideration. NEET's flaws — from paper leaks to technical glitches — jeopardise its integrity and disproportionately disadvantage underprivileged students. Merit should reflect societal good, not just test scores. NEET's single-test approach neglects essential qualities like empathy and dedication, which are crucial for future doctors. Moreover, the rise of commercial coaching centres exacerbates inequalities, favouring urban, affluent students over rural and economically disadvantaged ones. True meritocracy means providing equal opportunities for all students, considering diverse backgrounds and experiences. It's time to redefine merit in medical admissions to foster a more inclusive society.

SARGUNPREET KAUR, MOHALI

## Future of aspirants at stake

Apropos of the article 'NEET fails to provide a level playing field', the allegations of a paper leak and irregularities in the test should be addressed on priority. The National Testing Agency must come clean and take steps to avoid a repeat of the fiasco. The future of lakhs of students is at stake. This is not the first time that the integrity of an entrance test or a recruitment exam has come under the scanner. Haryana, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh have all been rocked by cheating scans. The onus is on the authorities concerned to allay the apprehensions of the candidates.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM

## Ensure fairness in entrance tests

Frequent paper leaks, partiality in recruitment tests and malpractices at centres call into question the integrity of testing agencies. It is incumbent on the National Testing Agency to restore public faith in the test. It must ensure transparency in the allotment of marks. Stringent action should be taken against those behind the leak to set a strong precedent. Technical glitches and delays in the frisking process at centres need to be looked into. Any widespread disruption in the test could affect the fortunes of numerous students and should hence be avoided. Fairness

and equality of opportunity in entrance exams and recruitment tests are the need of the hour.

ASHA RANI, YAMUNANAGAR

## Plug the gap in defence

Refer to 'No room for complacency along LAC', the article rightly underscores the urgent need for the new government to prioritise the requirements of our armed forces. China's continued military buildup along the LAC demands enhanced Indian intelligence and better defence capabilities. There has been a modest rise in budgetary allocation to defence, but it is still inadequate for significant acquisitions. Besides, the delayed implementation of an integrated theatre command structure is a cause for concern. The ineffective Agnipath scheme warrants an urgent and thorough review. The government must address these critical issues on a priority basis.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

## No peace in J&amp;K

The terrorist attack on a bus carrying pilgrims in Reasi and multiple encounters within this week have rattled not only Jammu and Kashmir but the entire nation. It is unfortunate that a CRPF jawan lost his life in Kathua district and five soldiers and two police officers sustained injuries in separate encounters. Innocent people are being gunned down in J&K. The BJP's decision not to contest in the Valley is an admission that the party's 'Naya Kashmir' policy is an abject failure. The government's claim of restoring normalcy in the region stands in stark contrast with the ground reality.

SK KHOSLA, CHANDIGARH

## Manipur a victim of BJP apathy

Refer to 'In Bhagwat's utterances after polls, signs of RSS-BJP unease'; the Sangh chief's belated remarks on the government's failure to resolve the crisis in the conflict-torn Manipur are welcome. Bhagwat's comment is a message to the Narendra Modi-led BJP government. It seems like the BJP's indifference to the ethnic turmoil that has roiled the northeastern state was the final straw for the RSS chief. The Sangh leadership should have nudged Modi to act when the first reports of violence had started to trickle in from Manipur. The PM must pay heed to the RSS chief's words before it is too late.

AVINASH GODBOLEY, DEWAS (MP)

## Draw lessons from Kuwait blaze to protect workers



**KP FABIAN**  
FORMER AMBASSADOR TO QATAR

A building with about 200 foreign workers, mainly from India — with Kerala and Tamil Nadu accounting for the majority — caught fire in the early hours of June 12 in Kuwait. According to a report from Kuwait, the fire broke out around 3.15 am. As the building lacked arrangements for fire-fighting, including a fire alarm, the blaze spread and some residents even tried to jump from the building. At least one person died in such a fatal jump. The fire was reportedly caused by a cooking gas cylinder that was being used by a security guard. The fire department was alerted at 4.30 am and fire extinguishers were promptly sent. The Kuwaiti Home Ministry got a report of the fire by 6 am.

The Kuwait Government has expressed condolences over the loss of 49 lives. Some senior officials of the municipality have been suspended for failing to ensure adherence to safety norms for buildings.

While we spontaneously think of the plight of the bereaved families and of the injured, we should apply our minds to the lessons to be learnt and the measures required to prevent recurrence of such a tragedy.

Let me share a few thoughts based on my professional association with the West Asian region starting from 1976, when I went to Teheran. Our embassies need a better set-up to look after the nine million of our compatriots there. Kuwait has around one million Indians, accounting for 30 per cent of the expatriate population and about 21 per cent of the total population.

The embassy website says that the labour section works from 8 am to 4 pm, Sunday to Thursday. Obviously, barring the security guard, no official will be available to attend to emergencies when the labour section is closed.

In this context, we need to raise a few questions. When did the Indian embassy get information about the fire incident? When did the Indian media get to know of the fire? Hours after it occurred. Why?

When I was in Doha (1992-97), we had cases of maids running away from home seeking shelter in the embassy. We had arranged for an official, preferably speaking the mother tongue of the maid, to come



**VISIT:** Ambassador Adarsh Swaika (left) with an injured worker at a hospital in Kuwait. PTI

to the embassy within half an hour. This arrangement was good 24x7.

In the present case, I rang up the helpline number of the embassy a couple of times. It was busy. Obviously, there should have been more than one number.

In this context, there is a good deal we in India can learn from the Philippines. When a Philippine citizen arrives in a West Asian country to work as a caregiver or maid, she is received at the airport by embassy officials. She is briefed about the country and how she can get in touch with the embassy in need. She goes to the

employer after a day or two. The embassy invariably has labour attachés holding a law degree.

There is no communication or coordination among the labour-exporting countries. Two years ago, I visited the region. I asked the first secretary in charge of consular work and labour welfare whether he attended a conference that the International Labour Organisation had recently organised in the city on the problems of migrant labour. He replied that he had not heard about the conference.

I asked him whether he met his counterparts from manpower-exporting coun-

tries to exchange views. The answer was in the negative.

The set-up in the Central Government, too, needs a reform. For a long time, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) handled the matter. Later, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs was established in 2004. It was dissolved in 2016 and the MEA resumed charge. There is only one Joint Secretary who is the Protector General of Emigrants, an office that was earlier with the Ministry of Labour.

The MEA organises well-choreographed annual Pravasi Day functions where the affluent members of the diaspora are feted and lauded. Has there been any conference on the problems facing the ABC (ayah, bearer, cook) part of the diaspora?

India is the leading country in South Asia and the leading voice of the Global South. What initiative has New Delhi taken to address the problems of the migrant labour globally? The idea that labour-exporting countries cannot work together as they are competing is wrong.

In the run-up to the 2022 Football World Cup in Qatar, many foreign workers died, mainly due to unsafe working conditions. I do not recall any in-depth investigation by the Indian media.

The Guardian of the UK investigated and concluded that 6,500 migrant work-

ers from South Asia had died, with India accounting for a good part thereof. We have not heard that India officially took up this matter with Qatar.

There is apathy in the government and the media. What can be done to remove that apathy? Any French citizen abroad can vote in the French elections. Let us extend this facility to Indian citizens abroad. If the workers in the Gulf can vote, we might expect our politicians, and consequently, the bureaucracy to take more interest in their welfare.

It might be argued that the Gulf monarchies would resent such a move. I doubt it. The matter deserves to be examined immediately.

The Central Government responded with alacrity once it came to know of the Kuwait tragedy. The Prime Minister chaired an emergency meeting. He sent Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh to Kuwait to oversee assistance to Indians injured in the mishap.

In the big evacuation of 1990-91 to bring back 176,000 Indians from Kuwait and Iraq, no minister had to visit Kuwait, except then External Affairs Minister IK Gujral, who oversaw the entire operation. He went there only once and did not interfere with the work of the Ambassador.

It is wrong to assume that labour-exporting countries cannot work together as they are competing with each other.

## Spate of terror attacks unlikely to derail electoral process in J&K



**DANISH YOUSUF**  
RESEARCH ASSISTANT, CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

THE fresh spate of terror attacks in the Jammu region marks a concerning trend. Historically, such attacks were primarily concentrated in the Kashmir valley. This shift to the Jammu side of Pir Panjal suggests a strategic change in tactics.

The terror strikes in Reasi, Doda and Kathua appear calculated to send out a political message and create chaos. Their timing, coinciding with the installation of the new government at the Centre, is aimed at undermining the government's narrative of achieving stability and normalcy in the region. The intention seems to be to disrupt the democratic process, as the Election Commission of India has begun the process of allotting symbols to parties and preparing for the Assembly elections.

While such actions are meant to foster fear and uncertainty, the fact is that the recent Lok Sabha elections did not witness violence in J&K and saw the highest turnout in 58.46 per cent.

The 2024 General Election in J&K was historic as it marked the first major electoral process in the region since August 2019, when the Government of India abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution, which granted J&K special status.

The elections were historic for two reasons. One, the most notable outcome was the dismantling of the longstanding perception that participating in polls was an act of betrayal, often referred to as 'gaddari'. This stigma had long discouraged many from voting, as they feared social ostracism or being labelled as traitors to the so-called cause of Kashmiri autonomy. This shift reflects a growing acceptance of democratic norms and a desire for political engagement among the populace. Two, the participation of young voters was another critical aspect of this election. For the first time in many years, there was a substantial turnout of young people.

This election was also historic because it managed to satisfy diverse political aspirations in one way or another. Despite being relatively new to the political scene in Kashmir, the BJP managed to make inroads. The party's success lies in its ability to challenge the entrenched political dominance of two prominent families — the Abdullahs and the Muftis. Although the perceived BJP proxies — Sajad Ghani Lone



**SHIFTING SANDS:** The emergence of Engineer Rashid is a proclamation of democracy's triumph in the Valley. PTI

and Altaf Bukhari — did not win, the mere fact that the traditional political strongholds were shaken is a significant achievement for the saffron party. One of the most profound impacts of this election is the emergence of alternative politics in the region. This is crucial as it opens up the political arena to new actors and ideas, which is essential for a healthy democracy.

The election of Engineer Rashid, who defeated former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, is a loud proclamation of democracy's triumph in the Valley. Rashid, who has been lodged in Delhi's Tihar Jail since 2019 for alleged terror funding, capitalised on a wave

of sympathy votes across north Kashmir. The National Investigation Agency had filed a case against him for raising and receiving funds through illegal means, including *hawala*, to support separatist and terrorist activities in J&K. Rashid's victory is not just a personal success but a symbol of the people's desire for a new political narrative, free from the clutches of dynastic politics.

Rashid is a two-time former MLA from north Kashmir's Langate Assembly segment. In his earlier avatar, he was considered a close confidante of slain Hurriyat leader and People's Conference founder Abdul Ghani Lone, Sajad's father. Rashid broke away and made a significant impact by

winning the 2008 and 2014 Assembly elections. Rashid's victory dismantled the political legacy that Sajad and his father had established since 1967. His release from jail could further enhance the BJP's position by fostering alternative political voices.

Rashid's release, provided that he is able to counter the charges against him, will be a critical moment in Kashmir's political evolution. It could signify the end of the dominance of traditional political parties, particularly the National Conference (NC). Rashid's ideology, often considered a deviation from the mainstream, could be re-evaluated in a more pragmatic light, given the evolving political dynamics in the Valley. The political scenario in Kashmir has evolved significantly over the past five years. The fact that even the Jamaat-e-Islami — traditionally seen as a separatist organisation — had expressed its willingness to contest elections underscores the changing dynamics in the Valley.

Rashid, along with many others, appears willing to work within a transformed environment, acknowledging the evolving political realities and the necessity for a more inclusive and democratic approach. The possibility of the government considering Rashid's release stems from the failure of the BJP's perceived proxies to create a substantial alternative. Rashid's release could further bolster the BJP's

efforts to establish a new political paradigm in the Valley.

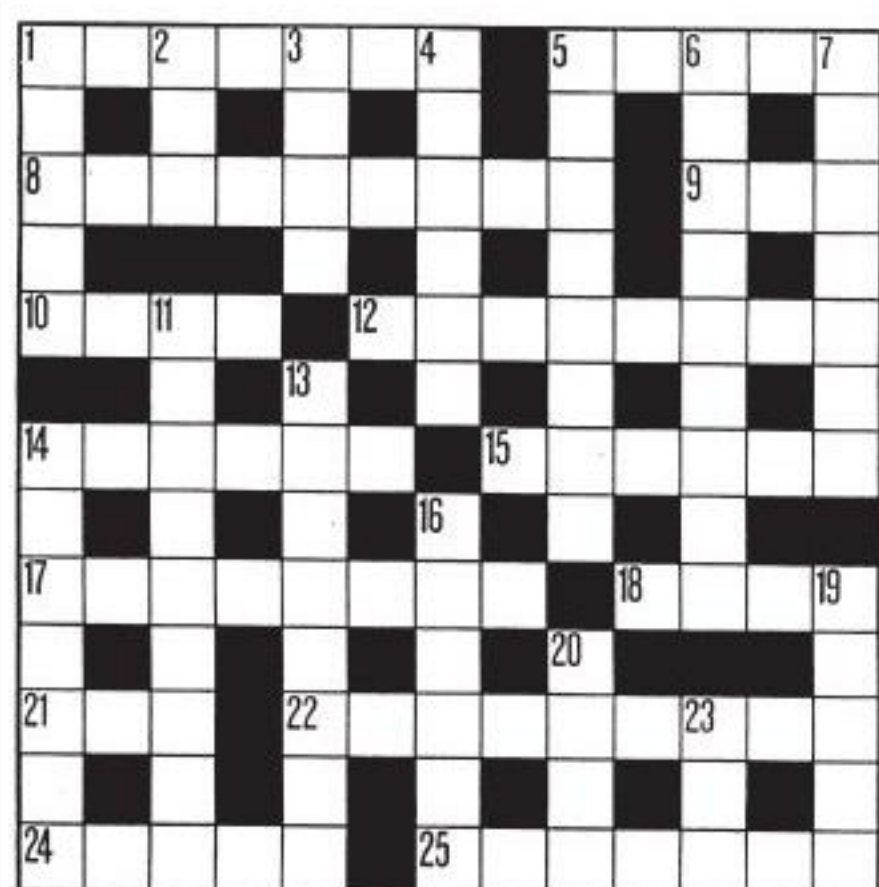
The election also brought to light a significant shift in public sentiment towards the right to vote. For several years, Kashmiris were deprived of this fundamental right. The boycott of elections in the past only served to reinforce the dominance of traditional political parties. This time, however, the high turnout demonstrated a collective determination to reclaim democratic rights and participate in the electoral process.

Whether the BJP, the NC or the People's Democratic Party won or lost, the true winner of this election was democracy. This poll was a testament to the people's desire for change and a better future. The BJP's success in fostering alternative politics is something that the Congress could never achieve, highlighting a fundamental shift in the region's political landscape.

As the UT looks forward to the Assembly polls, the General Election has not only restored the democratic process but also laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and representative political environment in Kashmir. The terror attacks in the Jammu region are intended to delay the elections and create a sense of unrest. However, such attempts are unlikely to succeed, given the clear signal that the people of Jammu and Kashmir are fully committed to democracy.

The BJP's success in fostering alternative politics is something that the Congress could not achieve, highlighting a fundamental shift in the region's political dynamics.

### QUICK CROSSWORD



#### ACROSS

- 1 A great success (7)
- 5 Tree of Acer genus (5)
- 8 Documentation (9)
- 9 After all deductions (3)
- 10 Dejected (4)
- 12 Competitor with little chance (4,4)
- 14 A monastery (6)
- 15 Solid content (6)
- 17 State of being forgotten (8)
- 18 Regularly traversed round (4)
- 21 Do wrong (3)
- 22 Sacred writings (9)
- 24 Slightly unwell (5)
- 25 Uneasy (7)

#### Yesterday's solution

**Across:** 1 Untoward, 5 Oslo, 9 Large, 10 Prairie, 11 Fully-fledged, 13 Athens, 14 Jordan, 17 Stand a chance, 20 Fanfare, 21 Inane, 22 Lull, 23 Interest.

**Down:** 1 Ugly, 2 Through, 3 Wheel and deal, 4 Rip off, 6 Sprig, 7 Overdone, 8 Take for a ride, 12 Parsifal, 15 Dictate, 16 Screen, 18 Annul, 19 Next.

#### DOWN

- 1 Slightly warm (5)
- 2 Mischievous child (3)
- 3 To notice (4)
- 4 Bringer of bad luck (6)
- 5 Substantiate (4,4)
- 6 A dwelling on a roof (9)
- 7 Designate (7)
- 11 In a more prominent form (4,5)
- 13 Grotesque misrepresentation (8)
- 14 Extraordinary ability (7)
- 16 The next day (6)
- 19 Set foot (5)
- 20 Stimulus (4)
- 23 Prefix indicating one (3)

### SU DO KU

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

#### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

#### CALENDAR

JUNE 14, 2024, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Jyeshtha Shaka 24
- Aashadh Purnimite 1
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 8, up to 12:05 am
- Siddhi Yoga up to 7:07 pm
- Uttarphalguni Nakshatra
- Moon enters Virgo sign 11:55 am

### FORECAST

CITY	FRIDAY SATURDAY	
	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	44	29
New Delhi	44	30
Amritsar	45	29
Bathinda	45	27
Jalandhar	45	27
Ludhiana	45	30
Bhiwani	40	31
Hisar	44	31
Sirsa	44	32
Dharamsala	36	26
Manali	30	15
Shimla	29	21
Srinagar	28	15
Jammu	44	28
Kargil	25	12
Leh	22	08
Dehradun	41	26
Mussoorie	30	20