

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Indian students in peril

America must prioritise their safety

THE spike in the deaths of Indian or Indian-origin students in the US this year indicates that the Joe Biden administration is not doing enough to halt the alarming attacks. Earlier this week, Mohammed Abdul Arfath, a 25-year-old student from Hyderabad, was found dead in Cleveland; he had been missing since last month. His family had received a ransom call on March 17. It is unfortunate that the student could not be rescued, even though the Indian consulate had claimed that it was working with local law enforcement agencies to find him. The death of an Indian student, Uma Satya Sai Gadde, was reported in Ohio last week, while a trained classical dancer, Amarnath Ghosh, was shot dead in St Louis, Missouri, in March.

A succession of unnatural deaths in January-February had prompted White House communications officer John Kirby to assert that there was no excuse for violence based on race, gender, religion or any other factor. In a bid to reassure the Indian diaspora, he had said that the Biden administration was working 'very, very hard' to try to thwart the attacks. US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti had said that his government was 'very committed' to making Indians realise that America was a safe and wonderful place to study. However, the situation on the ground seems to be worsening.

The US-based Foundation for India and Indian Diaspora Studies has identified the main causes of these incidents, which include violent crimes, suspicious accidents and mental issues triggering suicide. It has urged the authorities to raise awareness about various risks and provide mental health support. There is speculation that negative propaganda against the community is fuelling hate crime. With Indians accounting for about 25 per cent of the foreign students in the US, it is imperative for America to prioritise their safety and crack down on the hate-mongers. The prevailing laxity can damage America's reputation as a popular destination for Indian students.

Climate change

Courts affirm protection from impact as human right

THE verdict of the European Court of Human Rights in a case filed by older Swiss women who have challenged government inaction on climate change marks a pivotal moment in climate litigation. The landmark order asserts that the protection from climate impact is a fundamental human right, setting a precedent for cases across Europe. It underscores the urgency of addressing the climate crisis. While the ruling's effectiveness hinges on governments' willingness to implement robust climate policies, the importance of public pressure and activism to hold the European governments accountable cannot be overstated.

The European court's assertion resonates globally, especially in the light of a recent judgment by India's Supreme Court. The SC emphasised that climate change directly impacts the right to life. It observed that India should prioritise clean energy initiatives, highlighting citizens' right to be shielded from the detrimental effects of the climate crisis. Legal victories are also reshaping climate policies in the Netherlands and the US.

The rulings showcase the interconnectedness of climate change and human rights. They highlight how environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalised communities and exacerbates inequalities. From indigenous tribes in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to neglected communities facing food and water shortages, the ramifications of climate change are far-reaching. Transitioning to renewable energy emerges as a pivotal solution in mitigating its adverse effects. It not only reduces reliance on fossil fuels, but also promotes social equity by ensuring access to clean and affordable energy for all segments of society. These judgments signal a paradigm shift in climate litigation. This should compel nations to take action to combat climate change and safeguard the rights of the present and future generations.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, APRIL 11, 1924

The theory of inseparability

THERE is one point in the report of the Frontier Enquiry Committee which deserves closer examination than it has received so far. The majority declares that it is not merely inexpedient but impossible to separate the administered districts from the tribal tracts. The minority, on the other hand, suggests a scheme by which some, at any rate, of the objections raised by the majority against separating the districts from the tracts are fully met. They propose that the five districts and the parts of the tribal tracts which are now connected with the five districts should be separated from the remaining tracts and re-amalgamated with Punjab. This is an altogether new scheme neither contemplated by the Government of India nor included in the terms of reference to the committee, but suggested to the members in the course of the inquiry. The majority has nothing very convincing to say against this proposal except that it is 'new' and has 'never occurred to anybody before'. The great advantage of the new scheme is that it recognises the 'inseparability' of the districts and tracts in so far as it is recognised in actual practice and entails the minimum of disturbance in the present arrangements. What the majority urges against this proposal is that it would weaken tribal control by dividing responsibility in the different parts of the tribal area between two governments. If such a separation were effected, it says, it would lead to the adoption of a forward policy.

Affordable air travel a distant dream

Top airlines are thriving, but the needs of cost-sensitive consumers are being put on the back burner

SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST

THE Indian aviation industry has been reviving rapidly after the Covid-19 pandemic, with the number of passengers rising exponentially over the past two years. The two major highlights of this recovery have been the privatisation of Air India and the enormous order for 970 aircraft placed by Indian carriers last year. It has not been a smooth flight path upwards, however, with several obstacles coming in the way. One such has been the recent pilots' crisis hitting Vistara, the joint venture between the Tatas and Singapore Airlines. It has led to flight disruptions, with passengers scrambling to shift to other airlines. To add to air travellers' worries, other carriers like Indigo are also cutting down on flights due to maintenance needs and the slow arrival of new planes. These developments come in the wake of the travails faced by budget airline GoFirst last year. It ultimately filed for insolvency after grounding half its fleet due to problems with Pratt and Whitney engines.

The Indian aviation sector has now virtually become a two-horse race, with Indigo commanding an enormous 60 per cent share and Air India following with 26 per cent. Players like SpiceJet and newly formed Akasa Air are way behind, with the latter's launch muted due to leading promoter Rakesh Jhunjhunwala's demise.

The upheavals in the domestic industry reflect the turmoil in global aviation, with Boeing's top management roiled over safety issues. The company's chief executive had to resign in



MERGER: One can only hope that the long-term goals to retain Vistara as a full-service carrier within the Air India stable. REUTERS

January as a result of the door-plug panel blowout on a 737 Max aircraft of Alaska Airlines. While an inquiry is underway, the company is grappling with continuing concerns over the safety of its aircraft due to earlier 737 Max crashes and some recent incidents. Air India and Akasa have placed orders for as many as 400 planes from the iconic aircraft manufacturer. Boeing's woes are being examined closely as safety is undeniably the highest priority for commercial aircraft, with the lives of hundreds of passengers being at risk on every flight.

The situation is more complex for the Tatas, who are carrying out the colossal task of merging several Air India carriers into a single entity. Vistara, which is currently experiencing turbulence, has also been pulled into the Air India stable, but this may affect its niche status as the preferred carrier for business travellers. It had gained brownie points from the corporate sector by remaining a full-service airlines despite the huge demand for budget flights in the country. Employees are now having to shift to an altered set of wage scales and performance stan-

The financial health of the aviation sector is set to get better despite high prices of turbine fuel impacting profitability.

The strategy has clearly not been a success so far. For the time being, Vistara is cutting back on flights to maintain the sanctity of its schedules, but a more viable long-term policy needs to be evolved if it is to remain a successful niche product.

The structural complexities of merging airlines were witnessed when two state-owned entities, Air India and Indian Airlines, were brought under a single umbrella in 2007. That particular decision did not turn out well. It was carried out under the stew-

ardship of then Civil Aviation Minister Praful Patel, who was blamed for the subsequent creation of an unwieldy behemoth. It combined a healthy, profitable domestic company — Indian Airlines — with a struggling unprofitable international carrier. This led to innumerable difficulties in creating a single efficient and profit-making enterprise.

Comparisons are odious, however, and it would be unfair to consider the Air India-Vistara merger as being similar to the earlier one. The company management is already trying to be responsive to pilots' complaints about roster issues. One can only hope that the long-term goal is to retain Vistara as a full-service carrier within the Air India stable as this would give a wider range of choices to consumers.

As for Indigo, the airline strides the Indian skies like a colossus. This is a worrying development for the civil aviation sector in general and for consumers in particular. The all-pervasive presence of an airline with a commanding market share has ensured that it is slowly moving away from the original concept of a budget airline.

Additional charges are levied for seat selection, while food items on board are priced exorbitantly. Combined with seasonal spikes in air fares, as is happening right now, the extra charges mean it would be difficult to call it a 'budget' airline.

To add to the consumers' woes, media reports abound of disabled passengers being treated shabbily by airlines — though this is not an issue confined to the market leader. It is also unfortunate that despite air fares being left to the discretion of the market forces, the Director General of Civil Aviation is forced to intervene so that passengers are treated in a humane manner. A case in point were the widely circulated photos of passengers having a bite to eat while sitting on the tarmac. The fact that airlines can treat consumers who are travelling by the most expensive mode of transport in this cavalier fashion can be traced directly to the near-monopolistic state of the industry today.

Consumers' concerns come in the backdrop of the improving health of the domestic aviation industry. Air travel has bounced back from the doldrums of the pandemic, with 152 million passengers flying in 2023. This is a 23 per cent rise over the previous year and exceeds the count of 144.2 million passengers in 2019. The financial health of the sector is set to get better despite high prices of aviation turbine fuel impacting profitability. On the other hand, the government's assurance of making air travel affordable for all has yet to become a reality, with the ambitious regional connectivity scheme expanding more slowly than originally anticipated. Similarly, the emergence of a near-monopoly is ensuring that even 'budget' airlines are far beyond the means of the average Indian traveller. The net result is that top airlines are thriving, but the needs of cost-sensitive consumers are being put on the back burner.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Get closer than ever to your customers. So close that you tell them what they need well before they realise it themselves. — Steve Jobs

Making short work of a king cobra

RS DALAL

OUR IPS batch of 1974 was unique in many ways. It was the last one to be trained at the Mount Abu campus of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy and the first to step into the new premises at Shivarampally, Hyderabad.

The new campus was ready, but the local traders' lobby at Mount Abu stood in the way of the academy shifting as it was good for their economic interests. The Director, SM Diaz, however, deftly handled the situation, and after two months of training at Mount Abu, we landed in Hyderabad. And, equally significantly, ours was also the last batch to have emergency commissioned/short service commissioned armed forces' officers selected in the IPS and other all-India Services under a government scheme. There were five of them who were selected in our batch, including MS Malik, who hailed from Haryana.

He was a tall, handsome and energetic young man. Quite early on, I happened to travel with him on a train from Delhi to Nagpur for a short training session at National Civil Defence College. I was curious to know about his Army experiences. He recounted with pride his years in the Army, of leading his men with valour in the 1971 Bangladesh war. He talked of his stint as an instructor at the Army School of Jungle Warfare, too, where, among other subjects, he taught how to handle and defang snakes — and the thought of a slithering serpent evoked aversion in me.

The academy was located more than 20 km from the main town and only a few essential buildings stood on a sprawling campus peppered with rocks and boulders typical of a Deccan plateau. I was allotted a corner room on the ground floor. One day, around 3 am, I got up to use the washroom. As I switched on the light, to my horror, I saw a king cobra curled up around the toilet seat. Terrified, I quickly closed the door. Malik's snake stories flashed in my mind. I rushed upstairs to his room and banged on his door. He sleepily opened it. 'Come on! It's a real test of your skills. There is a snake in my room,' I blurted out in a torrent of excitement and fear. In his vest and shorts, he accompanied me to my room. When he opened the washroom door, the snake was still there and it angrily lifted its hood with a hiss.

'Go and get a stick,' he told me. I went out and searched for a stick but could not find one. Eventually, I broke a stout withy off a tree and showed it to him. Though he looked at the withy disapprovingly, he went inside the washroom and made short work of the snake. And then, he coolly laid the dead snake on the porch in a public display of his trophy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Prioritise relief efforts

Apropos of the editorial 'Disaster relief delay'; India is a country that faces calamities like landslides, floods, cloudbursts, cyclones and droughts every year. Such disasters wreak havoc on entire communities, claiming lives and destroying property. Tamil Nadu is right to ask the apex court to direct the Centre to pay Rs 37,902 crore for the damage caused by Cyclone Michaung and another Rs 2,000 crore as an interim measure for relief operations. Political wrangling and red tape must not come in the way of relief work. The priority of the government should be providing aid to the people in distress. The wellbeing and welfare of the citizens are what really matter.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

Frequent defections in politics

It is intriguing that Birender Singh and his wife, Prem Lata, have quit the BJP and rejoined the Congress. This comes just a month after their son, Brijendra Singh, joined the grand old party. Birender had served as a minister in PM Narendra Modi's cabinet; his son got elected as the Haryana MP on the BJP ticket; and his wife was an MLA. It is clear that Birender was still not content and deserted the BJP for the Congress in search of greener pastures. Politicians are focused on gaining power, and that attitude is to blame for frequent defections. This only puts off voters.

RAMESH GUPTA, NARWARA

Kejriwal must mend his ways

Apropos of the news report 'Enough material: Delhi HC rejects Kejriwal's plea against arrest by ED'; the Delhi High Court has rightly rejected the AAP national convener's petition challenging his arrest by the probe agency. The court also dismissed his allegation of political vendetta on the eve of the Lok Sabha elections. The HC's rebuke of Kejriwal for 'casting aspersions' on the judicial process with his claim about an approver in a money laundering case making donations to the BJP via electoral bonds is welcome. The CM must shun the use of such tactics.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

A victim of political vendetta

The Delhi HC's rejection of Arvind Kejriwal's plea challenging his arrest in the graft case is disappointing. It not only undermines the principle of justice but also raises concerns about the impartiality of our legal system. Kejriwal's arrest, just ahead of the General Election, reeks of political vendetta and is not a genuine pursuit of justice. The Supreme Court must intervene to ensure that our leaders, regardless of their political affiliations, are treated fairly. The allegations of 'tax terrorism' and politically motivated investigations further highlight the urgent need for accountability and transparency in governance.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Systemic failure to rein in crimes

Refer to the article 'Systemic changes a must to curb fake encounters'; the problem of fake encounters is assuming alarming proportions in India. Often, the cops who carry out fake encounters, generally under pressure from those in power, are treated as heroes. Politicians perceived as having a hand in such encounters also reap electoral dividends. Besides, the officials involved in fake encounters are seldom brought to book. There is no excuse for breaking the law, not even when it is broken to take out anti-social elements. Such cases are an outcome of the systemic failure of the law enforcement agencies to tackle crimes and the inability of the judicial system to deliver justice in time.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

Glorifying extrajudicial killings

With reference to 'Systemic changes a must to curb fake encounters'; the pop culture and movies are to blame for romanticising extrajudicial killings. Influenced by cinema, many citizens have started celebrating such encounters, which are now common in states like Uttar Pradesh. The due process of law is a long and exhausting one, and it involves a lot of effort on the part of the police to have a culprit convicted. The idea of the state spending so much money on the confinement of criminals does not sit well with many well-meaning people. And that is what prompts the authorities and police officials to take the law into their own hands.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

The enduring enigma of India-Russia relations



ABHIJIT BHATTACHARYYA
AUTHOR AND COLUMNIST

DURING his recent trip to New Delhi, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, whose country has been at war with Russia for over two years, urged India “not to rely on Russia” and “reconsider” its traditionally close relationship with Moscow. Kuleba told Delhi that “cooperation between India and Russia is largely based on the Soviet legacy” and “it’s not a legacy that can be kept for centuries... the legacy is evaporating”.

Kuleba was a guest from a country that regards India as a friend and a potential mediator in the Russia-Ukraine war. Not surprisingly, India adhered to the official convention, norms and protocol like a graceful host rather than embarrassing him with a harsh retort. Nevertheless, a counter-narrative about the guest’s sermon definitely wouldn’t be unwarranted in order to put things in a broader and

proper perspective.

Kuleba knows very well that Russia and Ukraine are friendly to India, which stands neutral as a third party in their conflict. For more than three decades, Ukraine has been India’s trusted and dependable partner, just as Russia has been Delhi’s reliable ally since Independence.

Both Ukraine and Russia were part of the erstwhile USSR for decades. Ukraine simply cannot distance itself from the historical achievements of the USSR, which stole a march on the US in the space race and gave the West a run for its money in the Olympics.

Let’s try to unravel the ‘mystery’ of the enduring Russia-India bonhomie, attributed by Ukraine to the ‘Soviet legacy’. Newly Independent India was not taken seriously by the British, going by the remarks of a known Delhi-baiter, then Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Then PM Nehru visited London in 1953 to attend the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. However, among the British PMs who were Nehru’s contemporaries, Churchill, Anthony Eden and Alec Douglas Home did not bother to travel to India.

Then US President Harry Truman, however, warmly



OFF THE MARK: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba. It is unreasonable of Kyiv to expect New Delhi to reduce its dependence on Moscow. PTI

hosted Nehru during a state visit in October 1949, even though Washington regarded India as a poor Third World nation.

In contrast to the British cold shoulder, Nehru paid a state visit to the USSR in June 1955. The gesture was warmly reciprocated by Moscow’s topmost leaders Nikolai Bulganin (Prime Minister) and Nikita Khrushchev (First Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR) with a three-week-long visit in

India cannot afford to take sides in the east European war. Mutual goodwill will help ensure its food and energy security.

November-December 1955, covering the length and breadth of India. Indians turned out in millions to greet the Russian leaders, with the people of Calcutta in particular showering love and respect on the visiting duo. The USSR, despite being a communist state that was poles apart from the Indian political establishment, played a pivotal role in strengthening bilateral ties even during tough times faced by India, such as the 1962 Chi-

nese invasion. The Soviet Union consistently used its veto power in the UN Security Council to bail out India whenever the West had ideas inimical to Delhi’s sovereignty. These are undeniable facts, and there is nothing to suggest that Moscow, despite the ongoing global turbulence, has deviated from this path.

All this, however, has not been related to suggest that the Moscow-Delhi relationship has always been picture-perfect. There have been tensions at times, but what has triumphed in the end is the mutual appreciation guided by maturity and profound diplomatic wisdom, often conspicuous by their absence from India’s engagement with some other major powers.

The year 1971 was the apogee of the Moscow-Delhi ties, making it the ‘finest hour’ for then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In one stroke, the West, China and Pakistan were humbled by the strength and sincerity of the Indo-Soviet relationship. Months before the creation of Bangladesh, India and the USSR signed the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. The pact was guided by the desire to expand and consolidate the “existing relations of sincere friendship” between the two nations.

Indeed, the journey, which began in the 1950s, continues today owing to an understanding of each other’s point of view and appreciation of each other’s national interests. When the West shut its door for arms on India, Russia gave it the latest and the best which it was using itself, with no strings attached.

Ukraine’s contribution in this regard cannot be ignored. The Indian Air Force’s transport aircraft Antonov An-12 and An-32 are Kyiv-manufactured. The Indian Navy’s Kashin-class destroyers were built at the Nikolayev shipyard near Mykolayiv (Ukraine). And even today, Russian contribution to the Navy and other sectors continues. There exists multi-faceted Russia-India connectivity, but that doesn’t take away the fact that Ukraine, too, is India’s friend. Hence, to suggest that India should choose between Ukraine and Russia because “you have to take sides” is absurd and not feasible. India will always give priority to its national interests, which override all other considerations. New Delhi cannot afford to take sides in the east European war. Only mutual goodwill and an uninterrupted flow of essential commodities will help ensure India’s food and energy security.

Balance rights of accused with gravity of charges while granting bail



RANBIR SINGH
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IN the realm of the criminal justice system, bail serves more than just a procedural function. It is a shield that protects the personal freedom of an accused against legal proceedings. This idea, deeply intertwined with the pursuit of equitable justice, resonates profoundly with the essence of Article 21 of the Constitution, which upholds the right to life and personal liberty as sacrosanct, only to be curtailed by a procedure prescribed by law. Bail ensures that people are not unfairly kept in jail before their trial, balancing the need for justice with the individual’s rights. Detention before trial can have profound negative effects on individuals. Bail helps mitigate those potential injustices.

The law governing the grant of bail in India categorises offences as bailable and non-bailable, guiding the exercise of judicial discretion and the conditions under which bail may be granted. For bailable offences, the accused is entitled to bail by right under Section 436 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), provided he complies with the set bail conditions. In non-bailable offences, bail is not a right but

is subject to judicial discretion. The CrPC also allows for specific conditions to be imposed when granting bail to ensure that the accused complies with the legal requirements and to safeguard the judicial process.

Over time, the Indian judiciary has established specific norms that shape how judges use their discretion when granting bail. Judges deciding on bail for non-bailable offences must consider several factors, including the gravity of the offence, the nature of the evidence and the potential risk of the accused tampering with evidence or fleeing. Such judicial discretion in granting bail requires a balance between the rights of the accused and the nature of the charges. Although a detailed examination of evidence is not necessary at the bail stage, the judge must provide reasons, particularly when dealing with serious crimes, to justify the grant of bail. This rationale is crucial to ensuring that the decision is based on thoughtful consideration rather than a superficial assessment. Further, denying bail should not serve as a punitive measure before a conviction, respecting the principle of the presumption of innocence. In *Sanjay Chandra v CBI* (2012), the Supreme Court held that the object of bail is neither punitive nor preventative; it is merely to secure the appearance of the accused at the trial by a reasonable amount of bail. Additionally, the denial of bail can significantly impact the right of the accused to a fair trial, especially in terms of preparing a defence with legal



CONTRAST: Judgments by the Supreme Court in various cases reflect its oscillation between restrictive and liberal interpretations of bail conditions. PTI

counsel in a restricted environment. Ultimately, judicial rulings have consistently emphasised that bail-related decisions are based on the specific merits of each case, underscoring that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to granting bail.

There was a time when the Supreme Court adopted a liberal approach of ‘bail, not jail’, and weighed in favour of the presumption of innocence while balancing the need to protect society by incarcerating the accused. However, over decades, the judicial approach to bail in India has seen a marked evolution, illustrated by contrasting judgments in notable cases. *Pappu Yadav v CBI* (2007), involving a high-profile political figure accused of murder, saw the apex court prioritise societal interest over individual liberty, emphasising serious allegations over prolonged detention without con-

Bail helps make sure that the law does not punish someone before it is proven that they have committed the offence.

viction. This stance somewhat contradicted the presumption of innocence, leaning towards pre-trial detention as a quasi-punitive measure, despite the lack of direct proof of influencing of witnesses or tampering with evidence by the accused. Conversely, the 2G scam case — *Sanjay Chandra v CBI* (2012) — marked a return to the principle of ‘bail, not jail’, with the SC overturning the Delhi High Court’s decision that had underscored the gravity of economic offences as a basis for bail denial. These cases reflect the Supreme Court’s oscillation between restrictive and liberal bail interpretations.

In cases of economic offences covered by special statutes, the judiciary has developed distinct standards for granting bail, recognising the unique and prolonged impact of such crimes compared to general offences. Economic offences,

exemplified by cases like money laundering, are considered continuing offences because their commission or consequences stretch over a long period of time. The SC, in *State of Bihar vs Deokaran Nenshi* (1973), elaborated on this concept, highlighting the challenge in determining the end of such crimes. The complexity arises because the proceeds from the crime can be used indefinitely, making it difficult to ascertain when the criminal act concludes. Again, in *YS Jagan Mohan Reddy vs CBI* (2013), the top court reiterated that economic offences are treated as a separate class of crime because of their broad impact on society and the nation’s economic stability.

Another critical aspect of bail considerations for such offences are the ‘twin conditions’ for bail, especially under statutes like the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002. These conditions require the public prosecutor to have the opportunity to oppose bail and, if opposed, necessitate the court to be satisfied with reasonable grounds that the accused is not guilty and won’t commit further offences while on bail. This approach signifies a higher threshold for bail in economic offences, ensuring a rigorous examination of the accused person’s potential guilt and the risk of ongoing criminal activity. Additionally, the bail procedures in such cases are enshrined in various special laws, including the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, and the

Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, among others. These laws impose additional obligations on courts, stressing the grave nature of economic crimes and their significant societal and economic repercussions. The judiciary’s stringent standards for bail in the case of an economic offence reflect a focused concern on protecting the democratic structure and the national economy from the detrimental effects of such crimes.

The judicial approach to bail in India has evolved significantly, underscored by a fundamental shift from a liberal ‘bail, not jail’ philosophy towards a more nuanced consideration of societal interests and the gravity of crimes. However, the application of particularly strict standards in the context of economic offences raises concerns. The possibility that stringent bail conditions could be counterproductive, potentially infringing on personal liberties without serving the intended protective role for society, cannot be overlooked. The introduction of ‘twin conditions’ for bail in statutes like the PMLA underlines a dedicated effort to mitigate the detrimental effects of such offences. Yet, the challenge remains to strike a balance that neither compromises the fundamental right to personal liberty nor ignores the significant risks posed by economic crimes to societal wellbeing. This balance is essential not only for upholding the ideals of justice and liberty but also for maintaining public confidence in the judicial process.

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- Without foundation (10)
- Fast (5)
- Expression of admiration (7)
- Credulity (7)
- Possessor (5)
- Equal (2,1,3)
- Dismount (3,2,5)
- Detest (5)
- Moroccan seaport (7)
- A stringed instrument (5)
- Region behind coast (10)

DOWN

- Exact copy (7)
- Excessive (5)
- Be indecisive (6)
- Embodiment (7)
- Treat with contempt (5)
- Dry land (5,5)
- Find after long search (3,2,5)
- Indict before tribunal (7)
- Obsolete (7)
- Headlong attack (6)
- Intuitive feeling (5)
- Flatten (5)

YESTERDAY’S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Scampi, 4 Humbug, 9 Come out, 10 Asset, 11 Lodge, 12 In store, 13 Every second, 18 Through, 20 Elver, 22 Aloud, 23 Nonplus, 24 Extort, 25 Speedy.

Down: 1 Sickle, 2 Armed, 3 Pioneer, 5 Urals, 6 Bassoon, 7 Gather, 8 At first hand, 14 Vermont, 15 Clean up, 16 Strafe, 17 Trusty, 19 Under, 21 Value.

SU DO KU

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

YESTERDAY’S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

APRIL 11, 2024, THURSDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Chaitra Shaka 22
- Chaitra Parvishite 29
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 3, up to 3.04 pm
- Priti Yoga up to 7.19 am
- Ayushman Yoga up to 4.29 am
- Kritika Nakshatra up to 1.38 am
- Moon enters Taurus sign 8.40 am

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	36	19
New Delhi	39	19
Amritsar	35	18
Bathinda	36	19
Jalandhar	35	19
Ludhiana	35	18
Bhiani	35	21
Hisar	38	19
Sirsa	39	21
Dharamsala	25	15
Manali	21	07
Shimla	22	11
Srinagar	18	08
Jammu	33	18
Kargil	16	02
Leh	12	-01
Dehradun	35	18
Mussoorie	22	13

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Scaling new highs

Market valuations reflect optimism

India's stock market indices have continued to advance, hitting new records. The National Stock Exchange (NSE) benchmark, Nifty 50, which has risen four per cent this calendar year, has hit new highs this week, while the BSE Sensex has touched the 75,000 mark for the first time. The market indicators are all reading green and there is little sign of nervousness at this point. The volatility index (VIX), which reflects spreads in Nifty option premiums and is considered a reliable sign of trading sentiment, is at its lowest level so far in 2024 — a sign that the market is calm and big price moves are not expected. Good daily trading volumes indicate strong participation, and stocks across multiple industries are trending higher. Retail flows into equity mutual funds continue to be strong — so strong, in fact, that some fund managers have restricted lumpsum inflows, and the regulator has issued advisories about “frothy” valuations in smaller stocks.

Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have been net buyers of equity in 2024, and they have also bought significant quantities of rupee debt. Domestic institutions (other than mutual funds) are also net-positive on equity. The Nifty's price-to-earnings (PE) ratio, at 23, is on the higher side when compared with historical valuations, but well below the peak of over 30. The valuation is expected to come down as corporate results for the January-March quarter of 2023-24 are released and financials are updated to reflect new earnings data. The consensus estimates for the March quarter and full-year earnings are good. Management commentary and business updates are optimistic for the most part. Most high-frequency indicators also have positive values. Vehicle sales have been strong in 2023-24, railway and port freight traffic has grown, and power consumption has been high. Banks have seen a steep rise in credit demand. Taken together, all these fuel optimism for a sustained growth recovery.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has also made encouraging statements. It expects the retail inflation rate to average 4.5 per cent in 2024-25 and growth to remain robust. However, the financial market may have to wait for rate cuts, which will come only after the RBI has met the inflation target on a durable basis. There are some danger signs as well. Mutual fund investors (mostly corporate treasuries) have pulled money out of the debt market. On balance, fewer shares have gained ground in March and April than those that have declined. A poor advance-to-decline ratio is often a sign of bull market peak. Geopolitical stresses have also triggered a rise in oil and gas prices, which is always a red flag for the Indian economy, given the country's high import dependence.

There could also be some nervousness due to the upcoming general elections, whose results will probably be the next trigger for marketwide trends. Most of the investment community expects the Bharatiya Janata Party-led central government to return for a third term. If that happens, the market might be set for another big uptrend. A different result might conversely lead to a significant correction. The immediate trigger for the market would be the March-quarter results, which will soon start coming. Given the level of investor optimism, as reflected in the valuations, there might be little scope for corporate underperformance in the near term.

Cyber risk to stability

Financial regulators need to be vigilant

Financial stability risks can emanate from a variety of sources. The state of macroeconomic policies, the health of the banking and financial system, financial sector regulations, or a shock like a pandemic could disturb financial stability. Sudden policy changes in systemically important countries, such as a significant increase in policy interest rates by the US Federal Reserve, could also pose risks, as was observed during the recent monetary policy tightening. But most of these risks are well understood by policymakers and efforts are made to minimise them. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) this week released an analytical chapter from its forthcoming Global Financial Stability report, highlighting the cyber risk to macrofinancial stability. Since this is a relatively new source of risk and falls outside the traditional framework of managing financial risks, governments and financial market regulators need to understand it better.

As the IMF highlighted, cyber-related risks have increased significantly since 2020. This can perhaps be explained by the increased adoption of digital means by both individuals and businesses. Financial institutions in advanced economies, particularly the US, have been more exposed to cyber incidents. JP Morgan Chase, the largest bank in the US, recently reported “45 billion cyber events per day” and is spending about \$15 billion per year on technology. There could be various reasons for cyberattacks on a country's financial institutions, including geopolitical tensions. Although direct financial losses due to cyberattacks have been limited thus far, there are various ways in which they could render the system vulnerable.

Such attacks on banks can disrupt payments and affect economic activity. They could also lead to sudden withdrawals, as depositors may begin to doubt a bank's ability to meet payment demands, potentially triggering a run on banks. Besides banks, disturbances in financial market infrastructure providers, such as stock exchanges, could have a variety of consequences and lead to loss of investor confidence. The study notes that the use of common software and hardware by financial entities could also be a source of risk. More than 50 per cent of information technology service providers to systemically important banks globally are reported to be servicing two or more systemically important institutions. In addition, the very high level of interconnectedness among financial institutions across the globe also increases risks.

Given that the risk has increased in recent years, it is unlikely to be contained in the near term. While banks and financial institutions are aware of such risks, their perception and estimates may be limited to the potential risk to the institution alone. It is thus important for financial market regulators to push institutions to become cyber-safe. In this context, a survey of central banks and supervisory authorities of 74 emerging market and developing economies by the IMF in 2021 revealed that only 47 per cent had a national and financial sector-focused cybersecurity strategy. The Reserve Bank of India issued comprehensive directions to regulated entities in this context in November 2023. Nonetheless, since the level and nature of cyber risks are likely to continue evolving, both financial entities and regulators need to remain vigilant. International cooperation will also be critical in this regard as it will help regulators and financial authorities better understand the risks and develop safety nets.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

There is another way

Strong, decisive rule is not the only way to effectiveness. Our experience since 1991 shows diffused economic and political power can deliver the goods even better

R Jagannathan's thought-provoking article in these pages (“Democracy, autocracy, or both?”, *Business Standard*, April 3, 2024) has raised some very important issues. He is surely right in saying that countries as a whole are difficult to compare, as no country is like another across all elements. But he then goes on to directly assert that autocracies are more effective at getting things done: “A country that wants quick, radical change will tend to be less democratic because big change needs more concentration of power.”

There is another way. As many have pointed out (see Martin Wolf's piece last week in the *Financial Times*), there is no correlation between autocracy and performance. For every Lee Kuan Yew (who brilliantly developed modern Singapore) there are multiple Maos, Stalins, Pol Pots, and Chavezes who were walking, talking disasters for their countries. Democracies may often stumble, but the option of voting incompetence out can drive improved performance like nothing else.

It depends, too, on what change one is driving. Large infrastructure projects can benefit from top-down drive. But our single largest economic challenge is employment; we need to create millions of good-quality jobs each year. In our private-sector-driven economy, many things must line up. Since 1991, broadly sensible economic policy across governments has kept growth reasonably strong. But that isn't enough to annually add millions of good-quality jobs. The state must remove obstacles to employing more labour (our long-pending labour reforms) and ensure market access through free-trade agreements for labour-intensive goods like garments and footwear. But even that isn't enough. The key missing element is a mindset among Indian entrepreneurs that labour-intensive manufacturing is good business. What else explains why a large garment plant in India employs 3,000 to 5,000 people, but one

across the border in Bangladesh employs 30,000 to 50,000. Changing mindsets involves persuading, modelling, encouraging, incentivising, and doing so consistently over many years; it cannot be ordered to happen. As dozens of entrepreneurs move in the right direction, hundreds and then thousands more will follow them. How do we make that happen?

Let us learn from our own experience since 1991. The key element was the retreat of the state. We scrapped rules restricting what industry could be started, where it could be started, how much could be produced, what price it could be sold at, what could be imported, for how much it could be imported, what technology could be licensed from whom and by whom, and how much could be paid for it. All this, decided by bureaucrats with no domain knowledge, held India back for 30 years. It is the removal of these controls that has seen India be one of the world's 10 best-performing economies for 30 years, with every projection saying we will continue to be so for the next 30 too.

The removal of controls unleashed Indian entrepreneurship. Over the years I've done a simple exercise of comparing the *Business India* list of India's top 100 firms. What is striking is how the 10 years to 1991 saw a largely similar list. Ten years after 1991, new entrants made up half the list. Whole new sectors such as pharmaceuticals, information technology services, hotels and branded fast-moving consumer goods products came in, while commodity producers retreated. Since around 2000, the churn has reduced, and some older commodity groups have even returned to prominence. The entry of new entrepreneurs slowed down in the 2000s, which has persisted to this day. The Indian market seemed to become less welcoming to entrepreneurship at precisely the time it was growing fastest. Why?



INDIA'S WORLD?

NAUSHAD FORBES

Judicial activism in the air

As temperatures in the National Capital Region soared to 38 degrees centigrade, an early warning of the summer to come, two landmark judicial verdicts offer new perspectives on climate change.

In India, the Supreme Court uploaded the detailed judgment of a dictated order of March 21 that delineated for the first time the right to be free from the adverse effect of climate change as a distinct right. Articles 14 (equality before the law and equal protection of laws) and 21 (right to life and personal liberty), a three-judge Bench headed by the Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud said, are important sources of this right.

Over 6,000 km away in picturesque Strasbourg, the European Court of Human Rights passed a ruling on a petition filed by a group of over 2,000 Swiss women, all senior citizens, that appears to have set a global precedent linking the impact of climate change to human rights. The court ruled that the Swiss government had violated the human rights of its citizens by failing to do enough to combat climate change. This first ever climate action ruling is non-appealable.

The two rulings appear to have a commonality but the similarity is superficial. The Supreme Court's verdict addresses a commercial dimension. The case concerns the rights of solar power developers to install overhead transmission lines versus the preservation of the Great Indian Bustard in Rajasthan and Gujarat. The latest verdict, which underlines the citizens' right to clean power rather than polluting fossil fuel, overturns a 2021 Supreme Court verdict that mandated that all overhead high- and low-voltage power lines be taken underground so that the dwindling population of GIBs in the area did not fly into them.

On appeal by the government, the Supreme Court appointed an expert committee to decide. The real story is that moving cables underground would have

raised solar developers' costs significantly. Last year, this expert committee issued tech specs for bird diverters or LED-based warning discs to be installed by developers in GIB habitats. Though this is considered a lower-cost solution, there are problems in getting clearances for installations and a paucity of competent vendors for these gadgets. In November last year, the ministry of new and renewable energy filed an application stating that the compulsory undergrounding of solar power lines would impact India's carbon footprint.

This is a persuasive argument but what about the GIB, a protected species? It may be argued that with just 200 left in the wild, preserving them isn't worth the effort. Imagine if this argument had been deployed about the tiger population of less than 2,000 before Project Tiger. Set against the larger question of global warming, the extinction of any species upsets the environment's intricate balance with unforeseen deleterious consequences. Witness the rise in malaria, chikungunya and dengue-causing mosquito populations as the lizard and bird populations, which feed on them, decline. That forces us to spray (and inhale) more harmful chemical repellents, adding to the global warming budget.

No environmental solution can be perfect, but governments can balance the risks. We take pride in Project Tiger's achievements but overlook the displacement of populations that it entailed. Some parks, such as Kanha and Corbett, found solutions in training local land losers as guides and trackers. The solar power developers' dilemma could have attracted a different solution, with the government sharing expenses and fulfilling both public-interest objectives — clean energy and conservation.

How far will the Supreme Court's latest judgment, which locates a development issue with the framework of constitutional values, enhance citizens' access



SWOT

KANIKA DATTA

The paradoxical freedom of living by the clock



BOOK REVIEW

SANJAY KUMAR SINGH

Aditya, an 18-year-old from Delhi, has completed Class XII and is now preparing for the law entrance exam in December. Recently, feeling bored at 10 pm, he decided to watch a movie on Netflix. The movie ended at 12.30 am. When Aditya went to bed, he felt restless. At around 1 am, he started pacing the balcony of his flat. It was almost 2.15 am by the time he could sleep.

The next morning, when his mother woke him up at 8 am, he felt tired and groggy. He dozed off for another 45 min-

utes on the toilet seat. By the time he had bathed it was 10.30 am. Breakfast took another half an hour. Once at his desk, he started browsing through X and then could not resist catching up on the latest updates on Instagram. Then he chatted with a friend over WhatsApp. When he glanced at the wall clock, it was almost 1 pm. Half the day had slipped by with nothing accomplished. With a twinge of guilt, he turned to his books, consoling himself with the thought: “Well, tomorrow is another day.”

This account, while fictional, mirrors the daily routines of countless individuals across age groups. People start their day without an agenda and then coast along, swayed this way and that by whatever catches their fancy in the moment. They are easy prey to the umpteen distractions that inevitably come along in this age of hyperconnectivity and social media.

Anyone who feels they lack a firm

grip on their day should read Marc Zao-Sanders' *Timeboxing* and adopt its tenets. Mr Sanders is the chief executive officer and co-founder of filtered.com, a learning tech company.

A good life, he says, is the outcome of thoughtful choices. The trouble is that a lot of people are making very poor choices today. *Timeboxing*, he believes, can help them get their act together.

This time-management tool has two critical components. The first is the to-do list, where one jots down the important and urgent items to be accomplished during the day. The second is the calendar (which can be physical or digital, though the latter, like the Google calendar, is recommended). In the calendar, you create a timebox by naming a task and then assigning a start and a finish time to it. Repeat this for all the key tasks of the day. The author recommends starting with a few timeboxes and gradually

moving on to timeboxing a substantial part of the day as you become more proficient at this exercise.

This ritual of timeboxing should ideally be conducted late in the evening or early in the morning. The key is to carry it out when you are in a tranquil state and have not yet got caught in the day's rush.

Next comes the implementation. In each time slot, work exclusively on the task assigned to that hour. Put away the mobile phone, turn off the notifications on your laptop, and immerse yourself completely in the assignment.

Do not second-guess during the day. Unless something truly urgent comes

up, stick to the choices (of things to do) made originally, when you were calm and best placed to decide on the most productive use of each hour.

Why timebox? Most knowledge workers feel overburdened. Like The Joker in the Batman movies, we have all, at one point or the other, muttered to ourselves: “So much to do, so little time.” When the cumulative burden of all the tasks weighs on our mind, we feel

fatigued and overwhelmed. Assigning one task to a specific time slot eases the load. Saying yes to one thing and no to a thousand others is, according to Mr Sanders, immensely liberating. More than just a productivity hack, timeboxing, according

to climate justice? The decision builds on a body of jurisprudence from the 1980s, including famously *M C Mehta versus Union of India* that treated the right to live in a pollution-free environment as an Article 21 fundamental right. Yet India consistently enjoys primacy in annual rankings of the world's most polluted cities. The judgment also raises questions about how governments will address deaths caused by rising heatwaves and Glacial Lake Outburst Floods, the most potent sign of global warming.

Melting glaciers have been the proximate cause of the case at the human rights court brought by a women's group that said the Swiss government had failed to do enough to cut greenhouse gas emissions. The Swiss government has pledged to cut emissions by 50 per cent from 1990 levels by 2030 but stronger measures had been rejected by a referendum as too burdensome. The suit was the result of a “climate lockdown” last year owing to a heat wave that kept many elderly women house-bound for weeks.

The practical impact of this verdict is unclear — some commentators suggest that litigation in national courts plus financial penalties could follow. The suit is also seen as a precursor to others — in Australia, Brazil, Peru and South Korea. One lawsuit in Norway on oil and gas exploration rights in the Barents Sea is underway.

Interestingly, the Strasbourg court rejected a case brought by six Portuguese youngsters against 32 European governments on grounds that a state's greenhouse gas emissions might impact people beyond its borders but that did not justify prosecuting a case across multiple jurisdictions, *Reuters* reported. The court may be right on a point of order but it's the youngsters who have understood the issue better. Climate-change action cannot be solely a national concern; it demands global cooperation and action, not tit-for-tat unenforceable national commitments that let the world's historical polluters off the hook and impose costs on the poorest. As these judgments highlight, it's the young, the elderly, women and the voiceless, voteless animal kingdom that pay the highest price for climate-change inaction.

to him, promotes mental well-being.

Timeboxing also enables practitioners to live more mindfully. Time is an intangible resource that flows unseen. Many, especially in their youth, are not keenly conscious of it and squander it recklessly. By breaking up the day into several boxes, giving a name and assigning a task to the hours, we make it a more tangible presence in our lives. We can then go about optimising its potential.

Mr Sanders has written this book in a simple and accessible style. The chapters are concise and easy to breeze through. But the book's message is potent and ought to be embraced by all who aim to harness this most finite and non-renewable of resources.

Motivational guru Stephen Covey once said one must heed not just the clock but also the compass. Travelling faster is futile if the end of the journey reveals you have been travelling in the wrong direction. So, define your life's goal and purpose — its true north — and then employ timeboxing to live each day with greater intent and purpose.

Bulls on Parade On Dalal St

FPI holdings share is declining, but is still a spur

Two psychological barriers were breached on the bourses this week with India's market capitalisation reaching ₹400 lakh crore, followed in quick succession by the benchmark Sensex cresting 75,000. It's a double whammy worth a doubly good cheer. The three immediate takeaways from the twin peaks are the speed of the rally, its breadth and the investors driving it. It has taken less than a year to add ₹100 lakh crore to market value, with domestic investors pushing small- and mid-caps to a territory the regulators have described as 'frothy'. The twin records were broken in the middle of an uninterrupted rise this month in the small cap indices as foreign portfolio investors turned net sellers in the cash market so far in April.

The caution by FPIs, which pumped ₹2.08 lakh crore into Indian equities in FY24, may not be keeping up with the bullishness of Indian investors. However, this is expected to be robust during the current financial year as well. The share of FPI holdings in Indian equities is declining steadily, but still acts as a spur to market movements. In that sense, the milestones achieved this week appear sustainable when FPIs resume buying. There is little evidence either to indicate domestic mutual fund flows will lose their momentum.

It has taken the Sensex under four months to add 5,000 points, or around 4%, which is slower than the average rate for the trailing 12 months. Some amount of profit-taking is underway. Over a broader time horizon, though, Sensex has converted ₹549.43 held on April 1, 1986, into ₹75,000 on April 9, 2024. That is no mean feat. This is testimony to India's turnaround from an economic crawl to a canter. As milestones, such as adding 10,000 points to Sensex, speed up — partly due to the power of compounding — Indian households are converting their savings habit from debt to equity. These are the new bulls on Dalal Street.

Changing Climate On Climate Action

The European Court of Human Rights' (ECtHR) ruling on Tuesday in the case brought by Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz, a Swiss association of women senior citizens, breaks new ground by linking climate change to infringement of human rights, to the obligation of states to protect fundamental rights. The verdict makes it the state's duty to act to limit climate change. It also makes it clear that while all of society must participate in efforts to limit climate change, the buck stops at the state's door.

Swiss senior citizens, who, given their age, are particularly affected by impacts of climate change in terms of health and living conditions, had sued the Swiss state for not doing enough to combat global warming. Ostensibly a 'first world' suit, the door now opens for wider consideration of impacts and actions to arrest climate change beyond Switzerland and, indeed, Europe. Initially binding on Switzerland, the ruling will impact 40-odd jurisdictions that are signatories to European Convention on Human Rights, including all EU member-states, Britain, Norway, Türkiye and some Central Asian states.

Climate cases have been on the rise globally, from 884 to 2,180 in 2022. But it's with the ECtHR ruling that the burden of proof has shifted — states have to justify that their policies are sufficient. India's Supreme Court's latest ruling in the Great Indian Bustard case is in a similar vein. By stressing that limiting climate change is central to protecting fundamental rights to life and equality, courts are creating legal accountability for states. The ruling is likely to create fresh impetus for climate action at a time when competing demands like cost of living, job creation and geopolitical fragmentation have led countries to soft pedal on climate commitments.

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JUST IN JEST

There doesn't seem to be any logic in keeping markets shut on a voting day

Why Make Democracy Bad for the Bourses?

The markets are full rock 'n' roll. Huzzah to that. One would have thought that in this buzzing bazaar, business would be open 24x7, 365 days a year, 366 in leaping ones that bring with them full faith. But money-making is still put on pause for reasons hard to understand. This week, NSE declared May 20, a perfectly monetisable Monday, as a trading holiday in Mumbai 'on account of parliamentary elections' in India's commercial capital. As circulars go, it goes quite counter to what the PM had said a couple of months ago when he told legislators that elections should not put matters of governance on hold. What's sauce for governance should also be sauce for business — in this case, business at the bourses.

Apart from the fact that trading will be shut today on account of Eid, on April 17 because of Ram Navami, and on May 1 for Maharashtra Day, having a shut shop because of elections makes for confusing optics. Pitched as a 'festival of democracy', turning one knob off in the citizenry's many functions — that of doing business — is rather, well, unhelpful to portray 'business as usual'. Traders and business folks in other markets don't hang the 'closed' sign to vote. They simply step out to do the needful. So, why 'penalise' brokers with unearned enforced leave in the name of 'doing democracy'? Let the show of bourses go on unhindered.

Odisha has the potential to be India's next breakout state — what it now needs to do is shift gears

Keep the Juggernaut Rolling



Poonam Gupta

Odisha, India's 11th-largest state by population and 14th-largest by size of economy, has come a long way during the last two decades. At nearly \$100 bn, if Odisha were a country, its economy would be larger than Tanzania's, Sri Lanka's or Ghana's.

The state has nearly bridged the gap with the national per-capita income. In 2003, its per-capita income was 60% of the national average, and today, it's close to 90%. This convergence was possible as Odisha's economy grew faster (7.4%) than the national average (6.2%). Its population growth rate has slowed to 0.6% a year, compared to 0.9% for the nation.

Growth momentum has been evident across sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing and services. Additionally, at nearly 10% of its economy and growing at 8% annually, mining has contributed to the state's economic well-being and robust public finances. Thanks to mining royalties, the state has a unique fiscal advantage. It collected non-tax revenue to 3.5% of its GDP a year, compared to 1% for an average Indian state during the last decade.

The state's rising prosperity has been accompanied by notable improvements in various socioeconomic markers, such as GER (gross enrolment ratio), gender parity index, infant mortality rate, fertility rate, life expectancy, immunisation, and access to sanitation, drinking water and electricity.

Odisha has among the best fiscal yardsticks due to its deft fiscal management. It has been running a revenue surplus, unlike revenue deficit for an average state. It holds few contingent liabilities and runs a fiscal deficit within the limits mandated under its fiscal rule. The state's capex has doubled to nearly 5% of its GDP during the last decade and far exceeds that of an average state.

Further, under most conceivable scenarios, its small public debt is projected to decline. Yet, Odisha still lags on several indicators:

- Its urbanisation rate of 18% is only half that of the national average.
- Enrolment ratio in higher education is only 22% compared to the national average of 28%, and much below that of the leading states, such as Tamil Nadu's 47%.
- Bank credit-to-GDP ratio at 29% is nearly half that of the national average.

These examples indicate that despite lifting itself from the rank of a low-income economy to that of a low-middle-income one, Odisha has miles to cover before it can become an advanced economy, or contribute to the nation's goal of becoming an advanced economy during the coming years.



On a rollicking yatra

So, what can Odisha do to join the club of richer states, such as Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, leaving behind the company of poorer states, such as Rajasthan and West Bengal?

► **Raise aspirations** Odisha must aim to attain a double-digit growth rate, and prepare its policy framework accordingly.

► **Tweak growth strategy** A high-middle-income economy with a per-capita income of \$4,500, or a high-income economy with a per-capita income of \$12,500, looks different from today's Odisha with a per-capita income of about \$2,000.

Higher-income economies are less dependent on agriculture and more on manufacturing and modern services, less rural and more urban, more digitally connected, more innovative, and more capital- and skill-intensive. For Odisha to aspire to be an upper-middle-income or a high-income economy, it ought to steer its growth strategy keeping these end goals in sight.

► **Tourism** Odisha gets only 0.7% of

the domestic and 0.4% of international tourism. It can learn from Kerala and Goa on how to get more international tourists.

► **Tech gurus** Karnataka and Telangana can teach Odisha how to develop an alternative IT hub.

► **Manufacturing matters** There is much to learn from Tamil Nadu and Gujarat on making the state attractive for manufacturing companies.

Unless Odisha pursues a more ambitious pathway, existing growth drivers may soon run out of steam. Early evidence points to such a possibility. ► **GDP growth** has decelerated to 6.6% during the last decade from 8.1% in the preceding decade.

► **Deceleration** has been equally noticeable in manufacturing, mining and services.

Odisha now has all the conditions to be the next breakout state, and it should be very proud of this. What it needs now is to shift gears.

The writer is director-general, National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER)

HOW THE NUMBERS STACK UP

INDICATOR (YEARS AS INDICATED)	ODISHA VALUES	STATES / NATIONAL AVERAGE
Literacy rate (2011)	72.9%	73.0%
Population growth rate (2023)	0.6%	0.9%
Urban population (2023)	18.8%	35.1%
GDP share in national GDP (2021-22)	2.9%	-
Per-capita GDP share of national per capita GDP (2021-22)	90.0%	-
Share of agriculture in GVA (nominal) (2021-22)	21.7%	19.7%
Share of industry in GVA (nominal) (2021-22)	43.3%	29.3%
Share of mining/quarrying in GVA (nominal) (2021-22)	10.8%	2.3%
Share of manufacturing in GVA (nominal) (2021-22)	22.3%	14.8%
Share of service in GVA (nominal) (2021-22)	35.1%	51.0%
Improved drinking water source* (2019-21)	90.8%	95.9%
Households with access to electricity (2019-21)	96.3%	96.5%
Households with access to sanitation facilities (2019-21)	59.1%	69.3%

*Households with access to; *States' average

SANJEEV RAJ JAIN



ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

On Eid, all the joy does arise,
As we feast 'neath radiant skies.
With hugs and with cheer,
And delicious biryani near,
Even the scales on the scale sigh!

Global Services Export

In 2023, commercial services trade totalled \$7.54 trillion, rising 9% year-on-year on the back of recovering international travel and surging digitally delivered services. However, on an overall basis, transport services, a major part of which is freight shipping, dropped 8%. Transport formed almost a quarter of global services trade in 2022. A list of the top 10 exporters...

Exporters	Value (b. \$), 2023	Annual %age change
US	966	7
UK	581	16
Germany	435	2
Ireland	397	11
China	380	10
France	355	4
India	344	11
Singapore	328	-3
Netherlands	314	10
Japan	201	21

Commercial services trade, y-o-y growth	2022	2023	2023 vs 2019
Transport	25%	-8%	31%
Travel	71	38	4
Goods-related	8	7	18
Others	3	9	30
TOTAL SERVICES	15	9	24

Source: WTO's Global Trade Outlook and Statistics

Bell Curves



For the benefit of others here, could you sing with subtitles?

SANJEEV RAJ JAIN

Ignoring the Boeing Bits



Tushar Gore

Boeing has flown into rough weather again. CEO Dave Calhoun — brought in to revive the aerospace and defence giant in January 2020 from the tailspin of the two 737 Max 8 aircraft crashes in 2018 and 2019 — announced his planned December exit last month. The many pun-laced stories regarding the turbulence enveloping Boeing shouldn't distract from the bleak point that this is just another instance of a giant corporation betraying the trust of the public — and that, sadly, this won't be the last.

As the findings of many investigations and committees conclude — even as the company faces fresh safety scrutiny after a Boeing engineer emerged this week alleging 'major flaws' in 777 and 787 Dreamliners — Boeing may have gotten away with shoddy design of the Max 8. The design was cleared by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), as per aircraft certification guidelines applicable at the time. This means no one did anything wrong intentionally. Lack of any criminal convictions thus far also appears to support this conclusion.

Reduced oversight creates a swamp wherein the shady thrive, and even the scrupulous can lose their sense of ethics. Without oversight, even Atlas could be tempted to shrug and drop the heavens he bears on his shoulders.

Prior to this latest issue of a panel blowout, investigations into the Max 8 crashes had already uncovered many lapses at Boeing. These reports, however, fail to answer the basic question: how did Boeing get away without a serious review — either internal or external (via FAA) — of the MCAS (Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System) software that auto-commanded the doomed aircraft's nose to point downwards?

The US Congress' investigation into the Max 8 design and certification stated, 'Boeing made fundamentally faulty assumptions about critical technologies on the 737 Max...'. It also noted, 'Boeing also failed to classify MCAS as a safety-critical system, which would have attracted greater FAA scrutiny.' And, yet, this and other reports do not shed light — other than highlighting Boeing's secrecy and FAA's poor oversight — on the reasons Boeing could get away with such decisions.

The US passed a law in December 2020 mandating tighter rules for FAA to follow during aircraft certification. Presumably under these rules, Max 8 certification would have resulted in a different evaluation of MCAS and other design features. The US government realised that reduced oversight is not the answer in every situation.

Proponents of minimal government laud a government-free system of enterprise and innovation as key to unlocking prosperity. Ayn Rand is a hero for this group. Her philosophy articulated through works like her novel, Atlas Shrugged, presents corporations and executives as a besieged group in shackles by governments that want to 'extort' them for the good of society.

The main contradiction between the philosophy and reality is that the protagonists in Rand's books were largely an ethical lot, only looking to run efficient companies that delivered innovative products and services. They were not looking



Don't let him shrug

to cut corners and quality norms, play in grey areas and hoodwink the public.

At the other extreme, regulation should not assume all actions are maleficent and make the tiniest flaw a criminal offence. Such measures stifle any risk-taking and innovation. Subsequent to an industrial accident, there is an urgent need to assign blame, find the root cause and show corrective action. Risk is present in any industrial enterprise, and an accident reveals the areas of weaker risk assessment and management. Not all accidents are a result of purposeful neglect.

Reports after an accident will always highlight some misses, or uncover some stakeholder's view that highlighted the risk back then. This doesn't mean that the team or committee responsible for risk assessment purposefully ignored a risk. Well-intentioned experts can disagree without hidden agendas.

Risk assessment, by definition, is a subjective activity. It involves predicting 'what can go wrong'. A typical risk assessment assignment involves generation of a list of risks with a rank/rating to each item for the severity of consequences and likelihood of the risk event actually occurring. The goal of risk assessment is to put in mitigation measures to reduce either the severity of the risk or its likelihood. Since these are qualitative assessments, typically by a committee, expertise, experience and persuasion skills play a role in the final conclusion.

Hindsight always shows us how our foresight led us astray. But there need not be anything criminally or ethically wrong about the lack of foresight.

The ideal is a knowledgeable agency that runs a balanced regulatory framework that does not stifle risk-taking, but still compels companies to commit to safety assessments without distraction of profits and timelines. One benchmark to evaluate the framework: can a company get away by classifying the risk of pushing down the nose of an aircraft as non-critical?

The writer is managing director, Resonance Laboratories, Bengaluru

STEP UP TO THE PLATE

Disfrutar Barcelona, Spain

You could very well miss it for just another trendy European restaurant. But one of Barcelona's finest, Disfrutar — 'Enjoy' in Spanish — is much more. Enter through its narrow door and pass in front of the kitchen space and you enter a cavernous dining space where the creations of chefs-trio, Oriol Castro, Eduard Xartruch and Mateu Casañas, enrapture diners.

Even as the menu keeps changing around the year, especially lip-smacking and word-of-mouth is the pan-chino, essentially exquisite caviar buns mixed with cream cheese. Pesto with pistachios and oel is another Disfrutar legend. Then there's the classic Catalanian sen-

se of culinary adventure in what's on the menu as 'Fear: The Prawn' — a pool of dry ice is presented to the diner, who will have to blindly fish into the mystical and mistful vapour with bare hands to hunt and retrieve gorgeously cooked crustacea.

If you're in Barcelona, both for food and ambience — the restaurant's double-height vaulted ceilings with full-length glass running along one side of the restaurant's walls is stunning — Disfrutar is a must. Even if you're not in Barcelona, here's a sumptuous reason to go there.

of financial and economic literacy of the majority of low- and mid-level employees, it is unfair to leave their pension benefits to the uncertainties of the markets — be it equity or debt. Got abandoned OPS because of its inability to generate reasonable returns on a sustained basis. Making NPS compulsory is sheer abdication of responsibility and indicates low confidence in the economy's fundamentals.

M V SATYAPRASAD Chennai



THE SPEAKING TREE

Eid Mubarak

NAJIB SHAH

Thirty days, abstaining from solids and liquids from dawn to dusk. Thirty days of feeling pangs of hunger, more so of thirst, given the scorching summer we are currently experiencing. Felt even by us sitting in comfortable homes — what to say of the faithful who toil in the sun. Every evening, when the first drops of water trickle down your throat and you bite into a date, is a celebration of life, of gratitude to the Maker for His infinite blessings.

After 30 days, the month of Ramadan culminates today in Eid-ul-Fitr, the festival of breaking the fast. The holy book was revealed in this month. So, the faithful would have read the Quran with greater reverence. After all, the first command and word of the Quran is, 'Read, in the name of your Lord who created.' Tadabbur is what it is known, as we contemplated its relevance in our lives.

Thirty days when we sought to develop Taqwa, God Consciousness, which inspires us to be on guard against wrong actions. Eid is a day of celebration, of remembering the lesser fortunate, a day by when you discharge the religious obligation of giving a certain portion of your wealth to the poor and needy in charity. Known as Zakat, it does what it literally means — purifies your wealth.

The challenge, of course, is to ensure the learnings of the month of Ramadan are not forgotten and that we retain the goodness in us and remain responsible and loving, empathetic and humane, good citizens of the world.

Chat Room

Stocktaking: VFM The Right Mantra

Apropos the news report, 'Peak 75K: Some Feel Weary But Most Remain Bullish' (Apr 10), the Sensex went past the 75,000 mark on Tuesday, with the combined market capitalisation on the BSE crossing ₹400 lakh crore. The fact that this unprecedented rally is not limited to the larger companies and includes the smaller ones, with the small-cap index up 65%, reflects the growing optimism of investors. While factors such as healthy economic growth momentum, expectations of strong corporate earnings in Q4, a brightening prospect for rate cuts by central banks of developed countries and the expectation of policy continuity explain the current surge, valuation concerns cannot be overlooked.

M JEYARAM

Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

Nest Egg Served Sunny Side Up

This refers to 'OPS... They Did It Again!' by Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar (Apr 10). It is definitely imprudent to run a pension scheme on 'fund-as-we-go' basis without appropriate planned funding and investment plan to manage the corpus. However, considering the low levels

of financial and economic literacy of the majority of low- and mid-level employees, it is unfair to leave their pension benefits to the uncertainties of the markets — be it equity or debt. Got abandoned OPS because of its inability to generate reasonable returns on a sustained basis. Making NPS compulsory is sheer abdication of responsibility and indicates low confidence in the economy's fundamentals.

M V SATYAPRASAD Chennai

M V SATYAPRASAD Chennai

It is a matter of grave concern that a political party in desperation for votes has brought on such a mammoth burden on the coffers of 3 states. Such fiscal imprudence is completely unwarranted, and would lead to similar demands from other states who may resort to strikes and protests. What clicks for the political party here is the immediate small gain from the cessation of the 14% NPS contribution, while the OPS cost is only likely to start materialising in the late 2030s — government employees who joined after 2004 start retiring — when many of today's politicians would not be in active politics.

SAMARTH S RAJNAYAK

New Delhi

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

Opinion

THURSDAY, APRIL 11, 2024



JOURNALISTS IN GAZA

UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres

“An information war has added to the trauma of the war in Gaza — obscuring facts and shifting blame. Denying international journalists entry into Gaza is allowing disinformation and false narratives to flourish”

Sensex@75K

Equities as a share of net household financial assets have zoomed to 14.7% in FY23 from just 4.5% in FY21

THE RALLY IN INDIA'S stock market with the Sensex scaling a new peak of 75,000 is truly remarkable. The move to a market capitalisation of over ₹400 trillion or close to \$5 trillion has, in the past couple of years, been fuelled largely by domestic liquidity. Investors, a good chunk of them in the younger age groups, are looking for better returns. The current demat monthly addition run rate is over 3 million and total demat accounts have exploded from 40 million in March 2020 to 150 million today. Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) too snapped up stocks worth \$20 billion in 2023 as allocations to India have been raised in the absence of a rebound in China. Once the interest rate cycle turns decisively, as is expected by the end of 2024, one should expect bigger allocations to equities as an asset class. The average inflows of an annualised ₹2 trillion into Systematic Investment Plans (SIP) could also go up significantly. How attractive stocks are as an asset class can be gauged from the fact that equities as a share of net household financial assets went up to as much as 14.7% in FY23 from just 4.5% in FY21.

The most significant aspect of the rally has been its breadth, with stocks of all hues — large cap and mid cap — running up. There seems to be little concern over the rich valuations even after the regulator saw froth in some segments. While it is true that the Indian market is getting re-rated, and justifiably so, given the performance of its economy and the corporate sector, valuations are indeed expensive for some sets of stocks. But a large set of investors seem willing to wait it out and are convinced that valuations of 60x or 70x are well-deserved.

The optimism stems from India's strong growth story and the prospects of political stability. Without doubt, the economy has weathered both the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war much better than expected and seems to be coping well with the Israel-Hamas hostilities. The balance of payments (BoP) position is far more healthy today than it has been in many decades. Following an average growth of about 5.8% in the last 10 years, India is currently growing at around a brisk 7%.

To be sure, the headline GDP numbers mask many weaknesses, the biggest being the anaemic growth in private consumption which inched up to 3.5% y-o-y in Q3FY24 from an even slower 2.4% y-o-y in Q2. Moreover, the rural economy isn't recovering fast enough to support consumption. Again, much has been made of the strong investments, but while the gross fixed capital formation grew at a good 10.6% y-o-y in Q3, it came off a weak base. Private capex remains at levels that are lower than is needed to propel the economy to a sustainable growth of 7%.

If investors are shrugging off these concerns, it is because one section of corporate India has been doing exceedingly well. Other businesses might not be as exciting but are tipped to benefit from the economic growth in general. This explains the high earnings multiples that many companies command. At a market cap to GDP ratio of around 1.2x, India is not yet overvalued relative to much bigger markets that that of US. A ratio of 1.5x would signal a full re-rating.

\$200 billion of M&A wasn't enough in US oil patch

EVEN AFTER A record \$200 billion dealmaking frenzy last year, US oil and gas producers haven't consolidated nearly enough. On a per-barrel basis, there are still too many companies, too many chief executives, and too many drilling rigs wooing a limited pool of available capital. The solution is simple: more M&A.

Granted, the industry is today a lot slimmer than it once was. If you attend industry events where people still exchange business cards — rather than pair iPhones — and you keep a rolodex, just flip through it to see how much has changed since the pandemic.

I did so a few weeks ago as I was setting up a meeting ahead of an industry conference in Houston. The result was a trip down memory lane: Anadarko Petroleum, among the first to go; Whiting Petroleum, merged and re-named; Endeavor Energy Resources, about to disappear; Cimarex Energy, merged; Concho Resources, long gone; Encana Corp., rebranded. The list goes on.

Still, if my own worn-out rolodex serves as any reference, there is plenty of scope left for a fresh round of consolidation. Few outside the industry know them, but there are plenty of independent exploration and production (E&P) companies in the US. The segment to focus on is publicly listed firms with a market value under \$25 billion — but above \$1 billion.

Bigger isn't always better, but with Wall Street generalist investors largely ignoring oil stocks under \$25 billion in market value, boards of directors necessarily need to prioritise size. Some companies may achieve growth in earnings per share by buying back their own stock. But not everyone has that luxury. That's why more M&A is needed, and it's already coming: Year-to-date, North American oil and gas companies have already announced nearly \$50 billion in deals. If sustained at a similar pace throughout the year, it would nearly match 2023's record activity. In most cases, either small and medium-sized E&P firms combine among themselves, or they would be prey for larger companies — ConocoPhillips, Devon Energy Corp. and EOG Resources Inc., three potential 2024 acquirers, if you believe the chatter among bankers and lawyers.

Until now, industry consolidation has followed two broad trends. First, large companies with operations across the country bought smaller ones, as Occidental Petroleum Corp. has done since 2019. The second involved smaller E&P outfits buying or merging with peers in the same region they operate, creating pure-play basin champions — think Diamondback Energy Inc.'s deals consolidating the Permian basin of Texas and New Mexico, and of Chord Energy Corp.

For this year and 2025, we could see multi-basin deals. While companies with diversified geographical portfolios typically have a tougher time selling their vision, E&P outfits may need to make a virtue out of necessity: Without multi-basin dealmaking, companies may struggle to grow further as some reach the limits of their current geographies. As much as investors love the pure-play story, there's merit to not having all your eggs in one basket.

The two bigger obstacles for the next consolidation phase start with a “p”: politics and prices.

First, the politics. The US Federal Trade Commission is already scrutinising the last round of M&A oil deals, and Democrats in Washington are calling for antitrust investigations. “These deals are likely to harm competition, risking increased consumer prices and reduced output throughout the United States,” a group of senators wrote in a November letter to Lina Khan, the head of the FTC. Misguided as they are, the calls are likely to get louder as the election date nears. Ultimately, the FTC is unlikely to block the deals, but it can delay dealmaking by requesting more documents.

So the first of the “p” would more likely delay than derail the deals. The second “p” could prove more of an obstacle, however.

The industry consolidated over the last decade in part thanks to moderating oil prices, with the exception of the 2021-22 spike as Russia invaded Ukraine. When oil prices stay low, the bid-ask spread between sellers and buyers of companies narrows. Push oil prices to \$100 a barrel, and deals become more complicated. Thus, the American oil patch will see more M&A in 2024, but whether the activity comes close to last year may depend on forces beyond its control.

REAL POLITICS

AHEAD OF THE POLLS, MODI HAS FUELLED ASPIRATIONS; OPPOSITION'S NARRATIVE HASN'T EMERGED YET

Narratives of hope vs despair

MOBILISATIONS DURING DEMOCRATIC elections in a country like India aren't merely the result of a narrative of substantial gains. They also occur through socio-psychological *bhava* (gesture) such as offering hopes and aspirations, and countering despair and social inertia. As I see it, this general election is going to emerge as a contest between two narratives — one of hope and the other of discontent. The narrative of hope is facilitated by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance, and the narrative of discontent and despair is being produced by the Congress-led Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance. *Viksit Bharat, Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat, Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas* and many such examples are constituents of hope narratives produced by the BJP.

The BJP started its election campaign in a consistent manner. A peculiarity of the BJP is that it does not have much to do during elections except holding rallies, campaigns and organising the public at the booth level. In fact, the BJP keeps up with actions that create impressions, narratives, image-building, and organisational preparation throughout its tenure. The party evolves its political narrative capital by framing various development policies and their implementation, deriving arguments from governance activities, etc. during the entire five years of its time in office. By election time, it merely has to reorganise, reframe, and reuse the accumulated political and symbolic capital.

On the other hand, for the opposition, elections are not a continuation of their normal political course. They need to reinvent themselves for every election, as it's not a culmination of their efforts. Throughout the five years preceding the election, it is very difficult to find their leaders being active at the grassroots and among the masses.

BADRI NARAYAN

Director, G B Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad. Views are personal



They need to do many things to organise the party symbolically and substantially during elections. It is very difficult to accomplish this within a few months prior to election. And so, they are bound to accept second class in electoral campaigns.

It is interesting to observe that the politics of governance and development, which Narendra Modi as Prime Minister and the leader of the BJP is trying to craft for the nation, is continuously producing hope among various sections and also diluting the deep-rooted despair and depression at the grassroots. PM Modi has understood the need of the hour.

I view this era as the second phase of neoliberalism in which there has been an explosion of aspirations and mobility. It has prepared the ground that allowed the weak and vulnerable to aspire and acquire. PM Modi has created a synergy between the state, market and technology, and crafted a politics of development to fulfil the new aspirations of the common people. As we know, the first phase of neoliberalism, which began in the 90s and continued in the subsequent decade, was basically the preparatory period for a new liberal economy to forge its relation with the public. It is true that this phase elicited among the public various kinds of suspicion and distrust of the state and the market after a neoliberal turn for the

economy and society.

On deeper analysis, one may find that PM Modi tried to evolve 'hope' as a base *bhava* for his process of political mobilisation in India. It may be called a 'hope narrative'. He crafted hope as a supportive emotional constituent that may produce aspirations among people. The growing aspirations ruptured an entrenched inertia in the public, especially among the vulnerable and marginalised. However, these hopes and aspirations cultivated a sense of social, development-related and locational mobilities not only among those on the margins, but also for every layer of society. For creating hope, Modi used his discursive capabilities and communicative engagements, deploying inspiring narratives and his symbolic

image. He also envisioned policies and development schemes to cultivate public capacity to aspire and acquire.

First of all, he is trying to create aspirations and feelings of 'to be developed', 'to go ahead', and 'becoming stronger' vis-à-vis the nation at all layers of society. This sense of hope is working not merely as a development catalyst but also as a political, mobilisational and electoral one for PM Modi-led politics. During various field visits, we observed that this hope among public working and is an important mobilisational constituent for the BJP. The youths think that *rojgar* (employ-

ment) opportunities may evolve in the new market-based conditions. Many youths would say, “*Agar naukari nahi mili to kuch rojgar kar lenge*” (if we don't get a job, we'll find some employment).

Hopes of marching ahead in the context of individual, collective and national future are visible among the youths of various communities in northern India. They show deep trust in PM Modi. With this process of generating hope through politics, Modi has amassed a huge following that gets reflected in elections. This hope narrative mobilises social groups in favour of the PM's appeal beyond castes and primordial identities.

On the other hand, the opposition's political narrative of despair, which has not yet emerged fully, is based on triggering and mobilising spaces of discontent scattered in the public imagination. Through this narrative of despair and describing disillusionments, the opposition is trying to project their politics as one of hope. The element of hope in the despair narrative is thin. The opposition parties devote much of their narrative on *anyaya* (injustices) to project their *nyaya* (justice).

The feeling of disappointment in the political narrative may encourage people in terms of immediate and momentary mobilisation, but it may not always transform into votes. Hope may be a more powerful mobilisational element in reorienting and activating the public for a certain political result than a narrative emphasis on despair and *anyaya*. In the speeches of Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, and many other opposition leaders, we identify tactics to generate despondency for political mobilisation.

In this election, in the contest of narratives—of hope represented by Modi, and the opposition's attempt to trigger disappointment and despair against the BJP—we must wait and watch who will win and who will be vanquished.

Goraiya Gram: A shelter for the sparrow



BIBEK DEBROY

Chairman, EAC-PM

Six years ago, in *Indian Express*, I had written a column on the disappearing sparrow (*bit.ly/3USPzMO*). It is time to revisit the sparrow.

There is a Simon and Garfunkel song that goes, “I'd rather be a sparrow than a snail.” The forests are no longer an option. They have been taken over by streets and we no longer feel the earth beneath our feet. What is Delhi's state bird? GK questions involve the national bird (peacock), but rarely are we asked about state birds. Thanks to the Hornbill Festival, many people may think the hornbill is Nagaland's state bird. It isn't. Nagaland's state bird is Blyth's tragopan, a kind of pheasant. The hornbill is the state bird of Arunachal and Kerala. Since 2012, Delhi's state bird has been the house sparrow. (Before that, Delhi had no state bird.) One needs to specify house sparrow (*passer domesticus*), since there are other sparrows. It's odd that Delhi's state bird should be a sparrow, since sparrows have vanished from the city. Since 2010, March 20 has also been celebrated as World Sparrow Day. Some 50 years ago, when we used to be students in Delhi, sparrows were a common sight. No longer. I presume students still declaim from Hamlet, “There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.” One shouldn't blame providence for the fall of the house sparrow. It has more to do with human development and urbanisation.

One can go to Goraiya Gram to see a sparrow. *Goraiya* means a house sparrow

and this village for sparrows has been set up in Garhi Mandu forest, one of four city forests in Delhi. There are many words for sparrow in Sanskrit. The most common is *chataka*. But the one I like most is *grihabalibhuj*, since it captures the nature of a house sparrow. It is a bird that feeds on offerings strewn around the house.

There is a long list of reasons cited for the fall of the sparrow. Some are reasons not immediately obvious. In 1898, there was an international conference on horse and this village for sparrows has been set up in Garhi Mandu forest, one of four city forests in Delhi. There are many words for sparrow in Sanskrit. The most common is *chataka*. But the one I like most is *grihabalibhuj*, since it captures the nature of a house sparrow. It is a bird that feeds on offerings strewn around the house.

There were concerns that urban centres would be swamped under heaps of dung. This didn't happen, because automobiles drove horses out of business and eventually, horse traffic was banned. These workhorses were fed grain and grain had spillages, which sparrows fed on.

On the net, I found a delightful essay by WH Bergtold, written in 1921 (published in *The Auk*) titled “The English Sparrow (*Passer Domesticus*) and the Motor Vehicle.” Fifteen years ago one could see on any of the crowded business streets of Denver, dozens, nay, hundreds of English Sparrows, and the air was then resonant with their shrill notes of love, war and

alarm;.....To what can this changed condition be attributed? Increase of enemies, mortality by disease, changing environment, or lessening of food supply, all of these, and perhaps more, might be cited as possible causes....Obviously there is but one cause to which one can attribute the great shrinkage in the equine population of this city, namely the displacement of the harnessed horse by the motor vehicle;...While it has been almost unnoticed, it has been none the less certain and effective; the self-propelled vehicles of a city affect the sparrow not only through starvation, but probably also through making the species' street life so hazardous and fatal as to drive it largely out of the business areas.” You should read the entire essay. As I said, reasons you won't immediately think of, reminding you of Ian Mal-

colm's butterfly effect. There will be a host of reasons cited by ornithologists. But I wonder about nests built by sparrows. When we were young, houses had ventilators and invariably, sparrows built nests in them, sometimes on top of ceiling fans. I can't remember, in an age of air-conditioning, the last time I saw a ventilator. Modern urban architecture robs sparrows of their nesting sites. Humans migrate from rural areas to urban. I guess sparrows have

Modern urban architecture robs sparrows of their nesting sites. Humans migrate from rural areas to urban. I guess sparrows have

taken the reverse route. I have seen sparrows outside Delhi. The State of India's Birds report shows there is still a declining trend (in the number of sparrows), but with some reversal in recent years. There is a greater concern about sparrows and an organisation like the Eco Roots Foundation provides nests, and people have taken to feeding sparrows.

Besides architectural design, there are other factors. Where will sparrows get food? Home gardens have virtually vanished in metros. Insecticides and pesticides have got rid of insects. I remember an article from *Down to Earth*. To quote, “Subramanya, a Sacon (Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology & Natural History) member in the National Wetland Conservation Programme and currently working with the University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore, confirms the decline of sparrows in Bangalore. He attributes it to the lack of nesting sites in modern concrete buildings, disappearing kitchen gardens and the non-availability of particular larvae (*Helicoverpa armigera*), associated with the field bean... Formerly, urban households in India used to buy field beans as pods in vegetable markets. When the pod was broken, larvae came out, to be promptly devoured by sparrows. But now that fresh seeds are available in packets, these larvae have disappeared, depriving the sparrow.”

If the house sparrow loses its food and habitat, what can it possibly do, but to move to Goraiya Gram?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Flawed law

The Bharatiya Janata Party is claiming the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) as one of its big achievements. The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance promises to repeal it, if voted to power. No matter what the Modi government says in justification, the CAA is a flawed piece of legislation as it predicates citizenship on religion. It is based on the false assumption that persecution in South Asia occurs

only in predominantly Muslim nations and that too only against Hindus, Christians, Parsis, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists. The sum and substance of the law is that you must be a non-Muslim to be eligible for automatic citizenship. Even if Muslims are no different from non-Muslims except in the matter of faith, they are deemed ineligible to get citizenship. A secular democracy cannot have religion as a determinant of citizenship.

—G David Milton, Maruthancode

Sensex crosses 75,000

BSE Sensex crossing the 75,000 mark was bound to happen but what makes it noteworthy is the speed of its ascent. It's taken less than four months to jump from the 70,000 mark it crossed in mid-December. In April 2020, in the middle of the first nationwide lockdown, Sensex had then dropped to about 27,591. The rise in the index value since then has been around 271%. The 75,000 mark

was important but it's nothing compared to 100,000. The markets guru, Mark Mobius, said last year the 100k mark could be crossed within five years. Others feel it could happen sooner. Sensex's boost comes from investor anticipation of corporate profits. There's optimism about India's nominal GDP growth, which many think will be beyond 10% for a while.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

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The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Summer warming

Heat-related deaths present a public health challenge. State, civil society must protect the most vulnerable



RAJIB DASGUPTA

2023 WAS THE world's warmest year on record and it has been 47 years since the Earth has had a colder-than-average year. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), 2023 was the second warmest year in India in 122 years — the warmest ever recorded was 2016. The IMD predicts that most of India is likely to experience both above-normal maximum and minimum temperatures in April, May, and June.

States or regions most prone to increased heatwaves include Gujarat, Maharashtra, North Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, North Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh. A high of 45.2 degrees Celsius was reported from parts of Raichur district, Karnataka, on April 6, with seven people from different villages suffering mild heat strokes.

The nature of the rising threats from heatwaves can be gauged from an EnviStats-IMD analysis which noted that the total average number of heatwave days annually has been increasing each decade: from 90 in 1990-99 to 94 in 2000-09, and to 139 in 2010-2019. The total annual average heatwave days increased from 42 in 2020 to 190 in 2022. Mortality statistics on account of heatwaves are reported by several agencies and those often do not agree on the exact numbers. While the IMD reported 10,545 deaths between 2000 and 2020, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) put it at 17,767 and the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 20,615. The National Programme on Climate Change and Human Health (NPCCCH) has initiated a reporting platform for heat-related illnesses (HRIs).

For the record, the NDMA reported the number of deaths as only four in 2020. EnviStats-India reported 27 deaths in 2020 and none in 2021. However, in response to an unstarred question in the Lok Sabha, the Minister of Earth Sciences reported 1,274 heat-related deaths in 2019 followed by 530 in 2020 and 374 in 2021.

Notwithstanding these differences, there is apparent unanimity on three aspects. One, the actual number of deaths is likely to be

higher than those reported; two, deaths peaked around 2015-16 and, three, they have been on the decline since. These trends are to be seen in the backdrop of two more statistics: the number of heatwave-affected states increased from nine in 2015 to 23 in 2019 and the number of average heatwave days recorded in this period increased nearly five-fold, from 7.4 to 32.2. This underscores heat as a growing public health challenge.

The cases of Ballia and Deoria districts in Uttar Pradesh are worth recounting. These district hospitals witnessed sharp spikes in admissions from certain areas and recorded 150 deaths in five days during the week of June 15-22, 2023. These were not medically certified as heat-related deaths but district officials confirmed that most were aged above 60 years and suffered from co-morbidities that "may have aggravated due to the heatwave". The state-level investigation concluded that heatstroke could have been "contributory" to the deaths but not "causative". Environmental analysts noted that temperatures at that time were about 45 degrees Celsius, with a relative humidity of 30-50 per cent — that meant, it would "feel like" more than 60 degrees Celsius. This is unquestionably life-threatening.

What is often lost in these statistics is a key question: What constitutes heat-related mortality given that exposure to heat is a significant threat to high-risk populations and contributes to increased morbidity and mortality? In theory, almost all heat-related deaths and illnesses are preventable while in practice, gauging the public health impact of extreme heat is difficult as HRIs are not yet mandatory to report to public health authorities in most countries. Environmental health experts draw attention to the fact that non-biomedical external factors are often missed on death certificates leading to inaccuracies in cause-of-death reporting or estimations. The classic example is lightning strikes where the direct cause may be a falling tree branch or a fire but the indirect cause — the lightning strike — that triggered a cascade of events culminating in mortality does not find

mention. The US National Association of Medical Examiners defines "heat-related death" as a death in which "exposure to high ambient temperature either caused the death or significantly contributed to it".

Analyses from Europe are instructive. A standard method to estimate deaths occurring on account of these situations is recording and mapping excess deaths during the specified period. It is now agreed that over 70,000 excess deaths occurred across 16 countries with a combined population of about 400 million in Europe during the exceptionally hot summer of 2003. An epidemiological analysis of the Eurostat mortality database published in July 2023 quantified heat-related mortality burden during the summer of 2022, the hottest season in Europe so far. The number of heat-related deaths estimated for 35 countries between May 30 and September 4 is 61,672. These countries have a combined population of 543 million, a little less than half of India's. Among them, those around the Mediterranean Sea experienced the highest mortalities — Italy, Greece, Spain, and Portugal. Despite the experience of 2003 and with most countries institutionalising adaptation measures, the magnitude of heat-related deaths underscores the enormity of the challenge.

The Union Health Minister reviewed public health preparedness for the management of HRIs on April 3. Updated Heat Action Plans are available in 23 states and about 100 districts have initiated awareness campaigns. Those at the greatest risk include children, pregnant women and the elderly; those with pre-existing conditions such as diabetes and heart disease; those who are socially isolated and the poor. As the summer season intensifies, the state and civil society will be tasked with watching out for the extra-vulnerable.

The writer is professor (Community Health), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and a collaborator in the Wellcome Trust Project, Economic and Health Impact Assessment of Heat Adaptation Action: Case studies from India

BACK ON TRACK

SC setting aside arbitral award on Delhi Metro rights a wrong. It is also a cautionary tale

IN A WELCOME respite for the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation, the Supreme Court, on Wednesday, set aside its 2021 judgment that had upheld an arbitral award against the Corporation. The award, which was in favour of the Delhi Airport Metro Express Pvt Ltd, a Reliance Infrastructure firm, had granted it damages to the tune of Rs 2,782.3 crore plus interest. The SC verdict, which comes at a time when the government is making a concerted attempt to ramp up physical infrastructure across the country, is significant for many reasons. For one, it points to the manner in which processes and systems can be manipulated. The SC notes that the division bench of the high court had applied the correct test when it held the arbitral award to be "perverse, irrational and patently illegal". In fact, the award had "overlooked crucial facts and evidence on record" central to the determination of the issues before it. This led to an "undeserved windfall" for a private firm at the expense of the public entity which serves lakhs of commuters every day.

This episode also holds lessons for the larger policy-making and regulatory apparatus in the country. Consider the timeline. This issue dates back to 2008 when the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation and Reliance Infrastructure (Delhi Airport Metro Express Pvt Ltd) entered into an agreement for the Delhi Airport Express. In 2012, the Reliance Infrastructure company terminated the agreement stating that the defects in the metro line had not been corrected in the "cure period", even though certain repairs had been completed. This led to DMRC invoking the arbitration clause. In 2017, the three-member tribunal passed an award in favour of DAMEPL. Thereafter, Delhi High Court upheld the award, but a division bench of the high court set it aside. And in 2021, the Supreme Court upheld the arbitral award, which it set aside three years later. Such a long drawn out resolution process will only undermine the confidence of private capital when it comes to greenfield infrastructure projects. Such delays block time and capital. Resolution of business disputes should be carried out in a timely manner. In fact, disputes such as these underline the need for an independent regulator.

Given that "a patently illegal award" had "saddled a public utility with an exorbitant liability," the Court has done well to right the wrong. However, this episode also holds a lesson for court interventions in the future. After all, the Court has acknowledged that it "erred in interfering with the decision of the Division Bench of the High Court," and "caused a miscarriage of justice". Given expectations that the country is on the cusp of an uptick in the investment cycle, systems and processes have to be put in place to guard against such a miscarriage and the high toll it takes on the system.

HEPATITIS WARNING

WHO report speaks of familiar healthcare deficits. India's programme to control the liver disease must course correct

A WHO REPORT has flagged the seriousness of India's Hepatitis challenge. With nearly 3 crore Hepatitis B patients and more than 50 lakh Hepatitis C patients, the country's burden of these liver diseases is the second highest in the world. They claimed more than a lakh lives in 2022. Even more worrying is that a very small fraction of the infected come under the diagnostic ambit. Less than 30 per cent of Hepatitis C cases are detected; the figure for Hepatitis B is less than 3 per cent. The National Viral Hepatitis Control Programme (NVHCP) aims to eliminate Hepatitis C by 2030 and "achieve significant reduction in morbidity and mortality associated with Hepatitis B" by that year. The WHO report is a warning that the country has much work to do to attain this target. However, the global health agency has also struck a note of optimism: "Course correction between 2024 and 2026 can bring NVHCP on track".

Hepatitis B and C are spread through contact with contaminated blood. Hepatitis B can lead to the scarring of liver tissues and increase the risk of cancer. Diagnosis is complicated — carriers can harbour the virus for years without appearing to be diseased. They can infect others even when they do not show symptoms — these often show up only when the pathogen takes an aggressive form. There is no cure, though treatment can help manage symptoms to an extent. The NVHCP, initiated in 2018, provides free testing and medication. However, the WHO report indicates that the programme hasn't touched most patients. Rigorous adoption of blood screening protocols in the past 20 years has substantially reduced the risks from transfusion. Most of the Hepatitis B infections in the country are today passed on from mother to child. Vaccination can prevent the disease but the highest immunity is conferred when the child is administered a jab just after birth. In India, less than 50 per cent infants get vaccinated this early. This is largely to do with the low rate of institutionalised births in large parts of the country. Informing community healthcare workers with vaccination protocols could increase the efficacy of the immunisation regime.

Hepatitis C is far easier to treat. Anti-virals can cure the disease and prevent long-term liver damage. According to WHO, treatment costs in India are amongst the lowest in the world. But 70 per cent patients eluding the diagnostic network speaks of a healthcare deficit that must be addressed immediately. Whether it's containing viral diseases like hepatitis or bacterial infections like TB, there can be no shortcuts to expanding the country's medical facilities.

THE CRITICAL MASS

Peter Higgs changed human understanding of the fundamental nature of the universe

WHY DO SOME particles have mass? As a young lecturer in Mathematical Physics at the University of Edinburgh, the thought had consumed Peter Higgs. The British physicist's research into the flavour symmetries of particle physics threw up a tantalising possibility — the presence of a particle that accounted for how elementary particles acquire mass. The first paper he wrote on it was promptly rejected — it was thought to have no bearing on particle physics — but Higgs persisted. He resurrected the paper again with additions in 1964. This time, not only did it pass muster, it also concurred with parallel research. The Higgs boson or "the God particle" would revolutionise the discipline of Physics and human understanding of the fundamental nature of the universe. It would also earn Higgs, who died on April 8 at the age of 94, a Nobel Prize in Physics in 2013.

Higgs' discovery validated the Standard Model, the present framework for accessing the building blocks of the universe and paved the way for his work on spontaneous symmetry breaking, the mechanism behind the particle's existence. It continues to influence critical research into areas such as Dark Matter and the unification of forces, the latter first broached by Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell in the 1860s.

The Nobel that Higgs shared with Belgian theoretical physicist François Englert would have seemed to be a natural culmination of his pioneering work but before that there was a tease of a wait of nearly five decades for the elusive Higgs boson. In 2012, scientists at CERN in Geneva finally managed a breakthrough, thanks to the powerful Large Hadron Collider, the particle accelerator built at a cost of \$10 billion. Higgs had been specially invited for the occasion. His reaction to it, like most things outside of the lab, was self-effacing: He wiped a tear and told the assembled scientists that he was just grateful that the discovery had come in his lifetime before catching a flight back home.



POOJA PILLAI

WHAT IS THE real Kerala story? Perhaps it's a film which offers a slice of life from Malappuram, where a local Muslim family ends up nursing — and eventually caring for — a Nigerian football player with a broken leg who had been recruited for the wildly-popular sport of "sevans football". Or maybe it's the one about an impetuous young man and his "team" in a Christian community in Angamaly, which offers a glimpse into their life of petty crime and violence, with unforgettable depictions of the area's main obsession, pork fry. It could also be the film set in gorgeous Kumbalangi, which uses the story of four brothers from a fishing community to ask what it means to be a man in the world today and in which a young Hindu woman, speaking to her mother about her Catholic boyfriend, says "Isn't Jesus someone we all know?"

One such story of the state, some in Kerala believe, has been told by the 2023 Hindi film, *The Kerala Story*, directed by Sudipto Sen and produced by Vipul Amrutlal Shah. Controversial from the very start — even before its release, the film's teaser and trailer had raised hackles in the state — *The Kerala Story* is allegedly based on the "true" stories of Malayali girls who were systematically brainwashed and entrapped by a section of Muslims, converted to Islam and turned into "terrorists" for use by the Islamic State in West Asia.

The film, which did poor business in Kerala and neighbouring Tamil Nadu, even as it raked in money at the box office in other parts of the country, is at the centre of a con-

NOT A BLACK & WHITE STORY

Kerala yields its best stories to those who have lived intimately with its complexities

troversy again, less than a month before the state votes in the Lok Sabha elections. On April 4, the Idukki diocese of the Kerala Catholic Church screened the film for students of Class X and XII as part of its summer catechism programme. According to Father Prince Karakkatt, the public relations officer of the diocese, this was done to "enlighten" young people about the dangers of "love jihad".

Following an outcry against the screening by the ruling CPM and the Opposition Congress — who had also protested against the film being telecast on Doordarshan last week — the Kerala Catholic Youth Movement (KCYM) decided to organise screenings in other parts of Kerala, too.

The Kerala Story confirms and feeds the demographic anxieties of certain sections of Kerala society, that one community is growing and prospering at the expense of others. Never mind that "love jihad" has, time and again, been proved to be a mere bogey, drummed up by conservative forces as they scramble to find their footing in a society that is rapidly changing — for such forces, controlling the lives and bodies of young people, especially women, is the first response to what seems like an existential threat.

Never mind also that the makers of *The Kerala Story* had to backtrack on the inflated claims they had made, about their film telling the truth about what had happened to "32,000 girls" in the state after they were taken to court. The number was revised to three, and a disclaimer that the story is a "fictionalised" account was also issued.

Few Malayalis would disagree that even God's Own Country has its problems: Growing poverty and unemployment, environmental degradation, a looming fiscal crisis and deep-rooted misogyny. "Love jihad" is one of these problems only in the sense that it serves as a weapon for those with a specific political agenda, of undermining the communal harmony that has characterised Kerala society for so long and which has helped it be largely immune to the clarion call of majoritarianism.

The films mentioned earlier in this article — *Sudani From Nigeria* (2018), *Angamaly Diaries* (2017) and *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) — all depict a Kerala that is comfortable enough with its diversity that it can, quite naturally, tell stories of and from all its communities, without feeling the need to moralise about it or resorting to tokenism. They show that Kerala yields its best stories to those who have lived intimately with and experienced its complexities; the many, everyday moments of love and beauty, yes, but also the cracks — formed by religion, caste and gender — that run through it.

How truthfully can a story from this diverse and complicated land, with a millennia-long history that connects it to the wider world beyond the Arabian Sea — and which is home to both India's oldest mosque and its oldest church — be told by those who understand it mainly through cherry-picked news reports and sensationalist headlines?

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APRIL 11, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

WORKERS END STRIKE

THE LONGEST STRIKE in the history of ports and docks of the country ended before midnight. The strike, by three lakh port and dock workers, lasted 28 days. It was called off following an agreement on wage revision between the government and leaders of the four federations of port and dock workers. The withdrawal was announced after a "memorandum of understanding" was signed.

CURFEW IN JAFFNA

SRI LANKA GOVERNMENT clamped an 18-hour curfew on Jaffna effective from mid-day

as violence escalated in the northern Tamil provincial capital. The swift action followed reported attacks on Sinhala property in Jaffna by militant Tamil youths. Reports said the Sinhala Maha Vidyalaya was set on fire while a Buddhist temple of Naha Vihare in the heart of the town survived, with minor damage.

CARE FOR THE NEEDY

A SEPARATE CELL, headed by an assistant medical superintendent has been constituted at Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan Hospital in New Delhi to identify destitute patients and ensure that their treatment is neither neglected, nor delayed. The cell, con-

sisting of two junior doctors, a social worker and a sanitary inspector, will also be responsible for the general welfare of these patients during the period of their treatment.

PM GANDHI'S RESPONSE

THE PRIME MINISTER, Mrs Indira Gandhi, scoffed at the threat of some extremist organisations against her and her son, Rajiv Gandhi. Asked about reports that the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front and the Dashmesh Regiment (Akali extremists) had placed both her and her son on their hit lists, she shot back: "I have lived with danger ever since I was born," she told newsmen.

9 THE IDEAS PAGE

Nari Shakti lessons from Japan

Following 'womenomics' reforms, investments in the care economy, Japan is reaping benefits of bringing more women into the workforce



MITALI NIKORE

CHANGE, THEY SAY, begins from the top. And in one of Asia's richest economies, it began with a commitment to gender equality from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2014.

Even as Japan was grappling with falling fertility rates, a declining population, and stagnant growth, a series of reforms on "womenomics" were introduced as part of the "Abenomics" era. And today, they are showing results.

Women's labour force participation rate (WLFPR) in Japan has grown by ten percentage points, from 64.9 per cent in 2013 to 75.2 per cent in 2023. This is not only the fastest growth in Japan's WLFPR in the past few decades, but also the highest amongst the G7 countries in the last decade. Notably, the largest increase in WLFPR is in the 30-34, and 35-39 years age groups — signalling the return of mothers to the workforce.

Moreover, adding roughly three million women to its workforce is helping Japan bridge labour shortages. Estimates suggest this increase in WLFPR could have increased Japan's GDP per capita by between 4 per cent to 8 per cent.

It's no surprise that a majority of the "womenomics" reforms have been linked to investments in the care economy and rebalancing gender norms.

The Japanese government's investment to expand daycare capacity from 2.2 million in 2012 to 2.8 million in 2018 has reduced daycare waiting lists that would often run into years. In 2023, the government of Japan announced a further boost in investment of \$26 billion for childcare measures between 2023 and 2026.

Japanese parents had been entitled to year-long partially paid parental leaves — with women receiving 58 weeks, and men 52 weeks. In 2022, greater flexibility in paternity leave provisions was introduced, reducing notice periods, and allowing men to break up their paternity leave. Moreover, making disclosures of paternity leave uptake mandatory, introducing flexible work, and encouraging companies to demonstrate that taking paternity leave would not hamper career progression have helped in boosting paternity leave uptake from 2 per cent in 2012, to 17 per cent in 2023.

In 2016, Japan's Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace made disclosures of diversity action plans and diversity data mandatory. This led to the introduction of the "Eruboshi" certification, a five-star system recognising companies committed to workforce diversity. The certification has become aspirational among Japanese firms today, with the number of companies receiving the Eruboshi certificate growing from 815 in 2019, to 1905 in 2022.

India and Japan share several cultural



CR Sasikumar

similarities — one that stands out relates to the social norms surrounding domestic work. Among the G20 countries, India and Japan have the widest gender gaps in unpaid care with women performing about 8.4 times the amount of unpaid work in India, notionally valued at 15 per cent to 17 per cent of GDP, and 5.5 times in Japan, similarly valued at about a fifth of GDP.

As India embarks on a path towards women-led development, a few clear lessons emerge from Japan's experience in enhancing WLFPR to push the country's GDP.

First, interventions for bridging the gender gaps in domestic and care work have a significant impact on WLFPR. Japan saw its highest gains in WLFPR when it committed to long-term public investments in care infrastructure and services, especially childcare.

Second, changing people's mindsets around social norms is as important as formulating progressive regulations. As is evident from the Japanese experience, legal entitlement to gender-neutral parental leave is not sufficient. Enhancing uptake among men requires an employer-led approach that dispels gender stereotypes around care work.

Third, it is essential to invest in a wide range of care infrastructure and services solutions — covering not only childcare, but also elder care, domestic work, and long-term care for highly dependent adults to reduce dependency and access the silver economy. For instance, Japan has leveraged

India and Japan share several cultural similarities — one that stands out is the social norms surrounding domestic work. Among the G20 countries, India and Japan have the widest gender gaps in unpaid care with women performing about 8.4 times the amount of unpaid work in India, notionally valued at 15 per cent to 17 per cent of GDP, and 5.5 times in Japan, similarly valued at about a fifth of GDP. As India embarks on a path towards women-led development, a few clear lessons emerge from Japan's experience in enhancing WLFPR to push the country's GDP.

some private sector partnerships for investments in affordable senior living and care services. As the share of elderly persons in India's population is expected to rise from 10 per cent currently to 20 per cent by 2050, India, too will need to prioritise elder care infrastructure and service investments.

Taking these lessons from Japan, and after an in-depth analysis of over 100 international best practices from around the G20 countries as well as notable domestic practices in India, our team, alongside the Confederation of Indian Industry, and Karmannya Counsel — with the support of the Ministry of Women and Child Development — has formulated a five-pillar strategy to unlock business opportunities in India's care economy, with a focus on the following: Gender neutral and paternity leave policies; subsidies for availing/providing care services; enhancing investments from both the public and private sector in care infrastructure and services; skill training for care workers; and quality assurance for care services and infrastructure.

After nearly declining continuously for five decades, India's WLFPR has begun showing a rising trend, increasing from 23 per cent in 2017-18 to 37 per cent in 2022-23. To keep this momentum going, we will require a continued long-term focus on the care economy for unleashing #NariShakti to achieve a Viksit Bharat @2047.

The writer is founder, Nikore Associates

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"If Israel and Hamas refuse to play ball, then the international community, led by the US, should negotiate a UN security council resolution like the one that ended the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah conflict. That might mean recognising Palestinian statehood, which ought to give Netanyahu pause for thought." — THE GUARDIAN

The sparrow in Goraiya Gram

The bird has vanished from most cities. A village has been specially designed to protect it



BIBEK DEBROY

SIX YEARS AGO, in this newspaper, I had written an article on the disappearing sparrow ('I'd rather be a sparrow', IE, February 22, 2018). It is time to revisit the sparrow.

There is a Simon and Garfunkel song, 'I'd rather be a sparrow than a snail'. The forests are no longer an option. They have been taken over by streets and we no longer feel the Earth beneath our feet. What is Delhi's state bird? General knowledge questions involve the national bird (peacock). Rarely are we asked about state birds. Thanks to the Hornbill Festival, many people may think the hornbill is Nagaland's state bird. It isn't. Nagaland's state bird is Blyth's tragopan, a kind of pheasant. The hornbill is a state bird in Arunachal and Kerala. Since 2012, Delhi's state bird has been the house sparrow. (Before that, Delhi had no state bird.) One needs to specify that it's the house sparrow (Passer domesticus), since there are other sparrows.

It's odd that Delhi's state bird should be a sparrow, since sparrows have vanished from Delhi. From 2010, March 20 has also been celebrated as World Sparrow Day. Some 50 years ago, when we used to be students in Delhi, sparrows were a common sight. No longer. I presume students still declaim from Hamlet, "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow." One shouldn't blame providence for the fall of the house sparrow. It has more to do with human development and urbanisation.

One can go to Goraiya Gram to see a sparrow. "Goraiya" means a house sparrow and this village for sparrows has been set up in Garhi Mandu forest, one of the four city forests in Delhi. There are many words for sparrow in Sanskrit. The most common is chataka. But the one I like most is grihalbhuj, since it captures the nature of a house sparrow. It is a bird that feeds on offerings strewn around the house.

There is a long list of reasons cited for the fall of the sparrow. Some of them are not immediately obvious. In 1898, there was an international conference on horse-dung. There were an estimated 3,00,000 horses in London in 1900 and some 1,70,000 in New York. One needed to handle the horse-dung and urine. There were concerns that urban centres would be swamped under heaps of dung. This didn't happen, because automobiles drove horses out of business and eventually, horse traffic was banned. These work-horses were fed grain and grain had spillages, which sparrows fed on.

On the net, I found a delightful essay by WH Bergtold, written in 1921 (published in *The Auk*) and titled, 'The English Sparrow

(Passer domesticus) and the Motor Vehicle'. "Fifteen years ago one could see on any of the crowded business streets of Denver, dozens, nay, hundreds of English Sparrows, and the air was then resonant with their shrill notes of love, war and alarm; ... To what can this changed condition be attributed? Increase of enemies, mortality by disease, changing environment, or lessening of food supply, all of these, and perhaps more, might be cited as possible causes... Obviously, there is but one cause to which one can attribute the great shrinkage in the equine population of this city, namely the displacement of the harnessed horse by the motor vehicle; ... While it has been almost unnoticed, it has been none the less certain and effective; the self-propelled vehicles of a city affect the sparrow not only through starvation, but probably also through making the species' street life so hazardous and fatal as to drive it largely out of the business areas." You should read the entire essay. As I said, reasons you won't immediately think of, reminding you of Ian Malcolm's butterfly effect.

There will be a host of reasons cited by ornithologists. But I wonder about nests built by sparrows. When we were young, houses had ventilators and invariably, sparrows built nests in ventilators, sometimes, on tops of ceiling fans. I can't remember, in an age of air-conditioning, the last time I saw a ventilator. Modern urban architecture robs sparrows of their nesting sites. Humans migrate from rural areas to urban. I guess sparrows have taken the reverse route. I have seen sparrows outside Delhi. The State of India's Birds report shows there is still a declining trend (in number of sparrows), but with some reversal in recent years. There is a greater concern about sparrows and something like Eco Roots Foundation provides nests and people have taken to feeding sparrows. Other than architectural design, there are other factors. Where will sparrows get food? Home gardens have virtually vanished in metros. Insecticides and pesticides have got rid of insects. I remember an article from Down to Earth. To quote, "Subramanya, a Sacon (Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History) member in the National Wetland Conservation Programme and currently working with the University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore, confirms the decline of sparrows in Bangalore. He attributes it to the lack of nesting sites in modern concrete buildings, disappearing kitchen gardens and the non-availability of a particular larva (Helicoverpa armigera), associated with the field bean... Formerly, urban households in India used to buy field beans as pods in vegetable markets. When the pod was broken, larvae came out, to be promptly devoured by sparrows. But now that fresh seeds are available in packets, these larvae have disappeared, depriving the sparrow."

If the house sparrow loses its food and habitat, what can it possibly do, but to move to Goraiya Gram?

The writer is chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the PM. Views are personal



Not mine or yours, ours

Sabke Ram listens, sabke Ram teaches us the power of empathy

IN GOOD FAITH BY NANDITESH NILAY

INAUGURATING THE RAM temple in Ayodhya on January 22, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said this was *sabke* Ram. Nothing tests this more powerfully than the campaign trail when everything, from the sacred to the profane, is fiercely contested. For almost 100 days, we, the people, will become we, the voters. Our identity will revolve around what we will do in the privacy of the polling booth, how many numbers will we add to whose kitty. It's against this charged backdrop, amid this noise, that I listened to my family's wishes and went with my parents to visit Ayodhya.

It is challenging to frame divinity in mere words but what we heard in the temple bells were strains of a music that rose above the noise of slogans, campaign microphones, or speeches. In the spring air, in the presence of the *bal roop* of Ram, watching my parents pray, there was an unmistakable sense of togetherness, of a family. And also of a humanity that transcended our identities of caste, community, yes, even religion.

In an interview with *The Indian Express* last year as the finishing touches were being given to the main temple, Nripendra Mishra, former Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and chairperson of the construction committee under the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, framed the message from Ayodhya: "One, it should not be framed as a victory — yes, there was euphoria amongst a very large community of people in India and outside who felt *apna time aa gaya*. And there were many who

guided me... and they said, look, Ram achieved *maryada purushottam* not when he was child or when he was to become king, but in the 14 years he was in vanvas. And, what did he do there? Through his action, he tried to leave messages for the society — live harmoniously, live as *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*... Another message was to try and make something which is for everybody... there is a plan to display events of Ram justifying his achievements of *maryada purushottam*... How he was a great person of truth... the principles which bring people closer to what is *sanatan*." And, above all, how the unanimous judgment of November 2019, is perhaps one "glowing example of how the heat, the temperature, and the emotions of the nation, got absorbed by the judiciary... a judgment where, I think, there were no winners or losers."

Of course, this will be contested. There will be many who don't belong to the Hindu faith who will question this, who see the temple as the result of a deeply divisive movement that has also seen violence and loss of lives — how can it be their own? That's why Mishra's words struck a chord that afternoon as we offered prayers. It became clear that if we are a country defined by the spirit of togetherness, Ram may be a god of a certain faith but *sabke* Ram doesn't belong to one community or political party. *Sabke* Ram means being Ram which, in turn, means being good. Ram, far from symbolising a religious identity, becomes a powerful and historical manifestation of the social and emotional presence of an ideal

human being. We heard of Noor Alam at Ayodhya who's busy providing shelter and food to thousands of devotees. In a Muslim family, a child was born on the day of the *pran pratishtha* and was named Ram-Rahim. These may be individual anecdotes but they tell a larger story. It's not a new story, it lies between the lines on the pages of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Maharshi Valmiki and later Goswami Tulsidas, both were successful in their own way in creating *sabke* Ram: More as a human being, virtuous and equipped with a moral lens that never got blurred, come what may. Indeed, the exemplary attributes of Ram in the Ramayana are more social, spiritual and philosophical than religious. Ram never preaches but always illustrates the spirit of human values.

Sabke Ram listens, *sabke* Ram teaches us the power of empathy; *sabke* Ram becomes *sabhi* ke Ram — because listening to others is the hallmark of leadership. The most important expectation in a democracy is lending an ear to the common man, nurturing the ability to listen with empathy to the last person — be it in the home or Parliament.

Ram is *sabke* because he's for all species. He led a team of monkeys, birds and beings. He transcended identities, he was ready to recognise the effort of the squirrel and the vulture. Caste or gender was never a barrier: Shabri and Kevat were both close to Ram. Ram was equally respectful of the sea, the mountains. In the history of scriptures,

no other character has been so complete and compelling as Ram. One moment, Ram is apprehensive for Sita, the other moment he's in tears for Lakshman. Ram is us, Ram is every person — *sabke* Ram.

An election is about one-upmanship, every victory gets vested with a larger meaning, defeat is pushed to the shadows. The imperative of electoral discourse is to win the argument, win the day, win the seat, take power — the very values that Ram transcends. Ram orders Lakshman to go and learn from Ravana, his moral opposite. Today, this is unthinkable. A victory is leveraged by the victor to further vanquish the defeated, to put them down. For *sabke* Ram, no victory was bigger than human dignity.

Ram saw everyone as a source of learning. Victory is no victory if it stokes hatred and feeds the ego. This is the triumph of humility. The statue of Ram consecrated in Ayodhya asks us to revere this Ram, the one who teaches us to learn, to be humble, to see no one as an enemy but as a fellow being. This is the Ram who is not mine or yours — but ours. So when we emerged from the temple, my family and I, there was no need to chant *Jai Shri Ram* aloud, the sound of silence was enough. I left Ayodhya along with my family, a little more humane.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CURING MEDICINE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'To be a doctor' (IE, April 10). A medical career comes with both respect and money. No wonder, in a rapidly changing world, it remains a big draw for the youth. Limited seats and a large number of aspirants make it a virtually "do or die" battle for many. Giving paramedics the required training and legal support, and thus, somewhat narrowing the doctor-patient ratio will not solve the problem. The youth either need to be persuaded away from the medical profession onto more lucrative ventures or the field must be made capable to absorb the incoming applicants. This, in the continuously shrinking job market, is a huge task.

Vijai Pant, Hempur

NO POLICY DELAY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Laws for a better climate' (IE, April 10). The Supreme Court on several occasions in the past few decades has relied on the Constitution to uphold human rights pertaining to environmental issues. The enactment of legislation and framing of policies, inclusion in manifestos of political parties in the fray for Lok Sabha polls and avoiding a delay between environmental jurisprudence and policy are the way forward.

SS Paul, Nadia

INDIA VS THE WORLD

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A high

point' (IE, April 10). BSE Sensex crossing the 75,000 mark was bound to happen. But what makes it noteworthy is the speed of ascent. It's taken less than four months to jump from the 70,000 mark it crossed in mid-December. Not only is India the fastest growing major economy, it's also got a four-decade track record of GDP growth that puts it in a small league of economies. It's a time of uncertainty for many major democracies heading for elections in 2024. India, however, stands out as an exception as most experts are sure of the election result. So, one of the factors that pushes back stock prices in an election year, gets nullified.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

BIDEN DOCTRINE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'An elusive grand bargain' (IE, April 10). The Biden doctrine of responsible competition can be used by India as a template to manage the Indo-China relationship. Given the heavy interdependence in commercial spheres and geographical compulsions, it makes sense for India to maintain a functional and transactional relationship with China. The on-going LAC issue is a legacy problem and it need not form the basis for an existential enmity. India, at this juncture of its economic trajectory needs at least a decade of stability along its northern borders. For this approach to be effective, India must deal with China from a position of strength and self-confidence.

Shubhada H, via email



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Up, up and away!

Proving India's resilience and potential, Sensex breaches the 75,000-mark for the first time

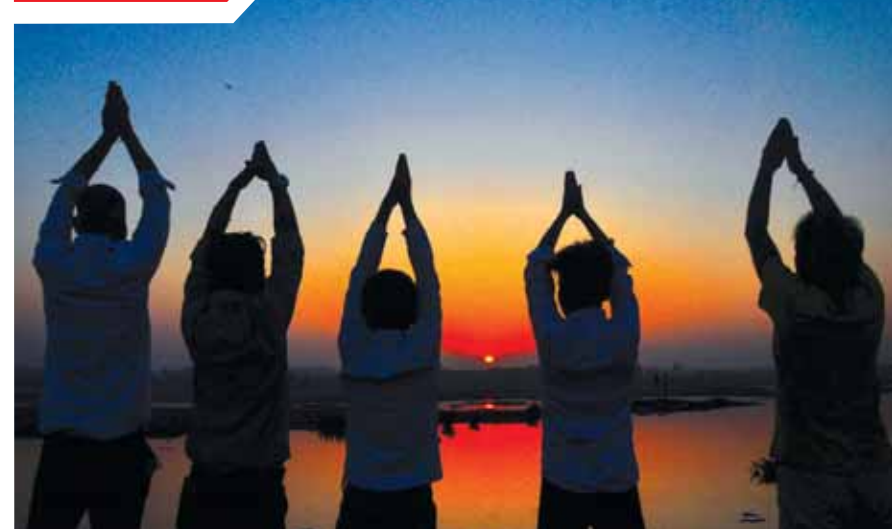
The Indian stock market is booming, and how! Putting a big smile on the faces of investors, Sensex — India's benchmark stock index — has unprecedentedly crossed the 75,000-points milestone. This surge is a testament to Indian economy's robustness and investor confidence in it. The Sensex jump to new heights can be attributed to a confluence of factors. One, the economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic has instilled optimism among investors. With the relaxation of lockdown measures and the successful rollout of vaccination campaigns, economic activities regained momentum and fuelled investor confidence. Corporate earnings have also played a pivotal role in driving the market rally. Many companies across sectors have reported stellar financial performances, which has bolstered investor sentiment and contributed to the bullish momentum. Favourable global trends have also provided tailwinds to the Indian stock market. Positive developments in global markets, coupled with liquidity inflows from foreign institutional investors (FIIs), have amplified the buoyancy of Indian equities. With happy indicators in major economies and accommodative monetary policies by Central banks, investors have increasingly turned their attention towards emerging markets.



The proactive stance of the Government in implementing structural reforms and initiatives to stimulate economic growth has also been instrumental in driving investor confidence. Measures aimed at enhancing the ease of doing business, attracting foreign investment and revitalising key sectors such as infrastructure have been received well by market participants. Though it is a great achievement for Indian economy, it is not

the only important thing. The policymakers must watch out for unemployment, rising inflation and rising numbers of MSMEs shutting down for one reason or the other. The Indian economy is still limping back to normal after the pandemic and any negative news could embolden bears, thus wiping off the gains overnight. It has happened in the past and it may happen in future. This perspective is not one of cynicism but of prudence. Investors have reaped substantial gains from the rally but they must exercise caution amidst heightened volatility. For corporates, favourable market conditions may present opportunities for fundraising and expansion. The buoyant stock market augurs well for the broader economy as it can spur consumption, attract foreign capital and stimulate economic activity. Looking ahead, market participants must remain attuned to evolving dynamics such as inflationary pressures, geopolitical tensions and other unforeseen eventualities. Policymakers must continue their efforts to address structural challenges and create an enabling environment for sustainable growth. Indeed, the historic breach of 75,000 points underscores the resilience of the Indian economy. As Sensex continues its ascent, it reaffirms India's status as an attractive investment destination and underscores the collective endeavour to shape a brighter future for the nation's economy.

PICTALK



Devotees offer prayers to the rising sun during the 'Chaitra Navratri' festival, in Moradabad

PTI

Cultivating sustainability through urban farming

Urban farming, encompassing the cultivation of crops within cities, not only yields locally sourced produce but also has environmental benefits

Climate change is no longer a distant concern but a current reality demanding immediate attention. Its effects, from extreme weather to rising sea levels and resource scarcity, are being felt globally. However, within these challenges lies an opportunity for eco-conscious decisions. Urban farming, once viewed as a niche, is now recognised as a practical response to mitigate climate change impacts. By converting urban spaces into sustainable ecosystems, urban farming has the potential to transform our environmental stewardship and build a more resilient future. The need to address climate change is urgent. The WHO estimates that by the 2030s, there could be an additional 250,000 deaths annually due to climate-related diseases like malaria and coastal flooding. Rising temperatures, melting ice caps and more frequent extreme weather events are among the outcomes of unsustainable practices. The time to take action is now and urban farming offers a promising path forward.



Urban Farming: Urban farming involves the cultivation of crops within and around cities. This practice not only provides fresh, locally grown produce but also has numerous environmental benefits. By reducing the need for long-distance transportation of food, urban farming helps to lower carbon emissions. In addition, the use of organic farming practices can improve soil health and biodiversity, further contributing to climate resilience.

Transforming City Spaces One of the key advantages of urban farming is its ability to convert underutilised city spaces into organic food production centres. Vacant lots, rooftops, balconies and even vertical surfaces can be

repurposed for farming, creating green spaces in the heart of urban areas. This not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of cities but also helps to mitigate the urban heat island effect, which can exacerbate the impacts of climate change.

Community Engagement Urban farming also promotes community engagement and social cohesion. By bringing people together to grow and share food, urban farms can strengthen social bonds and create a sense of belonging. It is time to embrace urban farming as a solution to climate change and work towards a more sustainable future.

underserved communities.

Policy Support

To fully realise the potential of urban farming, supportive policies and incentives are needed. While some state Governments have extended their support by providing subsidies and thus creating an enabling environment for urban farming, policymakers can help to scale up this sustainable practice and make it accessible to more people.

Bottomline

Urban farming has the potential to be a game-changer in the fight against climate change. By transforming city spaces into sustainable havens, urban farming can help reduce carbon emissions, improve food security and enhance the resilience of urban areas. However, realising this potential will require concerted efforts from policymakers, communities and individuals. It is time to embrace urban farming as a solution to climate change and work towards a more sustainable future.

(The writer is founder & CEO of CEF Group, views are personal)



MANINDER SINGH

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Could women sway general elections?

With a burgeoning number of female voters, women stand poised to wield significant influence in the upcoming general elections



KALYANI SHANKAR

Can Women voters decide the upcoming 2024 General elections? Their growing number of voters and favourable legislation, such as the one-third reservation for women in Parliament and legislatures, make them an important segment. Political parties are trying to attract women voters, a critical segment. To do this, they are offering various benefits. According to a recent report, the high turnout of women voters could significantly impact the 2024 elections. The report predicts that by 2047, women's voter turnout may reach 55 per cent, while men's turnout could decrease to 45 per cent.

It is worth noting that B.R. Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution, once stated that "Political power is the key to all social progress." This statement holds today, as women cannot expect to receive justice unless they have a say in decision-making processes. Women in India are demanding more measures to remove gender bias. Last September, the Parliament passed the Women's Reservation Bill to empower women. This bill ensures a 33 per cent reservation for them in Parliament and state legislatures. Both the Congress and the BJP claimed credit for the bill's passage. Congress leader Sonia Gandhi said, "It is our bill." 2008, Sonia Gandhi passed it in the Upper House but failed to do so in the Lok Sabha. Last September, PM Modi introduced this bill with pride and it passed almost unanimously after 27 years. Due to the delay in the census and delimitation process, the bill will be implemented only after four years.

Since gaining independence, India has had only one woman Prime Minister and 15 women Chief Ministers. However, the number of women contesting elections has increased sevenfold since the 1950s and women's representation in the Lok Sabha has risen from 5 per cent to 15 per cent. The situation is similar globally. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, women comprise roughly 26 per cent of lawmakers worldwide. In Rwanda, on the other hand, women hold more than 60 per cent of seats. In 2008, Rwanda



became the first country to have a female-majority parliament. Women hold only 14 per cent of parliamentary seats in India. There are 78 and 24 women members in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, respectively. India ranks 149th among 193 nations regarding women's representation in the lower house of the Parliament. Moreover, less than 16 per cent of MLAs in each state of India are women.

One significant measure in India was that in 1993, one-third of Panchayat seats were reserved for women, which has now been expanded to 50 per cent in most states. Nearly a million women serve as sarpanches at the grassroots level. These sarpanches could climb up the ladder with their gross root experience. The upcoming General Elections will have 96.88 crore voters, with over 47 crore being women. 1.41 crore of the 2.63 crore new voters are female. More women have registered to vote in Kerala, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland.

Despite the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill, the participation of women in politics has not significantly



IT'S ESSENTIAL TO UNDERSTAND THAT NOT ALL WOMEN WILL VOTE FOR FEMALE CANDIDATES. POLITICAL PARTIES SHOULD FOCUS ON ADDRESSING CRUCIAL ISSUES RATHER THAN RELYING ON INCENTIVES TO WOO VOTERS

increased. While political parties supported the bill, they only allocated a small percentage of their tickets to women, typically 10-15 per cent in the recent Assembly polls. For the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, BJP granted only 67 tickets to women out of 421 candidates in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. However, some chief ministers such as Mamata Banerjee, Nitish Kumar and Arvind Kejriwal have recognised the benefits of promoting women's empowerment. To remove the gender bias, Parties need to field more women leaders and candidates for Women's empowerment. However, some argue that women tend to win if they come from known political families. Many leaders also do not look beyond their families to pick candidates. It's essential to understand that not all women will vote for women candidates. Political parties should focus on addressing crucial issues rather than relying on incentives to woo voters. Many parties offer incentives to women voters but do not give women equal representation in their candidate lists. Parties should reserve at least one-third of their tickets for women as stipulated by the women's reservation legisla-

tion. Additionally, parties should discourage the preferential treatment given to political dynasties.

Indian political parties are targeting women voters with various schemes and benefits. Congress in Karnataka offers women free bus travel and a Rs 2,000 cash incentive. In Himachal Pradesh, women aged 18-60 will receive Rs 1,500 monthly. Delhi's 'Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojna' will provide Rs 1,000 monthly to women over 18 years. TMC in West Bengal has announced a remuneration hike. AAP and Congress offer incentives like Rs 1,000 monthly payment and Rs 1 lakh annual allowance before the Lok Sabha elections.

Political accountability towards women starts with achieving gender balance in decision-making, promoting women's more substantial presence and influence in political parties and advancing gender equality issues in party policies and platforms. Education is also important for all these. We need governance reforms that are sensitive to gender issues. These will enable elected officials to be more responsive.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BE READY FOR BLACK SWAN EVENTS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Be ready for black Swan events, expect unexpected: Army chief", published on April 9, this is my response. The term "Black Swan events" encapsulates highly impactful occurrences that defy prediction and often induce significant disruption. Originating from Nassim Nicholas Taleb's work, it characterises rare, unforeseen events with profound consequences. Recently, Army Chief Gen Manoj Pande highlighted the imperative of readiness for such unpredictable incidents, emphasising the need for adaptability and cross-functional collaboration within the military. He emphasised the Indian Army's ongoing transformative initiatives, particularly focusing on the absorption of technology in 2024. The Army Chief's remarks signify a proactive approach to address the evolving security landscape and the challenges posed by unpredictable events. By advocating for readiness and technological integration, Gen Pande aims to enhance the military's ability to effectively assess threats and respond within the national security framework. Ultimately, his vision encompasses a strong and self-sufficient defence infrastructure capable of adapting to unforeseen challenges while maintaining strategic balance and national security.

Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

AAP'S ELECTORAL PITCH

Madam — Apropos the news article "CAA: Why the hullabaloo?" published on April 7, this is my response. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has ignited the pre-election landscape with their latest campaign, 'Jai Ka Jawab Vote Se' (Respond to the jail with your vote), rallying support against what they perceive as BJP's oppressive tactics. The fervent appeal, spearheaded by AAP leaders including Sandeep Pathak and Sanjay Singh, aims to galvanise public sentiment in favour of Arvind Kejriwal, portraying him as a champion of the people. The timing is strategic, following Kejriwal's

Ending poverty is a pipe dream



Apropos the news article, "India's wealth inequality is rising", published on April 9, this is my response. The Billionaire Raj headed by India's wealthiest few is now more unequal than the British Raj headed by colonialist forces. Fearfully enough, such a huge and wide gap in economic wealth in India will facilitate a disproportionate influence on society and Government. Rising inequality in wealth will lead to slower poverty reduction, undermine the sustainability

of economic growth, compound the inequalities between men and women and drive inequalities in health, education and life chances.

Governments can start to reduce inequality by rejecting market fundamentalism, opposing the special interests of powerful elites and changing the rules and systems that have led to where we are today. Robust reforms must be implemented in such a way that money and power are redistributed to level the playing field. There are two main areas where changes to policy could boost economic equality — taxation and social spending. India has committed to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and to ending extreme poverty by that year. But, unless we make an effort to first contain and then bridge the gap between levels of extreme inequality, the dream of ending extreme poverty will remain a pipe dream.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

recent stint in jail and a symbolic fasting protest staged by AAP members. Their narrative emphasises Kejriwal's dedication to Delhiites, highlighting achievements in education, healthcare and public services. The call to voters is poignant, urging them to recall Kejriwal's face as they cast their ballots, juxtaposed with the transformative changes brought about under his leadership. As the Lok Sabha elections loom, AAP's rallying cry echoes louder, framing the electoral battle as a showdown between grassroots democracy and authoritarian tendencies, encapsulated in the slogan: vote against jail, vote for change.

Pankaj Bajua | Pune

HOMEOPATHY'S LEGACY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Unlocking the strength of homeopathy", published on April 10, this is my response. The journey of homeopathy from skepticism to global recognition embodies a profound evolution in medical understanding. Dr. Samuel Hahnemann's groundbreaking discovery in 1796 laid the foundation for a healing system that challenged conven-

tional medical norms. The principle of 'like cures like' illuminated a path towards holistic healing worldwide.

The event, graced by the esteemed presence of the Hon'ble President of India, symbolises the growing acknowledgment of homeopathy's significance in healthcare. In an era of advancing scientific exploration, homeopathy's individualised approach resonates deeply. Rejecting the 'one-size-fits-all' model, it acknowledges the uniqueness of each individual, offering tailored treatments for holistic well-being. India's leadership in homeopathic research underscores the sector's global impact, while the integration of homeopathy into mainstream medicine promises universal accessibility to effective healthcare solutions. On this World Homeopathy Day, let us embrace the vision of a future where holistic healing enriches lives worldwide, guided by the timeless wisdom of homeopathy.

Priyanka Sharma | Bhubaneswar

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



Pandora's box

More revelations from electoral bonds necessitate a thorough investigation

In the last month or so, ever since the State Bank of India was compelled by the Supreme Court of India to release information on donations via electoral bonds to political parties, emerging details have only confirmed the worst fears of naysayers in regulatory and policy-making institutions about the scheme before it was introduced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in 2018. A joint investigation that included *The Hindu* found that at least 33 companies that had aggregate losses of over ₹1 lakh crore from 2016-17 to 2022-23 had donated close to ₹582 crore, of which 75% went to the ruling BJP. Loss-making companies were donating substantial sums; profit-making firms were making donations exceeding their aggregate profits; some donor firms were not reporting data on net profits or direct taxes; some newly incorporated firms were making donations before the stipulated three-year period (after being formed) – the list of the rule-breaking and suspect sources of funding is significantly large. The nature of these donations raises several questions. Were these loss-making firms fronts to launder money? Were the firms that did not report profit/losses shell companies? Were donor firms that made significant profits – but did not pay net direct taxes in aggregate for a significantly long period – engaged in tax evasion? These supplement other questions raised earlier – was the fact that a number of firms, under investigation by agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate and the I-T Department, were significant donors for the ruling party, an indication that these agencies were being used as a means to ensure *quid pro quo*?

RBI and Election Commission of India officials were emphatic in their apprehensions that the bonds scheme could be utilised in money laundering and tax evasion. Yet, the Union Finance Ministry went ahead with the scheme. In the five and a half years of its operation, thousands of crores were encashed by political parties via electoral bonds, with the BJP receiving the lion's share. While the Court must be lauded for ending an opaque scheme with serious issues, the fact that large amounts were donated from dubious sources before every election is an indictment of the nature of campaign financing in place during this period. With the polity in India busy campaigning for the general election, it is up to the electorate to assess the effects of the electoral bonds scheme. But, more importantly, once the election is over and governance takes over, Parliament and the regulatory institutions must conduct a thorough investigation into the nature of donations and whether the donors and recipients broke laws. The judiciary must prod these institutions. A clean-up of campaign and electoral financing is a must for a healthy democracy.

Crowded field

Maharashtra politics has metamorphosed beyond recognition

In the extraordinary political landscape in Maharashtra, there are two factions of the Shiv Sena and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), each facing each other as part of opposing alliances around the two national parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress. The Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT) is set to contest 21 constituencies, the Congress 17 and the NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) 10 of the 48 Lok Sabha segments in the State, under the banner of the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA). These parties managed to arrive at an amicable settlement as each made significant concessions to ensure unity against the Mahayuti coalition, comprising the BJP, the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena, and Ajit Pawar's NCP, that has yet to announce its seat-sharing arrangement. The MVA had a tough time reaching this agreement as there were multiple aspirants for each seat. The Shiv Sena (UBT) will be fielding candidates in all five regions of the State – Konkan, western Maharashtra, Marathwada, north Maharashtra, and Vidarbha – while the NCP (SP) will concentrate its resources on seats with a higher win probability, largely in the sugar belt of western Maharashtra. The Congress's seats are distributed across Vidarbha, western Maharashtra, and Marathwada, leaving the entire Konkan region and most of the Mumbai seats to the other two allies.

In 2019, the united Sena was an ally of the BJP and the united NCP, an ally of the Congress. Mr. Thackeray's switching sides to the Congress-NCP triggered new political forces, and the opportunistic shifts and splits within the Sena and NCP are turning into more enduring arrangements. Troubles are far from over, however, and in many constituencies, the alliances will have to manage resentment and rebellion. The Pawar family is split between two parties, and Ajit Pawar has fielded his wife, Sunetra, against his cousin Supriya Sule in Baramati, the family stronghold. The Lok Sabha elections will be the first test of the popularity of various leaders and formations that have dramatically metamorphosed beyond recognition in the last five years. The Congress, in its enthusiasm to preserve its partnership with the Sena (UBT) and senior Pawar's NCP, ended up losing some of its leaders who could not be given a ticket to contest. The MVA is also trying to keep Prakash Ambedkar's Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) within its fold, though it has not been given any seats. The State is critical to the BJP's national calculations also – it won 23 seats in 2019. Its alliance with factions of the Sena and the NCP is going to be tested and its campaign will mostly pivot around Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Katchatheevu demands thinking outside the box

In his first term in office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi entrusted to his colleague and then Union Minister of State for Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises, Pon Radhakrishnan, the task of finding a solution to the Indian fishermen's issue with Sri Lanka. Mr. Radhakrishnan had invited 200 fishermen from Rameshwaram to hold discussions with the officials concerned in New Delhi. As he was aware of this writer's work on the subject, Mr. Radhakrishnan invited this writer too. In a public meeting at the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s headquarters, 19 of the fishermen spoke about the ceding of Katchatheevu and how Indian fishermen were being shot by the Sri Lankan Navy. When this writer's turn came, he complimented the fishermen for their lucid speeches. But he added that none of them had touched upon the relevant problem. At this point he asked: "Do the Sri Lankan Tamil fishermen have the right to fish in their waters?" There was stunned silence in the hall.

From the perspective of Tamil Nadu, the root cause of the problem is a conflict of interests. On the one side are the two governments which do not want to reopen the issue of Katchatheevu. On the other side are the Indian fishermen who will not easily give up a means of livelihood which they have enjoyed for several years.

There are two interrelated issues that should be kept in mind. First, the unilateral scrapping of a bilateral agreement will have profound consequences not only on India-Sri Lanka relations but also with several of India's other neighbouring countries. Bilateral agreements have a sanctity of their own and cannot be scrapped based on the whims and fancies of every party in power. At the same time, the Centre should be urged to take immediate steps to ensure the livelihood of fishermen on both sides of the Palk Strait. It would be unwise to attempt to create a Berlin Wall in the Palk Strait. India and Sri Lanka are like Siamese twins. What afflicts one will affect the other.

The quest for a peaceful solution

This writer's research on the subject began in early 1990. The objective was to find a peaceful solution so that the livelihood of the fishermen was not in jeopardy. The greatest problem was that all the primary sources relating to Katchatheevu had been taken away by New Delhi. At that time there was no Right to Information Act and this writer had to rely on secondary sources and interviews with the lead players.

In 1974, Atal Bihari Vajpayee was in the Opposition. In a debate in the Lok Sabha, he characterised the gifting of Katchatheevu as *Chhoodan*. He asked BJP leader Jana Krishnamurthy to file a case in the Madras High Court seeking judicial remedy. Jana's appeal was dismissed because he could not produce even a shred of evidence to prove that Katchatheevu was a part of the Zamindari of the Raja of Ramnad and that once the Zamindari was abolished, it



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had become a part of the Madras Presidency.

After studying the pros and cons, this writer came up with two suggestions. First, get back the island of Katchatheevu on lease in perpetuity – Tin Bigha in reverse. The sovereignty of Sri Lanka would be upheld but India could use the island and the surrounding waters for the purpose of fishing as a result of lease in perpetuity. Those days, Tamil Nadu fishermen did not venture far into Sri Lankan waters. The second suggestion was to allow Indian fishermen to fish in Sri Lankan waters up to five nautical miles. There was a precedent to this. Under the 1976 Agreement, Sri Lankan fishermen were permitted to fish near the Wadge Bank, near Kanniyakumari, for three years. While the Tamil Nadu governments (both the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) accepted this writer's suggestions, the greatest obstacle was in the form of New Delhi refusing to reopen the issue.

Introduction of trawling

Another important point needs to be highlighted. In the 1960s and 1970s, India faced a severe financial crisis. Indira Gandhi gave several incentives for ventures that earned foreign exchange. At that time prawns were a great delicacy in Japan and the European countries. As a result, bottom trawlers were introduced in the Palk Bay. The ethnic conflict was a godsend for the Indian fishermen. The Sri Lankan government had banned fishing and the Tamil fishermen from Sri Lanka came to India as refugees. They were employed by trawler owners and with their guidance, Indian fishermen began venturing deep into Sri Lankan waters. India's foreign exchange earnings went up, but most of it was due to prawns that were caught in Sri Lankan waters.

The use of bottom trawlers did incalculable harm to the sea bed. The trawlers swept away everything from the sea bed, resulting in no fish being available on the Indian side of the Palk Bay. Indian fishermen have to enter Sri Lankan waters to fish. And Sri Lankan fishermen began to complain that Indian trawlers would also destroy their sea bed. What is more, bottom trawlers are banned in Sri Lanka.

The need to have good personal relations with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mrs. Bandaranaike was the main reason guiding India's Sri Lanka policy. By early 1974, Mrs. Gandhi was determined to cede the island. According to S.P. Jagota, then Director of the Legal and Treaties Division, Mrs. Gandhi overruled the views of senior officials. What is more, she was even prepared to modify the median line so that Katchatheevu would fall on the Sri Lankan side. The Agreement, however, provided for the continued use of Sri Lankan waters around the island for the purposes of fishing, but this right was also given up under the 1976 Agreement.

M. Karunanidhi's attitude, to say the least, was strange. Before the signing of the Agreement,

then Foreign Secretary Kewal Singh visited Madras to hold discussions. M. Karunanidhi should have followed the stance taken by B.C. Roy, who went to the Supreme Court of India on the issue of transfer of Berubari to East Pakistan. B.C. Roy submitted evidence that Beru Bari was an integral part of India and to give away Indian territory to a foreign country, the Constitution would have to be amended. The Court upheld the claim.

M. Karunanidhi should have filed a case in the Court and prevented the ceding of the island. Instead, he got a resolution passed by the State Legislative Assembly. A resolution on a subject exclusively under the Centre's jurisdiction is not binding, whereas a judicial decision is binding on all concerned. This writer repeatedly asked then Law Minister S. Madhavan why M. Karunanidhi did not follow the West Bengal example. There was no convincing answer. It is reasonable to conclude that New Delhi had blackmailed M. Karunanidhi into submission.

Two interrelated points must be highlighted. Even if India were to get back the island of Katchatheevu, the problems faced by Indian fishermen will continue. And, if the Sri Lankan government were to file a case in the International Court of Justice – as the Philippines did against China a few years ago – India's image in the comity of nations would take a nose dive. Let us remember that the judgment indicted China. The politicians of various hues in Tamil Nadu who are raising an outcry today about Katchatheevu should realise that the problems Indian fishermen face are the result of Indian fishermen venturing deep into Sri Lankan waters and also the excessive use of bottom trawlers, which are banned in Sri Lanka.

The need for bold decisions

Every challenge provides an opportunity. The problems in the Palk Bay can be solved only if we start thinking outside the box. Here are two suggestions. The Palk Bay is not a barrier but a bridge between India and Sri Lanka. We must convert the Palk Bay from being a contested territory to one that is a common heritage. The first essential prerequisite is for the Government of India to ban all fishing equipment which are banned in Sri Lanka. And then, we should work to ensure that fishermen can equitably enjoy the rich marine wealth. There can be a formula: Sri Lankan fishermen can fish in the Palk Bay for three days, while Indian fishermen can fish on the other three days. One day can be a holiday. Second, let us encourage the Tamil fishermen of both countries to meet, form cooperative societies, and venture into deep-sea fishing. The trawlers can be modified into vessels that can assist the mother ship.

Such joint ventures will also help repair the damage Indian fishermen have caused to the livelihood of their Tamil counterparts. It is only bold initiatives such as these that can lead to a win-win situation.

It would be unwise to attempt to create a Berlin Wall in the Palk Strait; instead, the Palk Bay must be thought of as the common heritage of India and Sri Lanka

The advent of a holistic approach to 'one health'

The interdependence between humans, animals and environment has been increasingly evident with the emergence of pandemics such as COVID-19. It is not just humans who are affected by pandemics but also livestock – an example being the outbreak of lumpy skin disease that has spread across countries.

The recent decision on the 'National One Health Mission' by the cabinet marks a milestone.

In July 2022, the Prime Minister's Science, Technology, and Innovation Advisory Council (PM-STIAC) endorsed the setting up of the 'National One Health Mission'. Since then, 13 Ministries and Departments as well as science funding agencies – this includes the Department of Science and Technology, the Department of Biotechnology (DBT), the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Department of Pharmaceuticals, and AYUSH, or Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy – the Ministries of Health, Animal Husbandry and Environment as well as Defence came together to shape the mission, taking one of the most holistic approaches to one health and pandemic preparedness in the world. There was consensus among the leadership of these Ministries to have a National Institute for One Health. Based in Nagpur, it is to be the anchor in coordinating activities nationally, and the nodal agency to coordinate international activities across the space of one health. The foundation stone of this institute was laid by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 11, 2022.

More a journey

The goals of the 'National One Health Mission' are to develop strategies for integrated disease surveillance, joint outbreak response, coordinated research and development (R&D) and ensure seamless information sharing for better control of routine diseases as well as those



Ajay Kumar Sood

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of a pandemic nature. While diseases that affect humans such as COVID-19 are well known, diseases that affect animals such as foot and mouth disease or lumpy skin disease can hit productivity and trade. Similarly, these and other diseases such as canine distemper affect wild animals and their conservation. Only a coordinated approach will ensure that we are better prepared for such diseases as well as those that can cause the next pandemic such as avian influenza or Nipah.

Pandemic preparedness is incomplete without there being a focus on strong R&D. Focused R&D can ensure that we are better prepared for emerging diseases through the development of tools such as vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics, that is critical for India and the world. This is where all the participating departments such as the DBT, CSIR, the Indian Council of Medical Research, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and the Department of Pharmaceuticals will play a role. It is not just government departments but also our academic centres and the private sector that will be the critical stakeholders in making this a reality. All these efforts can become effective only when there is close coordination between the Centre and States. Therefore, working with States will not only help them in introducing this approach in a much better way at the ground level, but the lessons also learned in the process of implementation will help in evolving an effective strategy – the approach to One Health is more a journey than a destination.

A network of laboratories

Under the mission, a national network of high-risk pathogen (Biosafety level or BSL 3 and BSL 4) laboratories has been created. Bringing such laboratories that are managed by different departments together will serve to address the disease outbreak response better regardless of

human, animal and environmental sectors. There will be better resource utilization of expensive but much-needed infrastructure but also good linking from across sectors better to tackle diseases such as Nipah that involve bats, pigs, and humans, for example.

Further, India has to augment its epidemiology and data analytic capability. Under the mission, efforts are being made to apply artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning and disease modelling to address these issues and coordinate capacity building in epidemiology across sectors. Emerging approaches such as genomic surveillance from wastewater showed promise during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will be expanded to other sentinels such as places where animals (livestock or wildlife) congregate for a broader set of diseases to be taken up so that we mainstream these approaches to be a part of routine surveillance across human, livestock and environmental sectors.

A global subject

'One Health' is a global topic. During India's presidency of the G-20, this approach was highlighted and widely endorsed by all the members to work together in specific areas such as building better surveillance capacity, analytic capability and setting up an international network of 'One Health' institutes.

'One Health' is not just limited to diseases. It concerns wider aspects such as antimicrobial resistance, food safety, plant diseases and the impact of climate change on all of these. Intersectoral topics such as 'One Health' require close engagement of not just different governmental agencies but also non-governmental organisations, academia, the private sector and also citizens. Such an approach focused on an actionable framework will further the goal of moving closer to the clarion call of 'One Earth, One Health' and 'Health for All'.

The 'National One Health Mission' is the result of recognition that only a coordinated approach will ensure a better response to disease outbreaks

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Purchase of bonds

Despite the Supreme Court of India coming down heavily on the purchase of electoral bonds as unconstitutional, it is distasteful that leading political parties flouted the Court's directives (Page 1, "20 new companies bought poll bonds, a punishable

offence" April 10). It only points to the utter disregard and indifferent attitude of political parties to judicial orders. Twenty new companies have committed an offence punishable under the law. Will the amount be reversed from the individual party's fund and credited to the

respective donor's account?
N. Visveswaran,
Chennai

Label of corruption

Top leaders in the BJP labelling the "entire INDIA bloc corrupt" (Page 1 and inside pages, April 8) is akin to 'pot calling the kettle black'. It is the BJP that is

corrupt having got the maximum donations under the opaque electoral bonds scheme. If this is not corruption, what is it? The PM Cares Fund is another mystery. All political parties barring a few are sailing in the same 'corruption' boat but the

degree of corruption varies.
A. Jainulabdeen,
Chennai

Manifestos

The imagination runs riot and even the sky is not the limit when political parties offer manifestos with more chaff than grain. Sugar-coated welfare

schemes and freebies have become the hallmarks of such exercises without addressing the fundamental issues. What is conspicuous is the lack of a clear template or vision for the uplift of the nation.
Ayyasseri Raveendranath,
Aranmula, Kerala



A thought for today

The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living

CICERO

It's Just A Scooty

SC applying the proportionality test on voters' right to know addresses a flaw in an otherwise crucial reform

Supreme Court on Tuesday overturned a Gauhati HC judgment and upheld Independent MLA Karikho Kri's 2019 election to Arunachal's assembly. In July 2023, Gauhati HC invalidated Kri's election, for not including in his nomination papers the fact that he had three vehicles.

SC made three significant observations. One, a politician has a right to privacy as much as anyone else, and need not disclose every aspect of assets. Two, the voter has no "absolute right" to know everything about a candidate, that a candidate is "not required to lay his life out threadbare" for examination by the electorate. Three, the value of what Kri had left undeclared was "minuscule" in proportion to his declared assets of ₹8.4cr. Not every non-disclosure is a cardinal omission.

Neta's right to privacy | SC has provided some shade to the much-maligned tribe of politicians. Much of the diatribe is well deserved, but for some years now, even politicians' families haven't been spared coarse public discourse. Their private tribulations and difficult relationships have been discussed in basest of manners by fellow netas and media, which no longer seems to have a red line on private lives, from sexual orientation to divorce. As SC said, right to privacy applies to "matters of no concern to voters or irrelevant to his candidature for public office".

Voter's right to know | Following powerful advocacy and an appetite for some reform in politicians' behaviour, rules for affidavits declaring assets and court cases were introduced. Regulating politician behaviour is difficult. But voters' right to know was a hard-won battle. However, as SC said in Kri's case, voters' right to know about a candidate is "not absolute". Scrutiny is important, information must be limited to matters related to public office and individual behaviour.

Proportionality & balance | Which brings one to the final point on non-disclosure. The nub of the order was the proportionality test. SC said that for a non-disclosure to be considered a defect, even a minor one, would require a sizeable asset, of value by itself, or one that would reflect upon the candidate in terms of lifestyle. Kri's three vehicles in this case were a scooty, a motorbike and an ordinary van.

No amount of regulation is likely to bridge the gap between what citizens expect, and how politicians behave. To balance the two is what SC rightly attempted in Kri's case.



Cheers, DGCA

Aviation regulator right in saying setting limits on booze intake per passenger is a job best left to airlines

Having drunk co-passengers can make flying a hellish experience. And now, post #pegates, there is the new fear that they might urinate on you. But you have enjoyed many an in-flight tittle, without at all going overboard. This is where flight crews' judgment and airline protocols' solidity are tested. So, DGCA has done right to reiterate that it is up to the discretion of airlines where to draw the line. They get to decide the upper serving limits. The corollary of course is that they bear the responsibility of judging which passengers have climbed into the plane already stoked, and should not be served even the bare minimum.

Moral ground control | This is the just, joy-respecting, individual approach. Prohibition has its basis in the undemocratic idea of collective punishment. Because some persons abuse alcohol, the right to drink is taken away from all persons. Govts passing prohibition policies do not bother with data on the percentage of abusing persons to total drinking persons. Some parts of such govts know well that if such data were to be collected, it would take all the fizz out of their case.

Calm cabin | The 2021 Capitol attack saw American Airlines temporarily banning alcohol on flights to and from Washington. This was a fair judgment call, to try to provide a calm flight environment for every passenger, and protect against mob behaviour.

Judicious landing | When an 'overtly friendly' co-passenger shifts into harassment mode, how effectively does the crew respond? This is the crux of the matter. This is what the regulator should focus on. So that everyone who drinks responsibly can keep flying enjoyably. As it is, Indians are only served alcohol *en route* to other countries. Domestic flights are bone dry. Are they any 'rulier' than international ones?



Elect-rical appliances

The Summer Dhamaka Sale is on. Heavily discount all claims

Bachi Karkaria



Grand 'open-box' sales mark all festive seasons. But nothing beats the ongoing ballot-box sale. Everyone is up for grabs; the greater the need, the bigger the bonanza offered. Here too electrical appliances are the most noticeable feature. This time much has been made of the washing machine.

Bahut Josh Party is Brand Leader No.1, wringing to the last drop Band Leader No.1's superior technology. Once rivals have been put through the 100 ripooses per minute spin cycle, they emerge limp, and are hung out to dry. Although it doesn't use a remote control and relies entirely on natural intelligence, this model is still way more state-of-the-art than any others on the electoral market. Its sales pitch constantly disses the closest contender as 'Nationally Washed-out Congress'. But here's the thing. Main rival 'I Need Drastic Intervention ASAP' bloc is highlighting this machine's USP in its own campaigns. Namely, Bahut Josh Party's near-miraculous ability to wash darkly coloured into whites you've never seen.

However, washing machines aren't the only elect-rical appliance selling like hot MPs. One can spot several other staples. The goal is to microwave your opponents, so lo-tech OTGs too can toast your own and grill the rest. 'Induction' stoves enjoy an uptick. The humble iron sees biggest price spiral. Some parties to prevent being totally crushed, others to prevent any wrinkle in ambition – everyone is smoothening out differences with allies, rivals or their own disgruntled. Steamed-up frontrunner is no exception.

Even in double-engine showpiece UP, BJP has always had to woo others. This time, it pressed its suit with state-rival BJD's Naveen Patnaik till creases showed. But TDP's Chandrababu Naidu has been 'Reddy-ly' chosen over ally YSR's Jagan Mohan.

Delhi reels under a unique power-cut: the plug has been pulled on AAP's leadership supply. Other states too are sweating on similar counts. But in Maharashtra's Baramati, there's two much Pawar at play; each shrmati vies to corner it for her own family.

Heir-conditioning has takers, but in dry poll heat, desert-ers could be cooler.

Alec Smart said: "Aruna-chal gay? Never! We'll beti bachao."

Where Do Netas Go When They Die?

To the next election campaign. As AI raises political leaders from the dead, it also raises ethical quandaries. Some famous people's wills prohibit using their likenesses

Atanu Biswas



AI is being used extensively in the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, both for campaigning and for spreading disinformation. BJP has used AI to translate Modi's speeches into eight different languages to appeal to wider audiences.

However, AI application has advanced to the point that highly popular deceased politicians are now being 'resurrected' for new purposes. In an audio message, the late Jayalalitha, who passed away in 2016, appears to be deeply critical of the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu. Meanwhile, Karunanidhi, who passed away in 2018, was the surprise speaker at the DMK youth wing conference in Salem this Jan. Then, at the launch of TR Baalu's autobiography, an AI-generated avatar of Karunanidhi, clad in his trademark black sunglasses, appeared and complimented MK Stalin on his good governance.

In the current era of generative AI, a little audio and video material are sufficient to 'recreate' a person, who can then execute any action and speak any words put in their mouths. For instance, people in New Hampshire responded to a robocall in Jan that appeared to be from US President Biden, asking Democratic voters not to show up at the polls on election day.

Now, imagine if John F Kennedy returns digitally to support Trump and his nephew Robert F Kennedy Jr, should Trump select him as his running mate in the presidential election. JFK could even endorse Biden if his AI avatar is built that way. Either way, the AI-generated JFK will look more realistic than the digital trickery that manifested JFK in the 30-year-old movie *Forrest Gump*. Clearly, this would present a significant moral and legal quandary.

Why are some deceased leaders being AI-resurrected in the backdrop of the elections? Well, recycling charismatic leaders may draw fresh attention and is certainly a more economical form of campaigning than holding traditional rallies. Party cadre may be energised when an AI avatar of a deceased popular leader encourages a political fight. Would these garner a lot of

votes though? That is a domain of unknown unknowns. And as we know, elections are the complex outcome of countless socioeconomic and political factors.

This is not the first time AI-resurrections have featured in election campaigns, though.

In Feb 2018, 17-year-old Joaquin Oliver died in the horrific school shooting in Parkland, Florida. In 2020, Oliver's parents collaborated with non-profit organisations to create a deepfake video for a campaign promoting gun safety, where Joaquin said: "Vote for politicians who care more about people's lives than the gun lobby's money."

Four years on, one can expect many deceased leaders on the campaign trail, as nearly half the world's population across 60 countries is facing an election. These are set to be 'AI elections' in many ways. For instance, an AI-resurrected Suharto, who died in 2008, campaigned in Indonesia's election this Feb, and similar instances are expected this year in India, US and elsewhere.

The purpose of bringing illusory images of deceased politicians to the campaign trail is to capitalise on their enchantment and legacy. However, there's often potential for a legal dispute over who is entitled to these images and videos. Who would decide what and whom the leader would support going forward, if at all, in a completely

new political arena that was unanticipated during the leader's lifetime? The party or the family? What happens if there are multiple heirs? The laws are unclear in many places around the globe. Multiple politicians or parties may claim the legacy of a leader.

Not all departed leaders are resurrected, of course.

Party cadre may be energised when an AI avatar of a deceased popular leader encourages a political fight. Would these garner a lot of votes though? That is a domain of unknown unknowns

This might be a test of how relevant their legacies are perceived to be by their political heirs. The parties concerned may have other reasons for not wanting to use them in this fashion.

There have been many debates on the ethics of resurrecting dead celebrities. Usually, the rights of deceased celebrities may belong to and be controlled by either family or non-family estates or licensing agencies. This may mean that, if her estate approved of the use of her image and likeness in that way, Marilyn Monroe, for instance, could play

any part in any movie or ad or support any candidate in the next US presidential election. It has come to the point where one of the classiest actors, Audrey Hepburn, has hawked a brand of chocolate, one of the greatest popular dancers of all time, Fred Astaire, dances with vacuum cleaner, and a teetotaler like Bruce Lee advertises whiskey!

To guard against these kinds of digital reconstructions, celebrities such as comedian Robin Williams put stipulations in their wills prohibiting the use of their likenesses for 25 years after their passing. "These recreations are, at their very best, a poor facsimile of greater people, but at their worst, a horrendous Frankensteinian monster, cobbled together from the worst bits of everything this industry is," wrote Zelda, William's daughter, in an Instagram post.

Either way, as AI gets more sophisticated, debates around the use of phantom images of celebrities and politicians will only intensify.

The writer is a professor at Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata



RESURRECTION FAVES: Kennedy (left) & Suharto (right)

In Haryana Dangal, Saffron's Stumble

In a state where most want guaranteed pensions & army is the biggest employer, voters have many questions for BJP, which has given tickets to three defectors

Ajay.Sura@timesgroup.com



On April 9, JJP's state chief quit, and more are expected to follow, putting a question mark on the future of the party, still in its infancy. Tremors continue in April less than a month after minor party in Haryana gov't, JJP, was shown the door by BJP and CM Manohar Lal Khattar was replaced by party leadership. Near 70, Khattar makes his debut as an LS contestant from Karnal.

The BJP veteran and RSS pracharak held the assembly segment Karnal in 2014 and 2019. But his stock slipped soon after he formed gov't with JJP's help. He and his ministers weren't allowed by protesters to even enter villages during the farmers' movement. The major gov't reshuffle may have been to beat anti-incumbency, but it's also being seen as admission by BJP high command that it was unhappy with Khattar's governance.

Yet the party seems to believe there'll be little adverse impact, since Khattar is still playing Super CM. He has retained all his private staff in CM's office – from his personal secretary to retired bureaucrat RK Khullar, who's chief principal secretary to newbie Nayab Singh Saini, who in turn hasn't been able to appoint a single bureaucrat or staff of his choice.

The main contest remains between Congress and BJP, which won all 10 seats in 2019, but faces a tough fight on most seats ahead of the May 25 poll. Five issues parties will wrestle with:

Jobs | There's anger over the Agniweer scheme, the short-term military services recruitment and release after four years of service without pension and ex-servicemen status. Army has long been the biggest employer of Haryanvi young men, for whom it's

tradition to join the armed forces. High rate of unemployment and shrinking of landholdings in the agrarian state have worsened job conditions.

Pension | The second biggest issue likely to impact election outcomes is the demand for Old Pension Scheme (OPS). Neighbouring states of Punjab and Himachal, held by AAP and Congress respectively, have announced implementation of OPS. Around 3.25 lakh employees serve in Haryana at present; there are around 4L pensioners. Per



employees' unions, whose demand is for OPS, employees and families influence over 25L votes in the state.

Quota | There's resentment among Jats over their demand for quota in govt jobs and admissions to educational institutions. Courts stayed the Jat quota Congress gov't had carved out earlier, but the belief is that BJP-led gov't made little effort to free the quota from the stay. Around 30 Jats were killed in police firing during the bloodshed in Feb 2016, during the Khattar-led BJP gov't's first term. Comparisons are being drawn to Shinde's quota to Marathas.

Polarisation | Perception that the saffron party has created divisions with its narrative of Jat vs non-Jat is persistent. BJP made all appointments to state positions considering the caste factor, which tilted a certain caste profile in its favour. The hurriedly made appointment of Saini is also being seen as BJP's bid to woo backward class votes.

Candidates, candidates | Despite close to a decade in office, state BJP still suffers a paucity of potential winners. Six of 10 BJP candidates in Haryana are imports from other parties – three recently switched parties, and three had joined BJP in 2014. Naveen Jindal and Ranjit Singh Chautala were given tickets within minutes of joining BJP from Kurukshetra and Hisar, respectively. Their main hope lies in Modi's appeal.

Congress in play | Internal rift and factionalism within Congress's mid-level isn't expected to impact their campaigning given it has strong candidates in Kumari Selja and Deepender Hooda, who're expected to restrain BJP from repeating its 2019 win. Hisar BJP MP Brijendra Singh's switch to Congress is a boost to its chances. Even JJP and INLD voters may opt for Congress given Bhupinder Singh Hooda's appeal in rural Haryana.

Congress has been talking up alleged graft during the Khattar-Chautala coalition gov't, including recruitment scams in state public service and staff selection commissions. It's looking confident, and its INDIA ally AAP, contesting on Kurukshetra LS seat, has fielded Sushil Gupta, who'll be facing former Kurukshetra MP Jindal. People got to know of Gupta and his 'Haryana connection', only after Kejriwal sent him to Rajya Sabha.

INLD, once the state's main opposition party, is unlikely to have any impact whatsoever in LS polls – party patriarch, former CM OP Chautala, is aging. And younger son and Ellenabad MLA Abhay Singh Chautala will need more time to step into his father's shoes.

Haryana (10 seats) votes on May 25

Calvin & Hobbes

LOOK AT THIS GREAT SNOWBALL! I'D SURE LIKE TO PASTE SOMEONE UPSIDE THE HEAD WITH IT.



...BUT I FIGURE EACH SNOWBALL I THROW MEANS I'LL GET ONE LESS PRESENT FROM SANTA.



I WISH I KNEW IF SANTA WAS BRINGING ME ANY UNDERWEAR..



Sacredspace



O Thou most beautiful, whose holy hands hold pleasure and pain, doer of good, who art thou? The water of existence by thee is whirled and tossed in...waves. Is it, O Mother, to restore again this universe's broken harmony that thou...art at work?

Swami Vivekananda

Capturing The Spirit Of Eid Al-Fitr

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

Eid is a festival of peace and spirituality. It is celebrated on the first day of Shawwal, the tenth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. The full name of Eid is Eid al-Fitr, which means Eid of breaking the fast. It marks the culmination of Ramadan, a month of fasting, prayer, and self-reflection.

Muslims gather in mosques and open spaces to offer congregational prayers, displaying the real spirit of brotherhood, equality, and fraternity. The poor and the rich alike are in their best attire, and their friends and relatives are invited to share this joyous occasion. Eid, thus, is not just a religious event, it is a time for community and cultural sharing. People from different backgrounds come together to share their traditions.

When Prophet Muhammad saw the

new moon of the month of Shawwal, he said, 'O God, make this moon a moon of peace for us.' With these words, he expressed the true spirit of fasting: to promote spiritual values among people and create a peaceful environment in society.

There is no prescribed ritual for Eid celebration except for the two units of congregational prayers, in which the followers ask God to bestow His blessings on humanity and help all men and women promote a healthy society. After praying, followers visit their relatives, neighbours, and friends, exchanging greetings, 'May the peace and blessings of God be upon you.' Gifts of sweets distributed on this day represent the true spirit of the festival. The Prophet observed that an

exchange of gifts promotes love in society. Eid al-Fitr concludes Sawm, the ritual of fasting for the whole month of Ramadan. It signifies the successful completion of Ramadan. Hence, it is a day of thanksgiving and jubilation. It is with this spirit that Eid is observed all over the world.

Eid is also a festival of charity, reflecting the spirit of generosity and compassion. The Prophet of Islam describes Ramadan as 'the month of compassion'. One of the prescribed forms of charity observed at the end of this month is Sadaqa al-Fitr. Its purpose is that

even the less privileged can have the means to celebrate Eid along with the rest of the followers. It serves as a form of training to promote universal brotherhood. That is why the Prophet of

Islam gave alms and provided food for the less privileged and made it obligatory for all Muslims on this day.

Eid is also a festival of socialisation. Any gathering serves such a purpose, but a religious gathering acquires the colour of sanctity; this aspect of Eid highlights the importance of human interaction and brotherhood in Islam.

Eid is more than just a religious festival. Through socialisation, all followers reaffirm their bonds of love and friendship as people from different backgrounds come together. They re-establish the values of compassion, solidarity, and mutual respect.

Much like other festivals, Eid is not only a part of culture, it is also a source of promoting human values.

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan is founder of Centre for Peace and Spirituality International



THE SPEAKING TREE