



## Call for consensus

Parliament should give room for extended debates and disagreements

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has pledged to govern by consensus even as the 18th Lok Sabha began its first session. The ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Opposition INDIA bloc have both reiterated their rhetoric on protecting the Constitution, which was one of the central themes of the recent campaign during the 2024 general election. While both sides say they seek consensus, and are loyal to the Constitution, a demonstration of any convergence between them on any key question of governance or politics, unfortunately, remains elusive. The first session was in fact marked by mutual hostility that carried over from the campaign. The NDA and the INDIA bloc sparred over the selection of the *pro tem* Speaker and now appear set for a face-off over the Speaker's post. The Opposition has expressed willingness to support the NDA's candidate in return for the post of Deputy Speaker. In the past, the Deputy Speaker's post has mostly gone to a member of the Opposition. In the 16th Lok Sabha, the post went to the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam; and in the 17th Lok Sabha, the post remained vacant for its entire term, unprecedented in the history of Indian Parliament. The BJP remains non-committal on supporting an Opposition candidate for Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Modi's call for consensus and parliamentary debates can be a reassuring sign of a healthy democracy, but only if that statement is translated into tangible action. Union Minister Rajnath Singh, who has emerged as the government's key interlocutor, has reached out to Opposition leaders, and such interactions should become frequent. Consensus may be unachievable in many instances, and may not even be necessary in some cases. By demonstrating a commitment to sharing power within the ruling alliance and with the Opposition, Mr. Modi could expand his political authority and legitimacy. Beyond the limited tactical question of the stability of the government, in which the BJP is shy of a majority by 32 seats, the building of coalitions should be treated as a cornerstone of India's progress and prosperity. The first session of the new Lok Sabha should set the tone for extended debates, more room for disagreements and the pursuit of common ground across parties. The proceedings of the House and of Committees fell short on these counts during the last two terms of the Lok Sabha. As the leader of the ruling coalition, the BJP should demonstrate a renewed commitment to the norms and substance of Parliament and the Opposition should respond constructively.

## Free man

Assange deserves his freedom, but his conviction is a setback for free speech

Julian Assange did what journalists do in free societies. He published troves of secret documents exposing the conduct of America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and of its diplomacy. And for that, he was denied his freedom for more than 14 years. The hounding of Mr. Assange is a rare modern story of western democracies across the Atlantic, which take pride in their freedoms, working hand in hand to punish a journalist, publisher and whistle-blower. The WikiLeaks founder was first arrested in Britain in 2010 on a European warrant over sex crime allegations reported in Sweden – those charges were later dropped. While on bail, he took asylum in the Ecuador embassy in London, where he was holed up until 2019. He was kicked out of the embassy, and Britain rearrested him and put him in the high-security Belmarsh prison. After five years of life in jail, where he was largely confined to a solitary cell, the U.S. entered into a plea deal with Mr. Assange, that would set him free. The 52-year-old will plead guilty in the espionage case before a U.S. federal judge in Saipan, the capital of the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. Commonwealth territory in the western Pacific. According to U.S. and British media, Mr. Assange is expected to be sentenced for about five years, the time he has already served in Britain. He will then go to Australia, his native country.

While Mr. Assange's release, which brings his years-long ordeal to an end and is a reprieve for those who have been fighting for him, is welcome news, the road towards this day was not smooth. The way he is being released still raises concerns. The classified documents WikiLeaks published were handed to Mr. Assange by Chelsea Manning, a U.S. military analyst. Ms. Manning was sentenced to 35 years in prison after being convicted of violating the Espionage Act. U.S. President Barack Obama commuted her sentence, allowing her to go free in 2017, but Mr. Assange remained unfree. The Trump Justice Department indicted him in 2019 on 18 counts. And the Biden administration continued to push for his extradition, which he fought doggedly. Last year, Australia's Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese urged the U.S. to conclude the case, while lawmakers there passed a resolution this year calling for Mr. Assange to be allowed to return home. In recent years, the case has also become a public relations disaster for Joe Biden's Democratic administration. So when Mr. Assange agreed to plead guilty, all sides found a deal to conclude the case that would get the U.S. a conviction which it had been seeking and Mr. Assange his freedom. Yet, the fact that Mr. Assange would be convicted for publishing state secrets is a setback for free speech. And the pursuit of a whistle-blower for over 14 years would remain a blot on western democracies, especially the U.K. and the U.S., forever.

The high-level security meet on Manipur convened by the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, in New Delhi on June 17, 2024, was loudly conspicuous by its exclusion of the Manipur Chief Minister, N. Biren Singh. It also threw light on the way the Centre has been handling the violent ethnic clashes in Manipur between two of its major communities, the Meitei and Kuki-Zo tribes. There seem to be no signs of respite even after a year of bloodletting. It seems to confirm the long-held suspicion that there has been undeclared President's Rule in the State, with the Manipur government having been placed in virtual animated suspension.

Those invited for the meeting included Indian Army Chief Manoj Pande, Army Chief-designate Lieutenant General Upendra Dwivedi, Union Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla and Intelligence Bureau director Tapan Kumar Deka. From the State were the Director General of Police Manipur, Rajiv Singh, and the Security Adviser, Kuldeip Singh – both brought in from outside the State and appointed to these posts in the wake of the outbreak of violence on May 3, 2023. As a media columnist pointed, also conspicuously absent were officers from Manipur's stakeholder communities.

Considering that this meeting had quickly followed another one Mr. Shah had had in New Delhi with the Manipur Governor, Anusuiya Uikey, speculations were rife that this was a prelude to a formal invocation of Article 365 to impose a spell of President's Rule in the State. This anticipation, however, proved premature, as it is now clear that the meeting merely chalked out a strategy to contain the violence so that a dialogue process between the two warring communities can be initiated.

### The messaging about the State government

Not long after the ethnic violence broke out, it had become clear that the State government was no longer in charge. First, there was a viral news that Article 355 had been imposed in the State, passing on the State government's responsibility of law-and-order upkeep to the Centre. This was later officially denied. Still, from the patterns of security deployments and operations henceforth, it was more than apparent that the State government had been almost sidelined. For instance, Mr. Biren Singh was unceremoniously removed from the customary chairmanship of the unified command of the different security establishments in the State by an order of the Governor on May 31, 2023. Only his power to summon meetings of this body was retained.

It was probably unintentional, but in noisy



Pradip Phanjoubam

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cross-questioning in the Lok Sabha on August 9, 2023, during the no-confidence motion faced by the then National Democratic Alliance government, Mr. Shah when asked why the Manipur Chief Minister had still not been removed, again gave a glimpse of 'this unofficial Central rule'. In a Freudian slip, he said that there was no need for this as the Chief Minister was "cooperating" with the Centre.

Earlier, when Mr. Shah made his first trip to Manipur on May 29, 2023, after a fortnight of full punctuating the outbreak of mayhem in the State, violence again exploded in several places along the foothills. Mr. Shah made another declaration. There was to be a buffer zone along the foothills where the Imphal valley meets the surrounding hills. And, the hills were to be looked after by central forces while the State police were for the valley.

This may have been well-intentioned, but it proved to be ill-conceived. Probably, the assumption was that separating the warring communities would freeze the feud, and that normalcy would return. But when the conflict dragged on longer than anticipated, several unanticipated consequences became obvious. For one, the Meiteis, now confined in the valley, began to suspect the central forces, especially the Assam Rifles, of siding with the Kuki-Zos in the hills. And, conversely, the Kuki-Zos began viewing the State police as partisan to the Meiteis. This is despite the fact that the Assam Rifles has several Meitei officers and troopers, just as the Manipur police constabularies draw their recruits from the many communities in the State. These forces may just have been doing their brief, but amidst the dangerous and hateful passions, they ended up being coloured with communal hues.

### The drift

The wisdom in the cliched adage that peace is not merely the absence of violence seems to have been completely missed. The absence of violence does give a semblance of normalcy, but when no efforts are made alongside to identify the underlying causes of discord and put them to rest, a single spark – intentional or accidental – can cause an inferno. This has been the pattern of clashes in Manipur's year of mayhem so far.

Today, the number of central and State forces in Manipur is estimated to be about 70,000 personnel. Yet, the outlook of unofficial President's Rule in Manipur has been to manage and moderate the feud, so as to keep the damage minimal and not resolve it. It is bewildering to wonder why no move has been made yet to clamp down on both sides of the fence, using proportionate and legitimate force, to establish

With the conflict dragging on, even the idea of victim and perpetrator has become blurred amidst an elusive peace

# India needs the anchor of a national security strategy

The new National Democratic Alliance government faces some thorny old problems in national security. It will have to make decisions – or else continue to defer them – on everything from whether to build another aircraft carrier, to the process of implementing theaterisation, to managing strategic relations with the United States and competition with China. How will the coalition government, with competing demands on its resources and attention, make those decisions?

Its best option is to step back and consider national security holistically, from first principles. It should not consider this reform or that relationship in a piecemeal, haphazard way; that would risk wasting scarce resources and undermining national goals. It should, instead, commit to a new rubric for making these decisions – it should commit to writing a National Security Strategy (NSS).

Most powerful states publish some form of national security strategy. India does not. Consequently, its capability investment decisions are made by haggling between the military services. Plans and priorities get stuck in well-worn grooves, and are never systematically re-evaluated. Grand strategic vision becomes concentrated in the hands of a few individuals at the apex of government, where it gets hidden behind closed doors, or crowded out by other political whims.

### Many strategic risks

India cannot afford to be so reactive. The world is throwing up a slew of strategic risks, from climate change to pandemics, which require decades of coordinated policy effort to address. China alone represents an unprecedented array of interconnected challenges, from an explosive naval build-up, to geoeconomic clout in South Asia, to leverage in global supply chains. And even distant conflicts, from Ukraine to Gaza, are revealing new technologies and tactics of war that will invariably spread to India's neighbourhood.



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India needs a regular process to make sense of this tumult and plan for it.

### A blueprint for expanding power

A regular and well-crafted NSS would give India five critical benefits that it currently lacks. First and logically foremost, it would force the government to undertake a comprehensive strategic assessment – a review of the country's threats and opportunities, and a stocktake of global security trends. Such a periodic review would force New Delhi to spotlight evolving challenges, such as the growth of the Chinese navy, even though it does not pose an urgent and lethal threat today. In the absence of an NSS, long-term threats will be neglected until they pose an immediate and grave threat – when they will be much harder to manage.

Second, an NSS would provide a coherent framework for long-term planning. Strategic competition requires intense work in peacetime, to conceptualise how best to secure India's expanding interests and deter its adversaries, and then to develop the requisite military capabilities and international partnerships. An NSS, done rigorously, would give the government an overarching strategic blueprint to adjudicate, for example, between the Indian Navy demanding a new aircraft carrier, or the Indian Army seeking to raise a new infantry division. In the absence of such a process, scarce resources may get wasted on vanity projects with comparatively little strategic value, and the military services left scrambling to fill capability gaps with emergency procurements.

Third, an NSS would provide an instrument for signalling to friend and foe alike. It would help to clarify India's strategic intent – declaring that, for example, India takes seriously its role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean, so that it will counter armed coercion against other, smaller countries.

Equally valuable, an NSS would also clarify India's policy for its partners, highlighting areas

of converging interests, or explaining the limits on cooperation – to help mitigate instances of mismatched expectations.

Fourth, an NSS would create a mechanism to force various arms of the government to synchronise their efforts. Within the military, an NSS would give the Integrated Defence Staff and future joint organisations a clearer top-down mandate to better align the work of the Indian Army, Indian Air Force, and Indian Navy. Beyond the military, an NSS would provide common goals and plans so that various national security agencies, including the Ministries of Defence, External Affairs, and Home Affairs, and the intelligence agencies, could better coordinate daily at the working level, rather than episodically at the Cabinet level.

Issue of accountability Finally, an NSS would introduce a novel accountability tool, to ensure that the bureaucracy adheres to the political leadership's intent, and that the government's policies are as transparent as possible to Parliament and the people. The citizens of India have a legitimate need to know how their government is planning to safeguard their national security, and how well it is performing.

Some national security strategies are better than others. A fully effective strategy should be a public document issued with the imprimatur of the Prime Minister, because its purpose is to synchronise efforts widely across government, and credibly signal the government's political intent throughout the country and the world. A strong NSS would not automatically resolve conflicts between various arms of the government, but it should at least identify trade-offs and opportunity costs, so that political leaders can make rational decisions for long-term growth. In that way, an NSS would offer the intellectual scaffolding that is absolutely necessary for India to become one of the world's leading powers.

With so many lives and properties having been lost already, asking people who have suffered these losses to come to terms with their losses and move on, especially when it involves loved ones, is never going to be easy. But there is no other way than for those who have suffered to see their trauma being shared by their adversaries. And in the acknowledgment of this shared suffering, find the empathy bond and, ultimately, common redemption in tragedy.

The country must have a regular process to make sense of growing global tumult and plan for it

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### 'Will work for consensus'

The Prime Minister's "aggressive note", that his government "Will work for consensus in Parliament, says Modi" (Page 1, June 25), is befuddling. Has the top leader forgotten that he needs to shun "double speak"? Right now, Modi phraseology is about one-way traffic. In the coalition government that he runs, the most important portfolios are with the BJP. The *pro tem* Speaker

selection too has been his/the party's choice. Mr. Modi has already enjoyed two stints as Prime Minister. In his third term, he could accommodate fine gestures and democratic values.

P.K. Sharma, Barnala, Punjab

### Water seepage

The Prime Minister took a personal interest in the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, and the inauguration was grand.

Alas, the gigantic structure now has flaws (Inside pages, "Chief priest complains of water seepage in Ayodhya Ram Temple", June 25). The traditional *Agama Shastra* does not seem to have been followed in the temple's construction

D. Sethuraman, Chennai

The report reminded me of something that is fundamental to the Indian way of life. My friend

constructed a house some years ago and the structure was one of unmatched extravagance. Soon, the problems emerged. The expensive ornate windows and doors would not close properly. The drainage had many issues. The list can go on. We in India pay more attention to creating an impression, with needless extravagance, when close attention ought to be paid to the minute details. Only then can there be quality.

Does anyone care?  
Mohan Das, Bengaluru

Nothing seems to be going right for the government, from competitive entrance examinations to the quality of temple construction. Ancient Indian temples have stood for hundreds of years without any issue because that were built out of devotion. Not for votes.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee, Faridabad, Haryana

### Food packaging

Unwrapping a biscuit pack in today's world is about getting past layers of plastic laminates. In my younger days, biscuits came wrapped in biodegradable, environment-friendly butter paper or paper fluted board and were crispy with a good shelf-life. The Pollution Control boards must focus on the use of plastics in food wrappers.

Dinar L. Barros, Betalbatim, Goa

# Preventing another NEET fiasco

**D**uring the National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test (NEET) this year, scores and ranks were inflated. As a consequence, many candidates may not get admission to their desired college as predicted based on previous years' scores. Coaching and admission counselling centres, typically run by business tycoons, have realised that clients, the NEET aspirants, have failed to secure preferred seats despite their advice. However, despite this fiasco, the industry has found a way to enhance their brand value through media and social media coverage. The owners of this trillion-rupee industry, along with the 23 lakh NEET aspirants this year, are up in arms. Their hypothesis is that mapping scores to ranks cannot vary very widely from previous years. In this conundrum, various allegations of cheating and paper leakage, amongst others, have been raised. Despite numerous crackdowns and investigations, paper leakage in medical admission exams remains a persistent issue.



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governance in the form of foolproof and complete Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and their compliance. There cannot be any weak link in the chain of operations from setting question papers to conducting the exam to admissions. However, there are many weak links, as seen from the distribution of the wrong question paper at some centres, for example. Reportedly, some centres distributed the back-up question paper instead of the primary paper. How were both sets – the primary and the secondary/back-up question papers – accessed almost simultaneously? Were they accessed from banks' strongrooms or another reserve? How was the back-up question paper set taken from the banks' strongrooms without any emergency circumstances or protocols? There are several unanswered questions about the authorisation and attitude of the officials concerned. This seemingly inconsequential event is actually of enormous consequence and could give us an idea of how the exam was conducted this year.

This one error led to a cascade of errors. A wrong question paper was distributed, subsequently taken back along with the Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) sheet, thus creating panic among the candidates. The correct question paper was then distributed, and no additional time was given for the time lost. Then, exceptionally huge grace marks were awarded for the time lost, which was later scrapped due to a public outcry. Each of the above demonstrates the need for critical SOPs for complete governance of the exam, which includes several stakeholders such as those who set the question paper, translators, reviewers, the printing press, officials at examination centers, banks' strongrooms, and invigilators. Any loose links in this chain have the potential for malpractices. Only proper investigation may reveal any substantial wrongdoing. Despite all the above pitfalls, it

is commendable that the National Testing Agency (NTA) voluntarily disclosed most of the information, as per Section 4 of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005. Since the declaration of NEET 2024, the NTA has disclosed the most relevant information through its press releases. In addition, the NTA has followed SOPs for disclosure of answer keys, collecting feedback about wrong questions and answer keys, disclosure of the individual OMR sheet, and self-evaluation of one's score, which seem to have worked with no issues at all.

### The way forward

It is on record that these SOPs were developed and directed through a decade-long (2006-2015) protracted legal battle by the author of this article in the Supreme Court and High Courts to ensure transparency and develop well-defined rational SOPs for admissions to the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). In one such judgment, the Supreme Court observed in 2011, "In fact the action taken by the appellants in challenging the procedure for JEE 2006, their attempts to bring in transparency in the procedure by various RTI applications, and the debate generated by the several views of experts during the course of the writ proceedings, have helped in making the merit ranking process more transparent and accurate." However, this alone is not enough for NEET. The NTA should devise SOPs to get stabilised cut-offs, as done by the IITs, avoid inflated scores and ranks, and achieve a long-tail distribution. It should work to replace ad-hocism with well-defined, sound, and secure SOPs. It should follow a professional war-room culture to facilitate quick and sound decision-making during the entire process. As the Supreme Court said in 2011, "The selection process requires to be upgraded and fine-tuned year after year with periodic changes... so that the selection process and examination remain relevant and meaningful."

**No room for weak links** Since its inception, NEET has emerged as the largest exam in the 'One Exam, One Nation' model because of the number of candidates taking the exam, the number of languages the exam is conducted in, and the diversity of various other factors. The quality of education and the college fees payable are critical factors that vary widely. A seat in a top government college with good quality education could cost a few lakhs, whereas a seat in a private college could cost a few crores. Moreover, parents are willing to go beyond their means to secure higher ranks for their children in these competitive exams, as the family's reputation is considered to hinge on this. Thus, the stakes in NEET are incredibly high, making it vulnerable to irregularities, accidental or intentional. Therefore, we need strong

The stakes in NEET are incredibly high. Therefore, we need strong governance in the form of foolproof and complete Standard Operating Procedures and their compliance

# The persistent problem of toxic liquor

The State government does not seem to have learned lessons from the past

### STATE OF PLAY

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**T**he hooch tragedy on June 18 at Kallakurichi in Tamil Nadu, which has claimed 59 lives so far, has caused major embarrassment to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)-led front, which has been celebrating its superlative performance in the Lok Sabha elections.

This is the second such tragedy in the last two years in the State. Just last year, 22 people died and 45 were hospitalised in Viluppuram and Chengalpattu districts after consuming toxic alcohol. This time, the death toll is much higher. So is the number of people who have been hospitalised (more than 150). Ironically, the government had informed the Assembly in 2023, before the deaths occurred, that there had been "no hooch tragedies in the State" in the last 14 years due to its "zero tolerance" policy towards blending units. Significantly, during 10 of those 14 years in question, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), now the principal Opposition party in the Assembly, was in power.

As was the case in 2023, action has been taken against police and other officials this time too. More than half a dozen people have been arrested so far. The victims predominantly belonged to Scheduled Castes and other vulnerable groups in society. Apart from announcing a solatium of ₹10 lakh each to the families of the deceased and ₹50,000 for those undergoing treatment, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has ordered the constitution of a one-man commission headed by Justice B. Gokuldas, a former High Court judge, to con-

duct an inquiry into the incident. The government has also offered to support the education of children in the villages affected by the tragedy. This is a change in approach by the DMK: in 1996, when people died after drinking contaminated liquor in Pudukottai, Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, Mr. Stalin's father, ruled out compensation to the victims and their families arguing that it could be construed as encouragement for people following the wrong path. Methanol has been cited as the cause of many such incidents, at least since 1990. When it was found to be the main reason for hooch tragedies in 2002, the liquid chemical was brought within the ambit of the Tamil Nadu Prohibition Act, 1937. Yet, it was once again cited as the cause of the 2023 incident, too.

The residents of Kallakurichi knew well that spurious liquor was being sold and consumed. It is hard to believe that the government was completely unaware of the prevalence and spread of the problem. It is said that products sold through the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) are priced higher than illicit liquor, which is why people prefer the latter. It is not yet known whether the Intelligence Wing of the police tipped the authorities of the likelihood of the May 2023 episode recurring. Leading a demonstration in Kallakurichi

on June 24, AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami claimed that his fellow legislator from the area, M. Senthilkumar, had not only tried to move a calling attention motion in the Assembly last year on this issue, but even alerted the police officer concerned, a few days before the tragedy occurred at Kallakurichi.

Data of the last three decades show that hooch tragedies have invariably occurred in north Tamil Nadu. In other words, they have taken place within a radius of 200-250 km from Chennai, the capital of the State. It is also pertinent to note that in the last 10 years or so, other southern States have not reported any comparable incident of this nature. On June 21, Mr. Stalin informed the Assembly that the methanol used at Kallakurichi to produce the hooch was brought from Pudukcherry.

While the whole incident requires deeper scrutiny, the Opposition has demanded that the Chief Minister resign and the case be transferred to the Central Bureau of Investigation. While hearing a petition filed by the AIADMK, the Madras High Court wondered whether any lessons had been learned from the previous incidents and any preventive action taken to avert them. The founder of the Naam Tamilar Katchi, Seeman, argued that instead of using the taxpayers' money, the government should have made bootleggers pay the compensation.

The State government does not seem to have learned lessons from the past. Meanwhile, the Opposition parties, which performed disastrously in the Lok Sabha elections because of division within their ranks, continue to operate in silos to highlight the government's failure on the Kallakurichi incident.

# Lack of focus, not finance, behind sluggish Kavach deployment

Under 2% of the Indian Railways' yearly capital expenditure is enough to implement Kavach across all engines and tracks in 10 years

### DATA POINT

**Mahima Rao,**  
**Sambavi Parthasarathy,**  
**Vignesh Radhakrishnan**

**T**he railway accident on June 17 involving the Seal-dah-bound Kanchenjunga Express and a goods train in Darjeeling, West Bengal, has once brought focus to the absence of 'Kavach', India's Automatic Train Protection (ATP) system. Ten people died in the incident. On average, 80 people are killed annually in train collisions in India (Chart 1).

Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw reviewed the progress of an advanced version of the ATP Kavach 4.0 a week after the accident. He directed the installation to be taken up in "mission mode". Data show that availability of funds is not the worry for implementing Kavach; the issue lies with the pace at which it is being deployed.

Kavach can warn loco pilots if the train is at risk of overshooting the signal at red. It also has the capability of automatically applying the brakes if the loco pilot fails to reduce the speed below a certain limit. The three systems needed to implement Kavach are Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags placed in the tracks; the engine setup with RFID readers, a computer, and brake interface equipment; and radio towers installed at railway stations. The cost of installing Kavach in the tracks, including station equipment, is ₹50 lakh per kilometre. It costs ₹70 lakh to fit the equipment in one engine.

The route length of the Indian Railways is approximately 68,000 km. The cost of equipping Kavach on this route is about ₹34,000 crore (68,000 km X ₹50 lakh). There are about 15,200 diesel and electric engines in the Railways network. The cost of equipping the total fleet is ₹10,640 crore

(15,200 engines X ₹70 lakh). In total, it costs about ₹45,000 crore to implement the system across all the tracks and in all the engines. Given that the job will require skilled labour, specially designed equipment, and traffic diversion during implementation, assuming a 10-year window for deployment would mean that the yearly cost would be ₹4,500 crore.

The capital expenditure budget of the Railways increased substantially in the past few years to peak at ₹2,52,000 crore in FY25 (Chart 2). Even assuming that there is no increase in this amount in the next 10 years, the yearly cost of deploying Kavach is still less than 2% of the capital expenditure every year (₹4,500 crore/₹2,52,000 crore). This shows that covering the entire Railways network with Kavach would require only a small fraction of the Railways' budget.

The current rate of progress of installation of Kavach is sluggish. Field trials on passenger trains started in February 2016. Three firms were approved to supply the equipment in 2018-19. Kavach was adopted as the national ATP system in July 2020. As Chart 3 shows, until February this year, of the 68,000 km of route length (Rkm), Kavach has only been installed on 1,465 Rkm (close to 2% of the total). Of a total of about 15,200 diesel and electric locos, only 139 are equipped with Kavach (less than 1% of the total).

Even if we were to assume that the government did this in one year instead of four years (2020 to 2024), it would take another 46 years to deploy this system across all route km (68,000/1,465) and at least a hundred years to install Kavach in all engines (15,200/139) at the current pace. To be able to complete the installation of Kavach in 10 years, the pace will have to be increased to 6,800 Rkm/year for the tracks and 1,500 locos/year. Table 4 lists the calculations.

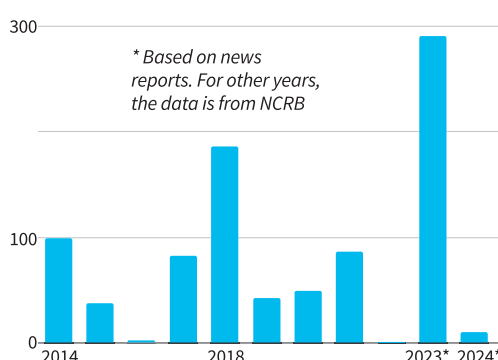
Mahima Rao is an intern with The Hindu

## On a slow track

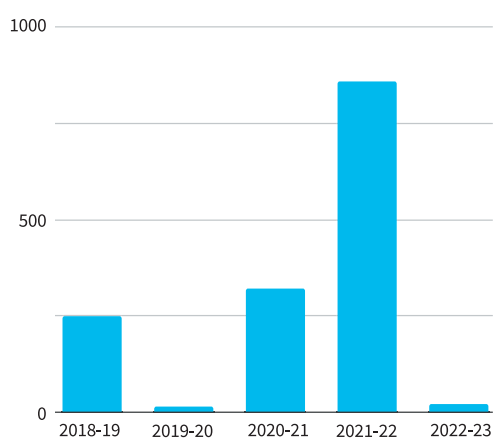
The data for the charts were sourced from the NCRB, the Press Information Bureau, and India Budget



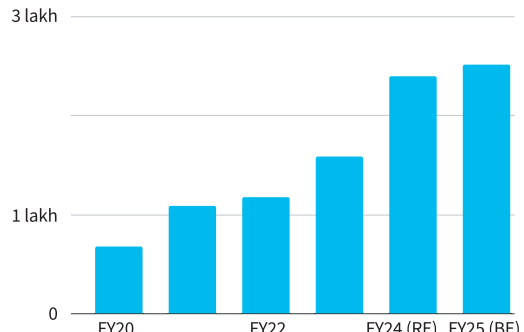
**Chart 1:** Number of people killed annually in train collisions in India



**Chart 3:** The deployment of Kavach annually in route kilometres (Rkm)



**Chart 2:** The Indian Railways' capital expenditure budget increased substantially in the past few years to peak at ₹2,52,000 crore in FY25



**Table 4:** The table shows key numbers involved to estimate the pace and cost of implementing the Kavach system

Parameter	Track	Loco
Cost per unit	50 lakh per Rkm	70 lakh per engine
Final goal	68,000 Rkm	15,200 engines
Total cost	₹34,000 crore	₹10,640 crore
Combined cost	~ ₹45,000 crore	
Coverage achieved till Feb. 2024	1,465 Rkm	139 engines
Years it will take at current pace*	46 years	100 years
Required pace to achieve goal in 10 years	6,800 Rkm/year	1,500 locos/year

\* Assuming that the government implemented Kavach along the 1,465 Rkm and in 139 engines in one year instead of four years (2020 to 2024)

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### The Hindustani

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 26, 1974

## Sikkim ruler in Delhi for talks on new Constitution

New Delhi, June 25: The Chogyal of Sikkim arrived here to-night for discussion with the Government of India on the new Constitution for the Himalayan Kingdom. The Chogyal left Gangtok early this morning with some senior officials in the wake of the State-wide protest, launched by the supporters of the Sikkim Congress against his reluctance to give assent to the new Constitution Bill.

The draft Constitution sought to usher in a democratic set-up which implied considerable curtailment of the Chogyal's powers and position. The Sikkim ruler is reported to have felt that some of the provisions went against the Indo-Sikkimese Treaty of 1950.

The Chogyal is expected to put forward his case in detail when he meets the Prime Minister and the External Affairs Minister here tomorrow.

From the observations he made to pressmen soon after his arrival here it was clear that he had strong reservations on the draft Constitution. He contended that the Assembly had not yet passed the resolution containing its recommendations on the Bill, he added. He also denied that during his last visit to Delhi he had indicated his consent to the clauses in the draft Constitution. According to him, he had told the Indian authorities that he would study the draft and convey his comments to the Prime Minister.

The Sikkim Ruler denied that he was holding back from signing the draft Constitution Bill. Asked about the delay in giving his assent to it, he replied that the Bill went before the Assembly on June 20 for consideration and its recommendations had now come to him in the form of a resolution. "It has not been discussed as a Bill yet. These recommendations are receiving my consideration. It will take a little time as you will appreciate that it is a constitutional matter," he added.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 26, 1924

## The "Advocate of India"

Bombay, June 25: The "Advocate of India", an oldest English evening daily paper of Bombay, the property of Messrs. F.F. Gordon Ltd. in liquidation, was sold by auction this evening. Bidding opened at Rs. 70,000 and closed at a lakh and a quarter at which price the property was secured jointly by Messrs. D.R. Vaidya, Architect and R.F. Munshi, Barrister.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

**NEWS IN NUMBERS**

**Medical evacuations hindered by Rafah crossing closure**

**2,000** The closure of the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza has prevented medical evacuations, Rik Peepker, the WHO representative said. REUTERS

**The amount the U.S. is expected to send to Ukraine**

**150** in \$ million. The U.S. said that it will be sending an additional amount of critical munitions to Ukraine, while Russia accuses Ukraine of using U.S.- provided munitions to strike inside Russia. AP

**The number of people still affected by the Assam flood**

**1.7** in lakh. The flood situation in Assam improved on Tuesday as the water level of major rivers receded with declining rainfall and the number of people reeling under the deluge decreased to 1.7 lakh. PTI

**The benchmark Sensex hits historic levels**

**78,164** points. Benchmark Sensex soared 823.63 points to breach the historic 78,000 level for the first time on buying in blue-chip bank stocks. PTI

**Kerala urges Centre to release overdue grant for NHM**

**637** in ₹ crore. Kerala urged the Centre to sanction the first instalment of the current financial year for the National Health Mission (NHM) in the State. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Analysing Maharashtra's water crisis

Why do different regions of Maharashtra experience varied levels of water stress? Why is sugarcane production not suited for regions with less rainfall? What is meant by the rain-shadow effect? How can supply-side solutions help the situation?

**EXPLAINER**

**Vivek Grewal**  
**Veena Srinivasan**

**The story so far:**

After the deficient monsoon last year, the Maharashtra government declared many parts of the State to be drought-hit. The impact of the deficiency manifested across the region this summer as wells ran dry and officials brought tankers to provide drinking water and water for irrigation. This situation is in sharp contrast with the State's coastal areas, where rainfall has often been in excess, leading to severe flooding. Marathwada's predicament is shaped by its location, topography, soil type, agricultural practices, and crop choices.

**What is the rain-shadow effect?**

Marathwada lies in the rain-shadow region of the Western Ghats. When moist winds from the Arabian Sea encounter these mountains, they rise and cool, causing heavy rainfall (2,000-4,000 mm) on the western side. But by the time these winds cross the Ghats and descend into Western Maharashtra and Marathwada, they lose most of their moisture, leaving Marathwada much drier (600-800 mm).

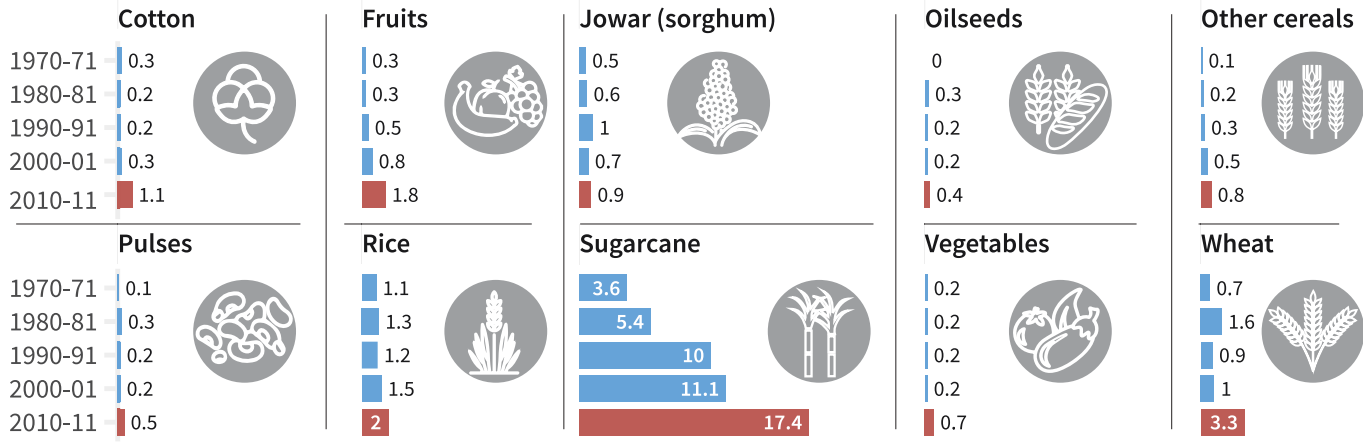
A 2016 study by IIT Gandhinagar researchers said climate change is worsening the situation in central Maharashtra. The region has experienced an increasing trend in drought severity and frequency of late. As a result, Marathwada and North Karnataka have emerged as the second driest regions in India after Rajasthan.

**How does this affect crops?**

Marathwada's agricultural practices are not well suited to its low rainfall. A major contributor to the region's water crisis is sugarcane cultivation. Sugarcane requires 1,500-2,500 mm of water in its growing season. While pulses and millets require four or five irrigations across their crop

### The water used for irrigation (in billions of cubic metres)

Marathwada's agricultural practices are not suited to its low rainfall. A major contributor to the region's water crisis is sugarcane cultivation. Sugarcane requires 1,500-2,500 mm of water in its growing season, outstripping what natural rainfall in the region can provide



Source: Irrigated areas from agricultural census reports

life, sugarcane needs to be irrigated almost every day. The area under sugarcane increased steadily between the 1950s and the 2000s, plateauing in the last decade. Today, the crop occupies 4% of the total cropped area in the region and consumes 61% of the irrigation water. As a result, the average river outflow in the upper Bhima basin has almost halved. Long-standing government support for sugarcane pricing and sales has expanded sugarcane irrigation, restricting the irrigation of more nutritious crops. Since December 2023, the government has been promoting sugarcane-juice-based ethanol production, which may be unwise for this water-starved area: 82% of the sugar grown in Maharashtra comes from low-rainfall areas. The Maharashtra Water and Irrigation Commission in 1999 recommended that sugarcane should be banned in areas that receive less than 1,000 mm of rainfall a year, yet production has increased.

**How do soil, topography matter?**

Marathwada has predominantly clayey black soil, locally called "regur". It is

fertile and retains moisture well. However, it has a low infiltration rate: when it rains, the water is either logged or runs off, but doesn't percolate down to recharge groundwater. To capture this high run-off, Maharashtra has been building many dams – such that it is today the State with the most large dams in the country (1,845). The soil also has low hydraulic conductivity and holds on to the water for a long time after rains. WELL Labs' work in the region has found that farmers face crop loss as a result.

Even within Marathwada, water scarcity is not uniform. The area has parallel tributaries of the Godavari and the Krishna flowing southeast. Each tributary flows in the valley and is separated by a gently sloping hill. The valleys have perennial groundwater while the uplands have seasonal groundwater. This is because groundwater slowly moves underground from upland areas to the valleys. The wells in upland areas dry up a few months after the monsoons, and is where the water scarcity is most acute. They are at a natural disadvantage and deserve special support.

**Can Marathwada be water-resilient?**

Supply-side solutions are about making the most of available resources. They include classical watershed management work (such as building water-conserving structures like contour trenches, earthen bunds, gully plugs, etc.). Second, rainwater that runs off agricultural fields carries the very soil that doesn't allow the water to percolate. So many of these structures accumulate silt. Funds under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme could be used to design silt-trapping mechanisms and organise training programmes for farmers on periodic desilting.

In a low-rainfall region, managing water demand includes practising water-efficient irrigation, cultivating drought-resistant crops, and diversifying livelihoods. Marathwada must also shift to other high-value, low-water-using crops, while sugarcane production must move to Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal.

Vivek Grewal is managing partner (technical consulting) at WELL Labs. Veena Srinivasan is the executive director of WELL Labs.

**THE GIST**

The Maharashtra government has declared many parts of the State to be drought-hit. This situation is in sharp contrast with the State's coastal areas, where rainfall has often been in excess.

Long-standing government support for sugarcane pricing and sales has expanded water-intensive sugarcane irrigation, restricting the irrigation of more nutritious crops.

In a low-rainfall region, managing water demand includes practising water-efficient irrigation, cultivating drought-resistant crops, and diversifying livelihoods. We must also control sugarcane production, if not reduce it.

## Will the Agnipath scheme be revamped?

Will the formation of a new government lead to a more detailed discussion on the recruitment of soldiers as Agniveers? How have the NDA allies reacted? What is the government's stance?

**Dinakar Peri**

**The story so far:**

The recruitment of soldiers into the armed forces as Agniveers under the Agnipath scheme has been a major issue in the recent general election. After the election results, NDA allies, the Janata Dal (United) and Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas), raised the issue of Agnipath and called for a discussion on it. The government is open to changes and discussions are on, officials in the know said.

**What is the Agnipath scheme?**

The Agnipath scheme for recruitment of soldiers, sailors and airmen into the three services was announced on June 14, 2022 doing away with the earlier process of permanent recruitment. Under the new scheme, Agniveers are recruited for four years on the completion of which, up to 25% would be selected into the regular ranks on a permanent basis. The age

bracket for new recruits was fixed at 17 and a half to 21 years of age and till 2026 the overall intake has been capped at 1.75 lakh. Subsequently, the Army is inducting 40,000 Agniveers per year and the Navy and Air Force are recruiting around 3,000 Agniveers each. Agniveers during their tenure can get class 12 certificates or a Bachelor's degree in addition to other skill certificates and when leaving after four years will get a lumpsum amount but are not eligible for pension. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had termed it a transformative initiative and a win-win situation for all.

The government has stated that the Agnipath scheme would bring down the average age of the armed forces from 32 to 26 years in line with the age profile of major armies worldwide. And that when Agniveers return to society, they will contribute to nation-building.

**What are the concerns?**

One of the biggest concerns for the armed

forces, especially the Army, is the accentuating shortage of personnel in the 'below the officer's rank' cadres. There was no recruitment during the COVID-19 period for over two and half years which created a deficiency. For context, around 60,000 soldiers retire from the Army every year, while 40,000 are being recruited every year. So effectively the shortage is adding on year by year. Additionally, the low conversion rate of 25% from Agniveers to regular soldiers is going to further accentuate the shortfall. Given the short duration of four years, the training schedules have also been compressed accordingly.

With the huge demand for recruitment into the Army in some parts of the country, the scheme became a political issue as well as a campaign issue during the election. The country was rocked by violent protests when the scheme was announced. Several parties have demanded that it either be scrapped or the concerns addressed.

There is anger among "certain sections" on the Agnipath scheme, said JD(U) leader K.C. Tyagi amidst talks within the NDA on government formation. "The Agnipath scheme should be reviewed clause by clause," he said.

**What is the current status?**

As reported by *The Hindu* earlier, as the Agnipath scheme completes two years of implementation, the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Defence Ministry headed by the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) has sought feedback from the forces on the scheme. This, officials said, is in line with the regular practice in the armed forces of reviewing any major scheme introduced or any weapon platform inducted to make required changes based on a detailed assessment.

Broadly, recommendation for enhancing intake numbers, increasing the permanent recruitment from 25% to at least 50% are among the suggestions. Also, there is a proposal to increase the age limit for entry through the technical route from 21 to 23 years to attract enough technically qualified individuals. This is not a new proposal but also existed in the recruitment process earlier.

Defence officials have stated that Navy and Air Force have compiled the feedback to be sent to the DMA. However, the Army is still in the process of compilation and will take some more time, multiple officials confirmed. The DMA will compile all the recommendations and send it to the Defence Ministry.

**THE GIST**

The Agnipath scheme for recruitment of soldiers, sailors and airmen into the three services was announced on June 14, 2022 doing away with the earlier process of permanent recruitment.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

# WikiLeaks: the enemy of the deep state

WikiLeaks' fortunes have been inextricably tied with the travails of its co-founder Julian Assange, who after a decade-long legal battle with the U.S. has finally been let free

Srinivasan Ramani

“Julian Assange is free,” WikiLeaks announced in a statement on X. “He left Belmarsh maximum security prison [in the U.K.] on the morning of 24 June, after having spent 1901 days there”, it further read. The co-founder of the whistleblowing website, WikiLeaks, has agreed to plead guilty to one count of conspiracy to obtain and disclose classified U.S. national defence documents, thus ending his long battle against extradition to the U.S. He was flown out of the U.K. to attend the court hearing at Saipan, a U.S. Pacific territory, after which he will return to Australia.

Mr. Assange is wanted in the U.S. for criminal charges, including breaking the Espionage Act for WikiLeaks' actions of leaking thousands of secret U.S. files in 2010. He was looking at a punishment ranging up to 175 years in prison for violations of the Espionage Act.

Mr. Assange's journey to freedom wasn't easy, and he had come dangerously close to extradition. On June 17, 2022, then U.K. Home Secretary Priti Patel had signed an extradition order for Mr. Assange to the U.S. (which he was able to later appeal). On the same day, the Assange Defense Committee, a U.S.-based coalition of media rights and human rights groups, released a statement through its co-chairs, which include the renowned linguist and public intellectual Noam Chomsky and former U.S. military analyst and whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, that said the decision “was a sad day for western democracy”. It added: “U.S. government argues that its venerated Constitution does not protect journalism the government dislikes and that publishing truthful information in public interest is a subversive, criminal act. This argument is a threat not only to journalism, but to democracy itself.”

These were strong words in favour of a man who has been held in the U.K.'s Belmarsh prison ever since the Ecuador Embassy revoked his asylum and citizenship after he stayed for seven years on its premises in London. Mr. Assange initially underwent imprisonment for bail violations during his stay in the Ecuador Embassy and got a reprieve from a U.K. district judge, Vanessa Baraitser, in January 2021, when she ruled that he could not be extradited to the U.S. because of concerns about his mental health and the possibility of suicide in a U.S. prison with strict incarceration conditions.

U.S. prosecutors later filed an appeal, and the British High Court, this time in December 2021, ruled in favour of the U.S. following the Joe Biden administration's assurances on the terms of Mr. Assange's possible incarceration – that it would not hold him at the highest security prison facility (ADX Florence in Colorado, which houses terrorists, drug traffickers, and high-profile criminals) and that if he were convicted, he could serve his sentence in his native Australia if he requested it. Mr. Assange moved the British Supreme Court against the verdict, but on March 14, the Court refused permission to appeal.

Mr. Assange's travails have mirrored those of the WikiLeaks organisation itself.



Freedom at last: Julian Assange at Bangkok Don Mueang International Airport, on June 25. REUTERS

In February 2022, on WikiLeaks' website, the submission system for files (by whistleblowers, ‘hacktivists’, etc.) and its email server went completely offline, months after the organisation's secure chat services had stopped working in October 2021. This was no surprise.

The organisation has been inevitably linked to its co-founder, who still remains a director. Ever since his incarceration, the release of whistleblower documents have only been few and far between and much less in consequence compared to what the organisation managed to achieve between 2010 and 2019.

Origins and impact

WikiLeaks' journey began in 2006 when the website was first established and its domain name registered by Mr. Assange. While initially the website began as a disclosure portal on the lines of the Wikipedia model, with anonymous submissions being put up and edited by volunteers, it soon became a repository of anonymously sourced material. News and classified information could be uploaded on it using the anonymity software Tor, which protects the uploader's identity from being eavesdropped on any network and even by WikiLeaks itself.

Internal dissension and wrangling between WikiLeaks employees had resulted in problems with the submission system, which resulted in its suspension in 2010, but WikiLeaks relaunched the site in 2015.

One of the earliest revelations by Wikileaks was on how the U.S. government had been deploying practices at the Guantanamo Bay facility holding terror suspects, that were in violation of the Geneva Convention protocols.

Some of the most consequential leaks during the period when the site's

anonymised submission system still remained active included the millions of classified files from the U.S. Defence Department on the Iraq and the Afghan invasions, besides lakhs of State Department communiqués – both were released by former U.S. soldier Chelsea (then Bradley) Manning. These leaks began with a 39-minute video released on April 5, 2010 that showed gun-sight footage of two U.S. AH-64 Apache helicopters in action during the Iraqi insurgency against the U.S. occupation in 2007. The video showed the helicopter crew firing indiscriminately and killing civilians and two Reuters war correspondents. For nearly three years, Reuters had sought access to this video via the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, but had failed.

WikiLeaks promptly released the war logs, which were published by a host of media organisations and exposed human rights abuses by occupation forces, besides the increased fatality counts in Iraq. The war logs' release was followed by the publication of several news stories, including by *The Hindu*, based on thousands of leaked diplomatic cables that were also released by Ms. Manning, leading to significant public exposure of the ways, lifestyles and attitudes of the elite in various countries.

The WikiLeaks model – using cryptographic tools to protect sources and allowing for anonymous “leaks” of sensitive information (that could also be in public interest) to be published – suddenly brought forth a new model of extensive investigative journalism into areas that were relatively shielded from the public eye, such as the functioning of the deep state in democratic societies and the operation of power agencies in autocracies.

While initially the cables were released to five newspapers that undertook the exercise of redacting sensitive information before reporting on them and published them over a year from late 2010 to 2011, the leak of the encryption key of the full cache of files (of what was then termed “Cablegate”), resulted in the release of unredacted material, an action that was condemned by many media outlets.

The lack of an anonymised submission system between 2010 and 2015 did not deter it from publishing other files that were obtained from other hackers such as the Stratfor email leaks. Later, WikiLeaks also published then presidential candidate (and former Secretary of State) Hillary Clinton's aide John Podesta's emails before the 2016 presidential elections. This action invited severe critique of WikiLeaks from activists and media personnel, who likened these leaks to an effort to intervene in the 2016 elections with Mr. Assange having been quoted as saying he wanted to “harm” Hillary Clinton's chances of winning the presidency and accusing WikiLeaks of obtaining this information from Russian intelligence agency hackers, something Wikileaks denied.

Later, it emerged that someone from WikiLeaks had conversed with Clinton's presidential opponent, Donald Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr., seeking to promote the leaks and even asking for favours for Mr. Assange in Twitter DM conversations.

Probe in the U.S.

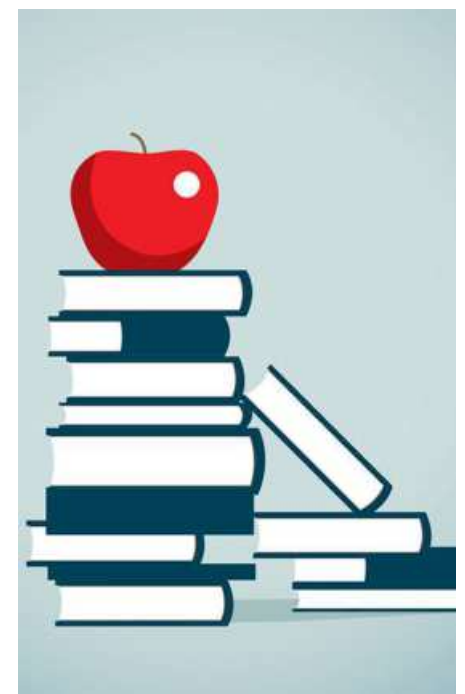
Wikileaks' releases, meanwhile, resulted in reprisals from the U.S. government. The Barack Obama administration began investigation of the Manning leaks, and Ms. Manning was convicted by court martial in July 2013 for violating the Espionage Act and underwent rigorous imprisonment before her sentence was commuted in January 2017 by the President. However, the administration concluded that it would not pursue criminal charges against Mr. Assange and WikiLeaks. The U.S. Justice Department under former President Donald Trump, however, charged Mr. Assange with collaborating in a conspiracy with Ms. Manning to crack a password on a Defense Department network to publish classified documents and communications on WikiLeaks in a sealed indictment in April 2017. These charges were unsealed in 2019.

Later, the Trump administration further charged Mr. Assange with violating the Espionage Act of 1917 – he was indicted on 17 new charges related to the Act at the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. In June 2020, the charges were further expanded for conspiracy with hacker groups. The Biden administration had made no attempt to reverse these charges. Until now.

In April, Mr. Biden said that he was considering a request from Australia to drop its prosecution of Mr. Assange, indicating a change in policy. And now the U.S. with the plea deal has agreed to drop all other charges, except one, against the whistleblower.

Mr. Assange's legal case sets a precedent for the future of investigative journalism of the kind that WikiLeaks represents and also serves as a litmus test for free expression laws that allow for unhindered journalism in countries like the U.S.. While the organisation is now a shell of what it was a decade ago, its ability to harness the act of whistleblowing to shine a light on the inner workings of those in power transformed investigative journalism, even as its decisions to intervene in the U.S. polity complicated its legacy.

*The copy, published on June 19, 2022, has been updated.*



FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

“What is the meaning of ‘save’ in the following sentence? ‘In our country, save for some big cities, boys and girls cannot mingle freely.’ (N. Ulaganathan, Madras)”

“It means ‘with the exception of’. What the writer means is that in our country boys and girls cannot mix freely except in some big cities. Here are some examples:

*I know nothing about Sailaja save that she's Hari's wife.*

*No one saw the gruesome accident, save Balagopal.*

In these two sentences, the word ‘save’ is used as a synonym for ‘except’. This use of ‘save’ is normally found in formal writing. You hardly ever use the word in the sense of ‘except’ in conversation. If you do, you are likely to be thought of as a snob. What would your friend think if you told him, “Listen Vasu. I'd like to help you save I have no money. I'm broke!” In fact, some grammarians disapprove the use of ‘save’ even in writing. They feel that ‘save’ is old fashioned.”

“Can we say ‘thank you ever so much’? (V. R. Moorthi, Thiruvananthapuram)”

“Yes, we can. But this expression is not used very often. “Thank you ever so much” cannot be used with everybody. One has to be careful with the use of this expression. It should be used only with the people you are very, very intimate with – relatives, and close friends.

*Thank you ever so much for the wonderful pair of earrings, Aunt.*

*That was a wonderful meal, Usha. Thank you ever so much.*

This expression is normally used when someone has done or given something for which you are very, very grateful. The more common ways of thanking people are: ‘thanks’, ‘thank you’, ‘many thanks’, ‘thank you very much’, ‘thanks a lot’, ‘thanks a million’, and ‘thanks awfully’. ‘Thanks a lot’, ‘thanks a million’ and ‘thanks awfully’ should not be used in formal situations; they are colloquial expressions. But don't say ‘thank you a lot’ and ‘thank you a million’.”

“Go down with (V. Kulkarni, Nagpur).”

“You ‘go down with’ an illness.

*Her son has gone down with dysentery. For a couple of days, she was feeling awfully tired and finally went down with a flu.*

“‘Drop round’ in ‘She dropped round last evening’. (S. S. Bhatnagar, New Delhi)”

“Drop round” means to visit someone without giving notice, without any appointment.

*She dropped round on her way back from office.*

“Drop in” and ‘drop by’ also mean the same as ‘drop round’. ‘Drop in’ and ‘drop by’ are more frequently used.

*Published in The Hindu on June 30, 1992.*

THE DAILY QUIZ

## J.K. Rowling's ‘Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone’ was first published on this day in 1997. Quiz yourself on the book, and the subsequent film of the same name

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1

Let's start with a simple and fun question. After the letters failed to reach Harry, which character travels to Harry's house to personally deliver the Hogwarts acceptance letter?

QUESTION 2

Which filmmaker had become a fan of the book series after his daughter persuaded him to read the first three books, leading him to call his agent to arrange a meeting at Warner Bros. to direct the film?

QUESTION 3

Another from the book's plot: what is the platform number to

board the Hogwarts Express at King's Cross railway station?

QUESTION 4

The director of the film (answer to question 2) wanted Daniel Radcliffe to be cast for the role of Harry. Which previous work of Radcliffe had impressed the director to cast him for the role?

QUESTION 5

This character is a poltergeist who causes trouble in Hogwarts. Rik Mayall was cast for this character's role in the film, but his scenes were cut from the final film, which eventually led to the character being omitted from all the Harry Potter films that followed. What is the name of the character?



Visual question:

This actor essayed the role of one of the most famous characters in the whole series. However, after portraying the role for two films, he passed away, after which another actor played the role. Name both actors. Which is the character? AP

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

1. The place where India's first Test match was held and its result. **Ans: At the iconic Lord's and India went down by 158 runs**
2. The two ‘royals’ who stepped down for the Test and the veteran star who was chosen to lead. **Ans: Maharaja of Porbandar Natwarsinhji Bhavsinhji Sahib Bahadur and his brother-in-law Ghanshyamsinhji Daulatsinhji gave way for Cottari Kanakaiya Nayudu to helm the side**
3. The England captain who became ‘infamously’ famous later that year. **Ans: Douglas Jardine of ‘Bodyline’ fame**
4. The siblings who donned the India whites in the historic first Test. **Ans: Syed Nazir Ali and Syed Wazir Ali**
5. The distinction Bill Bowes shares with the 11 Indians who played in that match. **Ans: He was the lone English debutant!**
6. Lall Singh born in this country. **Ans: Malaysia**  
Visual: Name this tearaway fast bowler. **Ans: Mohammad Nissar**  
Early Birds: Prashant Nain| Vamsi Mamidala| M. Suresh Kumar| Tamal Biswas| Abhinav Satwat

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

## Word of the day

**Obeisance:** bending the head or body or knee as a sign of reverence or submission or shame or greeting; the act of obeying; dutiful or submissive behavior with respect to another person

**Synonyms:** obedience, bow

**Usage:** *They paid obeisance to the monarch.*

**Pronunciation:** bit.ly/obeisancepro

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /əʊˈbeɪ.sən.s/, /əˈbeɪ.sən.s/

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

## Glitches galore

SDC process for ads needs fine tuning

In order to strike down the egregious claims made by one advertiser, Patanjali Ayurved, and to prevent further distorted claims by other advertisers in the future, the Supreme Court in an order on May 7, 2024, had directed broadcasters, and print and digital media to file self-declaration certificates (SDCs) that their ads comply with all extant rules. While it's nobody's case that this self-declaration would curb misleading ads, the ham-handed manner of its implementation has advertisers and media houses fretting.



In order to comply with the SC order, the I&B Ministry mandated that all advertisers upload details about their advertisements — print and digital — on the Press Council of India site, and TV and radio media on the Broadcast Seva portal of the I&B Ministry from June 18. While the self-declaration certificates sought on the PCI site exceed 28,000 as on date, that on the Seva site is not clear. This has stirred a hornet's nest among advertisers as the sites have been unable to handle the hundreds of log-ins for the SDCs. They complain that the sites hang, the process is cumbersome and takes ages to upload, resulting in a delay in the release of the ads to media houses and consequent financial implications. These glitches have shades of the earlier launch and implementation of the income tax portal and the GST portal which went through all the same teething troubles.

This again goes to prove that the digital backbone needs to be robust before embarking on such mammoth-scale endeavours. Other doubts and issues abound. As the Indian Newspaper Society in a letter to the Secretary of the I&B Ministry points out, requiring all ads to seek SDCs is not advisable. There are ads that make no claims — the whole kerfuffle emanated from misleading claims made by Patanjali ads — so these ads need to be exempted from such compliance, is its plea. Then there are government and public sector ads or statutory ads which may not need self-declarations. Getting SDCs for different sizes and versions of the same ad, as well as in different languages, also adds to the compliance burden.

Digital media, which is now closely integrated with the operations of the print media, has its own set of challenges as well. Digital ads are often released in tandem with print ads which means the SDCs need to be secured simultaneously, a challenge given that digital ads are more malleable and can be produced in various formats ranging from videos to banner ads. There are other issues of confidentiality as well, if an advertiser has to reveal the entire media plan on the portals and lose the edge over rivals. While the move by the I&B Ministry is in compliance with the SC order and is a welcome step to safeguard consumer interest and curb misleading advertising by unscrupulous advertisers, the manner of its implementation needs refinement and fine tuning. More confabulations with the advertising industry are certainly called for.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH



## Agriculture needs research focus

CHANGE TACK. Stepping up investments in agri research, rather than on welfare schemes, is key to ensuring food security

BHAGIRATH CHOUDHARY  
CD MAYEE

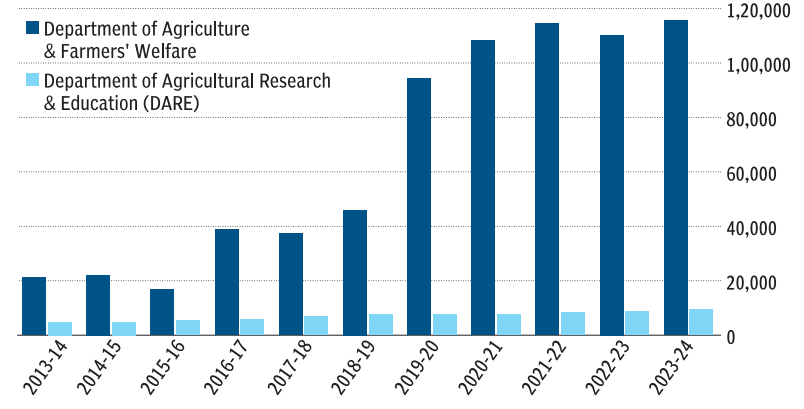
For the first time since the Green Revolution era, India is staring at a contracting supply of foodgrains and an uncomfortable reality of food insecurity. Although the country's granaries are brimming and foodgrains and horticulture production are at record levels, climate change-induced weather variability is taking a toll on the country's ability to cope with its adverse effect on food production, availability, and inflation — pushing a large section of society to government supplied free-ration and cash aid.

The discourse on imminent food insecurity is an awkward truth. The policy actions of restricting stock piling, imposing export duty, reducing import tariffs, and banning export of agri commodities from rice to sugar threaten the food security of the country's 140-crore people.

Moreover, the narrowing agriculture trade surplus, export-import imbalance, and galloping import of food items from edible oil to pulses to increased demand for the import of animal feed such as maize, Distiller's Dried Grains with Soluble (DDGS) — a by-product of maize based ethanol, soybean grain and meal — are worrisome. The surprising opening of the Indian animal feed market to imported alfalfa hay in 2023 (*lucerne*, or commonly known as *rizka*, as forage crop) from the US as part of the India-US Trade Policy Forum shows the paucity of animal feed for our thriving livestock sector.

In addition to feeding Indians with imported palm oil, soybean oil, lentils, pigeon pea, chickpea, Washington apple and California almonds, the time has come to feed the Indian cattle and buffalo population with imported alfalfa hay. This is the stark reality of agriculture today, which is concealed in the laurels of the past. In fact, agriculture research in India is stuck in the sloganeering of the Green Revolution era of the 1960s and 1970s.

Over the last 75 years, the country has increased its arable area from 97.3 million hectares in 1950 to 132.2 million hectares in 2023-24; an increase of 0.47 per cent per annum. On the other hand, foodgrain production has risen by a factor of six, from 50.8 million tonnes in 1950 to 350 million tonnes in 2023-24, an average

Public sector investment in agriculture:  
Welfare vs Research

Source: Ministry of Finance, 2013-2024; Analysed by South Asia Biotechnology Centre, 2024

annual increase of 7.85 per cent as compared to an average area increase of 0.47 per cent per annum. Undoubtedly, the productivity gains were a result of painstaking research in developing high yielding varieties of seeds coupled with expansion of irrigation, mechanisation, and other technological inputs. The Green Revolution is a classic example of technology-led transformation of agriculture production and a new paradigm of research based institutional support.

A recent empirical study by ICAR-NIAEPR points out that the pay-offs to investment in agricultural

**Almost 90 per cent of agri research funds are utilised for salaries, a chunk of the remaining 10 per cent for administrative matters and only a meagre amount for agriculture research.**

research and extension are quite significant. The study reveals that every rupee spent on agriculture research paid back ₹13.85, on extension ₹7.40 and on livestock sector ₹20.81, which is much higher than in other sectors of the economy. A RBI study in 2008 confirmed a similar outcome with regard to investment in agri research — a return of ₹13.45 per rupee spending on agriculture R&D. The RBI also noted that investment in agriculture research, education and rural infrastructure is often the most effective in promoting agriculture growth and poverty reduction.

However, the pace and pattern of investments in agriculture have been grossly skewed towards welfare schemes in the last two decades. Not only has the magnitude of investment in agriculture welfare schemes skyrocketed but also the ratio of investment in welfare to agri research has increased from 4:1 to 15:1. The current investment trend in agriculture has completely ignored research, education, and extension. Over the last decade, the investment in

agriculture welfare implemented by Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare jumped from ₹21,190 crore in 2013-14 to ₹1,15,532 crore in 2023-24, an increase of around 450 per cent. The corresponding increase in agri research administered by the Department of Agricultural Research and Education was from ₹4,881 crore to ₹9,504 crore, a 90 per cent rise (see Chart).

The current allocation of resource for agriculture research is barely 8 per cent of the budget allocated for agriculture welfare and cash aid. The meagre resources are for serving a vast national agriculture research system comprising 103 ICAR institutes and 72 State and Central Agricultural Universities housing over 6,000 agriculture scientists, 25,000 academia and around 11,000 extension professionals working in 731 Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVKs). Unfortunately, almost 90 per cent of agri research funds are utilised for salaries, a chunk of the remaining 10 per cent for administrative matters and only a meagre amount for agriculture research. Several new institutes have been created without any infrastructure for R&D and the infra of State Agricultural Universities are either outdated or not commensurate with present-day needs.

## DRACONIAN LAWS

The piling up of applications for the approval of pesticides, bio-stimulants and biotech traits and excessive focus on traditional production practices would do more harm than good. In addition, agriculture needs to be unshackled from the clutches of two draconian laws, including the Essential Commodity Act 1955 and the Fertilizer Control Order 1985. Sooner than later, India needs to revitalise the scientific community and break the 'plaque ceremony culture' of running R&D institutions. The need of the hour is to at least double public sector investment in agriculture research, education and extension.

Reversing the current trend and ensuring food security can be achieved only by designing and developing projects in mission mode in priority areas of food, feed, fibre and fuel, in coordination with multidisciplinary teams across R&D institutions. A new paradigm of 'welfare science' should take over from populist welfare schemes and India should once again embark on the accelerated path of science based food self-sufficiency and farmers' prosperity amidst pressing and unprecedented new challenges.

The writers are with South Asia Biotechnology Centre, Jodhpur. Views are personal

## Fixing a broken immigration system is not easy

Republicans and Democrats haven't found common ground on security measures at the border and pathway to citizenship

## Sridhar Krishnaswami

Political hell broke loose when President Joe Biden announced an initiative that would eventually offer citizenship to some 500,000 undocumented immigrants and benefit some 50,000 children from having to be deported. It was the same Biden who a few weeks earlier announced measures to toughen up asylum procedures at the southern border which seemed to be uncontrollable.

"The Statue of Liberty is not some relic of American history. It still stands for who we are... I also refuse to believe that for us to continue to be an America that embraces immigration, we have to give up securing our border. They're false choices", the President remarked in announcing his new scheme that would allow undocumented spouses of American citizens living in the US for at least 10 years by June 17 to request for permanent residency and staying on in the country during the process.

In normal times the announcement would not have received the kind of attention and reactions it did. But the November 5 Presidential election is not too far away and immigration is one of the top on the charts where both the

incumbent and his challenger, the former President Donald Trump, are trying to make inroads not just with their traditional bases of support that in some instances are seen wavering in a crucial election, especially in the six or seven battleground states.

## BALANCING ACT

For President Biden it is imperative to hold on to the progressives and the Left in the Democratic party, as well as making sure that the Hispanics and Latinos are with him and the Democrats. In a poll done in March only 3 of 10 Americans approved Biden's handling of immigration and border security with about one half of adults maintaining that the President is extremely or very responsible of what is happening on the US-Mexico border.

The tough-cum-lenient approach of the administration has also to be seen in the context of robust polling numbers wanting to deport all or most undocumented immigrants but voters in battleground states weighing in favour of allowing spouses of Americans who have lived for over five years without documents to stay. The dual approach on immigration issues has earned the wrath of Republicans and other conservatives of President Biden wanting it "both



AT THE BORDER. Families torn apart

ways". The Biden approach has taken a lot of flak even if one were to dismiss the ridiculous assertion that all those who stand to benefit would be lining up to vote for the incumbent President this November — factoring in the time frame involved to process the green cards and naturalisation, many in this group would be extremely lucky to vote even in the 2028 election.

It is not that the administration has only factored in one group of undocumented, but that it has forgotten the impact this could have on those legally and legitimately waiting for a green card or in the impact this move was going to have on the H-1B numbers. In one sense, Indian Americans who

are in the top three of the undocumented list — in the neighbourhood of 800,000 — could benefit by the White House order, but the community as a whole could question the priorities of the Democratic President especially at a time when there is a clamour for high skilled visas and in doing away with the seven per cent country-wise quotas on permanent residency.

For instance, there is apprehension in some quarters that expediting work visas for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and undocumented immigrants could make things harder for Indian professionals to get a H-1B visa.

In the last two decades or more Republicans and Democrats in the Congress have been unable to come together on a comprehensive immigration bill; and to a large extent the differences have been on security measures at the border and the pathway to a citizenship. And this is precisely where President Biden finds himself now: the difficult reconciliation between seeing families torn apart and giving a fair shot to those who have been in the country legally for years waiting for their chance.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

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

## Curb 'front running'

This refers to 'Front running in Quant MF, SEBI's action can undermine investor trust' (June 25). It is very disappointing that the officials and dealers of Quant MF, which has been highly rated by the market and trusted by investors, have acted unethically by indulging in "front running". SEBI's action may "undermine investor trust" in the impugned MF entity, but the regulator's action of conducting search and seizure operations on finding irregularities is necessary to initiate corrective measures and to send a message to the entire MF industry that violators of rules and regulations will be dealt with severely.

## Kosaraju Chandramouli

Hyderabad

## Delhi's water crisis

This refers to 'Who's responsible for Delhi's water crisis?' (June 25). Delhi is in the throes of a severe water crisis exacerbated by scorching temperatures nearing 50 degrees Celsius. Since Delhi relies heavily on its neighbouring States to meet almost 90 per cent of its drinking water needs, unfortunately politics has taken centre-stage and blame games are on between the ruling and opposition parties. Population growth and economic development have together put pressure on water resources. Reports suggest half a century ago, per capita water

availability in India was 2.5 times more than the current level — implying that authorities failed to keep the water supply apace with the growing demand.

## N Sadhasiva Reddy

Bengaluru

## Deposit insurance

This refers to 'Bank deposits are growing, but how well are they protected?' (June 25). With the rise in interest rates, deposits are also on the increase. However, depositors need to be assured about the safety of their money parked with banks. Statistics reveal that the coverage of deposits under DICGC insurance is not commensurate with their growth.

As per extant norms, if a bank goes into liquidation, DICGC is liable to pay to the liquidator the claim amount of each depositor up to the limit prescribed within two months from the date of receipt of claim list from the liquidator.

In the recent past, no public sector bank has gone into liquidation. Alternatively, the RBI finds a way to merge weaker banks with the stronger ones, as has happened recently.

## RV Baskaran

Chennai

## Effective governance

The Prime Minister's call for consensus signals his commitment to honouring the people's mandate.

In the previous Lok Sabha, the government faced minimal opposition due to the disarray among opposing parties. The unity displayed by the INDIA bloc resonated with voters, who expect them to act as an effective check-and-balance in Parliament. Despite differing ideologies and occasional conflicts, their parliamentary performance must reflect the electorate's wishes. The Prime Minister has rightly emphasised on the need for decisive actions, resonating with the public's desire for effective governance amidst concerns like unemployment and inflation.

## Vijaykumar HK

Raichur

# GST: A conciliatory way

The Council's accommodative approach is welcome

Mohan R Lavi



**GST COUNCIL.** Welcome decisions /ISTOCKPHOTO

After the fractured verdict in the 2024 general elections, there was a general impression that the Centre would adopt an accommodative approach due to their dependence on other parties.

A look at the decisions taken at the 53rd meeting of the GST Council would seem to confirm this impression. Almost six decisions were proposed at the meeting which included 14 changes in GST rates, eight changes in other areas of services, 21 measures and 11 clarifications to facilitate trade and six other changes of administrative nature.

The Council proposed that a separate entry be created in Notification No. 12/2017-CTR 28.06.2017 under heading 9963 (Accommodation services) to exempt accommodation services having value of supply of accommodation up to ₹20,000 per month per person subject to the condition that the accommodation service is supplied for a minimum continuous period of 90 days.

A similar benefit would be extended to past cases. The Council has proposed five changes in taxability of insurance/re-insurance services. For instance, transaction of ceding commission/re-insurance commission between insurer and re-insurer may be declared as no supply under Schedule III of CGST Act, 2017.

The Council has also stated that past cases may be regularised on a "as is where is basis".

The GST Council should instruct the Ministry of Finance to replace the phrase "may be regularised" to "should be regularised".

A new Section 128A is being proposed to be introduced in the CGST Act which would waive interest and penalties for demand notices issued under Section 73 of the CGST Act for the fiscal years 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20, in cases where the taxpayer pays the full amount of tax demanded in the notice till 31.03.2025.

The waiver does not cover demand of erroneous refunds.

The proposed waiver of interest and penalty is only for cases where Section 73 has been invoked. There have been instances of trigger-happy officers invoking Section 74 even when there has been no fraud, wilful misstatement or suppression of facts.

The waiver will work well only if there are clear instructions given

to the assessing officers on the distinction between Section 73 and Section 74.

### EASIER APPEALS

Establishment of GST Appellate Tribunals has been the biggest let-down to the taxpayer. Some of these Tribunals are expected to be up and running this year but are bound to be flooded with a huge backlog of cases.

Sensing this, the GST Council is proposing that monetary limits subject to certain exclusions for filing appeals from the Tribunal to the Supreme Court. The threshold limits being proposed are ₹20 lakh (Tribunal), ₹1 crore (High Court) and ₹2 crore (Supreme Court).

While this is a welcome move, CBIC should make sure that the sentence "subject to certain exceptions" is not made a rule but remains an exception. The GST Council would also do well to list out a few areas of dispute where they would not recommend litigation irrespective of the amount. For instance, for the differences between input tax credit as per GSTR 3B and GSTR 2A, there is an existing procedure that can be further refined. If the procedure is followed by the taxpayer, there is no necessity for the department to go on appeal.

In a taxpayer-friendly gesture, the amount of pre-deposit required to file an appeal is also being reduced. The proposal to introduce an amendment to GSTR 1 is also a welcome move. The Finance Minister has also announced the establishment of a fitment committee to recommend rationalisation of GST rates.

The conciliatory approach of the GST Council would ensure that tax laws are reasonable and will spring no surprises in the future. If assessing officers at the ground level are trained to be reasonable and not spring any surprises, we could actually be moving towards a good and simple tax, seven years after the phrase was coined.

The writer is a chartered accountant



**SUSHILA SHIKHAR SARANGI**

Recently an Indian traveller, whose connecting flight from Europe to India was delayed by 24 hours, decided to sue the airlines. The aggrieved traveller sued the airline in Europe instead of a consumer court in India.

This option delivered justice to the consumer sitting in India without the hassle of visiting the chambers of advocates or the courts!

Given the complexities and the delays involved in India's redressal grievance system, the traveller found a claims management company in Europe online that dealt in such cases.

Based on an agreement executed between the air traveller and the company, the attorneys in Europe took the case to courts there as the airline did not agree to settle the case initially.

The agreement provided that if the claim succeeded, the compensation proceeds will be split in the pre-agreed manner between the consumer and the claims management company and if it failed, the consumer did not have to pay anything to the company.

Finally, when the case was taken to court, the airline agreed to pay compensation and the claims management company transferred the agreed share out of the compensation money, to the bank account of the traveller.

### CHAMPERTY AGREEMENTS

This brings into context the role of Champerty Agreements where third parties, usually attorneys, agree to finance a compensation claim in lieu of a share of awarded compensation by the courts and this practice has been prevalent in many foreign jurisdictions and has been proven to be very efficient/cost effective making the justice accessible particularly for class action suits or small claims.

In India, the status of such agreements (Champerty Agreements), is nuanced under the Indian Contract Act, 1872 and are subjected to a closer scrutiny by courts of law based on their fairness, reasonableness and the larger objectives of public policy.

Besides, such assessment by the courts depends upon the specific facts of each case. So, in India, such agreements



# The Champerty route to consumer justice

**FAST TRACK.** This framework can ensure speedy and cost-effective justice to claimants in consumer cases

are not per se illegal but their validity is determined on the principles of public policy and equity by the courts, which have held such arrangements to be void if they are found to be against public policy or as promoting frivolous or vexatious or unnecessary litigation or are otherwise deemed to be extortionate or unconscionable.

### PROS AND CONS

This framework helps claimants who do not have the financial means to pursue cases on their own.

The advocates with a financial stake in the outcome would be motivated to

pursue cases vigorously, diligently and efficiently, leading to a faster resolution. Consumers, of course, do not bear any financial risk of litigation if the case is lost.

Of course, if the case is won, they will get the pre-determined and pre-agreed share out of the compensation allowed by the courts.

However, making such agreements legal also opens up the risk of exploitative practices by lawyers. They might even lead to frivolous litigation.

### NEED FOR REFORM

India's consumer law framework, though robust and accessible, can also be complex, time consuming and expensive for claimants.

The objective behind the passing of the Consumer Protection Act was to provide a simple, speedy and inexpensive remedy without any complexities of ordinary civil court.

But in practice, often cases end up taking more time than stipulated under the Consumer Protection Act for

disposal of consumer complaints.

In this scenario, if champerty agreements are recognised and properly regulated, they may provide an alternative mechanism to the consumers to pursue their claims. The government can consider various safeguards before allowing such agreements, establishing clear guidelines on what will constitute a fair and balanced agreement.

To begin with, such arrangements should be allowed for consumer matters. There is also a need for a monitoring system for oversight and regulation of attorney's conduct involved in such matters and the Bar councils need to constantly monitor lawyers' profession conduct. This would require amendments to the Indian Contract Act, 1872, the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 and the Advocates Act, 1961.

It is time to seriously consider allowing such mechanisms, on a pilot basis for consumer cases.

Sushila is Associate Professor, and Sarangi is Student of National Law University, Delhi

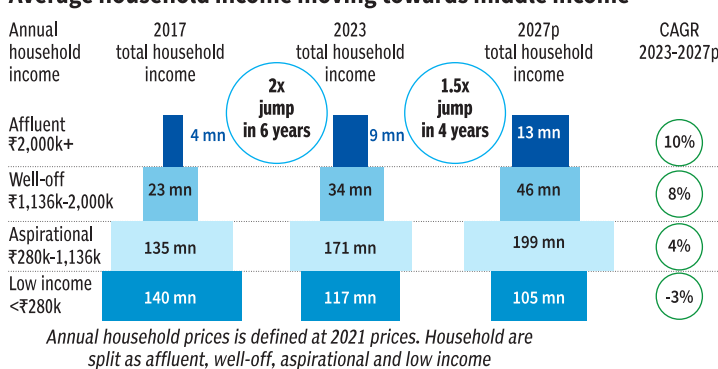
## STATISTALK.

Compiled Shreyas Arora | Graphic Visveswaran V

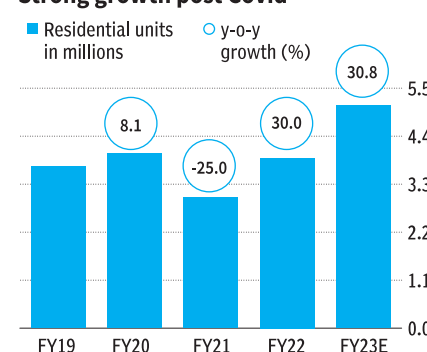
### Boom in India's luxury housing market

The luxury housing market in India is growing. This is marked by a rise in household income, the volume of residential units constructed, its ticket size, and the luxury real estate market in metro cities. One thing common from all the charts is that Indians are earning more, and are spending more. The proportion of affluent households is increasing every year, as does the money Indians spend on luxury goods and services.

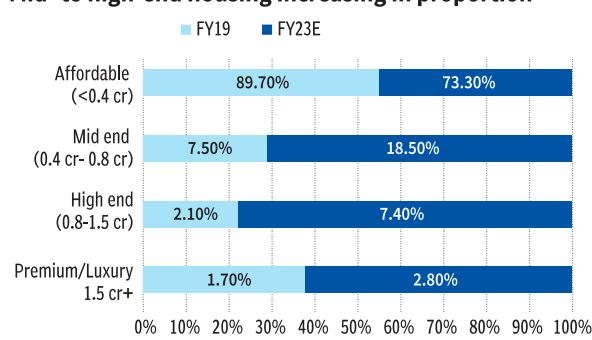
#### Average household income moving towards middle income



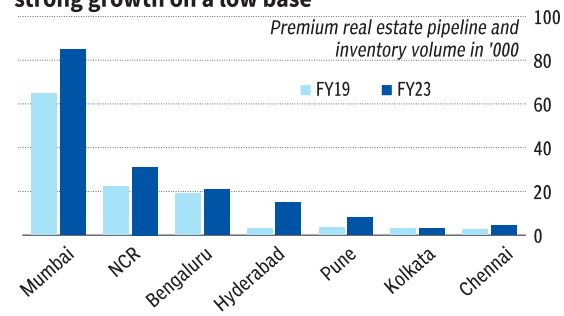
#### Strong growth post Covid



#### Mid- to high-end housing increasing in proportion



#### Hyderabad and Pune premium real estate show strong growth on a low base



Source: Stanley Lifestyle Ltd RHP | Writer is an Intern with BL

## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

June 26, 2004

#### MF scheme mergers leave investors with tax burden

Mergers of mutual fund schemes are leaving investors with the burden of capital gains tax. With the industry expected to consolidate further, investors are worried about the unanticipated tax outflow that they would be forced to pay. Unit holders who have invested in a scheme that is being merged have two options: redeem the units and exit the scheme or move to the new scheme.

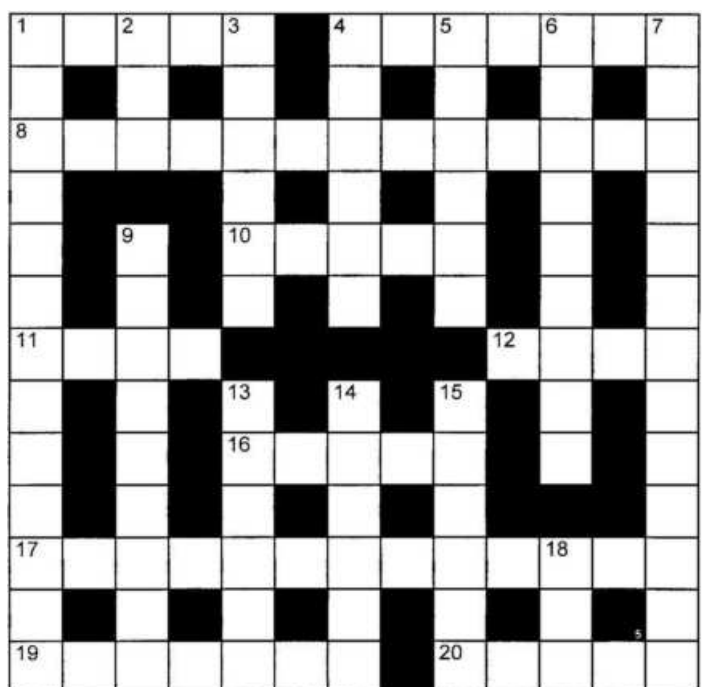
#### UB group plans low-cost airline by year-end: Mallya

The Chairman of the UB Group, Mr Vijay Mallya, said on Friday that the group would be launching a low-cost airline to be branded 'Kingfisher' by the year-end. "We plan to launch a low-cost no-frills airline. However, it will provide a great experience to the passengers who travel with us," Mr Mallya told newsmen after a meeting with the Minister for Civil Aviation, Mr Praful Patel.

#### Tatas launch sub-₹s 1000 indiOne hotel

A hundred years after setting up the country's first luxury hotel, the Indian Hotels Company launched today 'indiOne', India's first "no attitude" hotel with tariff under Rs 1,000. The hotel is located at the heart of India's Silicon Valley, at Whitefield near Bangalore.

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2469



### EASY

#### ACROSS

- 01. Hairdressing establishment (5)
- 04. Bravery, valour (7)
- 08. Topmost point reached by tide (4,5,4)
- 10. Name the letters (5)
- 11. Possesses (4)
- 12. Omen (4)
- 16. Go over the lines (5)
- 17. Failure to turn up (3-10)
- 19. Doctor who operates (7)
- 20. Wooden work-shoe (5)

#### DOWN

- 01. Day trips for pupils (6,7)
- 02. Limb (3)
- 03. Fairly recent, modern (6)
- 04. To this place (6)
- 05. Not frequently (6)
- 06. Supposing, forming mental picture (9)
- 07. Manages to balance budget (5,4,4)
- 09. Arms smuggler (3-6)
- 13. U-shaped fastening (6)
- 14. Deep hollow in the rocks (6)
- 15. Opposes face to face (6)
- 18. Pinch, arrest (3)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

- 01. Where hair is cut one's boy will take a novice driver in (5)
- 04. Bravery of the woman is shown in decoration (7)
- 08. It shows upper reach of spring, perhaps (4,5,4)
- 10. What wizard may cast for a time on watch (5)
- 11. Admits to having nothing, three ways (4)
- 12. Put one's name to such as The Balance (4)
- 16. The merest hint that one will go over (5)
- 17. Failure to be there is negative in France with one's looks (3-10)
- 19. He is making cuts in the theatre (7)
- 20. Something's afoot, rating being taken in by drunkard (5)

#### DOWN

- 01. Forms, dismissed, sing about trips to the museum and such (6,7)
- 02. One side for cricketer for example after Larwood's opening (3)
- 03. When is an adjustment to be made of fairly recent times? (6)
- 04. Strike with the woman on this side (6)
- 05. How infrequently one might depend on holding a right (6)
- 06. Having it in mind one is after a trap in breaking the Ming (9)
- 07. What ring-maker does with ends of rod in balancing budget (5,4,4)
- 09. The athlete after Lewis, who smuggles arms (3-6)
- 13. Principal commodity will let one fasten leaves together (6)
- 14. Crave change of direction where the rock is hollowed out (6)
- 15. Confronts the spade and Van Dyke (6)
- 18. Apprehend a note to take good care will have a heart (3)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2468

**ACROSS** 1. Sifts 4. Escorts 8. Hourglass 9. Inn 10. Optical 12. Kepi 14. Stirred 17. Lard 18. Compost 20. Old 21. In general 23. Surfeit 24. Sorry **DOWN** 1. Schoolfellows 2. Fruits 3. Sagacity 4. Era 5. Cash 6. Raised 7. Sentimentally 11. Lyric 13. Beam-ends 15. Trader 16. Horror 19. File 22. Got

## Shaping future trade

India should prepare for changing dynamics

The future of the World Trade Organization (WTO) remains deeply uncertain. The possible return of Donald Trump to the White House has concentrated attention, particularly in the West. Mr Trump has made no secret of the fact that he disapproves of the way international trade is currently governed, and that the United States has got a raw deal in it. The change brought by a second Trump term might be overstated, as the current Democratic administration has hardly been pro-trade either — the WTO remains hobbled by the US' continued veto of new judges to the appellate body that determines trade disputes. But, even so, some countries are reportedly seeking to move ahead on reviving the WTO in at least two new areas: Control over international fisheries and e-commerce. These are issues that were not major concerns when the original trade talks were taking place under the auspices of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or GATT. However, they are now of increasing importance.

The question is how India can and should respond to attempts to codify rules for fisheries and e-commerce. Naturally, the national interest must be fairly represented in Geneva. But the national interest should be defined in terms of the interests of consumers as well as producers, and tempered with an understanding that well-governed international trade is of vital importance. A previous ministerial conference worked hard to come to an agreement about fisheries, but India was one of the countries that prevented some clauses of the draft agreement from coming into force. Indian officials raised some good points about the need for poorer countries to continue to subsidise small and artisanal fishing enterprises. Indeed, there is no reason why single-family fishing enterprises should be treated the same way as large-scale trawler fleets. India must work harder to draw a distinction between its own concern for smaller fishermen and the unrestricted subsidies to mechanised deep-sea fishing provided by the People's Republic of China, for instance. It is after all the latter (unrestricted subsidies) that create risks of overfishing and naval incidents, which impact India as well as every other coastal country — that is the real target of any fisheries agreement.

When it comes to the e-commerce Joint Statement Initiative, India is not part of the negotiations at the moment. The official position — that India would like the existing WTO systems to be revived before expanding the body's scope — has some merit to it. But it is also true that every country always benefits from being in the room when such agreements are being discussed and hammered out. A commitment to multilateralism must not stand in the way of being party to beneficial plurilateral agreements. If others go ahead without considering Indian priorities, then there is a real risk that the rules of the road will be altered permanently, and India will become a rule-taker rather than rule-maker in this arena. India should reconsider its refusal to engage in discussions on e-commerce. The broader fact that the WTO has become dysfunctional is beyond New Delhi's control alone. But the fact is that lack of faith in the WTO is spurring various plurilateral efforts. Indian officials must recognise that this is reality and figure out how to become part of the process, not just bystanders.

## Labour reforms

Engagement with states will help

Over 40 central and 100 state laws governing labour relations exist in India, regulating various aspects of the subject, such as resolution of industrial disputes, working conditions, social security, and wages. Over the years, the multiplicity of labour laws in the country, with several archaic provisions, inconsistent definitions, and ambiguities, made compliance difficult and messy. Apart from multiplicity, the complexity of the labour laws was hindering industrial growth in India. To address the issue, the government took a bold step in terms of simplifying labour laws into four comprehensive labour codes. Of the 44 existing central laws, 29 central labour laws were consolidated and codified into these four labour codes — Code on Wages (2019), Code on Social Security (2020), Industrial Relations Code (2020), and Occupational, Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (2020).

Notably, the labour codes received approval from both Houses of Parliament as well as the President's assent, and the draft central rules on all four labour codes have been pre-published by the Union government. Four years later, however, the anticipated benefits have yet to materialise owing to delays in implementation. In this regard, the Ministry of Labour and Employment reportedly plans to conduct training workshops for state government officials and familiarise them with the labour codes. The initiative must be welcomed, given that the codes have the potential to foster ease of doing business and encourage formal job creation. The codes will introduce significant changes, including an increase in the threshold for layoffs and retrenchment in industrial establishments from 100 workers to 300 workers. This increased flexibility to employers is likely to attract more investment because firms can now scale their workforce in accordance with business needs without facing stringent regulatory hurdles. Changes have also been introduced relating to workers' right to strike. Further, the coverage of social-security benefits has been extended to a broader section of the workforce, including gig and platform workers. While this may result in higher operational costs, it will ensure a more secure and motivated workforce, which will enhance productivity and reduce turnover rates.

Labour is a concurrent subject that enables both Parliament and Assemblies to make laws. Implementation has been delayed because some states have yet to finalise their rules under the codes. A recent study by the V V Giri National Labour Institute suggests that a total of 24 states/Union Territories have made rules under all four codes so far. West Bengal, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Lakshadweep, and Dadra & Nagar Haveli are yet to formulate rules under any of the codes. Clearly, the Centre wants to implement the codes only when all states are on board to avoid legal issues after implementation. Additionally, in some states where draft rules have been formulated, the state codes differ from the central laws, which will make implementation difficult. The Centre has done well to start sensitising state government officials about the labour codes. It would need to build on this and address differences, if any. India needs modern labour laws to improve the ease of doing business, significantly increase its manufacturing base, and improve external competitiveness. This will help create much-needed jobs and improve long-term growth prospects of the Indian economy.



## The four pitfalls

Avoiding policy flaws more important than fulfilling India Inc's Budget wish list

In its pre-Budget meetings with finance ministry mandarins, India Inc is reported to have asked for relief in direct tax rates for those with a taxable income of up to ₹20 lakh, a reduction in excise duty on petrol and diesel, an increase in minimum wages to be paid under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and an increase in the amount paid to farmers under Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi or PM KISAN. One of the industry bodies has also asked for rationalising the goods and services tax (GST) into a three-rate system and simplifying the complex structure of capital gains taxation for all financial assets.

What are the prospects of the government accepting some of these recommendations and announcing them in the Budget in July? Going beyond these recommendations, it would also be instructive to assess the key issues that should engage the attention of the makers of the Modi government's first Budget in its third term.

The demand for converting multiple GST rates into just three, thereby raising the revenue-neutral rate and improving tax collections, has merit. But the Union Budget is not where such announcements can be expected. A committee consisting of representatives from the Centre and states is examining this issue and a decision should ideally arise out of deliberations of the GST Council, based on the recommendations made by this committee. Will Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman reveal the Centre's stance on the question of reducing the number of GST rates in the Budget? Quite unlikely.

The demand for simplifying a complex capital gains tax structure for both financial and non-financial assets like real estate is also justified. Of particular interest will be the industry body's recommendation that the holding period after which financial assets attract long-term capital gains tax should be made uniform at over 12 months and the rate rationalised at 10 per cent.

Similarly, short-term capital gains tax rate should be 15 per cent for financial assets. The suggestion to make the capital gains structure simple and transparent is valid. The original idea of reforming it was mooted about a few years ago. Surely, it is time for the government to take a final decision.

But will the government make the new structure public through the Budget? Over the last many years, Union Budget speeches have been disinclined to make any announcements that may potentially upset the stock market. The apprehension is that any move that might be unpopular for any segment of the stock market should not be allowed to neutralise the overall positive impact of the Budget or its tax relief proposals. Thus, the Budget's temptation could be to include only those moves which positively impact the stock market and steer clear of a step like restructuring the capital gains taxation regime, which will please some but could upset many more. The 2024-25 Budget, therefore, could reiterate the necessity of simplifying the capital gains taxation for assets of different types, but entrust the task of implementing the actual steps with an empowered committee later during the year.

The idea of increasing wages under MGNREGS and the amount paid to farmers under PM KISAN should prove to be attractive for the Modi government in the current political environment. Given the recent results of post-poll surveys showing rural India's preference for the ruling party on the wane, the Budget for 2024-25 will be seriously inclined to raise both MGNREGS wages and the PM KISAN amount. The wages should reflect the actual rural inflation index in recent years, just as the PM KISAN amount of ₹6,000 to a farming household during a year, announced in 2019, should be raised appropriately to reflect at least the impact of inflation. This should not cause a big concern to the government's fiscal consolidation drive as the tax-revenue buoyancy



RAISINA HILL  
A K BHATTACHARYA

## The new tale of two Indias

In the early 1990s, to explain India to foreign investors, ad guru Aluru Padamsee created an evocative presentation called "Two Indias", where he described a "strong India" that was urban, educated and well-off, and a "weak Bharat" that was rural and abjectly poor, both in income and education.

Thirty years later, as witnessed in the recent election, the narrative of two Indias, one strong and one weak, continues to prevail. The Modi India narrative is about the spring of hope, economically and aspirationally upwardly mobile, with continuous improvement in living conditions, and the Rahul India narrative is about the winter of despair, economically and aspirationally stagnant, with the majority being left out or left behind, with the ground they had slipping from under them. And, as is true of India, evidence of both narratives exists.

But India changes in sneaky little ways, and so while apparently nothing seems to have changed, many things have changed quite dramatically.

Since 1991, the kaleidoscope comprising the many segments of India has turned many times, and new patterns have emerged. Interestingly, even the old labels have taken on new meanings. Today, "INDIA" is the label of the political alliance that stands for the poor and disadvantaged. The term Bharat, in S Jaishankar's recent book, *Why Bharat Matters*, stands for the totality of the country's culture and traditions. And in corporate India, the label "Bharat" stands for tier 2 and 3, rural, less affluent and less sophisticated, mass markets that it believes is the new frontier for consumption growth.

In the 1990s, the concern was that the strong India might be too small to drag the larger weak India upwards, and could itself collapse from the weight of trying. However, thankfully, after many years and various governments, the strong India is now comfortably large to inspire and propel the other India,

as data on household income and living conditions shows. The data also shows that "top half" and "bottom half" is a good way to socio-economically describe the strong India and the weak India. The top half is now well spread regionally and across urban and rural areas. The bottom half, though also spread out, has greater pockets of geographic and rural concentration.

Within the "bottom half", there is a distinct and growing segment who, with some combination of access to networks, information, government support, and personal circumstances, find the agency and energy to try and strive for opportunities for a better life. Kishore Biyani has called this "India 2". While anecdotes are not data, most readers will connect these with their own experience. A young girl from a modest family in small town Madhya Pradesh (MP) joined a caregiver agency, which sent her to a nonagenarian in an unfamiliar city in Tamil Nadu. She hopes to save enough money and appear for the pre-nursing selection test in MP, which will get her admission into an affordable government nursing college. Another young woman in a village in Uttar Pradesh aspired to be a teacher. She interviewed with her (illiterate) migrant father's employer,

impressed him with her spark, and he decided to fund her education. A young man from Uttar Pradesh doing odd jobs in Mumbai found out about and sat for the Indo-Tibetan Border Police exam because army's "bharti" has not been happening in his village. A vegetable seller who knows exactly how to go up the value chain (take orders on WhatsApp for high-value vegetables and don't carry inventory) aspires to open a small legit shop while building a home delivery service. WhatsApp and UPI-powered own-account workers or micro-entrepreneurs of all kinds exist in large numbers in the breadth and depth of



RAMA BUJAPURKAR

## Chinese history, for the CCP



### BOOK REVIEW

GUNJAN SINGH

China is a civilisational state with a long, contested and layered history. It encompasses within itself the history of the empires, kingdoms, warlords and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). But the history of China to which the Chinese people and the world is exposed today is sanitised and approved by the CCP. Since 1949, the CCP has taken a lead role in writing and rewriting Chinese history with the sole aim of pushing its own narrative and agenda. This effort is also a crucial exercise through which the CCP advances its identity-building project. Thus, Chinese

history has to be uniform and unilateral. No surprise that, as Ian Johnson writes in *Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future*, "Xi Jinping has made control of history one of his signature policies — because he recognises counter-history as an existential threat."

But history is not unidimensional; memories cannot be erased or rewritten because every event, incident and change in China impacted the people and the Party differently. This is a major challenge for the CCP. A party that has been in power for more than seven decades is uncomfortable with criticism and alternative narratives. In China today, history is the same for everyone, because the CCP and Xi Jinping says so. The author argues that "these acts of disremembering warp the country's collective memory and have succeeded in convincing most Chinese people that even if the Party is flawed, it is doing a good job and its opponents are at best unrealistic, and at worst traitors" Under Xi Jinping,

nationalism is directly proportional to complete acceptance of the CCP's version of history and timeline.

*Sparks* (the title is the same as that of a 1960s student-run journal) challenges the most common assumptions towards Chinese history. The world is fed with one-dimensional narratives on Chinese history. The CCP can do this because it has managed to hold on to power uninterrupted and to choke alternative versions from gaining popularity. The party decides what is taught in school and what is allowed to be showcased via television, films and online platforms. Every effort to challenge the mainstream narrative has been crushed by force.

As an eye-opener, the book brings to the surface the underground historians who have been braving every form of state persecution to preserve the history and memories of the common people. This common man's history is becoming a challenge for the CCP. "The rise of China's counter-historians is significant because it is taking place in a tightly

controlled political environment and challenges Communist Party legitimacy," the author says.

The book vividly juxtaposes outcomes of various events in Chinese history and highlights their impact on the CCP and the common people. Heart-wrenching descriptions and explanations of how people suffered under CCP rule or have been victims of party infighting are hard to forget. The violence the CCP unleashed on its own

people (Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square massacre) all contradict its narrative of being the party of the Chinese people. Worse, the party never apologised, and the victims of its violence were never compensated; most were just numbers, their existence wiped out.

The CCP promoted the idea that it can do no wrong, Mao could do no wrong and everyone who was the victim of the

violence deserved their fate. Since it is still in power, it limits people's space to talk about the past. They have to carry the party's memories if they have to still survive and thrive. Xi Jinping even approved his own resolution on party history. He has argued that the resolution was, to "relive the glories of the Party and appreciate how the Party has rallied and led the Chinese people in making magnificent achievements".

One major effort by Xi Jinping to cement control on China's history has been the re-building of the National Museum of China. Though this was originally built in 1959, it is, according to the author "the best place to witness the party's endless fiddling with the past". Recently, it was renovated with an investment of \$400 million and now seems to be the place "best known for Xi Jinping's coming out party in 2012". No surprise that "Xi's supremacy can be seen on the museum's homepage".

investment of \$400 million and now seems to be the place "best known for Xi Jinping's coming out party in 2012". No surprise that "Xi's supremacy can be seen on the museum's homepage".

India, with amazing learnability, abreast of the latest trends in whatever field they work in. This top half and the aspiring segment of the bottom half is the narrative of Modi's India. Nowhere near "India shining" but not India stuck-in-a-rut either. No longer the India where you have no chance of getting food if you are down and out.

The narrative of Rahul's India is of people with no hope, no jobs, fear, poverty, and wanting social justice not economic opportunity. Even the conceptualisation of the welfare state in the two narratives is different — one claims to help build capacity in various ways so that beneficiaries can look towards economic opportunity, while the other commits to increasing reservations in many more ways and redistribution of wealth. If one claims we "help you to make a fishing rod", the other promises to deliver fish for life.

Each narrative resonates with one segment of India. Which narrative's resonance is larger? To draw conclusions based on election results requires punditry beyond the ken of this columnist and assumes a simplistic number of variables at play. Based on the speed and scale of adoption of digital utilities and the data on access to amenities and enrolment in higher education as well as primary schools, the "aspiring India" does seem to be larger than the "hopeless India", with "economic opportunity" being a proposition with more pull than "social justice". But custodians of both narratives have their work cut out for them — one rides a tiger of unleashed aspirations that must be fulfilled, requiring new policies actions on steroids to feed the opportunity hungry millions and build a bridge from aspiration to possibility. The other needs to truly want to empower the disadvantaged to find their way to be a part of the new India rather than go back to the old days, and to build a bridge of inclusion through enablement.

The writer is the author of Lilliput Land: How Small is Driving India's Mega Consumption Story

The power of history and memory is beautifully laid out in the book and the major purpose that drives the underground historians is that this is a process "by people trying to understand and describe their own lives". It clearly explains why the Chinese state has snatched people's history and experiences and altered them with its own versions. The primary answer being to stay in power. "The government under Xi Jinping is nostalgic about the past... The system is rotten, the government knows it — hence the endless, pointless campaigns to whitewash the past."

The book offers a lens to view China through the gaze of its people and not the party. It pushes you to think about your own understanding and question what exactly history is all about. Is it what is repeated again and again or is it a sum total of what is never talked about and what is politically correct? China's history is not just the history of the CCP, it is a sum total of everyone who was there before the party, are there today, and those who will be there in the years to come.

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## OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
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{ OUR TAKE }

## Friends turn foes in the new House

The BJD has reset its relations with the BJP. Its predicament is not exceptional

Naveen Patnaik's call to the MPs of his party, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), to act as an effective Opposition in the Rajya Sabha marks a moment of reckoning. In the recently concluded general and state elections in Odisha, the BJD lost office in Bhubaneswar to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and failed to win a single Lok Sabha constituency. The BJD, though not a constituent of the NDA, backed many of the BJP's contentious laws in Parliament during 2014-24, and recently, facilitated the re-election of the railway minister, Ashwini Vaishnav, to the Rajya Sabha from Odisha. This closeness seems to have undermined the BJD's independent standing as a political outfit and hurt its prospects in what was mostly a direct contest with the BJP. That anti-incumbency over a quarter century pulled down the BJD and the electorate chose to back the BJP directly rather than route support through the regional outfit. It will not be easy for the BJD to now establish its credentials as an Opposition voice.

The BJD's predicament is not unique. Many regional parties that aligned with the BJP have seen their bases eroded or lost electoral primacy to the latter in their strongholds. The experiences of the Shiv Sena, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), Janata Dal (Secular), Akali Dal, and AIADMK illustrate this trajectory. The AGP, for instance, has lost not just its electoral base but also its plank of Assamese exceptionalism to the BJP, once its junior ally. Similarly, the regionalist BJD could not offer a counter to the BJP's campaign over Odia *asmita* (pride) that focussed on the Tamil origins of VK Pandian, the bureaucrat-turned-advisor to Patnaik. The Sena faced the threat of its base being subsumed within the larger rubric of Hindutva, once its ethnic identity plank lost traction. The AIADMK and the Akali Dal broke ranks with the BJP after they realised that the alliance benefited the latter and cost them their social base, but both remain in political wilderness.

This, interestingly, is in contrast to the parties that have allied with the Congress: The Congress's allies tend to retain their base or expand under the umbrella provided by the former. This may well be because the political character of the BJP and the Congress are very different: The former is a unitarian outfit with a powerful ideological core whereas the latter's federalist character allowed multiple groups and voices to flourish. More importantly, the BJP has been on the ascent whereas the 140-year-old Grand Old Party is past its peak. However, the fractured verdict of the 2024 general elections may force many parties to reset their political preferences. The BJD decision may well be a harbinger of things to come.

## Learning to live with new monsoon cycles

The monsoon this year has been deceptive — after arriving two days early on May 30 in Kerala, it progressed slowly to reach Maharashtra on June 11, about nine days late. Since then, it has picked up momentum, but remains seven days behind schedule. So far, its performance is in keeping with the trend of below-normal rainfall in June, proper onset only in July, and prolonged, heavy rainfall in September. While the exact causes remain unclear, one explanation for the shift in monsoon patterns is delayed western disturbances and Arctic Sea Ice melting as a result of the climate crisis. What is clear is that the country should prepare for the new character of the weather system, which brings with it erratic rainfall distribution, an increasing number of dry days, and abnormally high night temperatures.

A dry June hurts the kharif crop, heavy rainfall days in July hurt vegetable output, and the season continuing well beyond September means a delay in the rabi crop. What may act as a double whammy for Indian farmers, are some key reservoirs running dry after an exceptionally dry winter. The situation, though far from a drought, calls for both mitigation measures for farmers to stave off economic losses, and adaptation for how India manages its water, particularly reservoirs that cater to drinking water needs for most of the plains in the summer months. HT reported on Tuesday that nine years since 2008 have seen below-normal rain in June.

The climate crisis calls for focus on devising policies that can deal with these threats adequately and puts the onus on even local governments to ensure proper implementation.

## Pulpit offers Biden his comeback opportunity

Donald Trump has the clear edge but the presidential debate offers Joe Biden a big chance to address an image deficit. Like in India, the final lap of the campaign will shape the outcome in the US

In January, this column suggested that there was a *hawa* in favour of Donald Trump in the American presidential election. Since then, Trump has swept aside all his rivals in the Republican presidential primaries and become the unchallenged leader of the party that had come close to disowning him after the January 6 attack on the United States (US) Capitol. Trump's daughter-in-law, Lara Trump, is the co-chair of the Republican National Committee. Mike Johnson, the House Speaker, owes his job to Trump. Mitch McConnell, the last remaining pillar of the old anti-Trump Republican establishment, has decided to retire. And Nikki Haley, the last woman standing against Trump, will now vote for him.

Having consolidated his own position, Trump has maintained an edge over Joe Biden in the polls, including in swing states and made inroads among Black and Hispanic voters. Despite being a convicted felon — Trump was held guilty in a New York

business fraud-campaign finance case and will be sentenced four days before the Republican convention; he also faces three other criminal cases — his approval ratings haven't been affected. In fact, the charges have allowed him to play the victim of an establishment widely viewed with suspicion.

Till last month, Biden was raising more money than Trump. But the criminal conviction helped Trump race ahead even on that metric. There is a discernible shift of American capital towards Trump, with both the Wall Street finance types and Silicon Valley tech types lining up to applaud him. *The Economist's* polling model now suggests that Trump has a two-thirds chance of winning the November elections.

Five factors are helping him. One, there is a surge in illegal immigration, which Trump has, often in racist terms, depicted as an invasion. But the issue resonates widely, including among legal migrants and in blue cities that have seen an increase in migrant presence. Two, inflation persists. And America's robust job creation record, which Biden takes credit for, doesn't take away from the lived reality of voters experiencing this gap between wages and expenses every day in grocery stores.

Three, voters are exasperated with America's entanglement with wars. Biden withdrew from Afghanistan. Those who wanted the US to get out rightly slammed Biden for doing so badly; those who didn't want the US

to withdraw never forgave him for it. Biden backed Ukraine against Russia. Those who wanted US involvement believe Biden didn't do enough, early on, to support Kyiv and that's why Russia has an advantage; those who didn't want US involvement blame Biden for doing anything at all, see it as a waste of resources, and believe the partition of Ukraine is worth the price of peace with Russia. Biden backed Israel's invasion of Gaza after Hamas's terror attacks. Israel's champions in the US think Biden isn't backing Benjamin Netanyahu enough; those who are horrified at Israel's crimes in Gaza hold Biden complicit. And then there are voters who see both Ukraine and Israel as proof that Biden is too externally involved at a time of internal distress.

Four, a strong White, Christian, ultra-conservative agenda finds home in Trump's rhetoric and policy world on abortion, rights of sexual minorities, pedagogy around race and sexuality and immigration. And finally, there are those who believe that Biden is too frail, including within his own support base that's low on morale even as Trump's team is emotionally charged.

And yet, at a juncture when the Trump *hawa* is arguably stronger than it has ever been, while Biden's base appears fragmented, here is a proposition: This election isn't over. It remains competitive and close. And Biden will defy expectations at the first presidential debate on Thursday. Here is why.



Prashant Jha



This election isn't over. It remains competitive and close

Biden is old. But, contrary to what edited clips of occasional physical fumbles, repetitions and tangents during his speeches suggest, he is mentally sharp. All those who have interacted with him, including Indian interlocutors, have come back with the impression of a clear and coherent leader capable of exercising sober judgment. He has deep political experience and an unerring instinct which first made him a Senator back in 1973 and has ensured he hasn't lost a national election since. Biden wanted this debate early in the race. On style, he is prone to repetitions and gaffes, but he will aim to project sharpness; on substance, he will aim to expose Trump's hollowiness and showcase his reasonably good record. But Biden's primary aim is to show he knows what he is doing, an admittedly low bar but that's a result of the Republican messaging around his age. If he succeeds, Biden will kick off campaign season addressing a big perceptual disadvantage.

Then there is the actual agenda. Biden's message is three-fold. One, Trump is a threat to democracy and he will be worse in term two than he was the first time around. In a close election, where a very limited set of voters in six to seven states will determine the outcome, this message can be persuasive. Trump's personal

conduct and political behaviour appeal to some, but not to many others.

Two, Biden will point out that Trump's judicial appointees took away national protection to abortion and his return will lead to more control over women's bodies, assault on personal and sexual freedom, and an even more conservative judiciary that may attack minority rights. Don't underestimate the power of the women's vote or the fear among people of colour about what's at stake.

And finally, Biden will showcase an impressive set of accomplishments on infrastructure, health care costs, jobs, domestic manufacturing, climate, and personal freedoms. He will tailor it for the Democratic base and moderate Republicans. And over the next few months, he will relentlessly focus on Arizona, Nevada, Michigan, Wisconsin, Georgia, North Carolina and Pennsylvania, with a well-oiled campaign machinery down to the grassroots.

None of this means one or the other candidate will win. It only means that like the elections in India, the final three to four months, and the final lap of the political campaign, will determine the outcome. Watch the debate, but don't bet on a winner just yet.

The views expressed are personal

## BJP's performance reveals Dalit anxiety on reservation

The 2024 general election results point to the significant erosion of Dalit support for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). According to the recently published CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey data, the BJP's vote share among Dalits has slipped to 31% from 34% in 2019 and that of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) allies to 5% from 7%.

This loss of support for the BJP is attributed to its slogan, "*Ab ki baar, 400 paar*" (this time, more than 400 seats). This slogan, many posit, created apprehension among the Dalits about the BJP's intention to abolish reservation through major constitutional changes. This fear, as per various ground reports, has hurt the party immensely in Uttar Pradesh (UP). But how far has this fear resonated in other parts of the country? In Bihar, which has historically been a fertile laboratory for Mandal politics quite like UP, the BJP-led NDA grabbed five out of six Scheduled Caste (SC) constituencies. One reason for the different outcomes in UP and Bihar could be the deft social engineering strategy of the Samajwadi Party (SP), the BJP's main rival in UP. Going beyond its traditional Yadav-Muslim combine, the SP

khand. The BJP's combined tally of SC seats in all these states together stands at 12, down from 13 in 2019. Hence, in these states, its Dalit support base seems intact. Among the third category states of Odisha, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, the party's tally has gone up from eight to 20 in Odisha, from four to eight in Telangana, and zero to 21 in Andhra Pradesh (for the NDA, where the BJP is the junior partner in the alliance with the Telugu Desam Party, or TDP). Significantly, in these states, the Dalit support for the party seems to have also gone up. In Odisha, where the BJP failed to win any SC constituency in 2019, it has managed to win all three such seats this time. In Andhra Pradesh, too, the TDP has managed to win three out of four SC seats. Only Telangana seems an outlier to this pattern, as the Congress has managed to win all three SC seats.

Therefore, the Dalit anxiety about the abolition of reservation seems to have impacted electoral outcomes in those states where the BJP has suffered major losses. In other states, such concerns have not received similar traction. The BJP's declining popularity in states like UP, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Haryana, and Karnataka may be because of a host of other state-specific reasons, which also may have amplified such apprehension. In 2019, the BJP won a total of eight ST constituencies in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Karnataka combined (UP and Haryana do not have any ST seats). This time, it has lost six of these seats. Therefore, it might be reasonable to presume that in these states, the Opposition's narrative of "Constitution in danger" did have some impact, both on the SCs and STs. But, in all likelihood, in other parts of the country, it did not raise much alarm. This also suggests that the electoral behaviour of the Dalits was far from being uniform across the country.



The "*Ab ki baar, 400 paar*" slogan, many posit, created apprehension among the Dalits about the BJP's intention to abolish reservation

formance, b) where the BJP and its allies more or less held on to the 2019 tally, and c) where the BJP and its allies have greatly improved their 2019 performance. A closer look at the results data suggests that the Dalits voted differently in each of these three categories of states.

The first category comprises six major states: Maharashtra, Haryana, UP, Rajasthan, West Bengal and Karnataka with BJP's seat loss percentage being as high as 60.87%, 50%, 46.77%, 41.67%, 33.33% and 32% respectively. In almost all these states, the BJP seems to have lost substantial Dalit votes. Compared to 2019, this time, its tally of SC constituencies has dropped to one from four in Rajasthan, to zero from two in Maharashtra, to zero from two in Haryana, to eight from 14 in UP, and to two from five in Karnataka. In West Bengal, the loss of Dalit support seems to be minimal as the party has been able to retain four out of five SC seats it won in 2019, though the winning margin in all these seats has come down significantly.

The second category includes Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. The BJP's combined tally of SC seats in all these states together stands at 12, down from 13 in 2019. Hence, in these states, its Dalit support base seems intact.

Among the third category states of Odisha, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, the party's tally has gone up from eight to 20 in Odisha, from four to eight in Telangana, and zero to 21 in Andhra Pradesh (for the NDA, where the BJP is the junior partner in the alliance with the Telugu Desam Party, or TDP). Significantly, in these states, the Dalit support for the party seems to have also gone up. In Odisha, where the BJP failed to win any SC constituency in 2019, it has managed to win all three such seats this time. In Andhra Pradesh, too, the TDP has managed to win three out of four SC seats. Only Telangana seems an outlier to this pattern, as the Congress has managed to win all three SC seats.

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The views expressed are personal

{ ANTHONY ALBANESE } AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTER



Regardless of the views that people have about Assange's activities, the case has dragged on for too long... we want him brought home to Australia



## Why New Delhi needs a national security strategy

Every organisation of repute has a macro plan to guide and synchronise the activities of its sub-elements to achieve organisational goals. There are two parts to this endeavour — the determination of the organisational aim and guidance for each sub-group to work in unison to achieve it. This becomes an inescapable imperative when considering something as vital as a nation's security, with each element of national power — economy, industry, commerce, taxation, justice, foreign policy, internal security, and defence — working in unison for ensuring an inviolate security cocoon. To ensure the required unison from each element, a National Security Strategy (NSS) is necessary to guide policy- and strategy-making. Unfortunately, India lacks one and a recent statement of the chief of defence staff suggests that New Delhi doesn't require one. The new government needs to urgently address this issue.

How do nations that wield power of consequence plan their security? The American NSS states that, "We will... galvanise collective action on global challenges, and shape the rules of the road for technology, cybersecurity, and trade and economics... Our approach encompasses all elements of national power — diplomacy, development cooperation, industrial strategy, economic statecraft, intelligence, and defence". The road map is, thus, clearly spelt out for all arms of the government.

The French NSS lists out 10 priority areas that include Euro-Atlantic relationship and capacity to defend and act in hybrid fields. The NSS of the United Kingdom states that, "the stability and resilience of our economy and society is a precondition of our security... we must preserve the huge benefits that stem from our openness while ensuring that we are protected from the worst effects of global disruption, transnational challenges, or to hostile interference. That means improving our economic, health and energy security". The Russian NSS, similarly, reinforces the common theme of every NSS that, "the strategy is founded on the inseparable interconnection and mutual dependence of the national security of the Russian Federation and the socio-economic development of the country."

All NSSs are signed by the executive heads of government, ensuring that all arms of the government are, by law, on the same page on national security. The rationale behind the endorsement at the highest level is pertinent:



Manmohan Bahadur

National security is just not about defence but is a whole-of-government approach that needs orchestration by the political executive head, not by the defence minister.

What has been happening in India? "The defence minister's op directive conveys the government's intention, and that suffices", goes a refrain. "We have won four wars without a written NSS, so what's the need for one," goes another. One has lately heard that "Israel doesn't have one, despite its challenging security environment," missing the point that Israeli society and institutions are militarised whereas all Indian institutions, other than the armed forces, are civilianised.

A decade ago, I was looking after procurement plans in HQ Integrated Defence Staff. The 15-year tri-services long-term integrated perspective plan (LTIPP) for the acquisition of capital equipment, duly passed by the Defence Acquisition Council (headed by the defence minister), was forwarded to the finance ministry; it also carried an estimated costing, and hence the budgeting that was required. The LTIPP, however, lacked a macro-level government policy statement to support it and hence was just a defence ministry wish list lying on hope. One wonders whether this has changed for the better with some surety of the defence acquisition plan having "government" acceptance. However, the despatch of empowered teams abroad for emergency armament purchases after recent border crises makes one wonder whether a duly published NSS would have avoided the haphazard costly purchases — as the output of other relevant government arms would have been synchronised with the duties of the defence ministry.

So, while there is a huge furore about the delay in establishing theatre commands, the Agnipath scheme and whether the Navy needs another aircraft carrier, what's holding New Delhi back from promulgating an NSS that would streamline such decision-making and help its *aatmanirbharta* campaign in defence? Is it that, being a formal written commitment of resources and political will to national security, the executive would be held accountable? It is time the new government grabs the proverbial bull by the horns and promulgates its NSS.

Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur (ret'd) is the former addl director general, Centre for Air Power Studies. The views expressed are personal




**OUR VIEW**


## Free-float shares rule: Tighten it for a change

The time seems ripe to reverse a softening of Sebi's rule that at least 25% of a listed company's shares must qualify as free float. Both market efficiency and corporate governance could win

How strictly should the Indian stock market's 25% free-float rule be enforced? Under this basic norm, meant to assure every traded stock sufficient liquidity for trading, at least a quarter of every listed company's equity must qualify as its 'free float' portion, as distinct from the stake held by its promoters. It's back in the news because five state-run banks—Uco Bank, Central Bank of India, Punjab & Sind Bank, Bank of Maharashtra and Indian Overseas Bank—still have public shareholding levels of only 1.8% to 13.5% and must raise it to 25% by 1 August. As *Mint* reported, while the Centre plans institutional placements to comply, these banks have sought another two years for it from the regulator, Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi). If the odds seem to favour their wish being granted, pin it on a trend of rule relaxations. An exception was made for companies holding a public issue that would lead their market value to exceed ₹1 trillion, with such cases given two years more than the usual three to touch the quarter mark. This had suited Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), in which the government wanted to offload a 10% stake in parts without subscribers falling short. In 2022, LIC raised over ₹20,500 crore from 3.5% of its equity and has since been granted leeway till 2032 to comply fully. Private lobbying for relief has been active too. Last year, Sebi eased its policy, letting stock options be counted as free float, for example, within a 2% limit. Institutional ownership always qualified as free float, even though such shares aren't always traded actively, a point that came up in a controversy over the Adani Group's free-float adequacy.

The burden of rule-making includes the need to review rules from time to time. However, the question to ask today is not how doing business is getting easier, but also whether the rule is meeting its aims. Let's turn to first principles. The basic rationale of a 25% float is to ensure every listed stock sees enough trading for apt price discovery. Plentiful shares available on stock exchanges usually means one-off deals can't distort its market value, thus also making the stock price harder to manipulate. It's an ideal that stems from the very idea of an open market, its efficiency driven by a blend of diverse views held by a disparate crowd on what listed assets are worth. The prices of widely traded stocks tend to reflect their true value better, which in turn helps sustain investor confidence. To satisfy this aim, though, equity held by financial institutions should ideally not count as free float. Back in 2010, when this rule kicked in for all listed firms, markets had sparse retail participation, so its definition was kept broad. Today, the post-pandemic retail boom has weakened that logic. To uphold the 25% rule in its best spirit, it may well be time to exclude equity that's not widely dispersed.

Corporate governance is another reason why markets prefer wide dispersal of ownership. It invites wider public scrutiny, after all, reducing scope for the whim of promoters to trump the will of other investors. Since it takes a quarter-plus of all corporate votes to block a special resolution, 25% may sound like the right slice to pry out of promoter hands. Yet, this cuts it so close that 75%-stake owners may still exercise their whims. For public shareholders to register dissent in defence of their interests, they would together need over 25%. A policy reset to 28%, say, might help. Tighter rules aren't always bad.



are, respectively, co-founder of Agami and Public Collective for Avoidance and Resolution of Disputes (PUCAR), and a partner at Trilegal and author of 'The Third Way: India's Revolutionary Approach to Data Governance'.

The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transformed payments. In the process, it streamlined transactions, connected banks and enabled ecosystem players to build citizen-centric solutions. In 20 years, credit card companies got just 9 million point-of-sale terminals to merchants, whereas, just eight years after its launch, India already has 350 million UPI QR codes. The UPI journey didn't start by merely digitizing the existing payment system. Instead, it focused on the outcomes it was looking to achieve. All the steps required to enable that—the actors that had to be aligned, the technology that needed to be built, the incentives that had to be created, and the governance that was required—were conceptualized with that in mind.

We need a similar transformation of dispute resolution in the country. But, where do we start? In an earlier article, we discussed the idea of selecting an appropriate 'unit of change' for reform. What then is the most effective unit of change for transform-

ing the dispute resolution experience?

For a citizen, a 'dispute'—from the moment it is triggered until it is resolved—is a single experience that is not segmented by different institutions or processes. The objective is to resolve the dispute effectively without worrying about engaging with various other institutions, actors or processes. If our goal is to transform citizens' dispute resolution experience, then the obvious unit of change to focus on would be 'dispute type.'

The first step would be to map out the entire journey of the parties in a dispute. With this understanding, we will be able to adapt the justice system to the user, using technology to the maximum extent possible. Let's see how this might work in cheque-bouncing disputes, which comprise 10-15% of criminal cases in the country. How might we re-imagine these disputes from the perspective of citizens?

Could we, for instance, design a system where banks proactively send alerts to the parties, providing them information needed to take necessary action? Can we ensure that citizens get reliable information on their rights, obligations and choices from AI chatbots? Can we help them easily discover mediators and lawyers through a portal? Can we use existing digital ecosystems like

the GST information network and that of the National Payments Corporation of India to offer credentialled digital evidence for them to use? Can we build digital ecosystems that reliably deliver notices to relevant parties? Can we offer them ways to asynchronously submit documents or digitally request the rescheduling of hearings? Can all the systems that a citizen interacts with operate seamlessly with each other?

We can set up special courts to resolve distinct 'dispute types.' This will let us carry out the changes we are proposing within a sand-boxed environment that would allow us to iterate and validate the reimagined process within the confines of a single 'dispute type.' It will allow us to narrowly focus the change management efforts that are needed in a manner that will make outcomes easily measurable. These special courts can be used to demonstrate proofs-of-concept for the integration of other dispute types with the larger judicial system.

A dispute-type approach would also give us the most bang for the buck. Many of the 'people' (lawyers, litigants, judges) and 'actions' (user authentication, issuance of summons, scheduling of hearings) that make up the user journey are common across multiple dispute types. If we can design each of them to be extendable and interoperable modules, it should be possible for us to adapt and deploy them across a wide range of different dispute types as needed.

**We can adapt the judiciary to the digital world by aiming much needed reforms at cases carved apart by type**

Taking 'dispute type' as a unit of change has worked well for transforming the justice system in the past. Efforts in the UK and India to transform 'traffic penalty disputes' have been successful. The Traffic Penalty Tribunal in the UK serves as a global benchmark for transformed resolution processes, allowing parties to upload digital evidence and asynchronously communicate. Since it sets time limits for each process, 90% of all its appeals progress to a decision without the need for a hearing, and 57% of its cases are closed within 15 days. In

India, the concept of 'virtual courts challans' has enabled a majority of cases to be settled at the summons stage without litigants having to go to court.

The online dispute resolution (ODR) movement also gained momentum when it used 'dispute type' as its unit of change. In the US, ODR providers first focused on e-commerce disputes before extending it to family and other disputes. In India, the early providers of ODR focused on unsecured loan disputes (involving personal loans and credit cards), as a result of which over 110,000 unsecured loan disputes with a total claim amount of more than ₹2,000 crore have been referred to ODR in the past two-three years. Over 65,000 awards have been passed via online arbitration and 10,000 plus settlements have been made in online mediation, with an average resolution time of 60 days.

We don't need a faster caterpillar, we need a butterfly—a complete transformation of our dispute resolution ecosystem. This is not just desirable, but essential to tackle the mounting backlog of cases in Indian courts. More importantly, this transformation is necessary to ensure that the formal dispute resolution systems that we currently rely on continue to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world.

**MY VIEW | ON THE OTHER HAND**

## Why do we have a housing glut and shortage at the same time?

A distorted market full of locked homes is largely to blame but policy changes can ease this problem



**VIVEK KAUL**  
is the author of *Bad Money*.

financial assets. *Second*, conspicuous consumption is at work when it comes to buying real estate for investment. The wealthy need to look wealthy. One cannot show off a financial investment. Also, those who have more money than they know what to do with end up investing in new homes that they keep locked, in the process ensuring that the demand-supply dynamic which is at the heart of any market, does not work properly in this case.

*Third*, investment of black money in real estate is always a reason. *Fourth*, favourable tax treatment of income from real estate incentivizes people to invest in it. *Fifth*, with the stock market having gone from strength to strength, high net-worth individuals are diversifying some of the gains made from stocks by buying homes.

*Sixth*, the rental yield—a flat's annual rent divided by its market price—is only around 1.5-2%, which disincentivizes renting out property. *Seventh*, some investors fail to calculate real returns from investing in real estate. Typically, they tend to look at 'returns' as the difference between one large number, the price at which they buy, and another large number, the price at which they can sell, without taking into account the time value of money, maintenance expenses, property tax and the general risk of owning real estate.

So, how do these locked homes hurt the overall economy? *First*, they turn a physical asset into a financial one. Investors are not buying a home to live in, but buying to flip it. *Second*, locking up homes for the purpose of flipping drives up prices and makes things difficult for those who want to buy homes to live in. Look at the joke that "affordable housing" has become.

*Third*, high home prices impact the other spending decisions of those who buy homes to live in. It also leads to lower financial savings. *Fourth*, it leads to cities over-expanding, requiring longer commute times and delivering a lower quality of life. *Fifth*, it raises the

question of whether a capital-deficient country like India should incentivize the building of locked homes. *Sixth*, the making of things like cement, glass, plastic, steel, ceramics, etc, which go into the building of homes, involves the emission of greenhouse gases. There is also construction dust. If no one is living in these homes, then what's the point?

So, what's the way out? *First*, capital gains from real estate need to be taxed at the marginal rate of tax, the same way as salary income or interest on fixed deposits. If that's too radical a proposal, then at least the period of holding for long-term capital gains—which allows inflation to be taken into account while calculating them—should be significantly more than 24 months.

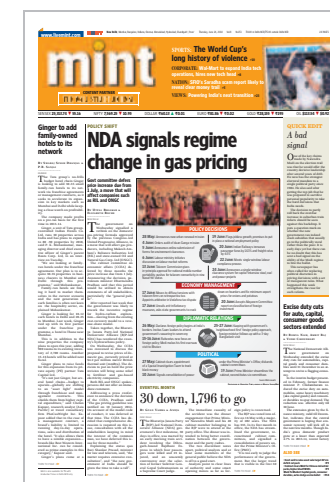
*Second*, as Babu of Naredco suggests, those who keep flats locked should be charged a higher property tax. Similarly, locked flats can be assigned a notional rent that would make the owner pay income tax on it. This would incentivize a few owners to rent out or sell their locked apartments.

Of course, such moves are not easily executable, but with the government collecting more data, things can only get better. Earlier this year, income tax notices were sent out to salaried employees claiming to pay a higher rent than they actually did.

*Third*, the government needs to get a proper real estate index constructed, detailed data for which should be available in the public domain a few weeks after the end of a month. The Reserve Bank of India's House Price Index is a quarterly index. Plus, it's a 10-city index with cities like Hyderabad and Pune not forming a part of it. *Fourth*, renting out homes needs to be encouraged.

Of course, all this will only start the process of taming real estate prices in Indian cities and not immediately make homes more affordable. It's important to understand that this is a complex socio-economic problem and such problems do not have simple solutions that deliver instant results.

### 10 YEARS AGO



### JUST A THOUGHT

Study after study, not only here but in other countries, show that the most affordable housing is where there has been the least government interference with the market—contrary to rhetoric.

THOMAS SOWELL

**THEIR VIEW**

## Target a 'unit of change' to transform our justice system

SUPRIYA SANKARAN & RAHUL MATTHAN



are, respectively, co-founder of Agami and Public Collective for Avoidance and Resolution of Disputes (PUCAR), and a partner at Trilegal and author of 'The Third Way: India's Revolutionary Approach to Data Governance'.

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THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Economic development could be led by policy-supported services

The big challenge has been to raise productivity in labour-absorbing services and here are four strategies that aim to do so



**DANI RODRIK & ROHAN SANDHU** are, respectively, professor of international political economy, and co-founder and co-director of the Reimagining the Economy initiative, at Harvard Kennedy School.

The future of developing countries is in services. This may sound odd in view of the fact that industrialization has been the traditional road to growth and eventual prosperity, one travelled by all of today's rich economies and by more recent successes such as South Korea, Taiwan and China. Manufacturing seems even more essential given that industrial policies to revive it are back in fashion in the US and Europe.

But today's manufacturing is different. Innovation in manufacturing has taken a predominantly skill-biased form, reducing demand for workers with relatively low levels of education. New technologies such as automation, robots and 3D printing directly substitute physical capital for labour. While firms in developing countries have an incentive to use more labour-intensive techniques, competing in the global marketplace requires employing production techniques that cannot differ significantly from those used in the frontier economies, because the productivity penalty otherwise would be too high. The need to produce according to the exacting quality standards set by global value chains restricts how much unskilled labour can substitute for physical capital and skilled labour.

Thus, the rising skill- and capital-intensity of manufacturing in turn means that globally competitive, formal segments of manufacturing in developing countries have lost the ability to absorb significant amounts of labour. They have effectively become 'enclave sectors,' not too different from mining, with limited growth potential and few positive effects on the supply side of the rest of the economy.

This means that enhancing productivity in labour-absorbing services has become an essential priority, for reasons of both growth and equity. Since the bulk of jobs will be in services, these jobs need to be productive enough to support income growth. The conundrum is that we do not know much about how to raise productivity in labour-absorbing services.

While some services, such as banking, infotech and business-process outsourcing (BPO) are both productively dynamic and tradable, they will not be labour-absorbing for the same reason that manufacturing is not. Even under the best circumstances, these relatively skill-intensive services will not provide the answer to the challenge of productive job creation. The challenge is to increase productivity in labour-absorbing services such as retail, care and personal and public services, where we have had limited success, in part because such services have never been an explicit target of productive development policies.

In a new paper, we describe four strategies for expanding productive employment in services that



ISTOCKPHOTO

create the most jobs in developing countries.

The first focuses on established, large and relatively productive incumbent firms, and it entails incentivizing them to expand their employment, either directly or through their local supply chains. These firms could be large retailers, platforms such as ride-sharing services, or even manufacturing exporters (with potential to generate upstream linkages with service providers).

The second strategy focuses on small enterprises (which constitute the bulk of firms in most developing countries) and aims to enhance their productive capabilities through the provision of specific public inputs. These inputs could be management training, loans or grants, customized worker skills, specific infrastructure or technology assistance. Given the heterogeneity of such firms, ranging from micro-enterprises and self-owned proprietorships to mid-size companies, policies in this domain require a differentiated approach that respond to their distinct needs. Moreover, given the numbers involved, policies often also require a suitable mechanism for selecting among the most promising firms, since most are unlikely to become dynamic and successful.

The third strategy focuses on the provision, to workers directly or to firms, of digital tools or other forms of new technologies that explicitly complement low-skill labour. The objective here is to enable less educated workers to do (some of) the jobs traditionally reserved for more skilled professionals and to increase the range of tasks they can perform.

The fourth strategy also focuses on less-educated workers and combines vocational training with 'wrap-around' services, a range of additional assistance programmes for job seekers to enhance their employability, retention and eventual promotion. Modelled after Project Quest, a US-based initiative, and other similar sectoral workforce development schemes, these training programmes typically work closely with employers, both to understand their needs and to reshape their human-resource practices to maximize employment potential.

There are examples of these kinds of initiatives around the world, many of which have been rigorously evaluated and which we summarize in our paper. There is already a foundation of practice on what might be called "industrial policies for services" on which future efforts can build.

Regardless of the success of individual programmes, it is important to bear in mind the scale of the challenge a services-oriented development strategy faces. A randomized policy intervention that increased earnings of low-income workers by, say, 20% would normally be judged a great success, assuming reasonable programme costs.

But even if it were successfully scaled up to the economy at large, this gain would not make up even 1% of the income gap that currently exists between a country like Ethiopia and the US.

Real success will require greater ambition, continuous experimentation and the implementation of a very wide range of programmes.

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GUEST VIEW

# Big Social Media let India down during election season

NAMRATA MAHESHWARI



is senior policy counsel and encryption policy lead at Access Now, an international digital rights organization.

The 2024 Indian general election highlighted the failures of major social media platforms, Google's YouTube and Meta's Facebook. Despite election preparedness promises, both fell visibly short on curbing disinformation and hate speech, while apparently profiting from opaque political advertising practices.

Before the election, much of the focus was on the creation of content, especially the blows that artificial intelligence and deepfakes could deal to democracy. But the dissemination of content—political ads, disinformation and AI-generated material—was a relatively overshadowed issue. Fake images or videos lack impact without wide reach, which is ultimately controlled by the platforms' algorithms for ads and posts.

The election underscored the platforms' failure to enforce their own policies. There continues to be opacity around how algorithms moderate content, and the data used for such algorithmic decision-making. This overarching lack of accountability is a warn-

ing sign for other countries, and an issue for India's new government to prioritize.

Experts labelled this year's election as the "YouTube election." Both YouTube and Facebook became prime venues for political content, used extensively by parties, candidates, content creators and the public. WhatsApp, which was pivotal in the 2019 election, was also used for campaigning this year. But YouTube's trump card was its virality potential with over 462 million users, and its ability to hyper-target audiences based on demographic and behavioural profiles. The platform became an alternative to traditional TV news, with opportunities for independent news media output and diverse content to thrive.

As for the influence of social media on elections, a 2021 Oxford Economics report found that 87% of Indian YouTube users turn to the platform during national news events. A news daily reported a two-fold increase in YouTube subscribers of digital news channels and political leaders as the election approached. According to a *Hindu* report, the official page of the BJP spent at least ₹19.38 crore on Facebook and Instagram, and the Congress spent at least ₹10.88 crore. Similarly, the BJP spent at least ₹85.8 crore, and the Congress at least

₹45.4 crore on Google, including YouTube. The ad repositories of Google and Meta, which are not as transparent as they should be, and only tell part of the story, show that the two companies earned 9-10 digit figures from just two major political parties between February and May 2024.

In the lead-up to the election, Google pledged to support the democratic process by enforcing policies against false claims. However, an investigation by Global Witness and Access Now shows that YouTube approved 100% of submitted ads containing election disinformation—including content that could result in vote suppression or plausibly even incite violence—in English, Hindi and Telugu, violating its content policies. In contrast, YouTube had rejected such ads before the 2022 US midterm elections, pointing to a disparity in policy enforcement between regions and potentially reflecting internal choices on resource allocation to pre-poll supervision in the US over that in India.

Meta also seems to have failed its self-regulation test. Civil society organizations found that Meta approved 14 out of 22 ads with inflammatory content within 24 hours, despite public commitments to detect and remove violative AI-generated content. Most users seeking to upload such content

are not researchers, and do not withdraw before publication. The potential harm from such content reaching millions is significant. These examples are part of a broader pattern of large platforms placing profits over other concerns.

The writing is on the wall for India's new government and other democracies: Self-regulation by social media companies is inadequate. Platforms wield immense influence over elections, and their policy enforcement (or lack thereof) has real-world consequences.

However, the regulatory efforts so far have mainly been aimed at shifting power from companies to the government. The need of the hour are policies that balance free expression, privacy and public account-

ability of algorithmic decisions. This is not a task for the government and tech companies to bilaterally address, as has often been done. The inclusion of technical experts, civil society and those impacted by these decisions can be a game-changer. Consultations on the upcoming Digital India Bill and data protection rules could help institute an inclusive-governance approach that fosters democratic engagement.

With newly elected representatives, a burgeoning tech sector and several imminent digital-regulation frameworks, India has an opportunity to lead with workable solutions for the repercussions of Big Tech dominance and modes of governance that involve those who are impacted the most: the end users of social media platforms.

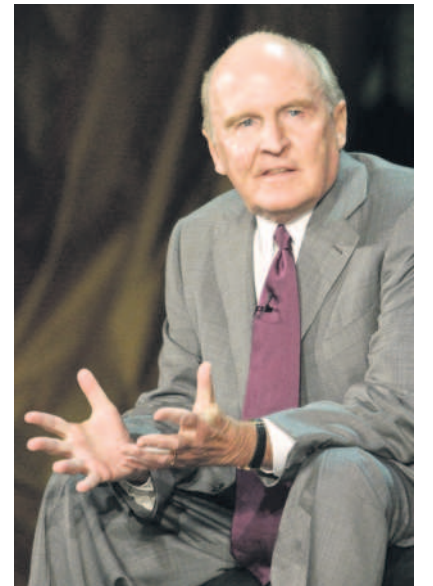
India's elevation of digital initiatives should be backed by leadership moves that focus on inclusive governance, compelling technology to be shaped in a way that empowers people. The country should send a clear message that platforms cannot have heightened accountability measures for the West and lax enforcement for the rest. A governance model which puts fundamental rights and collective deliberation up front would demonstrate a will to ensure that technology strengthens democracy.

# Global talent centres present India with a great opportunity

GE's Welch tech centre in Bengaluru offers a peek at possibilities



**ANDY MUKHERJEE** is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering industrial companies and financial services in Asia



The late Jack Welch, as GE's chief, was an early identifier of India's potential. BLOOMBERG

In the early 2000s, Alok Nanda's new colleagues called him the "bumper guy." His new job at General Electric back then was putting some plastic between the bumper and the beam of a Suzuki Swift. The plastics division had hired the young engineer from India's state-run DRDO, and asked him to find a cost-efficient way to reduce the impact on pedestrians in auto accidents. Two decades later, the former bumper guy and the John F. Welch Technology Centre he now heads in Bengaluru are executing far more complex projects. In the process, they're writing a template for MNCs on how to use India's engineering talent to create intellectual property, not just cut costs.

This is different from the code-writing work that gave India global recognition. While software outsourcing will face an existential challenge from GenAI, India's engineering prowess, if harnessed well, will launch the next wave of productive and lucrative jobs. Policymakers have their sights on China's factory-to-the-world crown, and are spending \$24 billion over five years on production-linked incentives. Trouble is, the rivalry is not limited to other Asian countries like Vietnam that are ahead in the game. The US, too, is running a very generous industrial policy to revive its manufacturing.

While India's factory ambitions are hobbled by its stifling bureaucracy and protectionist attitude to trade, it's still possible for it to make a play as a global engineering workshop and research lab. The knowhow it exports will be embedded in products made elsewhere. As Frederic Neumann, HSBC's chief Asia economist, says: "India's services connectivity to the world economy is so large nowadays that it 'compensates' for the lack of goods trade connectivity." It's time to use those links to target commercial services, whose cross-border demand grew 9% to \$7.5 trillion last year. World goods trade is three times larger, but it shrank by 5%.

Take Nanda's next big mission. As CTO for India at GE Aerospace, he and his team are working with colleagues in Niskayuna, New York, on a novel platform that would offer 20% efficiency gains in future jet engines. "I feel really privileged," Nanda told me. "For an engineer, it's like being a kid in a candy store."

When CEO Larry Culp rang the opening bell on the New York Stock Exchange on 2 April, launching GE Aerospace as an independent public company, joining the party on the podium was Ravindra Shankar Gan-

iger. With 100-plus patents, Ganiger has one of the richest hauls of all scientists and engineers at the Bengaluru centre. The team's intellectual inputs, already at the heart of newer jet engines like GE9X, is crucial to Culp's vision of "defining the future of flight."

GE woke up to India's potential early. Others are doing it now. Nearly 1,600 MNCs have set up captive units, employing 1.7 million professionals. By lifting the quantity and quality of the graduates and Ph.Ds India mints in science, technology, engineering and medicine, it can conceivably expand its relevant talent pool. A little less red tape and some improvement in civic amenities will keep more of them at home with good jobs.

As these highly paid individuals will support other Indians, and not just as drivers and housemaids but by generating tax resources for publicly funded employment in urban infrastructure, the narrow top of the employment pyramid would start filling its own middle. Stronger mass consumption will create demand for locally manufactured factory goods.

Consider the 360 Foam Wash. Vidya Venkataramani and her team wanted to test a portable washer to clean jet engines between flights. To simulate Middle East conditions, she created her own dust in the lab. The wash is already in use, saving global airlines fuel. Sanjeev Jha, meanwhile, uses machine-learning models to predict a maintenance schedule so carriers get the most out of engines.

In September 2000, I was present when GE's then-boss Jack Welch came to open the Bengaluru centre. At the time, the global behemoth had 12,000 employees in a market that barely generated \$1 billion in sales, not even 1% of its global revenue. "Market growth will come," he told us. "The real opportunity in India is its incredibly skilled workforce. We have used the software generated by our India business to change the company. That's great."

In the past 25 years, the appeal of India's talent has transformed. One idea for GE's upcoming engine platform is a hybrid-powered jet: a Toyota Prius of the skies. Suma MN is trying to crack that puzzle. I asked her if she is the first woman PhD from her village in Kerala. "I'm the first human," she corrected me.

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The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# Security and ecology

Making Andaman & Nicobar a maritime bastion is long overdue. Environmental concerns must be addressed



ARUN PRAKASH

AS FAR BACK as 1945, India's visionary historian-diplomat Sardar K M Panikkar had warned that, "the active control of the Indian Ocean and defence of the coastline is possible only by having islands as advanced bases. The A&N archipelago is admirably placed to secure control of the Bay of Bengal."

Manifold preoccupations with the western Indian Ocean expanse had, however, led India to neglect its eastern waters, including the strategic Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) archipelago. These included a perennially adversarial Pakistan, our huge diaspora and trading links with the Persian Gulf, as well as traditional ties with Indian Ocean island nations and the East African littoral. Notwithstanding these pulls, the strong compulsion of economic opportunities in Southeast Asia and the ASEAN region, coupled with growing seaborne trade and energy interests at stake in the Asia-Pacific region did, eventually, give rise, in succession, to the Look East and Act East policies.

New Delhi's complacency vis-à-vis the A&N islands had other reasons too. Few were aware of our tenuous hold on the A&N. In 1947, Britain had seriously considered retaining them as a Crown possession post-Indian independence, and during the 1965 conflict, Indonesia had offered to annex them on behalf of a fraternal Pakistan. A major reason for the lack of focus was their maritime remoteness. Great Nicobar Island — southernmost of the A&N group — is a mere 140 km from Indonesia, but almost 2,000 km from Chennai.

Any long-term vision for the A&N islands must focus on two major components. The defence of these strategically located insular territories and their vital role in India's national security matrix. The second, and equally important issue, is their economic development, which will make the islands as self-sustaining as possible and bring prosperity to the islanders.

Panikkar's advice was heeded only in the aftermath of the near-disaster of Kargil when a joint/tri-service, the A&N Command (ANC), was established in Port Blair, in 2001. For over two decades, the ANC has languished through neglect by the services — an indicator of the

resistance faced by "jointness" or inter-service integration within the military. Of late, however, encouraging signs are emerging of efforts to adequately fortify the ANC. From Shibpur in the extreme north to Port Blair, Car Nicobar, Kamorta and Campbell Bay in the GNI, the 800-km long north-south span of the A&N will be guarded by navy and air force airfields/bases. Plans are, hopefully, afoot to invest them with adequate defensive and offensive capabilities so that these strategic islands become India's eastern maritime bastion and sentinels of the Malacca Straits.

The rich maritime resources of the Andaman Sea offer a huge scope for sustainable growth. The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the islands adds up to 6,00,000 sq km or 30 per cent of India's total EEZ. The waters of the islands abound in marine life, comprising an abundant repository of edible fish, and there is said to be considerable potential for finding hydrocarbons in the Andaman Sea. Far more important than the natural resources of the A&N is their anthropological wealth. The Onge, Jarawa and Sentinelese tribes of the Andamans and the Shompens of the GNI need to be protected.

With limited scope for industrial and agricultural activity in the islands, and given the need to protect indigenous people and preserve their pristine ecological environment, tourism and fisheries had, so far, been considered the most sustainable avenue for their development and revenue/employment generation. However, in the news, recently has been a plan for the "Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island".

Conceived by the NITI Aayog and promoted by the media as a "mega-infrastructure project" and a "strategic masterstroke", this Rs 75,000 crore project is said to be of "importance for defence, logistics, commerce and industries, and eco-tourism". The project includes an international container transshipment terminal, an international airport, a gas and solar power plant, two greenfield cities, a coastal mass rapid transport system and a free trade zone.

Despite environmental clearances, said to have been accorded by an Expert Appraisal

Committee of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, there have been protests and appeals by conservationists, naturalists, various political parties and civil society groups, seeking a halt to the project on environmental grounds. They point to the potentially devastating impact on the Shompens, the tribe of hunter-gatherers, who live in a tribal reserve as well as the many species of flora and fauna, which are exclusive to the two national parks of India and the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in GNI.

While the NITI Aayog must have undertaken due diligence and a feasibility study before embarking on this project, a few issues need to be re-visited, if necessary, especially in view of the ongoing protests.

One, the security capabilities of ANC need to be addressed separately and must have no linkage with the developments contemplated for GNI. Two, lying equidistant (1,300 km) from established transshipment hubs and bunkering ports of Singapore, Port Klang (Malaysia) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka), the viability of yet another transshipment terminal in GNI becomes doubtful. Moreover, India has recently commissioned, with hope and fanfare, its own transshipment terminal in Vizhinjam in Kerala. Three, aspiring to replicate Singapore/Hong Kong duty-free ports/free trade zones on remote GNI (2,000 km from Chennai and Kolkata) without a hinterland, resources or industrial backup seems unrealistic. In this context, the travails of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port/airport projects would be instructive.

Finally, the Nicobar group has, apart from GNI, many other islands — Little Nicobar, Nancowry, Kamorta and Katchall — which could accommodate most components of such a project, without risking environmental, ecological and anthropological damage on this scale. These islands are, no doubt, smaller than GNI, but as Chinese civil engineers have demonstrated in the South China Sea, perseverance and ingenuity can transform mere rocks and shoals into artificial islands.

The writer is a former chief of naval staff

## CEREAL CONTROL

Stock limits on wheat don't square with record output figures. If supply is an issue, government should scrap import duty

IF THE UNION Agriculture Ministry is to be believed, Indian farmers have harvested an all-time-high wheat crop of 112.93 million tonnes (mt) this time, surpassing last year's record output of 110.55 mt. Against this background, the Narendra Modi government's decision to impose stock limits on the cereal with effect from June 24 and applicable until March 31, 2025, "in order to manage the overall food security and to prevent hoarding and unscrupulous speculation" is inexplicable. Wholesalers and big-chain retailers will not be allowed to hold more than 3,000 tonnes, with the corresponding stock limits set at 10 tonnes for individual stores and at 70 per cent of the installed milling capacity for processors. All these entities have been directed to declare their stock position and update them regularly on the department of food and public distribution's portal created for this purpose.

The stocking limits on wheat were first clamped in June last year, with these fixed at 2,000 tonnes (for wholesalers/big retailers), 10 tonnes (single outlets) and 75 per cent of installed capacity (processors), before being progressively lowered to 500 tonnes, 5 tonnes and 60 per cent respectively by February 2024. The limits were lifted from April 1 with the commencement of the new harvesting season, though the private trade was informally told to "avoid" buying any wheat brought by farmers at least for a month. That was meant to enable the government to shore up its own stocks. But now, with the marketing of the harvested crop completed, the stock controls have been formally reinstated. The reasons are probably three-fold. The first is retail cereal inflation ruling at 8.69 per cent year-on-year in May. The second is wheat stocks in government godowns, which, at 29.91 mt on June 1, were the lowest in 16 years for this date. The third is a not-so-great monsoon so far, which going forward can impact the production of rice as well, notwithstanding its reasonable stocks position for now.

The question to ask then is: How do stocking controls, along with restrictions and even bans on exports of non-basmati rice and wheat respectively, reconcile with official estimates of back-to-back record cereals output? The Modi government cannot be projecting one thing through the agriculture ministry (bumper crops) and another through the ministry of consumer affairs, food and public distribution (curbing hoarding). Why should cereal inflation be elevated, in spite of production touching new highs, and curbs on exports and stock limits placed on the domestic trade? If the government feels that the supply situation isn't as comfortable as its production estimates suggest, it should simply scrap the 40 per cent duty on wheat imports. With elections over and farmers already selling their produce, there isn't any political reason not to do so.

## HOLDING THE SPOTLIGHT

Julian Assange is finally set to walk free. His work, reaction to it represents a fundamental tension of the internet age

IN ONE FORM or another, sooner or later, the citizen's right to know comes up against a sealed envelope. Governments and bureaucracies — by design and intent — seek to make their functioning opaque. To his admirers, Julian Assange, arguably the most influential whistleblower of the 21st century, put a spotlight on people, events and practices that some of the world's most powerful entities would rather hide. However, the WikiLeaks founder's tale — he is set to be a free man for the first time since 2012 — is not a simple parable of personal suffering and the triumph of the principles of free speech and information.

Assange, an Australian citizen and ethical hacker, rose to prominence and for some, notoriety, in 2010 after WikiLeaks put out material obtained by former US soldier Chelsea Manning. Among the leaks was a video of a helicopter attack by American forces in Baghdad in which two Reuters journalists were killed. The same year, WikiLeaks also released a dump of over 2.5 lakh diplomatic cables and in 2016, ahead of the presidential elections, it published the emails by Democratic Party operatives that are widely believed to have hurt Hillary Clinton in the polls. Assange was accused of two instances of sexual assault in Sweden (the charges were dropped in 2017), and the US charged him under several counts of espionage. Assange, then in the UK, sought asylum at the Ecuador embassy, where he resided till five years ago. Since then, he has been in a British prison. Assange is now reportedly set to plead guilty to one count of espionage under US law — for which his imprisonment will count as time served — and return to Australia, a free man.

The figure of Assange — and equally, Edward Snowden — represents a fundamental tension between the nation-state's control over certain aspects of information on the one hand and those who believe, in the internet age, in a decentralised model of universal transparency. The former's justification has relied strongly on a national security argument. Revealing the identity of covert operatives, for example, constitutes a threat to their lives. They also argue that "data dumps" without context or editorial intervention can be misused by nefarious actors. There is some merit to this argument. However, in an era where technology is used to violate privacy and free speech is besieged in many quarters, sunlight continues to be — more often than not — the best disinfectant. Unfortunately, the vigour with which governments have gone after Assange and others like him could deter future whistleblowers.

## FOLLOWING DODOL

Food as a product is served well by things like GI tags, but food as culture needs a wider lens

DODOL, WITH ITS rich, caramelly sweetness, may not be as well-known outside Goa as its multi-layered distant cousin Bebinca, but that may just change with the state government's application to get the dessert a Geographical Indication (GI) tag. The All Goa Bakers and Confectioners Association, which has filed the application, hopes that the GI tag will help standardise the recipe and technique for preparing Dodol, safeguard its cultural identity as a "unique" dish of Goa and ensure its "authenticity". This is certainly a worthwhile goal from the perspective of those in the business of making and selling the sweet, but it also brings up questions about what terms like "authenticity" and "cultural identity" mean when it comes to something as migratory and adaptable as food.

The idea of GI, in the original European sense, is connected to the idea of "terroir" — a term most often used in the context of wine, but which broadly means that a food grown or developed in a particular region draws its unique flavour and texture from the natural environment (soil, water, climate) of its origin. The GI lens thus becomes a helpful way of tracing the provenance of certain kinds of comestibles, like wine and cheese. But what this approach, with its narrow focus on the idea of "origin", often misses is that food, like language, grows richer at the intersections where different cultures meet, whether now or in the past.

Take Dodol: The sweet — even the word "Dodol" itself — can be traced all along the route from South to Southeast Asia, popping up in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia. Who took it where? How? One food, in other words, has so much to say about the currents of history and the people, words and food that travelled on them. Food as a product is served well by things like GI tags, but food as culture needs a wider lens.

## THE FERTILITY MYTH

Reproductive health rights, not propaganda, must drive debates on population



SAROJINI NADIMPALLY AND KEERTANA K TELLA

ON JUNE 13, the Supreme Court stayed the release of the film *Hamare Baarah* (Our Twelve), originally called *Hum Do*, *Hamare Barah* (Two of Us, Our Twelve), and directed the Bombay High Court to take a final decision. On June 19, the Bombay High Court allowed the film's release, provided the filmmakers removed certain scenes and inserted disclaimers. Many political leaders in the past have used the slogan "Hum Paanch, Hamare Pachchees" (Five of Us, Our 25) to target the Muslim community. The slogan reinforces the myth about Muslim men having many wives and children, leading to rapid population growth among Muslims, which will eventually result in Muslims surpassing the Hindus. It is important to reiterate data that challenges portrayal of Muslim fertility as a threat.

The latest National Family Health Survey, 2019-20 (NFHS-5) shows that many states have already attained a replacement level of fertility, and there is a steady decline in India's total fertility rates (TFR). According to the data, the TFR in India is 2.0 children per woman up until 2021, which is slightly lower than the replacement level of fertility of 2.1 children per woman. The Economic Survey 2018-19 and the Sample Registration System (SRS) data from 2017 also had similar findings on the deceleration of India's population growth.

According to the 2011 Census, the growth rate of the Muslim population was higher than that of Hindus. The controversy surrounding this single interpretation obscured the fact that the gap between the two growth rates had significantly reduced between 2001 and 2011.

When comparing the fertility differentials between the communities using the 2001 and 2011 data, this convergence of fertility between Hindus and Muslims is evident. It comes with the caveat that since different states and groups are at different points in this transition, there are variations between regions — a fact evidenced by earlier studies.

Another recent analysis taking into account the drop in fertility and the rate of decline in population growth found that the drop in Hindu fertility was five per cent less than the drop in Muslim fertility in the last two decades, where Muslim population growth declined at a faster rate than that of Hindus. This analysis suggested that there may be "absolute convergence" in Hindu-Muslim fertility rates by 2030.

Data from the NFHS show that the fertility rates of all religious communities have declined over the two decades. The sharply decreasing family size of Muslims, particularly, is evident since the fertility rate for Muslims has decreased by almost half from 4.4 in 1992-93 to 2.4 in 2020-21.

The Population Foundation of India observed that education, healthcare and socio-economic development significantly impact fertility rates with states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu showing lower TFRs than Bihar that had less access to these resources. Thus, what influenced levels of fertility rates was not religion, but rather better socio-economic status.

The NFHS-5 data also shows that the higher the level of the mother's education, the lower the fertility. Across religious groups,

Muslims are the most disadvantaged economically, with poorer education and health levels — evident from their lower enrollment in higher education. The Sachar Committee Report in 2006 emphasised such socio-economic disparity among Muslims. The population growth debate should focus on investments in education, economic development, food, nutrition, healthcare, sexual and reproductive health services, and gender justice. Furthermore, women, particularly from marginalised communities, have limited freedom to make fertility decisions and controlled access to contraception and reproductive care.

The rhetoric about the fertility of the Muslim community directly affects Muslim women's right to have or not have children. This not only violates their right to life and dignity but also affects their subjectivities. Hence, the discussion concerning population growth and fertility must shift focus and centre on sexual and reproductive health rights, individual choice, and resist attempts at co-optation for politically motivated propaganda. To vilify a community through misinformation and then compound their experiences of unjust treatment through the normalisation of this rhetoric is unacceptable, discriminatory, offensive and misleading. As feminists, it is critical to challenge and resist broader attempts at polarisation by foregrounding facts, data, and a commitment to protect the right to determine reproductive outcomes.

The writers work on gender, fertility, reproductive rights and public health

## JUNE 26, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### TERRORIST KILLED

FIVE INDIVIDUALS, INCLUDING a four-month-old child, were killed in a terrorist attack in Punjab on June 25. Several were left injured. One extremist was killed in an encounter with security forces who were on patrolling duty in the Jhalal area of Amritsar. During sweeping operations, more arms have been seized from the Akal Takht and the Nanak Niwas in the Golden Temple complex.

### CURFEW IN HUBLI

NIGHT CURFEW HAS been imposed in five parts of Hubli, as the death toll rose to five.

They were all stabbed to death, while other reports of stabbing have received no official confirmation yet. The DIG Belgaum said that while the situation is tense, there is adequate police force to maintain order. A peace committee has also been put into place to restore peace between the two warring factions.

### PAKISTAN'S VIEW

THE CRISIS IN Punjab with the revolt of Sikh extremists and the storming of the Golden Temple, continues to make headline news in Pakistan. The turmoil in the neighbouring border state has evoked diverse comments from national leaders, particularly in the National

Press Trust papers, where the rights of the Indian minority to "a separate entity" are discussed and Sikh-Muslim talks on the eve of Partition are discussed. However, Islamabad's official line of thought remains unknown.

### ASSAM BANDH

ROAD TRAFFIC WAS disrupted on June 25 in the Brahmaputra valley as Assam agitators called for a 24-hour long, state-wide bandh. The agitators are protesting against the Centre's inaction over the question of foreign nationals in the state. Bomb explosions, tampering with train tracks and incidents of stone-throwing have been reported.



# 9 THE IDEAS PAGE

## A strategic window

The churn triggered by growing interdependence of European and Asian theatres is accompanied by the rise of middle powers with influence across Eurasia. India can use this to increase national power



RAJA MANDALA  
BY C RAJA MOHAN

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR Putin's visit to North Korea and Taiwan last week and this week's presidential debate in the US between Joe Biden and Donald Trump highlight the complex and deepening interconnections between European and Asian security that offer new strategic opportunities for middle powers like India. Four dimensions of the new "Eurasian" geopolitics stand out.

For one, Asia is no longer a passive adjunct to the European theatre. During the colonial era, Asian resources were critical in shaping the economic and geopolitical destinies of European imperial powers. Recall the large contribution of Indian military resources in reinforcing the primacy of Great Britain in the Indian Ocean from the early 19th century to the mid-20th century. Indian armed forces made major contributions to the military success of Britain and its Western allies in the First and Second World Wars.

Unlike in the imperial era, when the decisions on using colonial resources were made in the European chancelleries, the Asian states are now able to make choices that shape the balance of power in Europe. Note how both Russia and Western Europe are courting Asia in shaping the narrative on the war in Ukraine. The Ukraine peace conference last month was a major attempt by Kyiv and its Western backers to win political empathy and diplomatic support from the non-Western world in reversing the Russian occupation. Moscow, in turn, pressed key nations of the Global South to avoid attending the conference.

Conference diplomacy and the mobilisation of non-Western public opinion have indeed become important in the first major war in Europe since the Second World War. Even more important is the fact that Asia has now emerged as a major supplier of arms in a European conflict.

Consider the Korean Peninsula's new role in Ukraine. While North Korea has become a major supplier of ammunition to Russia, South Korean arms have been flowing towards Ukraine. While China is not said to be sending arms to Russia, it is supporting Moscow's war effort in other ways. Washington is pressing Tokyo to ramp up joint production of missiles and liberalise the export controls so that arms made in Japan can flow towards Ukraine and other zones of contest.

Two, the Asian agency in dealing with great powers has grown in the current conflict. No better evidence than Putin's visit to Pyongyang and Hanoi. Moscow had stepped back from its intensive partnership with Pyongyang after the end of the Cold War and focused on improving ties with Seoul which has emerged as an economic power. Russia is now eager to rebuild ties with the North. Putin travelled to North Korea last week, for the first time in 24 years, and signed a treaty on mutual security assistance and several other agreements to boost Kim Jong-un.

You could certainly argue that Putin has



CR Sasikumar

played the "North Korea Card" to challenge the West.

You could assert with equal veracity that Kim Jong-un has played the "Russia Card" to vastly improve his room for manoeuvre between China, Japan, South Korea, and the US. This, in turn, is likely to result in South Korea becoming an even more important partner for the US and Europe. If Russia helps North Korea to boost its nuclear arsenal, the resistance in the US to visualising a nuclear-armed South Korea is likely to diminish.

In the last couple of years, the Biden Administration has focused on strengthening the bilateral alliance with South Korea and has developed a new trilateral arrangement with Seoul and Tokyo. China, meanwhile, has revived its own trilateral cooperation with Japan and South Korea.

Asia's agency is also visible in Vietnam's decision to host President Putin. Vietnam is the only country that has hosted Joe Biden, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin on bilateral visits over the last nine months. Vietnam is already in a high-wire strategic act as it simultaneously expands its economic ties with China and the US and explores security cooperation with Washington. Hanoi is betting that renewing strategic ties with Russia improves Vietnam's balancing act between China and the US.

Three, as Asian manoeuvrability increases, Western dilemmas are sharpening. One of the major fault lines in the American debate on foreign policy is squaring the competing imperatives in Europe and Asia. (The political divisions on the question of American support to Israel appear less salient).

After the Second World War, the US-dominated both European and Asian theatres. Thanks to the Russia-China alliance unveiled just days before Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022, and the scale of the challenge presented by the two powers in Europe and Asia, America is under some pressure to define the source of its primary challenge.

An important section of the Republican foreign policy establishment argues that the US should not waste its energies on the Ukraine war and concentrate its military power in Asia. The Biden Administration agrees that China is the principal challenge but is not in a position to disentangle itself from supporting Ukraine. The arguments on this question might be heard in the debate between Trump and Biden this week.

Europe is utterly anxious about Russia but divided on how to deal with China. Europe does not see eye-to-eye with the US on the best strategic responses to the China challenge. Although Europe is wary about Chinese support for Russia, it also hopes that Beijing can be persuaded to restrain Moscow. Deep economic interconnections developed over the last four decades between Europe and China's industrial heartland on the eastern edge of Eurasia make its leaders hesitant in confronting Beijing.

Four, the real answer to the question lies in Europe taking a larger responsibility for its own defence — a principle that both Biden and Trump agree on. In other words, Washington wants the Eurasian nations to do more to balance Russia and China and relieve some of America's burdens. While Europe is struggling to get its defence act together, many Asian states, including Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea are willing to contribute a lot more to the reconstruction of the regional security order.

Europe is utterly anxious about Russia but divided on how to deal with China. Europe does not see eye-to-eye with the US on the best strategic responses to the China challenge. Although Europe is wary about Chinese support for Russia, it also hopes that Beijing can be persuaded to restrain Moscow. Deep economic interconnections developed over the last four decades between Europe and China's industrial heartland on the eastern edge of Eurasia make its leaders hesitant in confronting Beijing. Yet, Europe can't ignore the US calls to stand firm against the growing assertion of China in Asia and contribute to the Indo-Pacific security. Washington on its part is also encouraging its close Asian allies — Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea — to contribute to European security.

The great churn triggered by the growing interdependence of the European and Asian theatres is accompanied by the rise of middle powers whose influence is growing across Eurasia. The US is eager to build strong security partnerships with the middle powers to balance China and Russia. The new American emphasis on "integrated deterrence" gives the middle powers like India an unprecedented opportunity to enhance their comprehensive national power, including military capabilities.

This strategic window is unlikely to last forever. The question is whether the Indian bureaucracy can move fast enough to seize the current international possibilities for the urgent modernisation of India's defence industrial base and the rapid expansion of arms production at home. Self-sufficiency in arms production, after all, is the essence of the much-vaunted "strategic autonomy".

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## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"We face a potential health catastrophe, and cosmetic measures will not do. Every factor that keeps our young from breathing easy must be addressed through information about the need for a healthy environment indoors... by providing free masks to poor homes and commuters." — **DAWN, PAKISTAN**

## A test that can be trusted

As technology continues to shape education, it offers solutions that can ensure efficiency and credibility of competitive exams



HIMANSHU RAI

IN RESPONSE TO mounting concerns about the integrity of competitive examinations, the government has taken swift, decisive action to rectify the issues. Instances such as the postponement of the NEET-PG exam and allegations of paper leaks during NEET-UG retests across six cities, along with the recent UGC NET paper leak, have understandably raised serious doubts among students nationwide about the fairness and reliability of these crucial exams. However, the Indian government's proactive steps, which include implementing leadership changes at the National Testing Agency (NTA) and establishing expert committees, demonstrate a clear commitment to restoring trust and ensuring the integrity of the examination process. These actions are not just about addressing immediate challenges but also signify a long-term strategy to rebuild confidence and ensure fairness for all students.

To ensure transparent, smooth, and fair conduct of the exam, the Ministry of Education has established a High-Level Experts Committee. This committee aims to deliver within two months actionable recommendations that will reform examination processes, enhance data security protocols, and potentially restructure the NTA to better safeguard against future breaches. Furthermore, the involvement of the CBI signifies a commitment to a thorough, impartial inquiry that will not only identify those responsible but also uncover systemic weaknesses that allow such breaches to occur. Additionally, the government has introduced the Public Examination Act to curb unfair practices and deter potential wrongdoers. This act imposes stringent penalties, including fines up to Rs one crore and imprisonment for up to 10 years for those found guilty of compromising examination integrity. These measures are essential to send a strong deterrent message and ensure the sanctity of public examinations.

While the immediate actions are robust and necessary, further steps are crucial for the long-term security and integrity of the examination system. For online examinations, implementing cutting-edge encryption techniques and multi-factor authentication can protect against unauthorised access. Blockchain technology can be employed to track and secure examination papers from creation to evaluation, ensuring that any tampering is immediately detectable.

For traditional, offline examinations, stringent security measures are vital at every stage. This includes tamper-evident packaging for examination materials, secure transportation, and rigorous checks at all handling points. Employing real-time GPS tracking for logistics and using digital watermarking can also significantly reduce the risk of leaks. Employing AI-powered proctoring systems can enhance the monitoring of examinations, reducing the chances of cheating. Biometric verification can ensure that candidates are who they claim to be, adding another layer of security to the examination process.

Additionally, conducting frequent, thorough audits by independent bodies can help identify vulnerabilities within the examination process. Transparent and regular reviews make sure that security protocols are adhered to and any discrepancies are swiftly addressed. To prevent future failures of digital locks leading to the manual opening of examination booklet boxes and delays in distributing question papers, rigorous maintenance schedules and backup protocols must be implemented. Regular maintenance checks should ensure digital locks are fully functional before exams. Additionally, staff should be trained in emergency procedures for secure manual overrides under supervision. These measures will help minimise disruptions and uphold examination integrity.

Integrity workshops emphasising the virtues of fairness and integrity, alongside regular dialogue involving students, parents, educators, and policymakers, represent proactive measures that could significantly enhance examination integrity. Engaging stakeholders in these discussions would cultivate a vigilant community, thereby safeguarding against any unauthorised access to answer keys. These initiatives not only address immediate concerns but also lay the groundwork for long-term improvements in the examination process.

With over 10 million students registering annually for various exams under the NTA and a remarkable 12.3 million candidates in 2023 alone, the NTA stands as a global leader among examination-conducting bodies. This substantial participation underscores the influential role examinations hold in shaping the aspirations of India's youth. In light of these numbers and India's renowned education system, the government's proactive measures are commendable and far-reaching, aimed at ensuring long-term integrity and reliability. These actions will not only address immediate challenges but also lay a robust foundation for safeguarding the dreams and aspirations of millions of students. This approach promises to strengthen trust in the educational system, promoting fairness and transparency for generations to come.

Looking ahead, the future of Indian competitive exams hinges on innovative strategies geared towards ensuring fairness and efficiency. As digital technologies continue to shape education, the adoption of robust digital security measures emerges as a critical imperative. Implementing state-of-the-art encryption protocols and rigorous authentication mechanisms for online examinations will be a strong defence against cyber threats and unauthorised access. This proactive approach not only safeguards the integrity of assessments but also develops trust among stakeholders. Embracing advancements in data analytics and predictive modelling can further optimise exam logistics and resource allocation, ensuring smoother administration and reduced operational challenges.

*The writer is director, IIM Indore*

## Putting manufacturing on track

Government must improve value addition and export competitiveness



R NAGARAJ

THE MANUFACTURING SECTOR'S share in the GDP has stagnated as per the National Accounts Statistics. In 2014-15, the share was 16.1 per cent at current prices. It fell by three percentage points by 2022-23. At constant prices (net of inflation), the share declined marginally to 15.6 per cent. Make in India, initiated in October 2014, was one of the first policy measures of the then-incoming government. It aimed to raise the manufacturing sector's share in the GDP to 25 per cent and create 100 million jobs by 2022 (in addition to the existing 60 million at the time).

Achieving the goal required substantial investments. Policymakers reasoned that investors were wary of setting up factories and firms. India suffered from excessive capital and labour regulation, requiring a reduction of the "regulatory cholesterol", to use popular policy jargon. The government sought to credibly and measurably reduce the regulatory burden by benchmarking them against the globally accepted yardstick of the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index (EDBI) ranking. India's EDBI rank improved from 142 in 2014-15 to 63 in 2019-20. Alas, it failed to boost industrial investment or output growth. The annual growth rate of GDP manufacturing plummeted from a peak of 13.1 per cent in 2015-16 to a negative 3 per cent in 2019-20.

What went wrong? India chased a technically dubious and politically motivated index whose ranks (improvements in them) were not associated with increased investments anywhere. Incidentally, WB scrapped the index in 2021, as it became a

professional embarrassment.

The real gainers of the EDBI are perhaps the employers, as the reforms replaced state-mandated regulation with self-certification of labour law compliance. For instance, the boiler inspectorate's annual mandatory certification of industrial boilers — a critical industrial safety requirement — is replaced by voluntary, private, third-party inspection. Its compliance is reportedly zero in Maharashtra as of 2023.

After the border clashes in Galwan in June 2020, India launched the *atmanirbhar abhiyan* (self-reliance campaign) to augment domestic production — with a budget of up to one per cent of GDP — to reduce dependence on critical industrial imports such as active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) or fertilisers for agriculture. In 2021, the government launched the Production-linked Incentive (PLI) scheme to boost the manufacturing of 14 highly imported and strategic industrial goods.

None of these have worked, at least as yet. The much-publicised boom in production and exports of mobile phones has merely shifted the imports from the finished good to its underlying components with modest domestic value-addition. India needs to invest in component manufacturing. The industrial (gross value added) growth rate, at constant prices, was a mere three per cent per year during 2014-22, as per the Annual Survey of Industries — credible estimates based on the production accounts of registered factories — compared to the GDP growth rate of 6-7 per

cent. As industrial production was not growing fast enough to meet domestic demand, net imports, especially from China, ballooned to over \$70 billion in 2021-22, and increased to over \$100 billion in 2023-24, with China emerging as India's largest trading partner.

According to national accounts data, policy efforts failed to augment the aggregate fixed investment rate (gross fixed capital formation), which hovers around 30 per cent of GDP at current prices. Its composition has shifted towards services (mainly telecom and infrastructure), with its manufacturing share stagnating at 18 per cent (or declining marginally).

However, the lack of industrial investment is far graver than the national account figures reveal. The manufacturing sector's performance was overstated in the current series of NAS — as brought out in the unresolved debate on the GDP estimates. As the ASI data up to 2021-22 is available, it is possible to compare the NAS and ASI investment estimates for manufacturing to get a reality check.

As per the NAS, gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) and net fixed capital formation (NFCF) grew on average at 5.3 and 6.9 per cent annually from 2014-15 to 2021-22 at constant prices. The comparable ASI estimates are (-) 1.6 per cent and (-) 9.6 per cent per year. The Covid pandemic may have contributed to the high negative figure of NFCF. If we restrict the estimate to 2019-20, the NFCF growth is still (-) 1.6 per cent. Hence, the bottom line is that since 2014-15, there has practically been no expansion of the net fixed investment rate,

thus leading to a stagnation in manufacturing capacity. India's industrial imports have boomed to meet the demand-supply gap, mainly from China — a national strategic threat. Moreover, the share of labour-intensive exports has dwindled, hurting employment growth.

Why did policymakers fail to notice the abysmal investment growth? They seem to have followed the NAS's estimates, whose fault lines are now well documented ("Revisiting the GDP Estimation Debate", *Economic & Political Weekly*, October 30, 2021). Hopefully, the National Statistical Office will correct the shortcomings in the revised series, whose preparation is expected to commence shortly.

If the preceding arguments and evidence are valid, there is an urgent need for a well-designed industrial policy to address the problem of lack of net investment growth in manufacturing. Such a policy must prioritise productive investment over speculative property development promoted by physical infrastructure in metros and highways to nowhere. The government must align trade and industrial policies to augment domestic investment, improve domestic value addition and export competitiveness. Small industry requires localised, context-specific, and "last-mile" interventions to boost productive employment.

*The writer is at Centre for Liberal Education, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay. Views are personal*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### LEVEL THE FIELD

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A breach of trust' (IE, June 25). The NEET paper leak has endangered the future of those who have done well, after investing a lot of labour, funds and time into this exam. The reputation of the National Testing Agency (NTA) has come crashing down and so has the faith of our youngsters in competitive exams, where a good performance used to mean a secure future for them. How the government makes amends for this disaster is yet to be seen. It will take more than mere cosmetic changes to make the examinees believe that the competitive exams they have been preparing for have a level-playing field.

**Vijai Pant, Hemptur**

### A NEW MODI

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'BJP's coalition challenge' (IE, June 24). This time, PM Narendra Modi's political longevity was boosted by the BJP's political allies in the NDA, the JD(U) and TDP. However, the June 4 verdict will now have a bearing on the functioning of Modi 3.0, as the BJP will be heavily dependent on its allies to run the union

government. This will result in compromises and the dilution of the BJP's core agenda, both in Parliament and outside of it. It will be difficult to brush aside the sensitivities and priorities of its key allies. But given PM Modi's centralised and top-down style of governance, it is to be seen whether he will be able to adjust to the reality and politics of a coalition government quickly.

**SS Paul, Nadia**

### FIX THE SYSTEM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Why exam scams happen' (IE, June 24). The corruption in the recent NEET exam must prick our collective conscience, but it must, more importantly, make our policymakers investigate the causes. There is no dearth of hardworking youth in our country, but they do not find enough opportunities to prove themselves. Those who manage to pass the fiercely competitive exams are lionised by society and coaching institutes. But the majority are left frustrated. Expanding quality educational and employment opportunities could help to end the menace of exam fixers. Concerted efforts, involving all stakeholders and society at large, could definitely eradicate the education mafia.

**SH Quadri, Bikaner**

# Opinion

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 26, 2024



## INDO-US TIES

US envoy to India Eric Garcetti

“This is a relationship that isn't just additive. It's not just the US plus India. It's multiplicative. It's the United States times India”

## White-collar jobs gloom

There are lessons for all stakeholders in the hiring winter at some of India's premier institutes

**T**HE BUBBLE IN hiring white-collar professionals, led by the information technology (IT) sector, has burst. High-paying jobs and guaranteed placements have been long considered a given at India's premier engineering and management institutes. It is obviously no longer the case. According to information shared by an RTI applicant last month, 38% of Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) graduates across 23 campuses — around 8,000 — were yet to be hired through campus placement this year. A report by the National Association of Software and Service Companies earlier projected that the Indian IT industry would create 60,000 jobs in FY24, a steep fall from 270,000 added in FY23. Slower revenue and job growths reflect the pressure IT services firms are under, as they principally cater to regions such as North America that are experiencing a downturn.

Global economic trends have a direct bearing on IT jobs in India. During the Covid-19 pandemic, big tech firms bragged about a seismic shift in favour of online services benefiting them. After heralding a new digital dawn and swelling their workforce, there was a reversal a couple of years later with extensive layoffs across companies. Recent placement drives have witnessed IT majors staying off campuses for recruitment, and top institutes tapping into their alumni networks for employing fresh graduates. Such trends aren't limited to IT, but apply to India Inc in general.

B-schools too have acknowledged the distress and struggle to find headhunters this year. In a telling incident, the Management Development Institute in Gurgaon withdrew offer letters to at least 132 candidates for a flagship course in international business a week before classes were to begin. The issue has since been addressed but this was unthinkable even a year ago. Job cuts have also stalked big consultancies after a hiring surge during the pandemic was followed by a cutback in discretionary spending by clients. This month, two years after it went on a hiring spree Bain & Company's India arm laid off 15-20% of its consulting workforce as a result of the dipping fortunes of American private equity giant Tiger Global. A survey by Deloitte has found that projected salaries for MBA students in 2024 are 5-10% lower across tiers, a first in five years. It adds that the gap between entry-level salaries of management and BTech graduates have narrowed substantially, from 102% in 2021 to 57% this year.

The current slowdown in hiring betrays a cyclical nature that is dictated by economic upswing and slump. Factors such as automation, restructuring and disruptions caused by new technologies — such as artificial intelligence and machine learning now demanding a skill upgrade among prospective as well as existing employees — also cannot be wished away. The hiring lull may well prove to be temporary, but there are lessons for all. Companies are better advised to adopt a more thoughtful approach to managing employees than indulge in over-hiring and spending followed by a freeze. Secondly, it is important to note that educational institutes are not placement agencies but are best judged by the quality of learning and research. It is also true that a prestigious label does not guarantee cushy jobs. In IITs, for instance, a preponderance of tech jobs over the years has meant continuing negligence of core engineering. Companies across sectors must therefore be pursued to ensure students are not left fending for themselves.

## MONITORING BUSINESS

REGULATORS LIAISE WITH EACH OTHER, BUT LACK A FORMAL MECHANISM TO ACT IN COHESION

# Regulation needs a roadmap

**O**VER THE LAST two to three decades, India has moved towards a multi-sectoral regulatory regime to handle the multi-

tude of issues. Today, we have the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), Competition Commission of India (CCI), Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India, Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai), Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India, Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority, Central Electricity Regulatory Commission, and so many more, each of whom deal with the economic or industrial sector. Soon, India will have a regulator for data protection and privacy. Based on the nature, size, and business of a company, it interacts with one or more regulators. The company must structure its businesses, corporate governance, internal policies, practices, and procedures, etc. to ensure it keeps all the regulators concerned satisfied. While this in itself has the potential for conflict, the real conflict starts when someone wants to undertake an activity that needs the approval of more than one regulator.

Consider a proposal of merger of conglomerates A Ltd. and B Ltd. Let's assume they provide, through their listed and/or unlisted subsidiaries, banking and financial services, including broking and telecom services. The merger would then attract the scrutiny of the RBI, Trai, CCI, and Sebi. Each regulator would be concerned with how the merger would be relevant to their field. For instance, the RBI would be broadly concerned with financial stability, and impact on the banking sector; depositors and borrowers; banking operations and customer protection. Trai would focus on the impact on telecom, and Sebi would examine from the perspective of the effect on the broking arms of the merging entities and the interest of shareholders of the listed entities. The CCI would *inter alia* rule on the effect on competition in the relevant sectors, whether

## SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing partner, Finsec Law Advisors



there are any adverse effects on competition, and whether they are outweighed by the benefit to consumers. In fact, regulators such as the RBI and Trai would have to consider the impact on competition in their sectors. Based on the findings of each regulator, the companies would have to chart their next steps. In some instances, what one regulator signs off on is refused by the other, or the impact of the directions of one is in conflict with another. To

say due process is unwarranted, or unnecessary. Assessing the consequences of an arrangement between entities is a function of a vigilant regulator. But there is much room for improvement in harmonising the manner in which such assessment is carried out in instances where more than one regulator is required.

Regulatory conflict does not happen routinely, but that does not mean it's not necessary to address the issue. Further,

It can get intractable when two regulators insist, probably rightly so, on following their statutes

each regulator would stand by its decision, as it is required to look at only the universe under its purview. As stated above, each regulator has a specific mandate, which may not always align with that of another, giving rise to regulatory conflict, causing unusual second order impact on a company and invariably resulting in delays and pointless

bureaucracy. It can get intractable when two regulators insist, probably rightly so, on following their respective statutes or regulations, causing an impasse of the unmovable meeting the unstopable.

While regulators do liaise with each other, there is no formal mechanism for them to act in cohesion. Indian courts may not have tested the various issues that arise or may arise out of regulatory conflict yet. But the prevailing judicial view in case of two regulators with overlapping jurisdictions is that if there is a specialised regulator for the sector it will take precedence over the general regulator — as was the case when the Supreme Court held

that Trai would have jurisdiction over the CCI while examining competition issues surrounding Reliance's Jio.

Existing models to tackle conflicts are granting explicit and exclusive jurisdiction to regulators to remove ambiguity; regulators working towards arriving at a decision by consulting each other; mandatory consultation between regulators.

In India, the third approach seems appropriate. A standing committee comprising members nominated from each regulator or the ministry that supervises the regulator could be created. The leadership of such committee could be on a rotational basis, and its members could perform a dual role, coming together when required to decide on an application. The decision of the committee, arrived at via mandatory consultation among all regulators concerned, could be binding on all regulators. This results in a holistic view and a reasoned decision, even if it involves compromises on the part of all parties involved. It serves as a single-stop shop for businesses and would go a long way to ease the regulatory burden. A forum exists for discussing inter-regulatory issues in finance, but the Financial Stability and Development Council has had limited success. Such an approach could be considered for enforcement as well, where multiple regulators can act together as one saving time and costs on their end as well as for businesses. Indeed, the past few months have seen increasing cooperation between Sebi and RBI on enforcement.

Laying a road map for companies and regulators to work together efficiently is essential for stable growth. In a growing economy like India, where these issues are only starting to appear, we must take steps at this opportune moment to prevent irreparable harm or avoid costly solutions later, and adopt a whole-of-government approach rather than working in silos.

Co-authored with Parker Karia and Aniket Charan, respectively, senior associate and associate, Finsec Law Advisors

## China remains dominant player in supply chain

**DECLINES IN FOREIGN** direct investment in China bolster the thesis that global companies are turning away from the world's most important production hub, continuing the trend of decoupling that has policymakers and corporate leaders looking for alternative manufacturing bases. The truth of the nation's deteriorating importance isn't so simple.

Inbound FDI dropped 28.2% in the year through May, the 12th straight month of retraction. Other data released this month add weight to the “whither China” argument. Yet, there's a risk of overestimating the extent to which deglobalisation is occurring. Brad Setser, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, warns that policymakers may underestimate the trade and economic impact of conflict, especially in the Taiwan Strait.

Instead, it's important to recognise that some shift in manufacturing has already occurred, but this rate of change is likely to be stagnant for a little while. Both corporate and political leaders need to accept and adjust to the unsteady pace of decoupling, especially when it comes to planning for supply chain resilience.

Deglobalisation is the unravelling of global commerce, while decoupling is the gradual cessation of ties between two parties, in this case the US and China, and their spheres of influence. Fragmentation is the breaking up of previously large, centralised hubs of activity into more numerous, smaller groupings. Each of these is happening, and can be supported by data, but none is yet complete. They likely never will be.

China remains the single largest manufacturing economy and exporter in the world. Large swathes of industry have started to move out, including textiles, power tools, and electronics. But fast development in other sectors, such as electric vehicles and renewable energy, make the country even more crucial to certain parts of the global economy. As a result, you can find a statistic to support your position, whether you believe globalisation of trade is continuing, reversing, or stagnant.

While there's a growing number of indigenous Chinese firms that are global leaders in their field, such as BYD Co. in EVs, Contemporary Amperex Technology Co. Limited (CATL) in batteries, and Huawei Technologies Co. in communications equipment, they're not major exporters — each get more than two-thirds of their revenue domestically. Cutting them off from international markets isn't good for the world economy, but wouldn't much move the globalisation needle. Foreign firms shifting procurement and operations away from China, though, does change the balance. And we're seeing just that.

Dell Technologies Inc. has been in tight in wanting to reduce its reliance on Chinese manufacturing. Others, like HP Inc. and Apple Inc., are doing so, but more quietly and less directly. Power-tool maker Stanley Black & Decker Inc. closed its Shenzhen factory four years ago. Foreign automakers are also departing, with Mitsubishi Motors Corp. withdrawing from a joint venture and Ford Motor Co. saying it will cut back. Yet what we have seen leave China so far is the easy stuff, such as product assembly. Because the final manufacturing step is generally the most labour-intensive — be it putting panels on a car or slotting parts of an iPhone together — migrating this phase is the easiest. It's also better for marketing: You don't need to label something Made in China if the final bits are completed in Vietnam or Mexico.

For decoupling to have a real impact, though, we need components including chemicals, metal sheets, circuit boards, cables, and wiring, to be built outside of China. These are made with big, expensive machines that require fewer workers, but greater integration with other parts of the supply chain. For now, China's role in this phase of manufacturing remains dominant and likely will for some time.

If the goal is to create more resilience, reduce risk, and diversify manufacturing, then policymakers and corporate leaders can pat themselves on the back. But if the greater aim is to cut the world's second-largest country out entirely, and ensure the global economy can withstand a massive shock wrought by any future conflict between China and Taiwan, then that's a dream so far unfulfilled.

## Realising healthcare sarvodaya



## RANDEEP GULERIA

Chairman, Institute of Internal Medicine, Respiratory and Sleep Medicine, and director, Medanta Medical School

As India marches towards its goal of universal health coverage, the convergence of public and private sectors is indispensable

**INDIA STANDS AT** a critical juncture in its quest for universal healthcare coverage and the realisation of Viskit Bharat by 2047. Our healthcare sector boasts a competitive advantage, propelled by its large pool of well-trained medical professionals and affordability. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, shortage of workers, disparities in healthcare accessibility, and the burden of non-communicable diseases persist. Urban areas have a majority of hospital beds and medical professionals, with a concentration of 66% of hospital beds despite accounting for a mere 28% of the population. In contrast, rural areas, home to 72% of the population, have access to just one-third of hospital beds. Moreover, 67% of doctors in India practise in urban areas.

To enhance the quality of healthcare delivery, a multifaceted approach is required. We need stronger infrastructure outside of our main cities, especially in Tier-II and III townships. Second, with technology transforming healthcare access and patient outcomes, we need to harness it to modernise medical curriculum so that we are able to provide better treatment solutions, improve access, and meet patient expectations. Skilling and training healthcare professionals is paramount in this digital era. Telemedicine initiatives in the last three years, such as the national teleconsultation service, eSanjeevani, have opened new vistas in health services. Private hospitals as well as public units providing tertiary care have invested in digital infrastructure and allocated res-

ources and personnel to modernise hospital information systems, hospital management information system, and electronic medical records to manage patient data and draw insights. Patients too are using smartphones and internet to not just store diagnostic reports and prescriptions but also to make appointments, consult, use home-based diagnostics and testing facilities, and order medicines.

In the same way, tele-mentoring is emerging as a promising trend in bridging gaps in underserved areas by using technology to remotely mentor workers and screen patients. The changing landscape necessitates making workers tech-savvy and training to better manage advanced equipment and health-tech platforms and systems. India has all the essential ingredients for exponential growth in this sector — including a large population, 750 million-plus smartphone users, and internet penetration of 52.4% of the population.

A fundamental overhaul of the medical curriculum is a need of the hour to prepare doctors for the future. With the advent of advanced investigative medicine and a shifting focus towards non-communicable diseases, medical training must evolve to blend scientific rigour and artistic intuition. Patients no longer want to just recover from a disease condition but a better quality of life. They want

shorter hospital stays, less pain, and better performing medical devices fitted in their bodies. Those suffering chronic diseases and on medication over a long period want to enjoy a normal lifestyle.

We need to prepare for futuristic care, with new models including out-of-hospital, remote, and home care poised to shape service delivery. As the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) grows (causing over 60% of all deaths in India, as of 2021), necessitating long-term care, innovative approaches to training, and skilling of health professionals and caregivers become indispensable. Emphasis needs to be on prevention and professionals need to be trained in this regard. A mass strategy should be developed to align with the government's programme on screening for early diagnosis of NCDs. Students of medicine must learn how modern technological tools can diagnose cancers, hypertension, and eye diseases through smartphones and devices powered by artificial intelligence.

Private sector engagement is pivotal in this endeavour, given its resources, technical strengths, and reach. And public-private partnership (PPP) has the potential to emerge as the linchpin in driving these transformative efforts, leveraging the strengths of both sectors to enhance healthcare accessibility and affordability. In 2021, India secured a \$7.7 billion invest-

ment across 25 projects, marking the largest commitment in South Asia. While neighbouring countries experienced a decline in private participation in infrastructure (PPI) compared to the previous year, India notably saw a 49% increase in private investment commitments.

PPPs can unlock avenues for improving healthcare accessibility and affordability, through inclusive and sustainable approaches, as was witnessed during the Ebola Open Data Jam in Africa when hundreds of workers and volunteers gave their time to search and collate disparate sources of open information on Ebola to centralise the information to enhance the activities of governments, partners, and aid organisations. Covid-19 also saw public and private sectors working together on the vaccination drive for last-mile reach.

As India marches towards its goal of universal health coverage, the convergence of public and private sectors is indispensable. The private sector has a significant role in driving innovation, enhancing accessibility, skilling and training of medical professionals, harnessing technology to support smaller facilities and patients in underserved areas, and thereby improving the quality and reach of healthcare services. By fostering long-term partnerships grounded in shared objectives and mutual benefit, India can realise its vision of health for all by 2047.

Mahatma Gandhi envisioned a society where the welfare of all is paramount. Realising healthcare sarvodaya is a step towards fulfilling that vision.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Front-running charges

Apropos of “Investors wait and watch as Sebi probes Quant MF” (FE, June 25), it is not the first time when a mutual fund house has been found guilty of front-running. Axis Mutual Fund house was also found guilty of it in the past. Since domestic savings inflow into the mutual funds have increased in the last few years as retail investors have started showing bigger confidence in mutual fund investment,

it is more than imperative that the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) thoroughly investigates this case. Considering the fact that Quant small and midcap funds are performing well, retail investors will have reason to worry, but in the long run it should not impact their investment much. However, Sebi should ensure that such incidents do not repeat again and the hard-earned money of retail investors is protected. —Bal Govind, Noida

### Hopes on Parliament

The Prime Minister's call for consensus signals his commitment to honouring the people's mandate. Now, it is crucial for the opposition, particularly the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), to align with the PM. The unity displayed by INDIA resonated with voters, who expect them to act as an effective check in Parliament. Despite differing ideologies and occasional conflicts,

their parliamentary performance must reflect the electorate's wishes. The PM emphasised the need for decisive action over theatrics, resonating with the public desire for governance amid concerns like unemployment and inflation. Tangible improvements in people's lives remain elusive. The Centre must prioritise substance over spectacle to address these. —Vijaykumar HK, Raichur

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



Every time we witness an injustice and do not act, we train our character to be passive in its presence and thereby eventually lose all ability to defend ourselves and those we love

Julian Assange

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

—Rammath Goenka

## BUDGET MUST ADDRESS RURAL DISTRESS, HIGH FOOD INFLATION

As it nears the presentation of its first budget in about a month, the new Union government must lend an ear to the mounting rural distress and continuing high food prices plaguing the economy. Rural voters have made it amply clear they are not happy with the state of the farm sector. The BJP-led NDA's seat count in rural constituencies went down by 44, while the INDIA bloc gained 77 seats at the recent hustings. The distress is evident in the sluggish consumption figures and has been underlined by consumer goods companies. Rural consumption declined for six quarters from the beginning of 2021 before turning positive at the start of 2023, according to NielsenIQ data.

Higher fuel and food prices have driven up inflation in rural markets more than in urban areas over the last 18 months. Agricultural production, which grew steadily during 2021-23, has tapered to just 1.4 percent in 2023-24. The last two quarters' growth has slumped below 1 percent due to unseasonal rains and damaged crops. These trends show there is a sharp fall in rural earnings over the last two years and a consequent erosion in purchasing power. Among the first steps the government must take is easing food inflation, which is creating havoc among millions of families struggling on tight budgets. Basic vegetables and pulses, as well as onions and potatoes—the country's staple diet—have gone out of reach for many.

The immediate form of intervention, via the budget and otherwise, would be to allocate more resources to build supply lines and beef up distribution so that optimal supplies cool prices. The longer and bigger battle, however, is against climate change that is causing unseasonal rains and long droughts, and is resulting in destroyed crops. This involves more scientific agricultural methods and a greater investment in R&D—some economists have suggested an outlay of 1 percent of the farm sector's output—so that more resilient and diverse crops are sown. Providing relief by raising the subsidy on costly inputs such as fertilisers would also be welcome. Above all, a lasting solution to the government's narrow interpretation of minimum support prices needs to be found. The demand has stirred thousands of farmers in recent days in Punjab and the North. Suppressing these movements would not be the answer.

## INNER-PARTY CRITICISM CAN HELP CPM RECOVER

CRITICAL voices within the CPI(M) in Kerala are growing bolder. It is a welcome sign for a party that is trying to chart a way forward after the rout in the parliamentary elections that underscored a potentially debilitating erosion of support. While the party publicly admitted only to failing to gauge the people's sentiments, what transpired in the recent meeting of its state committee underlined a serious introspection and pointed towards a much-needed course correction. Several members are said to have accused Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's style of functioning and his government's lapses. That not all in the CPI(M) were happy with the government's performance or happenings in the party was known; but it is only now that some have gathered the courage to speak out. It's a sign that Vijayan's long-standing grip over the party could be weakening and inner-party democracy is getting a chance.

The home (handled by the CM himself) and finance departments were singled out for admonition. Some members were surprisingly direct in their attack of the CM, pointing out his body language and hostile disposition, and even listed out instances that contributed to his "arrogant" image. Some sought to bring out the contrast between the first and second Pinarayi cabinets, emphasising how his first term had a ministry packed with experience and efficiency. "One chief minister and 19 shadows" is how one of them described the present cabinet. LDF's apparent minority appeasement attempts and corruption allegations were also loudly talked about.

Dissent can prompt correction and lead to more effective administration. But for the party to take effective corrective steps, it must admit to mistakes that go far beyond merely miscalculating the situation. The performance of the second Pinarayi government has been uninspiring, to say the least. The CM's image has taken a severe beating and has become a burden for the party. The anti-government and anti-CPI(M) sentiments are real. The party has yet to admit these. Instead, it has chosen to blame communities and groups for not voting for the party and political rivals for making inroads into its vote bank. This smacks of a defeatist mentality. While the decision to listen to people is constructive, the party must see the re-emergence of inner-party criticism as a positive fall-out of the defeat and grab the opportunity to correct lapses.

### QUICK TAKE

#### URGENCY NEEDED ON MANIPUR

MANIPUR'S strife refuses to abate even after 14 months. On Monday, Kuki-Zo groups took out huge rallies in five districts to press their demand for a separate Union territory—different from their earlier call for a territorial council within Manipur. Tensions rose again in Jiribam district after bodies of a Kuki-Zo member and a Meitei were discovered. The governments' efforts are not working. In May, the Supreme Court refused to act against those who had not carried out its order on protecting displaced families' properties. The new Lok Sabha must take up the issues in earnest. And national leaders need to visit the state to assure its anxious communities.

THE purpose of this article is to drive home the great need to create institutions of self-government and local democracy, as mandated by two constitutional amendments—one for panchayats (73rd) and the other for municipalities (74th)—initiated as part of the momentous decentralisation reforms. I wish to raise some issues relating to the third tier of government and the terms of reference for the 16th Finance Commission.

Given the two amendments as well as the two separate clauses, Articles 280(3) (bb) and 280(3)(c) added for the panchayats and municipalities, it is desirable to do away with the practice of Finance Commissions treating both under the rubric of 'local bodies'. The problems of the two are different. FC-16 would do well to consider them separately.

That even after 30 years we cannot figure out the fiscal size of our panchayats and their place in the Indian public finance in terms of revenue or expenditure is a poor reflection of the progress made. Unlike western theories of federalism that do not recognise the institution of panchayats, the mandate of the decentralisation reforms for a gram sabha, an assembly of voters, to determine development priorities. The task of panchayats to plan for economic development and social justice and innumerable other building blocks of a local democracy are unique and challenging. A critical question to ask is why panchayats do not function as 'institutions of self-government', but work as agents for the Union and state governments. Panchayati Raj Institutions are still not an integral component of the federal fiscal system.

The basic message of the twin amendments, that the Union Finance Commission and state Finance Commission are organically linked in federal public finance, is not well recognised. The State Finance Commission is a counterpart of the Union Finance Commission created to rationalise the vertical and horizontal imbalances at the sub-state level. Ideally, if the Union Finance Commission takes care of inter-state equity (now that the Planning Commission is abolished, a large part of inter-governmental transfer responsibility falls squarely on it) and the State Finance Commission the intra-state equity, India has the best institutional mechanism to deliver territorial equity and basic services. To be

Panchayats don't function as self-governing institutions, as envisaged, but as agents of the Union and state govts. The 16th Finance Commission should give more voice to local govts

## THE NEED TO EMPOWER THE THIRD TIER

M A OOMMEN



Former Chairman, Fourth State Finance Commission, Kerala, and Distinguished Fellow, Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, Thiruvananthapuram



MANDAR PARDIKAR

sure, the Union Finance Commission acting in tandem with State Finance Commissions can promote the golden rule of cooperative federalism—that no citizen should be denied basic services, from drinking water to primary education, because of the choice of their residential location.

Continuity and change are important to take the decentralisation reforms forward. FC-11 and FC-12, despite clear mandates to "restructure public finance", did not find it important to include local governments in their scheme of restructuring. The efforts of FC-13 to take the lagging decentralisation reforms forward and link

local grants to the divisible pool and introduce a performance grant system, stipulating conditionalities like putting in place an audit system, an ombudsman, and enabling property tax collection were not continued later. Some Union Finance Commissions dismissed State Finance Commission findings as "sketchy" and "patchy" without a close reading of the reports and offering specific suggestions.

Again, the Union and states failed to implement the decentralisation reforms in a coordinated and consistent fashion. Most states did not part with power and authority, and did not exercise the simultaneous transfer of

## NTA 2.0: SPACEMAN'S COUNTDOWN TO LAUNCH COUNTLESS CAREERS

AN interview began with the question, "What is your name?" Pat came the reply, "Give me four choices." Welcome to the world of multiple-choice question-based competitive exams, in which you are either trained to eliminate the wrong choices, find the right one in the shortest possible time, or ignore the question fearing negative marks.

The coaching class hubs of Kota, Sikar, Noida and other scattered factory models have collectively created a craze unparalleled in the history of competitive exams in India, which is a gateway to millions of young people wanting to become doctors and engineers. This gateway, unfortunately, has also given way to 'secret keys' in the form of question paper leaks, 'solver gangs' as a service, and other questionable bubbles that burst shockingly to put 2024's college admissions in a quandary.

With the stakes and tempers soaring high, the Union Ministry of Education (MoE) swung into action—it called for a CBI investigation and formed a high-level committee to reform the National Testing Agency (NTA), responsible for conducting massive exams such as the JEE, CUET and NEET. Most importantly, it assured students of a secure and uncompromised future. As it begins to chart the NTA's future, the task before the committee is manifold.

Globally, admission to undergraduate or graduate professional degree programmes is a streamlined affair. In two of the world's largest higher education systems—in the US and China—the role of exam agencies is noteworthy. The College Entrance Examination Board in the US was conceptualised in Columbia University in 1900 with help from the legendary Harvard University president, Charles Eliot. Its pre-World War admission test was initially termed elitist and many post-war reforms made it one of the best managed standardised testing agencies. The 'education anarchy', where each post-secondary institution had its own entrance exam, was demolished by the College Board, which conducted the SAT, AP and BigFuture exams. It outsourced exams such as GRE and TOEFL to another non-profit, Education Testing Services. Started in 1947, this too is one of the largest private non-profit exam agencies. These twin agencies, which are professionally governed with an inclusive leadership, serve the education community through research and advocacy on behalf of students, educators and institutions.

S VAIDHYASUBRAMANIAM



Vice-Chancellor & Tata Sons Chair Professor of management, SASTRA University

Their major initiatives—Equity 2000, Pacesetter and Transition 2000—create innovative assessments that not only align with equitable policy change in governments and institutions around the world, but also ensure diversity at all levels.

Gaokao, the Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges in China, is the world's largest assessment for undergraduate admissions. Started in 1954, this is adminis-



China's Gaokao is the world's biggest college admission test. The police, postal system, cabbies and icons contribute to keep it safe and student-friendly. Even satellites are used to track real-time feedback. NTA, whose scale of operation is comparable, can learn from such exam systems

tered by the Chinese education ministry in collaboration with local governments. The entire nation works in unison to ensure the Gaokao is conducted in a student-friendly manner. Year 2024 saw about 13.4 million students cramming for Gaokao to make this spectacle of meritocracy a working reality. Drones swarming in the air, police personnel stationed to prevent untoward incidents, public transport and taxis prioritising test-takers, popular icons sharing wishes—all this can be seen around Gaokao time every June. China Post ensures the safe transport of exam papers with police protection. A satellite system is used to track real-time feedback, ensuring that the integrity of the exam is not compromised and porous vulnerabilities are plugged.

Other global examples include the University Clinical Aptitude Test in the UK and the Medical College Admission Test in the US. All of them are conducted on a massive scale and in a student-friendly manner.

The Indian experience calls for certain reforms aligned with global best practices.

The NTA's three big responsibilities—the JEE, NEET and CUET—apart from UGC-NET, CMAT, GPAT, SWAYAM and others, make it one of the world's largest testing agencies with a capacity to mark three lakh tests per day. Year 2023 saw almost 13 million student registrations, reaching close to the gargantuan peak of the Gaokao. The NTA is comparable with global peers like the College Board, Education Testing Services and Gaokao. Such a big role means bigger responsibilities, as the NTA shapes the life and career of millions. Sensing this, the MoE has rightly embarked on an honest exercise to reform the NTA into a vehicle that would transport students to their aspired futures.

There are certain global best practices and local customisations that the high-level committee headed by former ISRO chief K Radhakrishnan will definitely consider. The committee needs to cover the key success factors for entrance exams conducted on the NTA's scale and the speed needed to meet student aspirations. Some of them are related to governance and leadership, technology adoption, disruptive influencers, frequency of attempts, assessment scope, blending school and competitive exam scores for admissions, reducing the coaching factory model to address learning differences and creative testing models.

A quiver full of such triggering concerns awaits the committee's calibrated pathway for students to navigate the entrance exam maze. The future of India lies in the critical and creative capabilities of its youth, and not in the exam-cracking capabilities of tactful humanoids that the existing system has been generating. Chartering into unexplored territories is not going to be new for this committee headed by a spaceman. We hope NTA 2.0 will be a countdown to launch countless students' hopes.

(Views are personal)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Kosher cannibalism?

Ref: *Debating empathy at the dining table* (Jun 25). The author is right that pain has to be considered across every living being instead of just humans. If slaughter for food is justifiable per se, and if any animal can be slaughtered with no second thought, then cannibalism can also be kosher. Of course it's a sensitive issue, but don't we need to be different from our primitive carnivorous habits?

U Atreya Sarma, Hyderabad

#### Fewer justifications

The author has a great argument in favour of vegetarianism. In the near future, non-vegetarians will have fewer justifications for their food choices and eventually such writers will prove the old adage that the pen is mightier than the sword right.

S Raman Iyer, email

#### Title opportunity

The Indian cricket team has reserved a berth at the T20 World Cup semi-finals through their stupendous performance against Australia. With the knockouts on the cards, it would be a great opportunity for the Indian team to put an end to a decade-long ICC title drought.

M Rishidev, Dindigul

#### Form redemption

Virat Kohli was expected to be the mainstay of the Indian cricket team but the dashing batter has not even shown a semblance of form so far at the World Cup. The team management lacks the gumption to drop him and the likes of Yashashvi Jaiswal and Sanju Samson have been left to twiddle their thumbs. Whether Kohli will redeem himself in the semi-finals is the million-dollar question now.

CV Aravind, Bengaluru

#### Personal liberty

A special CBI court in Tamil Nadu denying bail on the grounds that bail can't be granted simply due to prolonged imprisonment is not right. Bail is a right whereas jail is a punishment. Until the accused is proved guilty beyond reasonable doubts, he can't be kept behind bars for so long. This is personal liberty, guaranteed in Article 21 of the Constitution.

Kaliappan Palaniswami, Salem

#### Cycling exemplar

It was quite interesting to see Appalanaidu, an MP from Andhra Pradesh, cycling his way to parliament for the oath-taking ceremony. If this act was not for mere pomp and show, he would be setting a great example to continue to go to parliament by bicycle everyday in a pollution-ravaged city like Delhi.

IV Venugopala Rao, Bobbili

Exempt Selectively Sovereign Funds, RBI

GoI needs to direct venture capital into select areas

The Centre is seeking carve-outs on merits from provisioning rules for banks and NBFCs to curb evergreening of loans through alternative investment funds (AIF). Last year, RBI closed a loophole in the discovery of dodgy loans by pulling bank lending out of investment pools that also feed the same borrowers. This was a genuine regulatory concern, voiced by Sebi, given the ballooning flow of capital through AIFs. RBI's directive to banks and NBFCs to liquidate their investments in AIFs that invest in their debtor companies is informed by previous instances of evergreening bad loans through shadow lending. The central bank moved with alacrity on Sebi's findings that AIFs were being structured for such purposes.

But some solution has to be arrived at for funds GoI uses to direct venture capital into select areas, such as startups, small enterprises and stressed housing projects. This exemption is justified. But a blanket waiver would open up the field to foreign sovereign funds as well. The accommodation is warranted by the fact that the sovereign funds the Centre wants exempted provide a structure to ring-fence investment against political spending of the kind we see plenty of. The

lack of transparency in operations of foreign sovereign funds doesn't allow this accommodation to be extended for all. Since a category-specific carve-out is against the regulatory intent of the tighter rules, exemptions will have to be made by RBI in specific cases.

RBI has also eased some of the new provisioning rules for bank and NBFC investments in AIFs. Lenders are now required to provide only for the amount the AIF has invested in a debtor company. Equity shares of the debtor company have been excluded from the provisioning requirements. The central bank also exempted lenders investing in AIFs through intermediaries such as fund of funds and mutual funds. The additional relaxation on merits for funds operated by the Centre addresses similar concerns over the new rules choking capital flow.

Spiller of Beans, and State vs Open Society

Release of Wikileaks cofounder Julian Assange, following a plea deal with the US Department of Justice, ends nearly 15 years of legal battles that were essentially a tussle between freedom of expression and a government's determined effort to keep its secrets. Assange, who shot into global prominence with the 2010 and 2011 publication of military and government documents of US activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, and diplomatic cables, was wanted by the US on espionage charges. The Australian, who faced 18 charges relating to stealing of military files carrying 175 years' imprisonment, will plead guilty to one count of espionage, with a sentence of 5 years, that will be offset against the time he has served in British prison. Like the house,

the state always wins. Wikileaks demonstrated the immense power governments, even in liberal democracies, have over their citizens and the extent to which a state will go to protect that power. Assange made us confront the ease with which governments use 'national security' as a default rabbit to be pulled out of the hat. AI will only augment this power exponentially. So, it's all the more urgent to establish safeguards that protect privacy while considering the needs of genuine national security and interest.

Another aspect of free expression that Assange put the spotlight on is the question of desirability. Assange was a hero of the civil liberties community when he published the US military files stolen by Chelsea Manning, but his image was dented when in 2016 he published the Democratic National Committee emails, stolen by Russian hackers, a move that worked favourably for Donald Trump's election as US president. Free speech isn't unalloyed good, but one mediated by who gains from it.

JUST IN JEST 'Dog ate my homework' and 'Nehru is to blame' rolled into one

Bad Hair Day? Blame Climate Change

Blaming government for everything is so passé. Now, from loss at the stock markets to that boil on a delicate part of your body is all the fault of climate change. Gone are the days when we simply forgot to water the plants, or left the car windows down during a rainstorm. Now, every wilted flower and damp car seat is a sign of the impending climate apocalypse. The sanctum sanctorum of a much-heralded new temple is found to have a leaky roof? Climate change. Traffic jam? Climate change. Boss gave you the buri nazar? Climate change. Reduced mandate from the people? Climate change. Cold coffee too warm, hot coffee too cold? You guessed it — climate change. It's the new and much more genteel version of 'Nehru is to blame'.

This is not to peddle global warming denial. Climate change is real. Just that culturally we are now attuned to the overuse of the term. And unlike 'The dog ate my homework', who won't believe you that the girl dumped you because of your 'carbon footprint', not BO. When a chief priest of a temple expressed his concern about a leak during heavy rains by saying, 'It's very surprising that despite having numerous engineers on board, water is leaking from the roof. Nobody would've thought this would happen,' he forgot to cite the root cause of the problem: no, not the lack of drainage but the climate-induced rains themselves.

CURSOR To AI or not to AI, that's not the question any more — India must plan to ride it

Saddle Up the New Bronco



T K Arun

The world's largest companies by market capitalisation are tech companies, specifically, tech companies that produce and deploy AI. This reflects the expectation that AI will play an expanding role in our lives, creating new value in both existing activities and in new activity enabled by, and only by, AI. The rise of AI presents us with new opportunities, new threats and new challenges. Innovating such response spans education, societal change, regulation and societal consensus on shunning use of AI in a way that realises the worst outcomes that sciobiologist E O Wilson feared could come out of the combination of humankind's palaeolithic emotions, mediaeval institutions and god-like technology.

Nvidia, designer of chips used to produce and run AI, recently became the world's most valuable company, beating Microsoft and Apple. Daily price variations make them go up and down in the rankings, but these constitute the most valuable trio. Of the seven companies that command a value of \$2tn or more, all save Saudi Aramco are tech giants — Alphabet, Amazon and Meta are the ones not already named.

Of the lot, all save Apple run and enable AI applications. Apple's stock price went up recently, after it, too, announced some of its own AI offerings. What does the dominance of tech companies mean for humanity? Does society need to arm itself with anything new either to take advantage of evermore ubiquitous AI, or to guard against possible harm from such prevalence of AI? Let us appreciate that AI is already

active in our daily lives in assorted ways. The options Google throws up the moment you start typing in the search box, the automatic spelling suggestions that materialise in Word or your phone's messaging app, the quant trading on the stock market, the anti-lock braking system in your car, and, if you're of a generation and location that admit use of dating apps, the opportunity to swipe right or left — algorithms are an integral part of your existence, some of them capable of learning as they go along, and making changes accordingly to what they do. AI, in combination with factory-floor robots, low-latency, high-throughput communications among robots and with AI, is poised to revolutionise manufacturing. AI can scan through X-ray and MRI images to spot abnormalities far more efficiently than humans can. AI can produce deepfakes and false messaging at scale to interfere with elections. It can produce art to order, summarise reports, write the first draft of a speech or a technical brochure. It can help a coder write 20 times more code than on his own. It can translate a screenplay into a dozen foreign languages. In other words, AI can destroy jobs as well as create altogether novel economic opportunity.

This creates fresh divides in the world. One is between those who can take advantage of AI and those who cannot, and lose out, either to AI or to those who wield AI to their own advantage. Another is between those who can create AI and AI applications, and those who cannot. Cultures that have a grasp of the number system, and of infinity, and the infinitesimal, find themselves at an advantage, compared to cultures whose quantitative cognition is limited to distinguishing one from two, and these from a numerical portmanteau simply understood as 'many'.

The divide between the AI have and the AI have-nots is going to be starker than this numerical divide, and it will manifest itself between nations, and within nations. The way to bridge this gap is to empower



Yee-haw and get into the algorithm

those who lack the requisite social and cultural capital. That means not just a more effective education system but also a sharp redistribution of social power to eliminate structural hierarchy in society, of the kind represented by the caste system, which cripples human agency and hobbles the ability to confront adversity and overcome it.

AI poses challenges even for those who are educationally and culturally attuned to effectively make use of it. This can come from badly designed and programmed AI, which picks up existing societal prejudices and amplifies them, such as giving lower eligibility scores to applicants who are either women or bear subaltern caste names. They can fall victim to AI acting out the Goebbelsian norm that a lie repeated a thousand times becomes the truth. They could come up against AI put to nefarious use, such as being used to crack passwords, to troll or blackmail individuals online, or to immobilise their

cars remotely. All these contingencies are over and beyond the possibility of AI going rogue, the classical SF nightmare, whose chances of morphing into daytime reality cannot be dismissed outright. What this means is that AI calls for sound, thought-through regulation, both specific to AI, and in relation to possible misuse of AI in ways that fall foul of norms that are valid outside the realm of AI as well.

Let us also note that the rise of AI is testament to the continuing and irreversible globalisation of human life. AI enmeshes the lives of people across the world — by empowering them, or by disabling them, by feeding on information and their lives to train and extend itself, by enhancing the commercial capability of com-

panies in fields unrelated to AI to do business with, and against people anywhere in the world. Whether such interaction with AI produces gain or loss depends on local action. India must plan for it.

The way to bridge the AI have and AI have-nots gap is to empower those who lack the requisite social and cultural capital



Zap Our Human Capital to Shape



Nitin Paranjpe

It took 60 years since its independence for India to become a \$1tn economy. The next trillion came in seven years, and the third trillion in five. The nation has set an ambitious goal to become a middle-income country, growing its economy to \$10tn by 2047. This goal will require stepping up its growth rate from a historical average of around 7% to over 8%. While not easy, it's possible. Several factors will help on this journey, primary of which is nurturing India's human capital.

India, with a median age of 28 and over 65% of its population in working age, is younger than the US, Britain, China and Japan. By 2030, India's share of the working-age population will rise to about 69%. However, with falling birthrates and increasing life expectancy, India will start ageing after that. We need to capitalise on

this narrow window of opportunity now focusing on certain areas:

Create jobs: Over the last decade, India's GDP growth has been productivity-led. While productivity will always be an important driver of growth, the next step up must come from higher job creation. Over the next 10 years, India will need to create 90 mn non-farm jobs to manage the inevitable migration of labour from agriculture, and provide meaningful employment opportunities to the increasing working-age population.

This will need concerted action in sectors with high employment elasticity. India's service and MSME sectors need to play a bigger role. For instance, the share of employment generated by MSMEs in most developed economies is over 60%, while in India, it's about 45%. We must tap this potential.

Employability: It should be ensured that our working-age population be employable and contributes to the economy. Top CEOs call out the relative scarcity of a skilled task force as one of the biggest impediments to India's growth. According to Mercer Mettl's India's Graduate Skill Index 2023 report, only 45% of



So, can you be upgraded?

India's graduates are employable. The problem begins at the school level, where students are not learning. Quality of education has to improve. At the same time, focus on: Building a solid foundation in primary education; Providing access to vocational skill-building; Reskilling and upskilling existing workforce; Making India the 'country of choice' for top talent.

Vocational training: While actions are being taken to strengthen primary education further, a significant gap remains regarding school-to-work transition. There is a dispa-

parity between enrolling for higher education and vocational training. This could be attributed to a cultural mindset on employment in skilled vocations. For a country to progress, this mindset needs to change. We must understand the role that skilled vocational work can play in lifting the economy.

Upgrade skills: Recognising that the world is changing at an unprecedented pace, focus must be on continuous skill upgrade in the workforce. Stop talent flow: In 2022, 7.7 lakh Indians left the country for higher education, a six-year high. We must make India attractive for our top talent and retain them within the economy.

India Inc + GoI: A close PPP can change the ecosystem by uplifting skills and capabilities on a scale required for our growth ambition.

While India accelerates its growth journey, it must ensure that no one is left behind. Economic and social progress will be key to this. We must create an India where every child receives the education they deserve, and a chance at making the livelihood they dream of.

The writer is non-executive chairman, HUL

Kite-Runners Between Wickets



Boria Majumdar

The president of Afghanistan calls me every match day to check on me. The whole country watches IPL religiously because Afghan players are playing in it. We are looked upon as a ray of hope in our country and that for me is deeply satisfying. That was Rashid Khan last year; Gujarat Titans ace bowler and Afghanistan's current T20 World Cup captain, after being asked what his IPL stint means for his war-torn country. After Tuesday's win against Bangladesh to earn Afghanistan's first semifinal place in T20 World Cup, it's now no longer just about Rashid. Making it to the semifinal is a huge deal for cricket-crazy Afghanistan, a big deal for world cricket.

Rashid and all-rounder Mohammad Nabi are superstars in Kabul. They stand proof that Afghanistan is a country beyond insurgency and turmoil, Taliban and war photos — it's also a cricket-playing/loving nation. Each cricketer of this Afghan side that engineered an 8-run win against Bangladesh at Kingston, St Vincent — and beat one of the title fav-

ourites, Australia, last Sunday, forcing their exit from the World Cup — now stands for cricketing cheer, aspiration and hope. The journey hasn't been easy. The Afghan team doesn't even have a home ground to train on. BCCI has been a help on this front, inviting the Afghan cricketers to train in Dehradun, Lucknow, and now in Noida. Afghanistan's home games are held in India, and it takes real effort to believe in a cause with all the adversities facing them. Perhaps BCCI and ICC could also use their heft, and Afghanistan's new well-deserved reputation as a cricketing nation, to lift the ban on women's cricket — including the national women's team — that was imposed by the Taliban since 2021.

Riding on players who have made big in T20 leagues across the world, Afghanistan is now a force to reckon with. Players like Rashid, Nabi and spinner Noor Ahmad are permanent features of most franchise leagues, justifying Afghan international sporting prowess. Much like Kapil Dev-led India in 1983, Afghanistan under Rashid has turned a new leaf in this World Cup. Written off as 'outsiders' who could, at best, cause an upset or two, the players kept a momentum feeding self-belief.

One of the key aspects of sports, especially at the national level, is its ability to motivate and inspire a whole country. From playing with sticks and rolled-up plastic bags that passed off as bats and cricket balls on Kabul's dusty streets, to taking on India at the 2010 T20 World Cup at St Lucia, Afghanistan's rise has been phenomenal. And it can't be 'simply' attributed to talent. A drive to combat the challenges of life, including death, has bred a special kind of resilience in a sporting side that has little parallel in today's sporting world.

The dream run isn't over yet. When they beat Australia against all odds on Sunday, the first act of this fairy-tale script was written. People had

started to believe in the dream. Beating Bangladesh added some more of the real to the dream. At the time when it had started to rain with Bangladesh at 105-8, Afghanistan was pretty much out. The Duckworth-Lewis par score for Bangladesh was 104. Had the game stopped then, it would have been a tragic end to the Afghan dream for this tournament. But, then, the rains lifted, the great game was pursued to its end. And Afghanistan and Naveen-ul-Haq obliged. The Afghan and Lucknow Super Giants pacer delivered under pressure — getting the last two wickets of Taskin Ahmed and Mustafizur Rahman off consecutive deliveries with another Afghan over to spare.

'Cricket has given people in Afghanistan a new life meaning. It is evidence that not all is lost. That things can be done, and there is much more to life than insurgency and warfare. Cricket inspires us to work hard. Push ourselves in the hope of doing better than we have ever done.' Rashid had earlier said. He may sound more like a diplomat here than a top-notch international cricketer, but what he stands for can be best summed up in one simple word: hope. And that's what defines Afghanistan's journey in this World Cup. And it's not over yet. Could this be their '83'?

The dream run isn't over yet. When they beat Australia against all odds on Sunday, the first act of this fairy-tale script was written. People had



Get behind them, Afghanistan



THE SPEAKING TREE

Nothing To Do

NARAYANI GANESH

You are up to your gills in work. You have absolutely no time to spare. Well, this is when you yearn to do nothing, at least for a while. When you suddenly find yourself with some free time, the sweetness is superlative. As Jerome K Jerome says, it is impossible to enjoy idling thoroughly unless you have plenty of work to do. There is no fun in doing nothing, when you have nothing to do. 'Wasting time is merely an occupation, and a most exhausting one. Idleness, like kisses, to be sweet, must be stolen.' True, which is why it is said that an idle mind is a devil's workshop — that is, prolonged idleness can turn negative.

What if doing nothing is in itself your avowed occupation, as in zoning out, detached from the material world, aspiring for that state of bliss where you become one with everything? One could argue that it is not strictly doing nothing, for you have a goal and you are working towards it. But, still, the process does involve doing nothing, in a manner of speaking. This is why most of us find it difficult to stay still and meditate, or simply 'be' without engaging in some kind of action. Hence, 'doing nothing' is also something that is cultivated with diligent effort and focus. Which means, to do nothing is also hard work. When you really do nothing, your brain/mind gets its much-needed break, relieved from stress and strain.

PEAS IN A PODCAST

Ways of Seeing

There is no dearth of podcasts on art history, but ArtCurious is in a league of its own. The website is, well, arty, but not highbrow — it's art history for all of us. The spread inside is lavish: information on ongoing exhibitions, interviews with art historians/writers, and virtual vacations focused on art. These episodes are not about lectures on chiaroscuro or contrapposto, but there is enough juicy stuff. Like, did Van Gogh commit suicide? How did the rivalry between Michelangelo and Raphael produce one of the best works of art?



In the episode, ArtCurious Virtual Vacation: Mexico City's Best Experiences, host Jennifer Dasal takes listeners on a virtual journey through the cultural wonders of the Mexican capital. Discover with Dasal, who also curates art-focused holidays and events, the enchanting world of Ballet Folklórico de México at Palace of Fine Arts, immerse yourself in the breathtaking murals of Mexican muralism, including Diego Rivera's 'Man at the Crossroads' (pic) and works by David Alfaro Siqueiros and Rufino Tamayo. Or step into Frida Kahlo at Casa Azul, her home-turned-museum in the charming neighbourhood of Coyoacán. Don't miss out on this enthralling narrative adventure on art.

Chat Room

Give Us This Day Our Daily Wheat

Apropos the news report, 'Stockholding Limit Imposed on Wheat' (Jun 25), there is no denying that imposing stock limits on wheat, maintained by wholesalers, retailers and processors in all states, can help stabilise its prices. However, it is very difficult to execute this in a large country like India, where any sort of control over anything gives rise to corruption. The two Cs always go hand in hand. Gof should, in fact, release the stock of wheat from the warehouses as and when it is needed to keep its prices under control.

SRAMAKRISHNASAYEE Chennai

The writer is author of Eleven Gods and a Billion Indians



## CONTRAPUNTO

I'm sticking to the script, I'm putting that organic feeling back in the game.

KENDRICK LAMAR

## Khela Hobe Na

Mamata tore into her own govt because she knows voters can throw any party out

It's unusual for a CM to upbraid the party organisation, top to bottom, sparing no one. That three-time Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee held forth for a record 70 minutes, critiquing municipalities on upkeep and maintenance, ministers, MLAs, party members and senior bureaucrats on graft and extortion, was a rare event, even for her. Her lecture failed to mention some TMC bigwigs close to her, alleged to be among Bengal's most corrupt, but her sweeping indictment perhaps was also a case of *kahin pe nigaahin, kahin pe nishana*? Whichever way it's sliced or diced, it's instructive to ask why mercurial Didi lit into her own govt. And why now?

**In top form** | The answer to both is Mamata yet again demonstrating political acumen. The Trinamool chief is at the top of her game. In both LS and assembly polls since 2017, TMC has proved wrong every poll punditry, all of which routinely predict a "close contest". Even ahead of this year's high stakes LS election, Didi – despite being an ally – played cat and mouse with INDIA bloc, refusing to even consider *not* fielding her own candidates on any of the state's 42 seats. She won the gamble to return 29 MPs to Parliament, up from 22 in 2019. BJP crashed to 12, down 6 seats, overturning all poll predictions. BJP replaced CPM as main opposition in 2021 assembly election, with 77 MLAs. But TMC was far ahead with 215 seats in the 294-seat assembly – notably, in its third term.

**What tomorrow holds** | Yet Mamata knows electoral victories are no slam dunk, when popular discontent is as deep, wide and serious as in Bengal today. The 69-year-old knows it's a self-goal to ignore the overhang on governance of entrenched political violence, extortion rackets, everyday crush of corrupt contractors. Political excesses of consecutive Left govts are what Mamata battled effectively – so much so that CPM's vote, the anti-TMC vote, has almost totally shifted to BJP. Her decision to overhaul the state's bidding process can mean upheaval for institutionalised corruption – risking your own party's ire is a game you play only when you dominate the field, as Mamata does now.

To Mamata's credit, she displayed publicly that she is not disconnected from the discontent. *That* is the politics that drove the authoritative dressing-down her govt received. She knows voters love just one management style – shape up or ship out.



## Warring. Worrying Bibi

Netanyahu now setting his sights on Hezbollah is bad for West Asia. He has severely hurt Brand Israel

Netanyahu continues to play with Israeli lives. After announcing the "intense phase" of the Israeli operation in Gaza is winding down, he now looks set to send more troops to the Lebanon border to fight Hezbollah. This, potentially, can be an unmitigated disaster. It won't help Israel's security. It may directly drag Iran into the conflict and lead to a wider conflagration. But Netanyahu now seems to want perpetual conflict to stay in power.

**Hezbollah not Hamas** | This Lebanon-based Shia militia group is far superior to Hamas in military strength. Its range of short-range rockets and missiles can pose problems for Israeli defences. In fact, since the Gaza conflict began on Oct 7 last year, Hezbollah's strikes into northern Israel have forced tens of thousands of Israelis to evacuate towns along that border. The last time the two sides had a full-scale war in 2006, there were heavy casualties on both sides and Israel failed to destroy Hezbollah's military capabilities. Hezbollah is far stronger today.

**Netanyahu's cussedness** | Hezbollah says it will stop firing into Israel once there's a ceasefire in Gaza. But Netanyahu continues to assert that the war in Gaza won't end until Hamas is eliminated. However, Israel's military has said Hamas as an ideology can't be defeated. Meanwhile, families of Israeli hostages in Gaza want a hostage deal. And US certainly doesn't want an Israel-Hezbollah war. But Netanyahu isn't listening.

**Image bruised & battered** | Long known as the only genuine democracy in West Asia and a tech powerhouse, Israel's reputation today lies in tatters. Netanyahu's actions have jeopardised Israel's fledgling relations with regional Arab nations, undermined its economy, and turned Israelis against their own govt. His determination to hold on to power has given Israel its worst PR moment. But King Bibi still thinks he can get away with it all.



## Liberal paradox

Those who uphold freedom of speech, even for those they disagree with, can tie themselves up in knots

Jug Suraiya



Doing the rounds on social media is a debate between a conservative and a liberal, expressing diametrically opposing views. The conservative extols what she sees as the benefits of the British Empire to its colonies, such as the bringing of railways to India.

The liberal argues that the British brought the railways to India not to benefit Indians, but to facilitate military deployment in the event of a repeat of the 1857 uprising. He also highlights the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and the man-made Bengal famine of 1943 which resulted in the starvation deaths of millions, and for which no apology, let alone any form of reparation, has been made.

However, no matter how deeply he disagrees he cannot, because of his liberal standpoint, deny his opponent the right to hold and express her opinions.

This is the paradox of the liberal. An outspoken conservative can give vent to views that are patently intolerant, and objectionable to those who take exception to such ideas and attitudes, but nonetheless can't deny their espousal.

I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it, is a quote attributed to Voltaire, and is a cornerstone of liberal ideology.

Liberals are enjoined to speak out against anything which is deemed to be prejudicial in terms of gender, or religion, or social or political orientation. They are compelled not only to oppose what they see as intolerance in any form but must publicly do so, because silence implies consent, and to be silent in the face of bigotry is to acquiesce in it.

At the same time liberals must not only grant their ideological adversaries the right to broadcast their creed, but must also endorse their entitlement to do so under the rubric of freedom of expression, as long as it does not violate the laws of the land or incite violence.

Caught between opposing the illiberal, yet supporting its advocacy, liberals can find themselves tied up in a knot of Gordian dimension which even Alexander would be unable to cut.

## WHAT ASSANGE FREED

Some see the digital fourth estate he pioneered as anarchic. But the real WikiLeaks lesson is citizens must know how their govts make decisions that affect their lives

Apar Gupta



Julian Assange's release after years of captivity invites us to reflect on the legacy of WikiLeaks. As the editor-in-chief and spokesperson of WikiLeaks, he became a household name, emblematic of the fight for radical transparency.

His work highlights the need for citizens to understand how govts and corporations make decisions that affect ordinary people's lives. WikiLeaks, which began in 2006, helps us understand our present information disorder and the weakening civic trust in democratically elected govts.

Assange and WikiLeaks have fundamentally altered the dynamics between the press and the powerful, pioneering a bold vision of the digital fourth estate. While some view this as a beacon of progress, others see it as teetering on the edge of anarchy and challenging traditional norms of journalism.

**Challenge US on state torture etc** | Though WikiLeaks has a global charter, its principal impact has emerged from focusing on US, the world's most powerful country.

In April 2010, WikiLeaks truly shook the global stage. The release of the "Collateral Murder" video, showing US Apache helicopters killing twelve individuals in Iraq, including two Reuters employees, marked the beginning of a series of disclosures that revealed the realpolitik actions of US govt.

Notably, these disclosures were made only after US govt denied access to Reuters. These releases followed the Afghan and Iraq War logs from earlier that year, all believed to have been sourced from US army intelligence analyst PFC Bradley Manning, which evidenced the use of state torture.

**Challenge the 'sensitivity' of India's elite** | This was only a prelude to "Cablegate" when, in Nov 2010, WikiLeaks began releasing 251,287 classified diplomatic cables sent to the US state department by 274 of its consulates, embassies, and diplomatic missions worldwide. This media maelstrom provided direct insight not only into the imperial instincts of US govt but also the

motivations of our own power elite.

It laid bare unvarnished commentary on Modi and Rahul, India's foreign relations, and reports on interactions with our politicians, including their candid assessments on issues of Hindu nationalism, Naxalism, and terrorism. Given their sensitivity, WikiLeaks collaborated with major news organisations like El Pais, Le Monde, Der Spiegel, The Guardian, and The New York Times to ensure careful analysis and redaction.

transparency. The subsequent prosecution of Assange by US govt, resulting in a restriction on his liberty for more than a decade, starkly reveals this hypocrisy as much as it is an attack on whistleblowers and press freedom.

As a counterblast to the disclosures, US govt prosecuted him under the Espionage Act and Computer Fraud and Abuse Act and sought his extradition. During this same period, US championed the internet as a tool to topple oppressive regimes but found it difficult to accept the use of the same tool when it undermined its own interests.

In Oct, 2021 a broad coalition of rights organisations through an open letter urged US govt to drop these proceedings: "A precedent created by prosecuting Assange could be used against publishers and journalists alike, chilling their work and undermining freedom of the press."

Finally, US has offered Assange a plea deal. As WikiLeaks' X account announced, after five years of imprisonment in a high-security prison in south London, "Julian Assange is free."

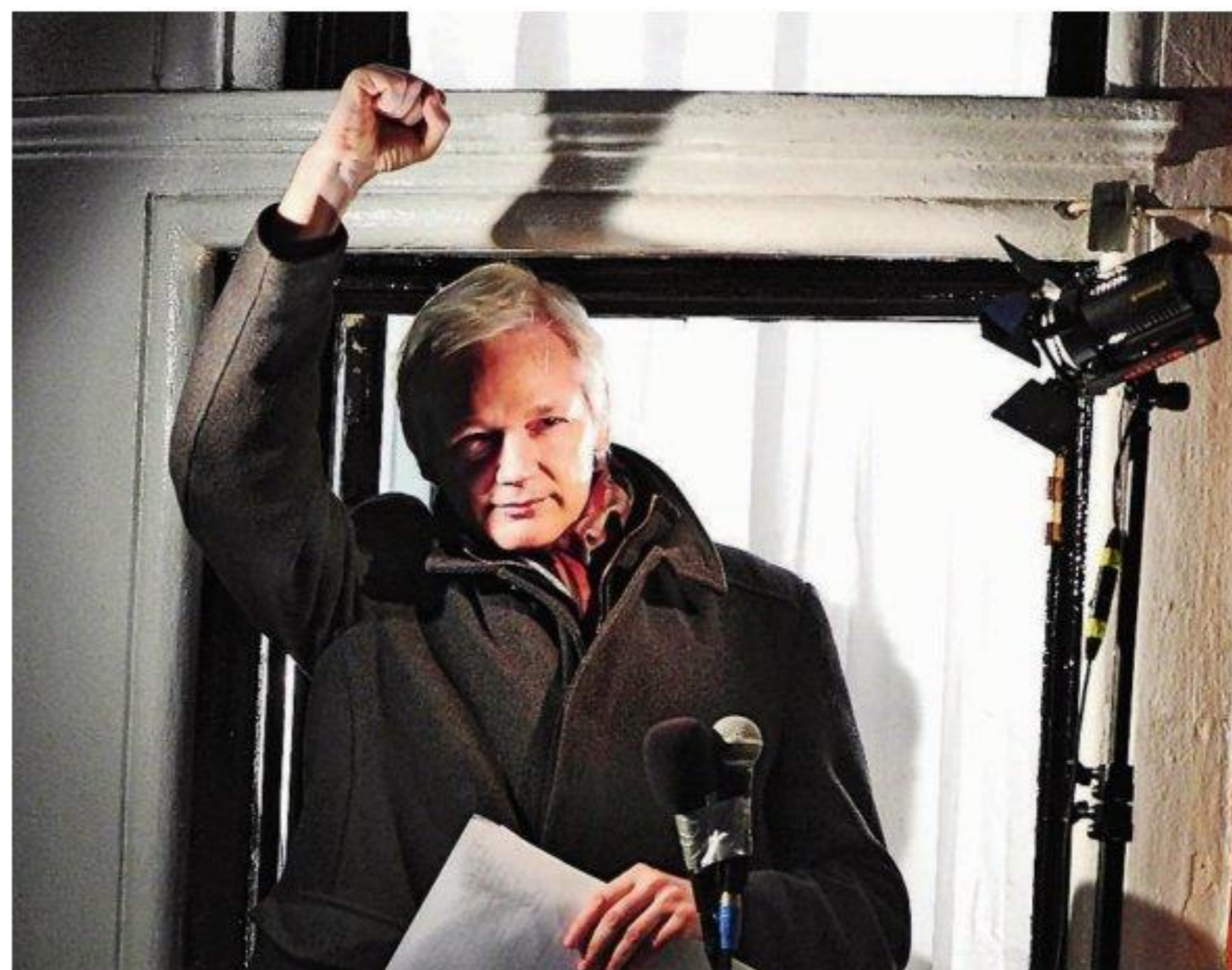
**Question how GOI provides data** | While WikiLeaks' contribution may, in time, be compared to historic archives that have shaped modern history, we must not read Assange's release as an obituary but as a principled need to fight for transparency.

For us in India, Assange's release after concessions made by US govt must draw attention not only to what WikiLeaks contained but also to the present. It must prompt questions about how our own govt provides data and makes proactive disclosures. How do we treat our own whistleblowers?

Over time, there has been a growing secrecy and centralisation of power by our elected officials. Recent changes and operational issues have handicapped transparency under the Right to Information Act, 2005. Special executive instructions, such as for website blocking, make orders secret.

While unpleasant, Assange used the internet to model a new form of whistleblowing and confront the brutish nature of state power. We must not only debate what Assange did, but also draw the right lessons from it.

The writer is an advocate and co-founder of the Internet Freedom Foundation



**Protect whistleblowers, protect press** | This radical form of transparency led to charges of terrorism, with Assange being termed "Public Enemy No. 1" by many US politicians. Even many press commentators at the time viewed it as upsetting the traditional norms of journalism, premised on issues of accuracy and verifiability.

It is important to remember, at such points, the value of a whistleblower in any society. Whistleblowing might expose the lurid details of the personal lives of the rich and powerful, but it serves an important function in breaking cosy, self-serving coalitions.

**Question the secrecy of power** | Often, democratic institutions and private corporations claim commitment to oversight and justice but choose opacity over

## 'No EVM can be hacked. An embedded programme fused on the processor can't be changed from outside'

Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) is the developer of EVMs in India. Its former R&D director Col (ret) HS Shankar led the team that produced the first 1.5L units used in 1990. EVM credibility has been questioned ever since and through each iteration. Currently CMD, Alpha Design Technologies, Shankar takes Chethan Kumar through the tech's journey:

● **What's the story behind switching from ballot paper to EVMs?**

In the 1980s, then CEC Peri Shastry studied poll processes globally. He proposed automating India's ballot paper process, while retaining the procedure. Col GK Rao, then R&D director at BEL, had a rudimentary EVM successfully tested in BEL's trade union elections. BEL then developed semi-production EVM models – about 100 units were used in Kerala polls, 1986.

In 1988, Rajiv Gandhi called for a demonstration. In attendance were Shastry, defence minister KC Pant, and a BEL team that included me as project head.

Gandhi had concerns about rigging, ballot stuffing and booth capturing. He suggested introducing a time gap between each button press on the Ballot Unit (BU) to limit the number of votes that could be rapidly cast – so that no more than two votes could be polled per minute. This modification was carried out. Gandhi's practical input to prevent misuse was crucial in making EVMs a secure and reliable voting system.

● **What was the initial opposition reaction?**

Opposition parties alleged Congress wanted to 'rig' elections via EVMs. VP Singh and George Fernandes called for a demo, claiming any software controlled equipment can be meddled with. That whichever button voters pressed on BU, it was all 'programmed' to automatically shift votes to Congress candidates.

● **What was Rajiv Gandhi's response?**

He set up a high-level team headed by LK Advani to

study these objections and recommend solutions. Experts from IITs, IETE, and DRDO, were tasked with attempting to "tamper" with EVMs within five days, to establish if these could be rigged/manipulated.

At IIT Delhi, Prof PV Indiresan led a team of four PhD scholars and experts who worked round the clock for five days, using high-end equipment and simulators. Despite their best efforts and Indiresan's assertion that any electronic device can be hacked, they couldn't tamper with EVMs. After this failed attempt, production and supply of indigenous EVMs went smoothly.

● **Has anything changed since and can EVMs be hacked now?**

No! But even if we, for a moment, give credence to those claiming the machines can be tampered with, there is another argument against EVMs' vulnerability. It's hard to manipulate machines on such a large scale. For instance, how many machines does one have to manipulate in order to rig an assembly election? It is basic maths.

Say mean electoral win/loss margin in an assembly election is 5,000 votes. Each EVM can hold up to 3,000 votes. However, the number of voters in a booth is generally around 1,200. Let's say 50% of these, that is 600, are manipulated to go in favour of a certain party. To manipulate 5,000 votes, one would have to manipulate a maximum of 9 machines. Also remember each vote added to someone is also one vote deducted from someone. So, to alter the result, one has to manipulate five

machines for 50% votes.

● **So, if EVMs are hacked, 50% manipulation at 3% of booths can subvert process integrity?**

Not a single EVM can be hacked. An embedded programme fused on the processor simply cannot be changed from outside. It's like claiming the encryption algorithm on STARS-V (army's basic communication system) can be changed from outside or through external wires/cables.

How can anyone change a software programme without knowing the programme? If any expert wants to try his hand, he can visit me – I'll give a printed circuit board with an embedded programme fused on the chip (not of EVM, but equivalent processor card) and will ask him to change it in my presence, or with experts.

● **EVMs use 'non-writable microprocessors'. What exactly does that mean?**

A non-writable microprocessor is a simple microchip. The writing pin is physically disabled. The processor has ROM (read only memory) and not 'Read & Write' version. Hence, the 'core' programme based on high-level encrypted algorithm is embedded/fused – can't be changed.

● **Argument is there are ways to write over such chips...**

No. It's impossible to manipulate input or programme through BU to CU (control unit) via cables. The 64-pin IC (integrated circuit) is soldered on CU-PCB by wave soldering process. It cannot be accessed directly through cables.

Also, the argument that a microchip on the wire can manipulate input to get a desired output *without* touching BU or CU doesn't hold. I will reiterate it for those who keep asking if EVMs can be hacked through outside networks. No, simply because an EVM, including VVPAT, isn't connected to the internet or any wireless network.

## Calvin &amp; Hobbes



## Meditation Could Be An Antidote To Drugs

Osho

If a person is addicted to drugs, the problem is not the drugs; the problem is why he is addicted to drugs – because life gives no joy, life is so empty, so meaningless. Drugs make at least a few hours colourful and psychedelic; there is great joy. One forgets this whole madhouse, this world.

You cannot tell them, "We will teach you meditation only if you drop all these things first." They cannot drop them. You have to be more compassionate to them... You teach them meditation.

Meditation will help them to drop drugs, not vice versa. Meditation can give them better experiences, far superior, and real. Drugs are only giving them hallucinations. And when someone has to choose between a dream and

a reality – and a reality which is far more golden and far more beautiful than the dream – I don't think anybody is going to choose the dream. But first let him have something else to choose, to fall upon.

He was empty; he was disgusted with his whole life. Drugs have supported him; they are killing him, they are destroying him, but they have at least shown him beautiful dreams. Life cannot give any beautiful dreams; the politicians, the

priests, the pedagogues altogether have made life so ugly, so difficult to live, so worthless, that any intelligent person is bound to find something or other. And meditation is not for sale – there are no meditation dealers from whom you can

get an injection. You will have to learn it, that is the difficulty. You will have to go through a certain discipline.

So tell them, "Whatever you are doing is absolutely accepted. You are doing it not without reason, so continue it. We will give you a better drug which is not chemical."

We will give you meditation; try it." And you will be surprised, the people who have been on drugs can enter into meditation more easily than other people...

Before he becomes addicted to any drug, he starts experiencing tremendous ecstasies within himself. The drug is left far behind. Now he himself can say that it was stupid to go on hanging around the drug; it was giving him only a hallucination, an

illusion. What does it matter if in your dream you become the king of the whole world? In the morning, you wake up in the same wretched hut; then you need more and more of the drug so that you need not wake up. That's how drugs go on killing people.

But anything that is so destructive can be used in a constructive way; it has been used for thousands of years...

Tell them to meditate, and never mention their drugs; just insist on meditation... The drug takes you into hallucinations, opens doors in your inner chemistry and that is the most vulnerable moment. You can meditate easily.

Abridged from *The Last Testament, Vol 2*. Courtesy: Osho International Foundation/www.osho.com  
June 26 is World Drug Day



THE SPEAKING TREE

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To make the fastest progress. Be an absolutely cheerful Hero-warrior. And take both victory and failure As parallel experience rivers Leading to the sea Of progress-delight

Sri Chinmoy







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PAPER WITH PASSION

## A new leaf

The 18th Lok Sabha begins on a promising note amid Opposition challenges to the Government

The much-awaited inaugural session of 18th Lok Sabha started on June 24th. This marks a pivotal moment in India's democratic journey. With the NDA returning to power albeit with lesser seats would make it a much-balanced house than the 17th Lok Sabha in which NDA had brute majority. However, the political landscape has undergone significant shifts which will reflect in the functioning of the new Lok Sabha. Indeed, the priorities set in this session will shape India's trajectory for the next five years. The first session of the 18th Lok Sabha hit the controversy on its very first day. The leaders of the INDIA bloc staged a protest outside Parliament on Monday, coinciding with the oath-taking ceremony of newly elected Members of Parliament. Key figures, including Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, party leader Sonia Gandhi, and Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav, held copies of the Constitution as they demonstrated against the BJP-led NDA government. The swearing-in process for other Union ministers and newly elected MPs was conducted by Pro-tem Speaker Bhartruhari Mahtab. Members of the Congress and the INDIA bloc, who are part of parliamentary panels, opted out of assisting with the oath-taking process for the newly elected MPs. They expressed their dissatisfaction over the appointment of BJP MP Bhartruhari Mahtab as pro-tem Speaker instead of their preferred candidate, eight-time Congress MP K Suresh. This is a first indication that the functioning of this Lok Sabha would not be smooth.



The 18th Lok Sabha's first session will continue until July 3. The election for the Lok Sabha Speaker is set for June 26, and President Murmu will address a joint session of both houses on June 27. Interestingly this session will see the appointment of a Leader of the Opposition for the first time in a decade. The session is expected to be contentious, with the opposition poised to challenge the BJP-led NDA on various issues, including the Speaker election on June 26, paper leaks in NEET-UG and UGC-NET exams, and disputes over the pro-tem Speaker's appointment. The opposition aims to address rising prices, food inflation, fatalities due to extreme heatwaves, and recent 'irregularities' in exam administrations. The 18th Lok Sabha is expected to prioritize measures to boost economic growth, tackle inflation, and create employment opportunities. The new session is also expected to focus on social justice, addressing issues related to inequality and ensuring that the benefits of economic growth reach all sections of society. Besides India's strategic interests and security concerns are expected to be prominent in the 18th Lok Sabha's deliberations in the wake of terrorist attacks in Jammu. Beefing up security and restoring law and order in various parts of the country should be taken up on priority. This session not only sets the legislative framework but also reflects the aspirations of a diverse and dynamic nation, eager to carve out a resilient and equitable path forward in a rapidly changing global landscape.

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## PICTALK



An Indian cricket fan blows into a shell horn prior to the ICC Men's T20 World Cup cricket match

AP/PTI

## Inordinate delay in naming new army chief



ASHOK K MEHTA

The Govt's decision to extend the tenure of Chief of Army Staff by 30 days, instead of announcing the new appointee has sparked controversy and conjecture

It is intriguing why the appointment of Lt Gen Upendra Dwivedi was not announced on 26 May but on 11 June which would have obviated a 30-day extension to COAS Gen Manoj Pande and the unnecessary speculation that followed. Government would not have been deterred by Model Code of Conduct for election as it had already appointed VAdm Dinesh Tripathi as Chief of Naval Staff on 19 April. That a supersession was contemplated but not implemented as the '400 paar' goal, even 272 mark were missed probably led to discretion superseding valour. Further NDA allies had already flagged the Agniveer issue!

Strange are the ways of the government. Just six days before Pande's superannuation-bringing the appointment down to wire-it ordered an extension after he had been feted out by his successor on 21 May. The extension was quite baffling. Government officials like Cabinet Secretary, Home Secretary and others (including Director ED) who run government for politicians get extensions as a matter of routine. In the case of ED's Sanjay Mishra, Supreme Court had to intervene to issue a deadline. But bureaucrats have made themselves indispensable like the repetition of NSA shows. The extension to COAS triggered extensive speculation: The last extension was given to COAS Gen Gopal Bewoor who succeeded Field Marshal Manekshaw. This extension ensured that Lt Gen PS Bhagat, a Victoria Cross winner was denied the post of COAS, opening the path for Lt Gen Tappy Raina, a Kashmiri, to get the coveted job. Incidentally, both Bewoor and Bhagat were Rimcollians (studied at RIMC Dehradun) and good friends. Appointments of CDS and COAS have got highly politicised - as their stature diminishing - as their most conspicuous relegation in the seating plan during PM's oath taking ceremony demonstrated. No one but they are to blame. Equally unusual was Defence Minister Minister Rajnath Singh being welcomed back to MOD by CDS Gen Anil Chauhan holding



a bouquet. A soldier's salute is the highest tribute.

A month's extension in the armed forces is a first, though in one case, extension was given for one day. The extension will affect the line of succession beyond the present contenders. VCOAS Lt Gen Dwivedi was the seniormost followed by Lt Gen Ajai Singh GoC-in-C Southern Command. Both were batch-mates but the tyranny of 'order of merit' while graduating from IMA dictates seniority. Both were to retire on 30 June.

Next senior was Northern Army Commander. Lt Gen Suchindra Kumar followed by Lt Gen Raja Subramani of Central Command. Interestingly all the Generals named except the outgoing COAS who is an Engineer officer are Infanteers. Pande is the first Sapper officer to break the glass ceiling. On 1 July the new Army Commanders will be Lt Gens Raja Subramani VCOAS, Devu Sharma AARTRAC, Dhiraj Seth Southern, Sengupta South Western and Manjinder Singh Central. Traditionalists hold that extensions in the military are not par for the course as they disrupt the line of succession and officers should refuse to accept extension. It is the government's prerogative to choose a Service Chief by seniority, merit and deep selection



GOVERNMENTS MUST NOT BE SEEN BREACHING THE SACROSANCT SERVICE RULE BOOK OR INVENTING NEW RULES. INSTANCES OF SUPERSESSION ARE RARE: THE MOST RECENT BEING THE APPOINTMENT OF LATE GEN BIPIN RAWAT AS COAS WHO OVERTOOK TWO SENIOR GENERALS

superseding officers or even recalling the selected from retirement. But service rules should not be tweaked whimsically.

In 2014 after BJP won the elections it tried to prevent the ruling UPA from appointing the seniormost Gen Dalbir Suhag as COAS.

The thing is, Governments must not be seen breaching the sacrosanct service rule book or inventing new rules. Instances of supersession are rare: the most recent being the appointment of late Gen Bipin Rawat as COAS who overtook two senior Generals. Supersessions have happened in the Navy and Air Force also. Admiral Robin Dhawan in 2014 and Admiral Karambir Singh in 2019 superseded their senior VADM's Shekhar Sinha and Bimal Verma. Superseded officers have generally resigned but some continued to serve. So why the one-month extension to Gen Pande.

The government wanted to be back in power (as it was on 9 June) before taking any unusual step like deviating from seniority principle. Remember all three - Incumbent Pande, next senior Dwivedi followed by Singh - were all to retire on 30 June. If government had wanted to appoint seniormost Lt Gen Dwivedi as COAS, his name could have been announced on 26 May as it had announced appointment of

VAdm Tripathi as CNS on 19 April while moral code of conduct was on. Instead, the government preoccupied with election extended service of Gen Pande giving itself more leeway in naming new COAS. Choices were A) appoint the seniormost Dwivedi. B) retire both Dwivedi and Singh and appoint either Suchindra Kumar or Raja Subramani or .... And C) Supersede Dwivedi and appoint Singh by tweaking the rulebook (one day extension for Singh) or deep-select from other eligible Army Commanders.

In the Air Force, service rules were tweaked by MoD in 1988. Air Chief Marshal Polly Mehra retired on 31 July. Air Marshal Nimmi Suri who was to retire on 31 July was given one day extension and appointed Air Chief Marshal and Chief of Air Staff, superseding Air Marshal MM Singh. In another case I believe the forenoon/afternoon tweak was applied which is being replicated now - retiring Gen Pande F/N and appointing Gen Dwivedi in A/N. The extension merely created a storm in a tea cup, the El Nino effect!

(The writer, a retired Major General, was Commander, IPKF South, Sri Lanka, and founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, currently the Integrated Defence Staff. The views expressed are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## COMBATING LONELINESS

Madam — The World Health Organization (WHO) declared loneliness a "global health threat" in November 2023 and should be commended for launching the WHO Commission on Social Connection to address this issue. Connecting with others has become easier in our modern era of smartphones and the internet. Here are a few practical suggestions to help older individuals combat loneliness: Each apartment complex or neighborhood should have a common room for social gatherings and reading, where people can read newspapers and magazines, chat, discuss general topics, and stay until family members return home from work. Employ a coordinator for the social room to attend to the needs of the elderly, such as running errands, engaging in conversations, and providing a cheerful atmosphere.

A written understanding should be established that discussions in the common room remain private to prevent controversies. Allow lonely individuals from nearby homes to join. Provide cots for naps and encourage bringing lunch boxes. Encourage keeping pets. Promote hobbies such as gardening, puzzle-solving, and reading. Participate in social platforms. Create quiz groups on WhatsApp and other social platforms for daily quizzes, with participants taking turns to pose questions and answers. Make humor and laughter sessions mandatory in every apartment complex, educational institution, and workplace, at least for 10 minutes each morning and evening. The internet offers an endless supply of jokes that are considerate of others' feelings.

PVS Sreelekha | Secunderabad

## OPPOSITION TAKES ON GOV

Madam — The parliamentary session starting on June 24 promises to be significant, as it marks the first time in a decade that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will not govern alone. New mem-

## Monetary compensation to housewives



Housewives are just as valuable as their employed male counterparts in families. From managing household chores to planning family events, housewives possess a range of skills that many working men cannot match. Years ago, the Supreme Court challenged the census for categorizing homemakers as 'non-workers' and called for laws to recognize their economic contribution. A woman's

role as a mother, wife, and homemaker should itself be regarded as productive work, transcending mere monetary value. She brings emotional attachment and selfless service to the family.

Society often views housewives solely as nurturers, failing to respect them as individuals independent of their familial roles. It took insightful minds and the efforts of many women to rebrand the term 'housewife' to the more respectful 'homemaker.' Unpaid household work by women must be recognized as productive labor, not just as tasks done for the family's welfare. The reality is that in most cases, women have little choice when it comes to housework. It's high time the contributions of homemakers are acknowledged through appropriate monetary compensation.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

bers of Parliament will take the oath of secrecy, overseen by temporary speaker Bhartruhari Mehtab. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), including the BJP's 240 members, now totals 294 members, highlighting a shift in the political landscape.

The Congress party, with 100 seats, alongside its allies totaling 234 seats, will have a strengthened position, allowing it to assume the role of Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha for the first time in ten years. This change amplifies the opposition's ability to hold the government accountable on issues like inflation, unemployment, and the ongoing violence in Manipur. This 18th Lok Sabha stands out for its strong opposition, and how the ruling party navigates this dynamic will be closely observed in the coming days.

Shantaram Wagh | Pune

## INDO-BANGLADESH TIES GET A BOOST

Madam — This has with reference to your editorial "Friend in need" published on June 24. Bangladesh Prime Minister

Sheikh Hasina's two-day visit to India highlighted the tight relationship between the two countries. The two countries signed ten agreements and memoranda of understanding, but the agreement struck on India's plan to send a technical team to conserve and manage the Teesta River garnered special notice.

The distribution of Teesta River water has been viewed as a problematic issue between the two countries. Considering this, China began to express interest in the management and conservation of the Teesta River in 2020. All parties were aware of the sensitivity of the situation, given India's reservations about it. Looking at countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives, we can see that China's approach was not new. However, given India's good relations with Bangladesh, the issue over Teesta water sharing did not raise suspicions and animosity between the two countries.

Abhijit Roy | Jamshedpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## Lessons from the life of Lord Rama!

Our experiences, coupled with the wisdom imparted through stories told by our elders or discovered in books, often shape us in profound ways

Our experiences, and even the stories narrated by our elders or those read by us, impart a certain wisdom. Many of these get so deeply ingrained in our minds that often we develop characteristics unknown to our conscious self. My mother always kept a copy of Ramcharitmanas in her prayer corner. We would listen wide-eyed to her recitation of the chaupais (a quatrain verse of Indian poetry), my imagination running wild with the story of Lord Rama, and his victory over evil. It remained a story to me in my growing up years, till I joined my railway job.

I was the head of my department in a division, sandwiched between two other divisions. My location required me to have smooth coordination with my neighbours. One day I complained to our mutual boss in the headquarters about the non-cooperation of my colleagues from the adjoining divisions, to be snubbed by him, "You are now a senior officer. You should handle these minor issues at your level." I was 29, with a working experience of only 5 years. It did not mat-



ter that I did not consider myself senior enough. It was the position that I held that imparted me the authority and consequently responsibility. The observation had gone home. I was a leader and had to act like one taking every-one with me to attain my goals.

As a branch head, I was also responsible for allotting government accommodation to the staff under my control. It was a routine exercise following the waitlist; however, the branch head had the discretionary authority to make an out-of-turn allotment. A few days into my posting, I was approached by the widow of

one staff, supported by a few union leaders, for an out-of-turn allotment on compassionate grounds. I passed the orders. Then I started having doubts, knowing that I would now also be approached by the rival union for favour. I refused the approach several weeks later despite their polite requests to follow the precedence I had set. I learned that it was important to be fair while making decisions.

One day a few union leaders came to me quite agitated. They complained about the disrespectful communication by one of my junior officers. The officer had used the Hindi tum (you), instead of the more respectable aap (you), when addressing a staff. I tried to assuage their hurt sentiments by pointing out the north Indian origins of the junior officer, where, in some regions, even the parents are addressed as tum. I learned to respect the local sentiments.

I also learned the importance of nurturing relations. Armed with bookish knowledge, I was a novice in the practical professional life. The staff had been dealing with these issues far before I had

joined the engineering college and many even from before I was born. I had no hesitation to sit with them without any biases and learn. I took strength from the stories of Nishad, Shabri, Sugriva, and many others.

It was only after I faced difficult situations in my professional life, I understood that the life of Lord Rama as a prince and then king was tough. He had to uphold integrity in his public life even at the cost of personal suffering. He also had to build and nurture new relationships without pre-conceived notions to fight for the good.

I had learned important lessons from the stories narrated by my mother. Ramcharitmanas was not just a story, it was a way of life! Following the principles that He lived and fought for on this earth was the true devotion that I could offer. I did not need the sanctuary of a temple to pray!

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA

## FIRST COLUMN

## WE ARE PLAYING THE SCRIPT OF LIFE

The world is a stage where we each have a unique, pre-scripted part to play



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

Recently a veteran actor from the Indian film industry was given the Highest Civilian Award for his contribution towards spreading cultural values across the Globe through his acting career. While he was given the award, everyone in the audience stood up to give him a standing ovation with so much love and respect to the legend, who brought so many characters to life on celluloid screen. We all have experienced this euphoria in theatres, while a heroic character makes an entry on screen, there are loud cheers, whistles, applause and more. And at the end of the film, the hero wins the audience's hearts and steals the show. Whether he plays a prince or a pauper, it does not matter as his fans through the theatres to catch a glimpse of him.

The beauty of his performance lies in his ability to internalize the character to the extent that he and his role seem one to his fans. But even while doing it, he is very much conscious of the fact that he is merely an actor in a particular drama, his role is carved, his dialogues are scripted and the costumes are designed for that particular character. Hence, his greatness lies only in playing the role to the best of his capability. On his long journey to stardom, every actor often turns a spectator and critiques his own work so that he can improve upon his act. It is this element of detachment from the different roles he plays that allows him to progress, play multiple roles simultaneously with clarity and then return to his personal life at the end of the day.

Not many of us know that the world cycle is very much similar to this drama in which all of us are actors with unique parts. Everyone is the protagonist in his life and can become a hero who draws applause. However, today we hardly find anyone cheering for the other person. Because, there is great dissatisfaction either with each other's performance or the script. As a result the drama appears to have become a tragedy. There is widespread chaos with actors criticizing each others' performances instead of theirs. The reason for this trouble is that most of us act without the knowledge that the earth is a stage and we have all come here to play our individual roles. Secondly, each actor's role is unique and pre-scripted and hence trying to match it with anybody else's



is futile. Thirdly, the biggest law of the world drama is that it is ever beneficial for everyone. In the absence of this understanding or its consciousness, we get attached to our roles, forget to change our costumes and make-up and lose the flexibility to adapt to each part. Take a simple example of a person who plays a son, a husband, a father, a friend and several other roles at the same time. If he is in the consciousness of being a male, he could dominate his wife at home or look down upon his female staff at office. At work, he would stick to his role of being a boss so much so that he forgets to become their colleague. On the other hand, if he is conscious that he is an actor and must like a hero win everyone's hearts, then he would understand the requirements of his role and become active, accurate and attractive at whatever he does.

Living the peaks and troughs of each character we play, we drain ourselves and are unable to muster enough strength to meet the demands of each role or take well the twists in the scenes, as a result of which there are emotional upheavals and sorrow becomes a regular visitor when the purpose of the drama is to help the actors experience joy and happiness. On the other hand, if we become detached to the roles we play and keep faith in the eternal law that the drama has been scripted for universal benefit, the feeling of loss and gain, comfort and pain would begin to dissolve and our mind would stop to question the developments in every scene. So, the moral of the story is that we should be detached and yet be involved in the part we are playing. That's the quality to be a superstar in this World Drama.

(Writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist; views are personal)

# Water crisis in Delhi is entirely man-made

The ruthless exploitation of natural endowments and that too when resources are being put to misuse is unconscionable



UTTAM GUPTA

The gravity of water crisis facing Delhiites has forced the Delhi government to approach the Supreme Court (SC) seeking its intervention to direct neighboring states Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh (HP) to provide additional raw water supply to the national capital. Initially, the SC directed HP to release 137 cusecs of raw water which translates to 70 million gallons per day (MGD) of more water for the city. It also asked Haryana to make arrangements for ensuring its free flow to Delhi.

But, now with HP claiming that it can't release more than what it is already giving (70 MGD), the top court has directed 'the Upper Yamuna River Board (UYRB) to convene a meeting with all parties and take a decision expeditiously'. The mandate of UYRB is to inter alia regulate the allocation of available water flows amongst the beneficiary States and also monitoring the return flows.

Is Delhi really short of water? According to Delhi's Economic Survey Report 2023, the overall water requirement of the city is 1,290 MGD, with an increase in the summer months. Against this, the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) which has the mandate to manage the water supply in the city (including procurement of raw water from various sources, its processing in water treatment plants or WTPs and its distribution) had said on April 3, 2024 in a written statement that water production in the capital stood at around 990 MGD on average between March end and start of April. The DJB actually produced 1,002 MGD on June 7, 2024.

Further, the Economic Survey of Delhi, 2023-24, says, "As per Outcome Budget (Q2 of 2023-24) of DJB, the total distribution losses are at about 52.35 percent". Distribution losses is a sophisticated nomenclature for pilferage of water supplies by tanker mafia and industries. The pilferage is happening at all stages of the water supply chain viz. the WTPs, conveyance systems and distribution systems. This couldn't have happened without the connivance of the authorities.

Deduct 52 percent pilferage or 520 MGD from production of around 1000 MGD, the quantity available for consumption by households in Delhi would be 480 MGD. This is barely 37 percent of the demand estimated at 1290 MGD. It sounds bizarre! If, that were the case, nearly 2/3rd of Delhiites would have been without drinking water; a complete disaster. That hasn't happened even as we see people chasing water tankers in several parts of Delhi.

So, what are we missing? There is something fundamentally wrong with the way mandarins in the government estimate the requirement. Ideally, this should be done from the demand side which involves conducting household survey, collecting data on how much each unit needs, aggregating and so on. Instead, they look at the total supply in the past say 2023-24, presume that that much quantity was consumed and apply an incremental factor/percentage increase to arrive at the requirement for 2024-25.

In this process, they end up including even the pilfered quantity in the requirement. It means that 1290 MGD also includes 520 MGD of water plundered by dubious operators from the system



(assuming that 52 per cent pilferage has continued in the current year). Minus this, the requirement of households was 770 MGD. This being higher than the net availability of 480 MGD, Delhiites are feeling the stress.

Unambiguously, plunder of water by tanker mafia is at the root of Delhi's water woes (last year, Delhiites were spared as the HH demand being muted, the net supply after accounting for the greed of the tanker mafia was sufficient to meet it). But, for this, the entire production of 1000 MGD would have been available for HH consumption resulting in a surplus of 230 MGD (1000-770) forget any shortage that we are experiencing today.

A sustainable solution to Delhi water woes requires that the State government addresses pilferage on a war footing. Yet, its overwhelming focus has been on getting more raw water from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, HP etc. While, making the demand it is oblivious of the fact that all its nine WTPs are already operating above their installed capacities (yielding a total of around 1000 MGD which is around 47 MGD more than the combined capacity of all nine WTPs) and that the DJB won't be able to deliver more even if it gets more raw water from the neighboring states.

As for addition to the processing capacity, last year, the Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal had approved an action plan to increase water production by 131 MGD in the short-term and by 380 MGD in the long-term. It

involved construction of a new plant at Chandrawal, with a capacity of 105 MGD and completion of another plant at Dwarka, which has the potential to increase production by 50 MGD. That plan hasn't made much headway. While, work on Chandrawal plant is yet to start, even the Dwarka project which was to come up by March 2024 is running behind schedule.

Unable to manage water supplies from the rivers viz. Yamuna, Ravi-Beas, Ganga and so on, the Delhi government is now increasing its dependence on groundwater which currently contributes a little more than 10 percent - almost 100 percent increase over the level five years ago. According to the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB), over 41 percent of Delhi's total area is overexploited even as it has been drawing more groundwater than it recharges. The total annual groundwater recharge decreased from 0.41 billion cubic meters (bcm) in 2022 to 0.38 bcm in 2023, while the annual extractable groundwater resource available decreased from 0.37 bcm to 0.34 bcm.

This is not a healthy trend. The ruthless exploitation of natural endowments and that too when resources are being put to misuse (read: diversion of water meant for HH consumption to industrial use) is unconscionable.

Apart from the huge imbalance between the demand and supply, the gross mismanagement and irregularities in running Delhi's water supply systems is also push-

ing DJB to the brink of financial bankruptcy. Pilferage of more than half of water supply means the Board doesn't get any revenue on that much quantity. Then, you have Kejriwal's free scheme that involves no payment for consumption up to 20,000 litres a month per household. Even for HHs who get the bills and haven't paid for years, the Chief Minister has been trying to get a one time settlement package cleared by the Lieutenant Governor which will tantamount to the State exchequer foregoing thousands of crore. Finally, there are reports of payments having been made by the households albeit to private entities (authorized to collect the money) but never reached the revenue department.

All this has led to a pathetic situation whereby DJB which until a decade back was making profit today has an accumulated debt of over Rs 70,000 crore. The Board is able to run its operations solely because it can borrow money from banks and other financial institutions (FIs) backed by sovereign State guarantee. Left to fend for itself, it would have collapsed long ago. One shudders to think of what this would entail for water supply to the capital city. The water crisis as also seriousness of problems on other infrastructure fronts such as electricity etc and overall governance issues in Delhi calls for some drastic action by the Centre.

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



A SUSTAINABLE SOLUTION TO DELHI WATER WOES REQUIRES THAT THE STATE GOVERNMENT ADDRESSES PILFERAGE ON A WAR FOOTING. YET, ITS OVERWHELMING FOCUS HAS BEEN ON GETTING MORE RAW WATER FROM HARYANA, UTTAR PRADESH, HP ETC.

# Navigating the complexities of drug abuse and illicit trafficking

With a strong emphasis on prevention, awareness, and eliminating stigma, the UN champions a holistic approach to tackling drug abuse

Annually observed on June 26, 'The International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking' was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1987 to combat drug abuse globally. The day serves to highlight the challenges posed by drug abuse and illicit trafficking, stressing the need for international cooperation. The 2024 campaign, "The evidence is clear: invest in prevention", focuses on raising awareness about the importance of providing help and treatment to individuals struggling with drug use. It advocates for a compassionate approach, emphasizing empathy and care over punitive measures. This shift, aimed to promote understanding of the negative impacts of drugs on



RAJDEEP PATHAK

personal, social, and spiritual well-being.

The campaign also calls for treating people who use drugs with respect and without judgment, aiming to change societal attitudes. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) underscores the significance of eliminating stigma and adopting a people-centered approach based on human rights and evidence-based practices to effectively

combat drug abuse globally. Besides, the primary objective is to address the multifaceted issues of drug abuse and trafficking by raising public awareness, promoting preventive measures, and advocating for robust policies and programs. Educating communities about the severe dangers and consequences of drug abuse and illicit trafficking is essential. Fostering international cooperation is crucial for a comprehensive approach, emphasizing global partnerships and collaboration among law enforcement agencies to dismantle drug trafficking networks. Addressing these objectives will create a more informed, prepared, and united front against the global drug crisis. Going by the 2024 theme -

"The evidence is clear: invest in prevention", the message of the Secretary General of the United Nations António Guterres is pertinent in which he reiterated that drugs inflict profound suffering, deteriorating health and wellbeing, with overdoses claiming countless lives annually. To him, the rise of more lethal synthetic drugs and record-breaking illicit drug production fuels crime and violence globally, impacting the most vulnerable, especially youth.

Those struggling with substance abuse face repeated victimization from the drugs, societal stigma, and harsh responses. To break this cycle, 'we must invest in evidence-based prevention programs that safeguard individuals and communities, disrupt illicit

economies, and prioritize rehabilitation, education, and harm reduction'. He cited the example of Portugal saying that prevention is effective. António Guterres said, "As this year's theme reminds us, breaking the cycle of suffering means starting at the beginning, before drugs take hold, by investing in prevention." But what does 'Drug Abuse' actually mean? Drug abuse can be defined as the improper or excessive consumption of illegal drugs or prescription medications for non-therapeutic purposes.

Drug abuse severely impacts physical health, manifesting in serious conditions. Reports point that chronic cocaine or methamphetamine abuse leads to cardiovascular issues, including heart disease and

stroke. Smoking drugs like crack cocaine can cause lung cancer, while intravenous drug use increases HIV risk. Other risks, as medical reports point, include nasal damage from snorting, liver and kidney disease from prolonged substance use, and oral cancer from smokeless tobacco. Contaminants in illicit drugs are linked to leukemia, and severe weight loss is common among stimulant addicts. Besides, mental health issues include depression, anxiety, memory and learning problems, insomnia, violent behaviour, delusions, paranoia, confusion, extreme mood swings, and substance dependence. Some report also suggests that the relationships between drug-related crime, crimes that affect the environment,

and convergent crime are complex and evolving. Drug cultivation and trafficking and crimes that affect the environment are surging in the Amazon Basin. Also, the 'UNODC World Drug Report 2023' highlights social and economic inequalities driving drug problems and their environmental and human rights impacts and rising conflicts. Treatment coverage remains low, with only one in five affected receiving help, notably lacking in some regions. Recent data from the Government of India reveals alarming statistics: more than 10% of the population grapples with psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis. A substantial segment, comprising 15 individuals per 1000, engages in drug

use, while chronic alcohol addiction affects 25 per 1000 people. The availability of psychiatric and de-addiction beds starkly contrasts with demand, with only 20% of the required facilities accessible nationwide, leaving an alarming 80% shortfall in inpatient care capacity.

Following a tailored treatment plan involving detoxification, counseling, and possibly medication is crucial. Lifestyle adjustments such as adopting healthy habits and avoiding triggers support recovery. The way out is, facing the problem, discussing and treating it with experts' guidance, but not being the escapist.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Snruti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Assange released

Wikileaks founder's long ordeal ends

WIKILEAKS founder Julian Assange's release from prison marks the culmination of a long-running saga of international intrigue. An Internet publisher with disdain for government secrets, he gained massive attention for the 2010 release of classified documents relating to the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The material, published on his website, included a video showing civilians being killed by fire from a helicopter in Iraq. One of his collaborators, US Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning, was sentenced to 35 years in prison before then President Obama commuted the sentence. His plea deal with the US comes as a relief for 52-year-old Assange, who has spent the last five years in a British jail, fighting extradition. Earlier, facing charges of rape in Sweden, which he denied, he spent seven years in refuge in Ecuador's London embassy.

Assange's activism made his case a cause célèbre among press freedom advocates, who insisted his work in exposing US military misconduct is exactly what journalists are expected to do. His supporters see him as a champion of free speech, exposing abuses of power and hypocrisy. In the US, he's projected as a villain for recklessly endangering national security. The British government signed an extradition order in 2022. Last month, two judges said Assange could appeal to address the question of whether, as a foreigner on trial in the US, he would enjoy the protections of freedom of speech under the First Amendment.

Under the plea deal, Assange will plead guilty to a single charge of breaching the espionage law and travel home to Australia, which Canberra has been pushing for. It's difficult to predict how the saga would play out in the coming US presidential elections. In 2016, a Russian hand was suspected when Wikileaks released emails that potentially harmed the electoral prospects of Hillary Clinton and boosted Donald Trump. Ironically, Trump went after Assange.

## Afghan glory

Cricket team lifts spirits of beleaguered nation

TAKE a bow, Afghanistan. The tough-as-nails cricket team led by Rashid Khan has scripted history by making it to the T20 World Cup semifinals for the first time. In the process, the Afghans knocked out 2023 ODI World Cup champions Australia. They upset the Aussie appellation in a Super Eight match on Sunday, a fortnight after they stunned New Zealand in a group-stage encounter (the Kiwis did not even make it to the Super Eight stage). It has been a dream run for Rashid's men in a bizarre tournament that has seen Pakistan and Sri Lanka — both former world champions in the T20 and ODI formats — making an early exit along with the perennial bridesmaid, New Zealand.

Afghanistan's superb performance is comforting news for a country that is in the throes of a humanitarian crisis. The food security situation continues to be alarming, with around one-third of the population estimated to be food-insecure. An economic downturn and political instability triggered by the Taliban takeover of August 2021 have worsened the woes of millions of Afghans. The inflow of funds from donor organisations has slowed down, even as healthcare, education and sanitation services have left a lot to be desired. Amid the turmoil, cricket has emerged as a balm.

The Afghan team's entry into the semis cannot be dismissed as a mere fluke. Last year, they had upset England, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the ODI World Cup hosted by India. But their heroic efforts went in vain as they failed to make it to the last-four stage. No matter the outcome of their semifinal match against South Africa, Afghanistan is now a force to reckon with in the cricket world. The rampaging Team India might have dazzled one and all in this tournament, but it's the Afghans who have stolen countless hearts with their never-say-die attitude.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, JUNE 26, 1924

## Our 'irreconcilables'

IN a recent issue, we took note of an article contributed to a British newspaper by one of our leading "irreconcilables", which closed with the significant observation that if worth the price which Great Britain may have to pay in the shape of its relaxing its imperial grip on India", "Great Britain's trust and friendship is also worth the price which India may have to pay for it". We have just come across an equally significant observation made by another leading "irreconcilable" in the course of the debate on the Steel Industry (Protection) Bill in the Legislative Assembly, which we have been re-reading in the Official Report. The question before the House was whether the Bill should not include a safeguard against the steel industry gradually passing into the hands of foreign capitalists starting firms in India for the manufacture of steel in the shape of a provision to the effect that the protection afforded by the Bill should not extend to any firm "except under such condition as to the proportion of Indian capital and the Indian element in the management as may be determined by the Governor-General in Council in concurrence with the Indian Legislative Assembly". Moving an amendment, Pandit Motilal Nehru spoke as follows:- "I do not at all mean to convey that I agree with those members who suspect that the real object of the Bill is to introduce foreign companies into this country. That is an extravagant assumption to make, and I cannot be party to it. But that the Bill leaves a very wide door open for such companies to come in, there is not the slightest doubt."

## India must remain ahead of the curve

Pursuit of global aspirations must be tempered by awareness of regional &amp; immediate challenges

SHYAM SARAN  
FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY

THE din of the Lok Sabha elections is over. A duly elected government is in place and it is gearing up to face both domestic and external challenges. Some of these challenges are not new, though they have a different scale and dimension. But some will be novel and unexpected. On balance, the domestic landscape remains relatively more stable. There may be a coalition government at the Centre, but the BJP remains its largest constituent. Prime Minister Narendra Modi may have been politically diminished by the election results, but he remains the most popular and powerful leader. Temperamentally, he is unlikely to significantly alter the modus operandi he has relied upon during the past decade. He is more likely to double down in implementing his political, ideological and economic agendas than in stepping back into a more consensual mode. To the extent that political stability and policy continuity will matter in a world where even the more powerful countries, including the US, are descending into a period of mounting uncertainty, political polarisation and even fragmentation, India will be seen as a more stable and reliable anchor in the international system. That will be an asset it can leverage to advance its interests.

If India is able to sustain its current rate of GDP growth of around 7 per cent per annum over the next decade, as it seems likely to do, that, too, will make it an outlier among major emerging economies. The Modi government has been unusually busi-



KNOTTY MATTER: There is an assumption that the US has enough stakes in its strategic partnership with India not to let the Pannun issue get out of hand. ❧

ness-friendly and this has improved the investment environment for domestic and foreign entities. It must now shift from a business-friendly to a market-friendly strategy which creates an enabling environment for all businesses to flourish. If it does, the economic transformation of India will become the great story of the next several decades. This could potentially expand the country's diplomatic space. Foreign policy should be harnessed to promoting the interests of Indian businesses rather than those of a few chosen entities.

Unlike the domestic space, the external space will be far more challenging and India's vulnerabilities will be greater. In a rapidly changing and fluid geopolitical landscape, the uncertainties unleashed by continuing and escalating wars in Europe and West Asia and the prospects of dramatic and deeply disruptive departures in the foreign policies of major powers as a fallout of impending elections will require an extraordinary agility and skilful diplomacy on the part of India. There seems to be an assumption that India's value as a countervailing and constraining power vis-à-vis China would not only persist but also be enhanced. But as we had wit-

India is important to the world, but the world remains more important to India. A more modest external posture may help.

ness during the Cold War, the dominant powers often temper their confrontation with significant measures of détente and even collaboration at the cost of those allied or aligned with them. One should not rule out such strategic re-ordering of relations between the US and China which may shrink India's own strategic space and heighten its vulnerability to Chinese pressure.

It is also possible that in meeting the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific, the US may attach greater value to its alliance systems and operational arrangements with other partner countries in the region. The US has worked hard to create a truly trilateral military alliance with Japan and South Korea, helping overcome the historical antipathy between Japan

and South Korea. The three countries are now sharing intelligence, conducting military drills and coordinating their postures towards China and the region and this is becoming the core of American Indo-Pacific strategy instead of the Quad (India, Japan, Australia and the US). The AUKUS, comprising Australia, the UK and the US, which is a military alliance based on a substantial nuclear submarine force, will also gain in importance as it begins to be rolled out. The revival of the US-Philippines military alliance and the US gaining access to key bases in that country are another link in the American security chain. The Quad summit scheduled earlier this year in India has been postponed and is unlikely to be convened until after the US presidential elections. But its fate has become uncertain, and with that its value to India as a counter to China.

There are other vulnerabilities to be dealt with. The allegations regarding an assassination attempt, perpetrated by Indian intelligence agents against Khalistani elements in the US and Canada who are accused of spreading terrorism in India, may adversely impact India's relations with key Western partners. The allegation is that a US citizen, Gurpatwant Singh Pan-

nun, was the target of an assassination plot hatched by an employee of India's external intelligence agency, R&AW. It relied on an Indian citizen, Nikhil Gupta, to carry this through a hired hitman. The plot was foiled by the US authorities. The Indian government has promised a full investigation. There is an assumption that the US has enough stakes in its strategic partnership with India not to let the issue get out of hand. However, the extradition of Gupta to America from the Czech Republic and the initiation of judicial proceedings against him mean that the ability of the US administration to manage the fallout will be severely limited. If further damaging evidence becomes public during the trial, there will be even greater reputational damage to India and there will be demands in the US Congress and the American media for punitive measures against India. It would be prudent for the Indian government to work out a coping strategy and remain ahead of the curve.

It is hoped that the newly elected government will re-orient its policy towards its neighbourhood, including towards China. There needs to be a re-engagement with China and the search for a new equilibrium in the relationship. The opportunities for a resumption of dialogue at the summit level during the forthcoming summits of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the BRICS grouping should be grasped, even if the prospects of resolving outstanding issues are limited. The same goes for re-engagement with Pakistan, for which the conditions are much more conducive than before, given its grave economic crisis and geopolitical diminution.

The pursuit of global aspirations must be tempered by an awareness of more regional and immediate challenges. India is important to the world, but the world remains more important to India. A more modest external posture may help.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

A country that demands moral perfection in its foreign policy will achieve neither perfection nor security. — Henry Kissinger

## Whiskers and the brinjal bounty

SAURABH MALIK

IN our snug little house nestled in the tranquil village of Shoghi in Shimla, with its wooden floors creaking softly underfoot and sloping roofs that hugged the eaves, we had an unexpected and persistent visitor — a cunning mouse we affectionately named Whiskers. This little rodent was a master of evasion, outsmarting every trap we set. He would nibble on our cakes, devour our cookies and feast on crumbs, always avoiding the snares intended for him.

Days turned into weeks. We tried everything: cheese, peanut butter, even bits of veggie sausage, but Whiskers was too clever for us. It felt like he had a supernatural sense about traps, always leaving them untouched while enjoying the treats around them.

One evening, as we sat around the dinner table, my daughter Nayyera suddenly shouted, 'Look, Dad! Whiskers is nibbling on the brinjal!' We turned to see the mouse happily gnawing on a piece of the vegetable, bathed in the soft glow of the Himalayan sunset streaming through the window.

It was an epiphany. Whiskers had a particular fondness for brinjals. With renewed determination, we set up the trap with a fresh, juicy slice of brinjal, placing it in the usual spot by the hearth where the fire crackled warmly on chilly Shimla evenings. The house grew quiet as we dimmed the lights and waited, silently.

The next morning, a triumphant cheer echoed through the house as we discovered Whiskers in the trap, munching contentedly on the brinjal. We had finally caught him, not by outsmarting him, but by understanding his unique taste.

The pine forests whispered with the gentle breeze, their needles brushing against each other and releasing a calming aroma, as we carried the trap gently to release Whiskers in a nearby field. We watched as he scurried away into the tall dried grass — waltzing softly to the tune of the light wind — free once more.

As we walked back along the cobbled path winding through the Shoghi bazaar, I allowed one half-formed thought to pass: the solution is not always what we perceive, and it does not have to be as enormous as the problem.

We tried tempting Whiskers with 'big things'. All that was needed was a brinjal. Panting up the precipitous hill, I realised that success often lies in understanding and adapting to the unique preferences and behaviours of others.

The brinjal trap became a symbol of clever adaptation, a reminder that sometimes, the key to solving problems lies in seeing the world through another's eyes. We returned to our cosy cottage amidst the chirping of house sparrows, carrying with us a new sense of patience and understanding. Whiskers had left behind not just an empty trap, but a valuable life lesson.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Russia-Ukraine war rages on

The Ukrainian attack on Crimea with the help of US-supplied missiles has ignited a dangerous conflagration. Russia's threat to retaliate paints a grim picture. The missiles, allegedly programmed by American specialists, left Sevastopol scarred, with lives lost and peace shattered. As the Russia-Ukraine war enters its 29th month, the stakes remain high. Civilian casualties cast a shadow over diplomacy, as Moscow accuses Washington of puppeteering Kyiv. The spectre of a direct Russia-US confrontation looms, reminiscent of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Eastern Europe trembles, but the ripples extend globally, with supply chains disrupted and economies faltering. The region stands on a precipice. Dialogue, not destruction, must prevail. Though the Burgenstock peace conference faltered, there is still hope.

GURDEV SINGH, BY MAIL

## Avoid disruptions in House

Refer to the editorial 'New House meets'; soon after the results of the Lok Sabha elections were declared, PM Narendra Modi underscored the importance of consensus on critical issues. However, the diminished mandate for the BJP, far below its expected tally of 350 seats, seems to have had no sobering effect on its approach on dealing with the Opposition. The appointment of seven-time MP Bhartuhari Mahtab as the pro tem Speaker, overlooking the seniority of eight-time member K Suresh of the Congress, has understandably ignited controversy. By delivering a strong condemnation of the Emergency imposed by the Indira Gandhi-led government, PM Modi has made it clear that he won't mellow out anytime soon. There is widespread apprehension that Parliament could again descend into chaos, marked by sloganeering and walkouts leading to disruptions of proceedings.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

## All eyes on Punjab

Apropos of the article 'Punjab needs a vision for all-round development'; the election of Amrithpal Singh and Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa to the Lok Sabha has undoubtedly baffled many. Simmering discontent among voters over rising

unemployment and a lack of quality education and health facilities may have prompted them to back the two radicals. The electorate was probably hoping for results that successive governments had failed to deliver. However, a side benefit of the victory of Amrithpal and Sarabjeet is that both radicals will now have to swear by the Indian Constitution, implying that they must be ready to work for the development of the state as well as the country. It remains to be seen if the apprehensions being expressed over their election by some quarters are legitimate.

RAJESH CHANDER BALI, JALANDHAR

## Rise of radicals alarming

Refer to the article 'Punjab needs a vision for all-round development'; the defeat of mainstream political party candidates in Punjab at the hands of two radicals is a matter of concern for a state that once had to endure a wave of turbulence for a decade. Disillusioned with the Congress over its misgovernance when the party was in power in Punjab, the electorate decided to vote for AAP in the 2022 state polls. However, the Arvind Kejriwal-led party's poor showing in the state in the recent General Election is a reflection of simmering discontent among the masses. The only way the state government can tackle the rise of radicals is by ensuring employment, affordable education and healthcare facilities and lucrative farming opportunities.

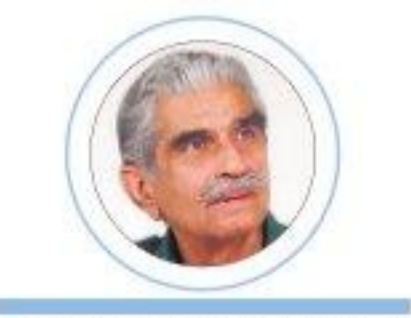
CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

## Check the loss of wildlife

Refer to the middle 'A bird's plea to humankind'; rapid deforestation and concretisation have not only hastened climate change but also destroyed the habitats of several birds, mammals and other creatures. Human beings are responsible for turning verdant forests into barren wastelands and causing a significant loss of biodiversity, which poses a serious risk to future generations. The onus to check the trend lies with each one of us. Planting more trees can play a key role in mitigating the effects of climate change. Besides, the government must take concrete steps to protect forests and wildlife.

JAKIR HUSSAIN, KANPUR

# Transformative defence reforms must have clarity



MAJ GEN ASHOK K MEHTA (RETD)  
MILITARY COMMENTATOR

ON taking charge for the second time as Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh announced his first 100 days' action plan: welfare of veterans, *atmanirbharta* and increasing defence exports to Rs 50,000 crore by 2028-29. There was no mention of theaterisation, even though he had said last month that it was "progressing, with consensus emerging among the three services". In its election manifesto, the BJP made a commitment to implement theaterisation — without specifying a timeline. On May 10, the Inter-Services Organisation (Command, Control and Discipline) Act was promulgated through a gazette notification.

The then CDS, Gen Bipin Rawat, told me days before his death in a helicopter crash in December 2021 that he was tasked to prepare a blueprint for theaterisation in three years, coterminous with his tenure. Gen Anil Chauhan, who was appointed CDS in September 2022, was also given a three-year term and has made progress on theaterisation

with a refined Integrated Theatre Command (ITC) plan. The CDS has become synonymous with theaterisation. At a book release event last month, Gen Chauhan said the National Security Policy/Strategy was not needed in a written form, adding that "we have policy processes, otherwise how did we resolve Article 370, did Balakot, handle Covid..." This is the first time anyone from the establishment has said that a written National Security Strategy (NSS) is not needed. The IAF considers the NSS a prerequisite for theaterisation. Early this month, Lt Gen Virendra Vats, Commandant, Defence Services Staff College (DSSC), Wellington, addressing the 80th Staff Course, explained the nuts and bolts of the NSS as a key ingredient of national security. The DSSC is training 40 triservice officers for ITCs and a one-star-rank officer has been posted to an ITC, the location of which is not known. Last week, Gen Chauhan released the triservice Joint Doctrine for Cyberspace Operations.

In April, a triservice conference was organised for "generating fresh ideas, initiatives and reforms for propelling jointness and integration". A triservice brainstorming session was held in May in the Old War Room, South Block, to assess the state of a transformed theaterised force capable of multi-domain operations. Twelve sub-com-



NEW FRONTIER: CDS Gen Anil Chauhan (second from right) with the three service Chiefs at the release of the Joint Doctrine for Cyberspace Operations in New Delhi last week. **PII**

mittees made presentations on ITCs. On May 21, speaking at the United Service Institution of India's annual Maj Gen Samir Sinha Memorial Lecture on 'Jointmanship: The Way Ahead' in New Delhi, Gen Chauhan stated that Operation Tiranga had helped in ironing out differences with service Chiefs over 11 meetings, each three to four hours long.

He spoke about joint culture 2.0 distilled from the best in each service. Operational commands will be independent of administrative functions of 'raise', 'train' and 'sustain', the residual functions of service Chiefs. He said the ITC would lead to the next step in

defence reforms like cyberspace, space and artificial intelligence. He noted that there were differences over reforms, without specifying any, but emphasised that theaterisation was 'imminent'.

Some wrinkles have to be ironed out. On the operational side, it's the merging into ITCs of two Integrated Battle Groups created in 9 Pivot Corps and five IBGs (integrated battle groups) in 17 Mountain Strike Corps, raising a new Corps in the Central Command which will be absorbed in the China-specific ITC at Lucknow against the PLA Western Theatre Command, fixing operational ORBAT (order of battle) of the Pakistan-specific ITC at

Jaipur; and allotting naval and air assets to the Integrated Maritime Command at Visakhapatnam or Karwar. The IAF's resistance to the division of air assets persists. Following revocation of their operational command, the role of service Chiefs will be limited to training, morale and logistics. Reducing the existing 17 single-service three-star commands into three- or four-star ITCs will require locating eminent slots for the dispossessed. Giving one land-based ITC to the IAF will restore some of its assets.

The CDS is currently wearing multiple hats — Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee; Adviser, National Command Authority; Secretary, Department of Military Affairs; single point of advice to the Defence Minister; head of all triservice institutions and unified commands like the Strategic Forces Command and the Andaman & Nicobar Command; and lead member of the Defence Acquisition Council. He will require a Vice CDS and additional deputies if he is also to figure in the command chain of the ITCs.

Significantly, theaterisation will require political guidance, conspicuously absent from the Indian military system. Leave alone any NSS or White Paper, a political directive to the Chiefs of Staff Committee or service Chiefs has rarely been issued. The then Defence Minister's operational directive of 2009

was prepared by the Director General of Military Operations. In his yet-to-be-published memoirs, former Army Chief Gen MM Naravane has reportedly narrated an incident during Operation Snow Leopard on the intervening night of August 29-30, 2020, when he asked the Defence Minister, External Affairs Minister, the National Security Adviser (NSA) and the CDS for clarification on orders to open fire (he was told by the highest authority not to be the first to open fire) against Chinese tanks approaching Kailash heights. No one responded, till two hours later he was informed by the Defence Minister that the PM had said that since it was a military situation, he should do what he thought best. This exemplifies the bane of unwritten operation orders.

It is quite inconceivable that transformative defence reforms are in the pipeline without even a Strategic Defence and Security Review and an NSS/NSP. Recently, former NSA Shivshankar Menon said an NSS was prepared not once but thrice during the UPA rule, but was never released due to a lack of political will. Even now, two drafts of the NSS, one prepared by the Integrated Defence Staff and the other by the National Security Council Secretariat in 2021-22, are with the NSA; they only need to be updated. Unfortunately, political will is missing on theaterisation.

Two drafts of the National Security Strategy are with the NSA; they only need to be updated.

# Rollout of new criminal laws will be beset with challenges



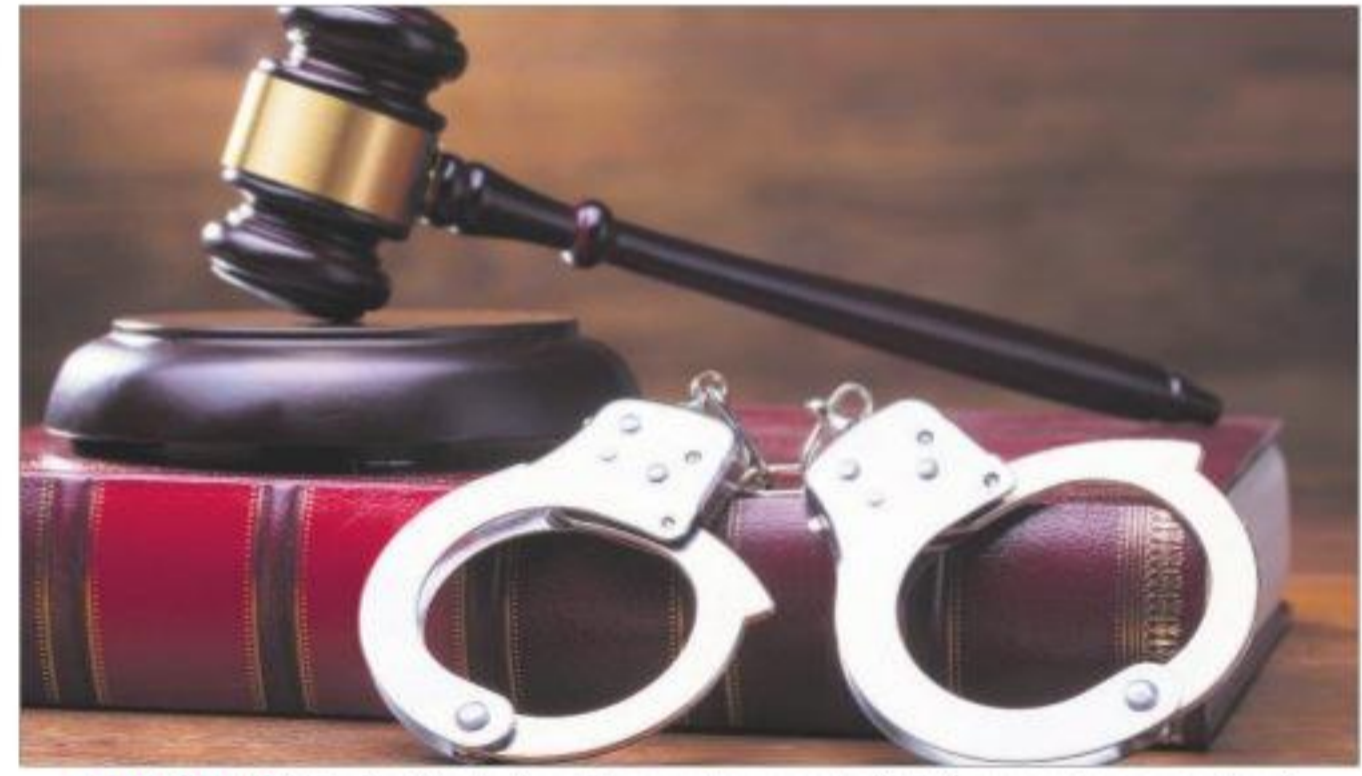
KP SINGH  
FORMER DGP, HARYANA

THE three new criminal laws, namely the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (BSA) would come into effect on July 1. Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud has hailed the new laws aimed at digitalising the criminal procedure and called them a significant step towards modernising the Indian justice system. A cross-section of the legal fraternity — including senior advocate Indira Jaising — has, on the other hand, raised serious concerns about the constitutionality of some of the provisions in these laws.

Opposition leaders, including Mamata Banerjee, are demanding that the new legislation be kept in abeyance until the newly elected members of the Lok Sabha approve them, arguing that the laws were passed in haste without a meaningful debate in Parliament, as a majority of the Opposition members were under sus-

pension at the time. Expressing concern regarding the validity of the new criminal laws at such a belated stage amounts to nothing more than a statement of missed opportunities. The laws were enacted after a three-year-long consultation process and wide-ranging deliberations with the stakeholders, followed by a thorough examination by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs. Suggestions were also invited from the masses through public notices on two occasions. The government, which is not yielding to any of these demands, seems determined to enforce the laws.

Concerns about the unconstitutionality of the new provisions do not hold water in view of the fact that changes in the BNS are mainly a reflection of the Supreme Court directions in the cases of *Navej Singh Johar vs Union of India* (2018), *Joseph Shine vs Union of India* (2018) and *P Rathinam vs Union of India* (1994) as well as the Centre's undertaking in the apex court in response to a petition challenging the sedition law, besides addressing long-pending national security issues. The objections to modifications in the BNSS and BSA also appear to be misplaced, as the amendments basically inhere digitalisation of the criminal proceedings and incorporate victim- and people-centric



NECESSARY: All wings of the justice delivery system need to identify areas where operational protocols and rules are to be framed urgently. **SPROCK**

provisions, in addition to reorienting the criminal procedures to meet the demand of quality investigations and speedy justice.

Notwithstanding the different opinions of informed stakeholders, implementation of the new statutes won't be easy, as it involves creating a variety of infrastructure, imparting training, laying down rules and operating procedures, revising standard forms and inter-agency coordination to iron out operational issues. At the same time, what inspires confidence that the laws will be rolled out on time is the existence of an experienced and time-tested criminal justice system that has the tenacity to adapt to and adopt any change and find workable

solutions to any problem with limited resources.

Another sign that the new laws would come into force as per the schedule is the fact that the police, prosecutors and the magistracy have undergone massive capacity-building training programmes, which are being sponsored and monitored by the Centre.

However, former law enforcers and adjudicators are sceptical. They argue that many crucial areas pertaining to the successful enforcement of the new laws are yet to be addressed.

There are several mandatory procedures in the BNSS, including videography of all searches, seizures and scenes of crimes and photography of case properties, that

would require the use of electronics and digital technology at the outset. On the other hand, the investigators and adjudicators are yet to be equipped with appropriate gadgets and trained to use them to generate, secure and store the required digital outputs uniformly and in an admissible form.

Additionally, there are many other procedures — such as e-court proceedings and serving of summonses/notices through electronic means — that would need massive digitalisation of the courts, police stations and prisons, standardisation of protocols, recruitment and training of technical and support staff, financial resources and inter-agency coordination. The ground reality is that nothing substantial seems to have been done in this direction so far in most states.

Community service has been included in the list of punishments under the BNS. The eventuality of awarding this sentence to petty offenders may arise even on the very first day of the laws coming into force. However, no identified apparatus is in place to execute it. The agencies are not yet clear on the jurisdiction to give effect to this sentence.

In the absence of essential operational protocols, it would be difficult to enforce some important provisions of the BNS, including those related to witness protection, trial in

absentia, serving summonses/notices through electronic means, seizure of the proceeds from a crime and its distribution to victims, a time-bound disposal of case properties and videography of various stages of an investigation, despite the clear mandate of the law for the states to frame rules instantly.

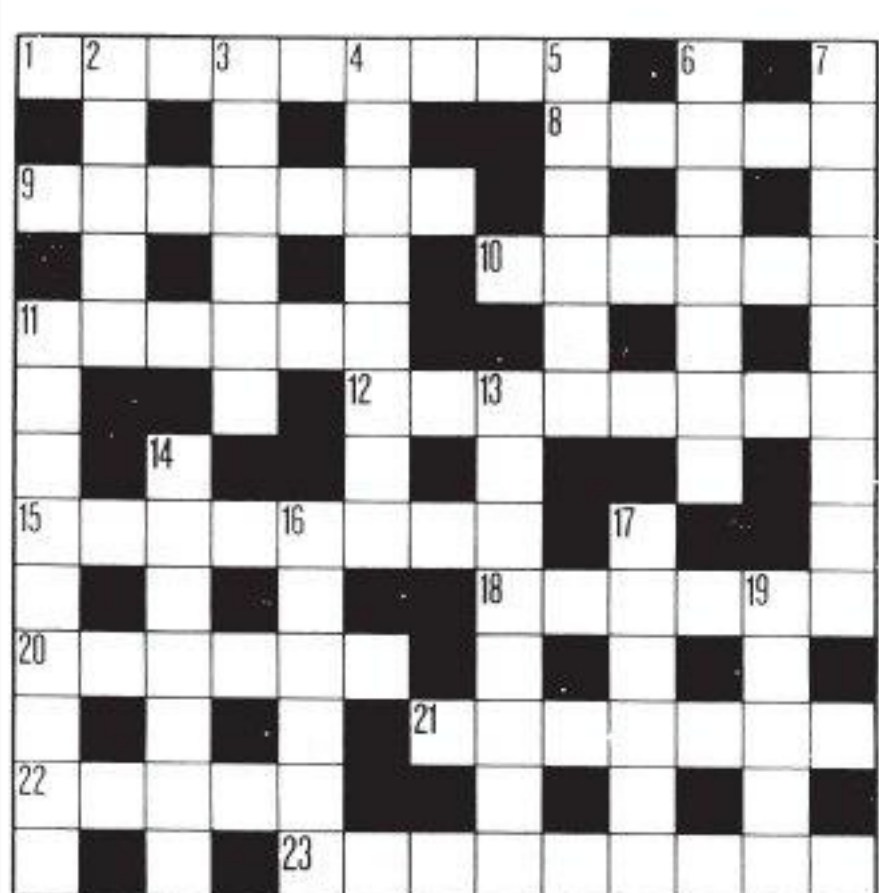
All wings of the justice delivery system need to identify areas where operational protocols and rules are to be framed urgently. Recruitment and training of a large number of technicians, law officers and support staff cannot wait further.

The upgradation and updating of the Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems and other software having an interface with different wings of the justice delivery system and governance have not been completed so far. This cannot be accomplished by the states on their own, as it would require a lot of know-how and coordination with Central agencies.

It is a given that states cannot walk the tricky road of implementing the new laws without the crutches of the Central Government. They would need hand-holding, support and monitoring at every stage. The Central agencies are expected to take the initiative and coordinate with the states, as in ensuring a successful rollout of the laws lies at stake the credibility of the Centre.

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## QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Support one or other party (4,5)
  - Puzzling question (5)
  - Stir up feeling (7)
  - Optical illusion (6)
  - Shrink back in fear (6)
  - Harmless untruth (5,3)
  - Act of disloyalty (8)
  - Counterfeit (6)
  - Every sixty minutes (6)
  - Labour and unnatural (7)
  - Easy to understand (5)
  - Root out (9)
- DOWN**
- Presage (5)
  - Scope (6)
  - Causing obstruction (2,3,3)
  - Dash to the finish (6)
  - Violent physical attack (7)
  - Jealous (5-4)
  - Small snug place (9)
  - Unfortunate (3-5)
  - Faithful (7)
  - Refer (6)
  - Gambol (6)
  - Outcome (5)
- Yesterday's solution**
- Across:** 1 Diploma, 4 Get-up, 7 Ford, 8 Abnormal, 10 Red herring, 12 Pistol, 13 Pliant, 15 Black sheep, 18 Outdated, 19 Rink, 20 Minus, 21 Shatter.
- Down:** 1 Defer, 2 Paradise, 3 Auburn, 4 Groundless, 5 Tome, 6 Pull out, 9 New Orleans, 11 Facelift, 12 Perform, 14 Access, 16 Poker, 17 Stun.

## SU DO KU

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

MEDIUM

## FORECAST

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

**CALENDAR**

JUNE 26, 2024, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Aashadh Shaka 5
- Aashadh Parvishthi 13
- Hijri 1445
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 5, up to 8.56 pm
- Vishkumbha Yoga up to 6.14 am
- Priti Yoga up to 3.20 am
- Dhanishtha Nakshatra up to 1.05 pm
- Moon in Aquarius sign

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	40	30
New Delhi	38	28
Amritsar	44	31
Bathinda	44	28
Jalandhar	43	30
Ludhiana	40	31
Bhiwani	36	29
Hisar	40	29
Sirsa	45	31
Dharamsala	33	24
Manali	27	15
Shimla	26	18
Srinagar	32	17
Jammu	43	29
Kargil	29	15
Leh	24	10
Dehradun	37	27
Mussoorie	25	19