



Three-pronged race

As the BRS slips, the Congress stays ahead in Telangana

With a behemoth like the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) on the wane on the one hand and frantic crossovers across party lines on the other, Telangana could well be among the most heavily contested States in South India in the general election. While the Congress won an impressive 39% votes in the Assembly election in November 2023, former Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao's BRS, which is now the principal Opposition party after a decade in power, was only two percentage points short in terms of vote share. The Congress bettered its vote share by 14 percentage points from the 2018 Assembly elections, while the BRS declined by a similar margin from a dominant 47%. But as *The Hindu* had reported then, the swing against the BRS appears to have gone both in favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress: in Adivasi dominated areas for the BJP and Muslim dominated regions for the Congress.

Moreover, in the nearly four months of Congress Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy's rule, there has been a marked change in the public's perception of the government and governance. For one, Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka, the Deputy Chief Minister and a Dalit, now occupies the official residence of the Chief Minister built by K. Chandrashekar Rao in 2016. The building has also been renamed Jyothirao Phule Praja Bhavan to counter the perception of inaccessibility and social exclusion. Sure, KCR's first deputy and Health Minister, T. Rajaiah, who was sacked within a year of taking oath, was also a Dalit. But so too was his replacement and former Education Minister, Kadiyam Srihari. While most welfare measures promised by the Congress, such as 200 units of free electricity, are yet to be implemented fully due to the Model Code of Conduct in place for the seven-phased Lok Sabha elections, the public appears to be in no hurry yet to write off the Congress. And with recent high profile defections from the BRS to the Congress, such as Mr. Srihari and Rajya Sabha Member K. Keshava Rao, who is widely viewed to be KCR's trusted lieutenant, the likelihood of the BRS matching its performance in the 2019 general election – nine seats and a 42% vote share – appears bleak. An important indicator not to be missed is the doubling of the BJP's vote share from 7% to 14% between the 2018 and 2023 Assembly elections. This points to a three-pronged race emerging in Telangana. Assaduddin Owaisi's party, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, is still a major player, though without any formal alliance. It remains to be seen how its supporters vote in the seats that it is not contesting.

Finality and justice

DMRC dispute flags need for arbitrators to be more mindful of fact and law

The Supreme Court of India has used its extraordinary powers to set aside its own judgment of 2021 and relieve the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) of an exorbitant burden of ₹7,687 crore in a dispute with a former concessionaire. The verdict vindicates the existence of the Court's curative jurisdiction on the one hand, and flags, on the other, a possible conflict between finality in litigation and the need for substantive justice. In this case, an arbitral tribunal had ruled in 2017 in favour of Delhi Airport Metro Express Private Ltd. (DAMEPL), which got the contract to construct, maintain and operate the line from New Delhi railway station to Delhi airport. DAMEPL had invoked the termination clause in its agreement in October 2012, citing the DMRC's alleged failure to cure some defects. While the DMRC invoked the arbitration clause, DAMEPL halted operations in June 2013 and handed over the line to the DMRC. Meanwhile, based on a joint application, the Commissioner of Metro Rail Safety (CMRS) issued a certificate of safety that helped revive the metro's operations. On appeal, a single judge of the Delhi High Court upheld the arbitration award against DMRC, but a Division Bench set it aside, holding that the award suffered from perversity and patent illegality. In 2021, a two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court restored the award, reversing the High Court Bench's findings in favour of the DMRC. A review petition was also rejected.

A curative petition is an extraordinary remedy, as it is filed after the apex Court refuses to review its judgment. There are only two main grounds for entertaining such a petition: to prevent abuse of process and to prevent gross miscarriage of justice, although it is not possible to enumerate all the circumstances that warrant it. It is founded on the principle that the court's concern for justice is no less important than the principle of finality. Under India's arbitration law, an award can be set aside only on limited grounds. It is normally inexpedient for arbitration issues to have many levels of litigation – in this case there was a statutory appeal to the High Court, and appeals to a Bench, the apex Court, a review petition and a curative petition. In the ultimate analysis, the DMRC case appears to have been rightly decided as the earlier two-judge Bench was ruled to have erred in setting aside the Delhi High Court Bench's view that the CMRS certificate was a vital piece of evidence. The outcome only underscores the importance of arbitrators and judges sitting on appeal over awards getting both fact and law right, lest commercial litigants be discouraged from arbitration due to the constant stretching of the idea of finality. Not all disputants can go up to the level of a curative petition.

“All geopolitics is local” is the unwritten rule of policymaking in the 21st century era of populism. As a result, most leaders around the world make foreign policies that ensure that there is no adverse impact on domestic politics, and if possible, even gain them some votes. However, rarely do general elections get conflated with foreign policy issues as the upcoming elections in India seem to have become.

Take, for example, the recent statements by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar calling into question the 1974 India-Sri Lanka agreement. Not only did they both castigate former Prime Ministers and their party for the decision to recognise Katchatheevu island as part of Sri Lankan territory, but the External Affairs Minister also went on to say that a “solution” must be found for the continuing “situation” Tamil Nadu fishermen find themselves in as a result of the agreement. The merits and demerits of the 1974 agreement and 1976 exchange of letters, replete with the “loss” of Katchatheevu and the “gain” of the oil rich Wadge Bank, have since been thrashed out by both sides of the political spectrum. Commentators have since pointed to government statements, Parliament and Right to Information (RTI) replies and depositions in court (on the Katchatheevu issue and fishermen's rights) that are at variance with Mr. Jaishankar's criticism of the 1974 agreement.

While the aim of the statements is to have an impact during the first phase of India's general election where Tamil Nadu will vote next week, the long-term impact that the statements will have on bilateral ties with Sri Lanka, which is headed for both presidential and parliamentary elections later, seem to have been ignored. Ties with Sri Lanka have been seeing new strength over the past few years after the Modi government extended crucial support of an estimated \$4 billion to help Colombo handle the economic crisis in the country. To have strains over a campaign issue would dampen some of the Wickremesinghe government's goodwill.

Credibility could take a hit

Other than the bilateral strain, the government's hints about reopening the 50-year-old agreement raise other international questions. Could other agreements, signed on the basis of the 1974 settlement, also be revised? Could negotiations that India is undertaking right now, or has already agreed to, such as the maritime boundary settlement with Bangladesh that was accepted by New Delhi in 2014 after a United Nations tribunal verdict, or as an Indian Opposition leader asked, the land boundary agreement (India-Bangladesh) to exchange enclaves, be revised by another government in the future? The recognition of maritime agreements by international bodies



Suhasini Haidar

such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) makes any revisions difficult. It will also put in doubt India's credibility as an interlocutor if New Delhi chooses to pursue this line after the general election. New Delhi has already seen the challenges to doing this with the World Bank-guaranteed 1960 Indus Waters Treaty. It has been five years since the Modi government threatened to revoke the treaty with Pakistan, and more than a year after New Delhi wrote to Islamabad calling for a renegotiation, but the matter has not yet moved.

On the CAA, transnational involvement

Days before the announcement of the general election, the government's decision to notify rules for the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or CAA, that it had refrained from doing since the law was passed in 2019, is another example of domestic moves that could put a dampener on otherwise strong ties with a neighbour. Although the government has consistently held that the CAA is purely a domestic law, its foreign policy implications are inescapable. It accuses India's neighbours, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, of persecuting minorities. The CAA's exclusionary nature, accepting only people of six faiths other than Muslims from the three countries, has been seen as discriminatory by countries in the neighbourhood. While ties with Afghanistan under the Taliban, and Pakistan appear to be of little consequence to New Delhi today, the accusation against a friendly government in Bangladesh is significant.

The fear over the long term, that as a result of the subsequent implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), hundreds of thousands of those believed to have come from Bangladesh could be deemed stateless citizens also has the potential to strain ties with Dhaka. There were protests against the CAA in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, but the most vociferous were in Bangladesh – during Mr. Modi's visit to Dhaka in 2021, 12 people were killed in police action against protesting mobs. While there has been no official comment from the Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh on the recent decision on the CAA by New Delhi, India's diplomats in Dhaka will have their work cut out for them if and when the policies are fully implemented.

Apart from areas where the government itself has brought foreign policy into contention at a time of the general election, there are those issues that others in the political arena are raising. In recent weeks, the Opposition has been issuing statements at regular intervals questioning the Modi government about India's standoff with China at the Line of Actual Control, and the fact that the China's People's Liberation Army has not yet vacated land that it took control of in April 2020.

The issue of alleged transnational killings by

Indian agencies is another thorn in the government's side, and is being raised internationally just as the general election gets underway. The trial of an Indian national in the United States for an alleged assassination plot to kill a Sikh political activist is expected to begin this summer. The Trudeau government in Canada is expected to do something similar as Canada alleges that ‘agents of India assassinated a Sikh community leader in British Columbia’.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has also sought to align its claims that Indian agents killed two Pakistani nationals, with the cases in the U.S. and Canada, and has endorsed a British media report that says Indian intelligence is possibly behind the killing of 20 other Sikh and Islamist separatist operatives in Pakistan. Although it is Pakistan which should be on the back foot explaining the presence of those men on its soil, New Delhi's discomfiture is underlined by the three completely different responses it has presented to Canada, Pakistan, and the U.S.

An assertion by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh that it is government policy to “kill terrorists that go into Pakistan” is at odds with India's rubbishing of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's allegations of Indian involvement in the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, India's strong retaliatory measures against Canadian diplomats in India, and New Delhi's tacit acceptance of the validity of U.S. government claims of Indian involvement in a botched assassination attempt on Gurbat Singh Pannun. Unlike its stand with Canada and Pakistan, New Delhi even agreed to examine U.S. evidence in the Pannun case and set up a “high-level” inquiry panel, for what Mr. Jaishankar called an investigation that is in “India's national security interests”.

Discretion the key

All of these issues can only be resolved discreetly, in closed bilateral negotiations, and not in the full glare of election campaign rallies and press conferences. The government must recognise that all statements it makes catch the attention of immediate neighbours, especially when it comes to territorial and sovereignty issues.

It came as a surprise to New Delhi that the Nepal government would take umbrage to the Indian gazette map, that was published in 2019, of a reorganised Jammu-Kashmir or to a mural in India's new Parliament building depicting “Akhand Bharat” – as no doubt, would any pushback from Colombo, Dhaka or Kathmandu on cartographic disputes raised during the campaign season. While the election season is relatively short, the consequences of sacrificing bilateral ties at the altar of domestic politics can, however, linger.

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A battle to save Ladakh, and all of humanity

When Ramon Magsaysay award winner (2018) and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk addressed a 30,000-strong crowd at Leh, Ladakh on March 6, 2024 to announce his 21-day climate fast, he was not just speaking to the people of Ladakh but also making an appeal to the world.

Tucked away between India's neighbours, Pakistan and China, at a height of 11,500 feet, Ladakh comprises 97% indigenous tribes, many of whom lead simple pastoral lives and depend on farming and animal rearing for a livelihood. Apart from border disputes, the Himalayan region also faces the damaging effects of climate change through floods, drought, landslides, greenhouse gases, and other pollutants.

There are about 15,000 glaciers in the Himalayan region, often referred to as the Third Pole. In spring and summer, these glaciers form an important part of the hydrological process by releasing meltwater to the Indus, the Ganga, and the Brahmaputra. The Himalayan glaciers, like those in the rest of the world, are at risk of melting due to global warming and climate change. This will affect both residents of the mountain region and those living downstream.

Infrastructure boom

In 2008, the Centre launched eight Missions under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC). One of these was under the Ministry of Science and Technology, i.e., the National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE). As the Department of Science and Technology (DST) website states, the “main objective of NMSHE is to develop a capacity to scientifically assess the vulnerability of the Himalayan region to climate change and continuously assess the health status of the Himalayan ecosystem”.

So, why has NMSHE forgotten its role of protecting the Himalayan region?

Almost as soon as Ladakh became a Union



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Territory, several mega infrastructure projects were launched at rapid pace. These included the construction of bridges, widening of roads, tunnels, railway lines, mega solar projects, a state-of-the-art airport terminal and wayside amenities to boost tourism. Among these were the 14.15 kilometre Zojila tunnel, the 230 km Kargil-Zaskar National Highway project, and a 10 gigawatt solar energy project covering 20,000 acres in the Changthang region. The Ladakh (UT) Industrial Land Allotment Policy of 2023 aims “to make UT Ladakh one of the preferred destinations for investment”.

The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has been spearheading many of these projects along with the National Highways & Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd. (NHIDCL). In its annual report of 2021-22, the NHIDCL states as its vision the following: “To fast-pace the construction of National Highways and other Infrastructure in the North Eastern Region, near border and strategic areas like Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh and also in the state of Uttarakhand and UT of Andaman & Nicobar islands”. Incidentally, all these areas are vulnerable to climate change-related disasters.

A region that has seen disasters

What is puzzling is why the various government bodies, sanctioning and executing the projects at such a feverish pace, are not paying heed to the warnings from past disasters in the mountains and learning from them.

Since 2010, there have been several disasters in the Himalayan region, with a loss of lives and livelihoods. In 2013, a cloudburst in the upper reaches of the Himalayas led to flash floods at Kedarnath, claiming 6,000 lives and sweeping away several settlements. In January 2023, disaster struck Joshimath, when water gushed down a lower slope of the mountain, submerging parts of the town. In November 2023, the rescue of 41 trapped workers in the collapsed Silkyara

tunnel project in the Himalayas garnered international attention.

Uttarakhand, where all these tragedies occurred, too has seen a slew of infrastructure projects from its formation in 2000. This has continued despite dire warnings from geologists and ecologists. A Supreme Court of India constituted expert committee even suggested that authorities limit the number of pilgrims visiting the Char Dam Himalayan shrines, at Kedarnath, Badrinath, Yamunotri, and Gangotri to carrying capacity. Carrying capacity is the maximum number of people that an ecosystem can support, without eroding it. But, instead, pilgrim numbers have only swelled every year. Some expert committees have even suggested that no hydroelectric projects are set up in the para-glacial zone.

When tragedy strikes, the human cost of environmental destruction is sadly borne by poor migrant workers in ongoing projects and by residents, tourists and pilgrims. Government bodies sanctioning the projects or the developers executing them escape the wrath of the mountains.

Scant review

What has been frustrating climate change activists is their recommendations gathering dust despite approaching the courts and the formation of expert committees. Hardly any due diligence which includes risk assessment, safety measures and geological and seismic analysis, goes into any of the multi-crore mega projects in the mountains.

In the name of development, we cannot afford to upset the fragile balance in the Himalayan ecosystem and its biodiversity. The onus is on all of us to ensure that the Himalayas and the people living under its shadow are protected.

For, Wangchuk's battle is not just about Ladakh and its people. It is a battle for all of humanity and its future generations.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Survey pre-poll findings

The Hindu-CSDS-Lokniti Pre-poll Survey 2024 findings, that “jobs, inflation” are the key issues in the Lok Sabha elections (Page 1, Opinion page, Inside pages, April 11) are hardly surprising. The common man is reeling under the burden of price rise and unemployment. Mounting income inequality

has also emerged as another major worry. However, what is surprising is that the Bharatiya Janata Party appears to be the least concerned about such issues and has been talking only in terms of ‘400 seats’ and ‘an action programme for the first 100 days in office’. That the BJP is able to get away by distracting the public from crucial

livelihood issues and instead focus on raking up divisive issues is a sad reflection of the captive state of the mainstream media. The right questions are not being asked. The Opposition parties have also failed to pin down the BJP on vital livelihood issues affecting the common man. The BJP has been allowed to get away

with the illusory image of being a crusader against corruption when it has been the major beneficiary of funds funnelled through the electoral bonds scheme. **Manohar Alembath,** Kannur, Kerala

The survey seems to have thrown up somewhat confusing results. While the primary concerns of a

majority of those surveyed are unemployment and inflation, how is it that 48% have felt that their quality of life was ‘much’ or ‘somewhat better’? It is also revealing that 55% have felt that corruption ‘has increased’. If the opinions on unemployment, price rise and corruption expressed by the survey's respondents reflect the

opinions of the broader sections of people, there may be a lot of surprises in store for our political parties. It appears that a majority of the weaker sections, irrespective of religion, caste, or gender, have not benefited from the ‘robust’ GDP growth witnessed by the nation. **Kosaraju Chandramouli,** Hyderabad

Despite the economy, how is the BJP sitting pretty?

The strengthening of Hindu identity through the construction and consecration of the Ram Mandir, the leadership factor, and the ambivalence of many voters on two issues — the Uniform Civil Code and the dilution of Article 370 — may work to the advantage of the BJP and help it weather the dissatisfaction about the economy

Suhas Palshikar, Sanjay Kumar & Sandeep Shastri

Reports based on the pre-poll survey of the Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), published in these pages on April 11, focused on the factors that had the potential to work in favour of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha elections. They indicated the possible chinks in the BJP's armour. Popular disapproval of the economic situation should be cause for worry for the BJP. However, the tenor of its rhetoric indicates that the BJP is confident of retaining its electoral ascendance. What makes the party feel so confident?

Perceptions and slogans

In the reports today, we focus on what appears to be working in favour of the ruling alliance in general and the BJP in particular. Drawing from the Lokniti-CSDS pre-poll survey, several indicators have the capacity to tilt the balance in favour of the ruling party. The perception of an improved image of India both within the country and abroad, the noticeable acceptance of key strategies, and a visible ambivalence regarding certain issues have the possibility of helping the BJP. But above all, the strengthening of Hindu identity and the BJP's clear identification with the Ram Mandir issue could help the party weather the dissatisfaction caused by the economy. In the next part of this series, we will also focus on the leadership factor, the glue holding all the positive factors together

for the BJP.

The question of India's global image is something that the BJP can take advantage of. About 8% of the respondents said that the one thing they liked about the Narendra Modi government was its work on this front, i.e., of creating an international image.

A related strong point, though relevant to a somewhat narrow social section, is the successful organisation of the G20 Summit. While many respondents had not heard of the G20 Summit held in New Delhi, those in the cities and with high exposure to the media were aware of the event. Among those who were aware of the event, close to seven of every 10 were positive about its impact. They felt that it was reflective of India's growing power. They also saw it as a foreign policy achievement that would help foster trade and boost the economy. Though this endorsement may appear thin, it was upheld by the upper sections of society and can help the BJP build the perception that things are going in the right direction.

The BJP's key slogan for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections was 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'. After the party's victory in 2019, the Prime Minister added 'Sabka Vishwas' to this slogan. In the pre-poll survey, this aspiration resonated with over three-fourth of the respondents. An overwhelming majority of respondents appeared to support the idea that India must remain a country where people following different religions can live and practice their faith freely. Those with greater access



An evocative issue: Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat offer prayers before the idol of Ram Lalla during the consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on January 22, 2024. PTI

to education appeared to endorse this statement more strongly.

Ambivalence on issues

A possible step in the direction of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), and the dilution of Article 370, are the two planks that might bring satisfaction to the BJP's more traditional voters. Moreover, the ambivalence of many voters on these two issues may work to the advantage of the BJP.

On the UCC, more than half the respondents had not heard of it or preferred not to express an opinion on it. While more than one-fourth said that it will empower women, less than two of every 10 said that it may interfere with religious traditions.

On the dilution of Article 370, four of every 10

respondents had either not heard of it or did not take a stand. While more than one-third said that it was a good step, one-sixth felt that it was good step but not done in the right way.

Will the ambivalence on these issues help the BJP or will the reluctance of some of the respondents to articulate their position throw up a surprise?

It is not clear whether the Opposition will be able to exploit these ambivalences in its favour. On the caste census too, more than half the respondents had not heard of it or did not express an opinion on it. One-fourth said that the Congress and its allies were serious about the caste census while one-third said that it was a political tool.

Thus, on potentially controversial and complex is-

suess, the absence of a clear alternative that resonates with the voters could work in favour of the BJP.

Hindu identity

Above all, the BJP has an opportunity in shifting the focus of the campaign. A significant share of the respondents mentioned the Ram Mandir as the most liked work of the Modi government. So, the construction and consecration of the temple has the potential of turning many voters in favour of the BJP.

The Ram Mandir has been a focus of a lot of debate as a key component of the BJP's electoral strategy. In the pre-poll survey, close to half the respondents felt that it will help consolidate Hindu identity. The support for this view was much higher among

Hindu respondents. Among the Hindus, there was a clear class and caste divide in the intensity of response. The greater assertion of consolidation was visible among the economically well-off respondents and the upper castes. While one-fourth of the minorities also held the view that the temple will help consolidate Hindu identity, a majority of the Muslim respondents expressed no opinion on this.

Given the assertion that the Ram Mandir has led to greater consolidation of Hindu identity, it will surely be an important plank of the BJP's electoral strategy this time around. A caveat is in order here: public opinion is still more favourably inclined towards an inclusive idea of India. How far politics and campaigns



Public opinion is still more favourably inclined towards an inclusive idea of India

can trump this innate quality of society remains to be seen.

Troubles for the BJP

While the temple issue may enable the BJP to neutralise adverse sentiments on economic issues, some other factors may add to the negative sentiments against the incumbents. Trust in the Election Commission of India (ECI) has dramatically declined compared to five years ago. In the 2019 Lokniti-CSDS survey, more than half the respondents reposed great trust in the ECI; this has declined to less than three of every 10. The share of those who have little trust or no trust in the ECI has doubled in the last five years. It will be interesting to see whether this declining trust will impact support for the BJP.

On the actions of government agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate and the Central Bureau of Investigation, the response seems to see a three-fold equal divide among those who said that these agencies were being used for political vendetta, those who said that they were working within the bounds of law, and those who had no opinion on the subject. What could work to the BJP's advantage is that close to half its supporters said that these agencies were working within the law, allowing the party to retain

its voter base.

In contrast, the issues of party switching, non-ideological alliances, and nepotism may trouble the BJP marginally — less in terms of image and more in terms of the support of the core base. Close to half the respondents felt that those switching over were protecting themselves from enforcement agencies. More than half the BJP's supporters felt that the party should not accept tainted leaders from other parties. Regarding alliances, BJP supporters were more likely to take the stand that everything is fair in politics and ideological purity is not a factor. There was more or less equal support of the view that the BJP is less nepotistic compared to the Congress and that the BJP was less nepotistic than the Congress. This suggests that the respondents were more likely to look at this issue from the lens of their party affiliation.

This is the basket of factors that the BJP may have to deal with. The party is likely to rely on the Ram Mandir issue, undoubtedly the most dominant of these factors, to obviate other factors. Moreover, the negative sentiments flowing from some of the above factors could be trumped by the leadership factor.

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'Construction of the Ram Mandir will help the BJP consolidate Hindu identity'

Suhas Palshikar

The Ram Mandir in Ayodhya is probably the most evocative issue that has shaped politics for over three decades now. If in the 1990s, the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation mobilised Hindu public opinion across the country, mainly in the north and the west, and propelled the BJP to the centre stage of politics, the construction of the temple and its consecration in January this year have helped the party silently consolidate Hindu identity. Whether this issue will be brought into focus during the campaign is not important. If it is, the BJP may make further gains, but even if it is not, the BJP has already established itself as a party that stands for Hindu pride.

Reference points

We conducted this pre-poll survey more than two months after the consecration of the temple. Yet, the consecration of the temple was etched in the minds of the respondents as a major event. While the consecration was widely welcomed, doubts were expressed over its effect on the non-Hindu minorities and also over the nearly full-fledged state sponsorship of the event at Ayodhya. As the election campaign unfolds, the temple has already become a subterranean issue that voters will carry to the polling station. And undeniably, the issue is likely to work in the BJP's favour.

In the survey, when asked to name the 'most liked action' of this government, over 22% of the res-

Table 1: There is a belief that Ram Mandir will consolidate Hindu identity

The construction of Ram Mandir will	(%)
Help in consolidating Hindu identity	48
Not impact Hindu much	25
No opinion	24

Note: Rest were not aware of Ram Mandir.

Question: Some people say that construction of the Ram Mandir will consolidate Hindu identity while others say Hindus are not really impacted by this. What is your opinion?

Table 2: Religious divide on Mandir issue

	The construction of Ram Mandir will		
	Help in consolidating Hindu identity	Not impact Hindu much	No opinion
Hindu	54	25	18
Muslim	24	21	50
Other minorities	22	36	30

Note: Rest were not aware of the Ram Mandir

Table 4: The Ram Mandir resonates a little less in the south and east

	The construction of Ram Mandir will		
	Help in consolidating Hindu identity	Not impact Hindu much	Don't know
North and West	51	24	23
South	43	28	23
East and Northeast	45	25	26

Note: Rest were not aware of the Ram Mandir

pondents mentioned the construction of the Ram Mandir. Nearly half the respondents said that the construction of the temple will

Table 3: Rich & upper castes were more likely to believe that the Mandir will consolidate Hindu identity

	Help in consolidating Hindu identity
	Overall
Class	
Poor	43
Lower	47
Middle	49
Upper	58
Caste group	
Hindu upper caste	59
Hindu OBC	55
Hindu SCs	46
Hindu STs	47

help in consolidating Hindu identity (Table 1). This assessment was upheld more by Hindus than non-Hindus (Table 2). This as-

Table 5: Will the Ram Mandir increase communal differences?

	The construction of Ram Mandir will			
	Increase harmony between Hindus and Muslims	Increase differences among the two communities	Make no difference	No Opinion
Overall	27	24	26	20
Hindu	31	22	27	18
Muslim	13	32	24	26
Other minorities	14	29	24	23

Note: Rest were not aware of the Ram Mandir.

Question asked: People have different views about the construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. Some people say it will foster harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Others say that it may increase differences between the communities. What is your opinion?

essment was prevalent more among men than women (49% men as opposed to 46% women believed that it will consolidate Hindu identity). The rich and the Hindu upper castes, followed by the middle classes and Hindu Other Backward Classes were more likely to believe that the Ram Mandir will consolidate Hindu identity (Table 3). This assessment was upheld more by rural respondents (50%) compared to urban respondents and the youth (52%). Also, the view that the temple will consolidate Hindu identity was held by more respondents in the country's north and west compared to the east and the south (Table 4).

Religious divide

It is quite clear that the temple issue also has the potential to lead to a religious divide. Overall, over one in every four respondents agreed with the view that this will be the case.

This view was more prominent among non-Hindus than among Hindus. However, two points need to be noted here: one, even among Hindus, more than two among every five believed that the temple issue would increase differences among the two communities; and two, nearly one-fifth of the respondents did not have any opinion on this matter (Table 5).

If the BJP builds on these sentiments among the Hindus, it could garner greater support both in the regions where such sentiment is strong and in the regions where the party intends to make fresh inroads. In the coming days, it will be interesting to watch how the BJP uses this pre-existing social atmosphere to its advantage and also whether the Opposition has any politically viable response to that.

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Remarkable support for religious pluralism

Table 1: Religious tolerance in India

	(%)
India belongs to citizens of all religions equally, not just Hindus	79
India belongs only to Hindus	11
No opinion	10

Question asked: I'm reading out two statements. Please tell me which one you agree with the most?

Sanjeev Alam & Nirmanju Chauhan

India has been a multi-religious society for centuries. Different religions have coexisted and created for themselves cultural niches in the social space. Religious pluralism has survived historical accidents and political maelstroms. But some sociopolitical events and a growing chorus to turn the country into a 'Hindu Rashtra' have created doubts. Is the long-cherished ideal of religious tolerance still close to people's hearts? Is India's secular social fabric under grave threat? The pre-poll survey helps clear these doubts.

The findings reveal that an overwhelming majority of respondents (79%) appeared to support the idea that India belongs to all religions equally and not just Hindus; that it must remain a country where people following different religions can live and practice their faith freely. This remarkable support for religious pluralism shows that religious tolerance continues to be a defining ele-

Table 2: Hindu dominance versus religious equality in India

	India belongs to citizens of all religions equally, not just Hindus (%)	India belongs to citizens of all religions equally, not just Hindus (%)
Overall	79	
Educational Level		
No Schooling	72	
College and above	83	
Residence		
Village	76	
Town	85	
City	84	
Age		
18-25 years	81	
56 years and above	73	

People in urban settings appeared to be more supportive of religious pluralism than those in the countryside

It is natural for religious minorities to lay emphasis on religious pluralism. But the view that India belongs to followers of all religions is also held by members of the majority religion. Nearly eight in every 10 Hindus said that they have faith in religious pluralism. Only 11% of Hindus said that they think that India is nation of Hindus.

What is more reassuring is that more young people (81%) than old (73%) were inclined to put premium on religious pluralism. Although the support for religious tolerance is high across the social spectrum, educational qualifications makes a difference. Compared with 72% of those who were uneducated, 83% of highly educated people said that

they were in favour of equal status of all religions. While communal tensions/conflicts are typically seen as an urban phenomenon, the data show a different pattern. As opposed to a commonly held belief, people living in urban settings appeared to be more supportive of religious pluralism and tolerance than those residing in the countryside.

In sum, a high degree of support for religious pluralism and equality at the societal level points to a couple of things. First, contrary to emerging perceptions, the idea of religious coexistence and tolerance holds its ground firmly. Second, a sharp religious divide in the wider society. One, therefore, needs to see how religion features in the electoral context and in everyday life separately.

Sanjeev Alam is Associate Professor at CSDS and Nirmanju Chauhan is Researcher at Lokniti-CSDS

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of vacant posts in pollution control bodies

6,075 More than 50% of the 12,016 sanctioned posts in 28 State pollution control boards and eight pollution control committees are vacant. PTI

Sunflower oil imports touch record high in March

4.45 lakh tonne. India imported a record crude sunflower oil in March, taking advantage of lower prices, while the country's total edible oil imports reached 11.49 lakh tonne in the month. PTI

Share of vacant train driver posts: Railway Board in RTI response

14.7 in percentage. Out of the total 1.27 lakh sanctioned posts of both drivers and assistant drivers in all railway zones across the country, 18,766 were lying vacant as of March 1. PTI

India's rank in the World Cybercrime Index

10 According to a study published in the journal PLoS ONE, Russia topped the list of cybercrime with frauds involving people making advance fee payments being the most common type. PTI

Workers from India to be brought to Israel by May

6,000 Indian workers will arrive in Israel to help the country's construction sector to meet a labour shortage. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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ISRO's 'zero orbital debris' milestone

How did ISRO ensure practically zero debris left in earth orbit after the PSLV-C58/XPoSat mission? What is the purpose and function of the PSLV Orbital Experimental Module-3 (POEM-3)? How does it contribute to space debris mitigation efforts? What are the risks space debris poses to space assets?

EXPLAINER

Suchitra Karthikeyan

The story so far:

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has said its PSLV-C58/XPoSat mission has practically left zero debris in earth orbit. The space agency explained that the last stage of the Polar Satellite Launch vehicle (PSLV) used in the mission was transformed into a kind of orbital station – called the PSLV Orbital Experimental Module-3 (POEM-3) – before it was left to re-enter the earth's atmosphere instead of floating in orbit once its mission was completed. ISRO said that after it completed the primary mission of injecting all satellites into their target orbits, the fourth stage of the PSLV was transformed into the POEM-3. It was subsequently de-orbited from 650 km to 350 km, rendering it more susceptible to being pulled towards the earth and burning up in the atmosphere. ISRO also said it "passivated the stage," meaning dumped its fuel, to avoid an explosion that could have flung small pieces of debris into orbit.

What is POEM-3?

Developed by the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC) as an inexpensive space platform, POEM uses the spent fourth stage of a PSLV rocket as an orbital platform. Used for the first time in the PSLV-C53 mission in June 2022, ISRO had POEM orbit the earth to perform in-orbit scientific experiments with various payloads onboard.

POEM is powered by solar panels mounted on the fuel tank of the rocket's fourth stage and a lithium-ion battery. It has a navigation, guidance, and control (NGC) system to stabilise its altitude along with helium control thrusters. The NGC system has four Sun sensors, a magnetometer, and gyroscopes, and talks to ISRO's NavIC satellite constellation for navigation. POEM also has a telecommand system to communicate with the ground station.



Orbital threat: With the rise in the number of satellites in orbit around the earth, space debris has become a pressing issue. AFP

ISRO first demonstrated the reuse of the spent fourth stage of its rocket in its PSLV C-44 mission in 2019. After satellites were injected into the target orbits, the fourth stage, carrying a student payload called Kalamsat-V2, was moved to a higher circular orbit of 443 km and stayed there, facilitating the payload's requirements.

What has POEM-3 achieved?

ISRO launched the PSLV C-58 mission from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota on January 1.

After deploying the XPoSat satellite in its desired orbit of 650 km, the fourth stage, now called POEM-3, was lowered to a 350-km-high circular orbit. The lower a satellite is in orbit around the earth, the more drag it experiences and the more energy it needs to expend to stay in orbit.

POEM-3 featured nine payloads: two each from VSSC and Bellatrix Aerospace Pvt Ltd, one each from the start-ups TakeMe2Space, Inspecty Space Labs Pvt Ltd., Dhruva Space, and from LBS Institute of Technology, KJ Somaiya Institute of Technology, and ISRO's Physics Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad.

It completed 400 orbits around the

earth by its 25th day. The payloads were operationalised to perform their experiments at this time. ARKA200, RUDRA, and LEAP-TD completed their respective experiments while the data from WeSAT, RSEM, and DEX were collected after every orbit for further analysis on the ground. Two fuel cells from VSSC demonstrated their ability to generate power. By January 27, 2024, all of POEM-3's payload objectives were completed.

For two months, POEM-3 prepared for its re-entry while ISRO tracked it with its Telemetry, Tracking and Command Network stations in Bengaluru, Lucknow, Mauritius, Sriharikota, Port Blair, Thiruvananthapuram, Brunei, and Biak (Indonesia) and the Multi-Object Tracking Radar (MOTR) at Sriharikota. On March 21, POEM-3 re-entered the earth's atmosphere, meeting its fiery end.

Why is this significant?

With the rise in the number of satellites in orbit around the earth, space debris has become a pressing issue. Space debris in the low earth orbit (LEO) mainly comprises pieces of spacecraft, rockets, and defunct satellites, and the fragments of objects that have deteriorated

explosively as a result of anti-satellite missile tests. This debris often flies around at high speeds of up to 27,000 km/hr. Due to their sheer volume and momentum, they pose a risk to several space assets.

The LEO extends from 100 km above the earth's surface up to 2000 km above. It includes satellites tracking intelligence data, encrypted communication, and navigation. According to ISRO's Space Situational Assessment Report 2022, the world placed 2,533 objects in space in 179 launches in 2022.

Debris also exists, but in smaller volumes, in the geosynchronous orbit (GEO) 36,000 km above the earth's surface. Currently, 7,000 operational satellites are orbiting the earth at different altitudes along with millions of pieces of space debris. The U.S. Space Command tracks and catalogues space debris larger than 10 centimetres in LEO and larger than 0.3-1 metres in GEO.

How are agencies dealing with debris?

The latest incident of space debris causing havoc was recorded on March 8 when a discarded battery pallet dropped by the International Space Station ripped through the roof of a house in Florida.

As more communication satellites/constellations are launched and more anti-satellite tests are conducted, more on-orbit breakup and collisions occur, producing smaller fragments in orbit. The number of space objects (debris or functional equipment) greater than 10 cm in size in LEO is expected to be about 60,000 by 2030, per ISRO estimates. Space debris can also create unusable regions of the orbit where too much debris has accumulated, and which can trigger a cascading avalanche of collisions that produce yet more, but smaller pieces of, debris.

Currently, there are no international space laws pertaining to LEO debris. Most spacefaring nations abide by the Space Debris Mitigation Guidelines 2002 specified by the Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee (IADC), which the U.N. endorsed in 2007.

THE GIST

ISRO successfully conducted the PSLV-C58/XPoSat mission, deploying the XPoSat satellite into orbit and subsequently transforming the last stage of the PSLV into the PSLV Orbital Experimental Module-3 (POEM-3).

Developed by the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC), POEM utilises the spent fourth stage of a PSLV rocket as an orbital platform for scientific experiments.

POEM-3 completed 400 orbits around the earth, operationalising nine payloads to conduct various experiments before re-entering the earth's atmosphere.

With the increasing number of satellites in orbit, space debris poses a significant risk to space assets.

Is transparency lacking in candidate disclosure?

How has the Supreme Court addressed concerns about candidates with serious criminal charges contesting elections? What reforms have been proposed by the Law Commission and EC to address these issues?

Rangarajan. R

The story so far:

The Supreme Court recently held that candidates need not disclose every piece of information and possession in their election affidavit unless it is substantial in nature. In another development, the Election Commission of India (EC) has asked the Central Board of Direct Taxes to verify the declaration with respect to yearly income in the affidavit filed by Rajeev Chandrashekar, the BJP candidate from Thiruvananthapuram.

What does the law specify?

Section 33 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RP Act) read with rule 4A of election rules, requires every contesting candidate to file their nomination paper for elections along with an affidavit in a prescribed format. In *Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) Vs Union of India* (2002), the Supreme

Court held that voters have the right to know about the criminal antecedents, income and asset details of the candidate and his/her dependants and educational qualification of contesting candidates. This resulted in Section 33A being added to the RP Act that requires details of criminal antecedents to be part of the election affidavit.

Section 125A of the RP Act further provides that failure to furnish required information; giving false information or concealing any information in the nomination paper or affidavit shall be punishable with imprisonment up to six months or fine or both.

What are the issues?

In a recent case, an independent candidate from Arunachal Pradesh failed to declare three vehicles as assets in his election affidavit while contesting the Assembly election in 2019. His election was set aside by the Gauhati High Court. However, the Supreme Court reversed the

decision and held that non-disclosure of information that is not material or substantial cannot be treated as an attempt to unduly influence the voters. In the case of Mr. Chandrashekar, the complaint is about alleged concealment of his income and substantial assets in his election affidavit that can have a potential impact on the decision of the voters.

An even more significant issue relates to candidates with serious criminal charges contesting elections. Some candidates circumvented the requirement of rule 4A by leaving certain columns blank and filing incomplete affidavits. It once again required an order of the court in *Resurgence India Vs EC* (2013), to ensure that all columns are filled appropriately. According to a report by ADR, 19% of candidates in the 2019 Lok Sabha election faced charges of rape, murder or kidnapping.

The Law Commission in its 244th report on 'Electoral Disqualifications' (2014) and EC in its memorandum on

'Electoral reforms' submitted in 2016 had provided certain recommendations. First, a conviction for filing a false affidavit should attract a punishment of a minimum of two years imprisonment and be a ground for disqualification. Second, the trials in such cases must be conducted on a day-to-day basis. Finally, persons charged by a competent court with offences punishable by imprisonment of at least five years should be debarred from contesting in the elections provided the case is filed at least 6 months before the election in question.

The Supreme Court in *Public Interest Foundation Vs Union of India* (2018) directed candidates as well as political parties to issue a declaration about criminal antecedents, at least three times before the election, in a newspaper in the locality and electronic media.

What can be the way forward?

Debarred chargesheeted candidates from contesting elections is likely to be misused by various ruling parties. However, the other recommendations with respect to increasing punishment for filing false affidavits and making it a ground for disqualification need to be implemented. The Supreme Court's order to provide wide publicity of criminal records should also be strictly implemented. This would enable a discerning voter to exercise a well-informed choice.

Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. Views expressed are personal

THE GIST

The Supreme Court ruled that candidates are not obligated to disclose every detail in their election affidavits unless the information is substantial in nature.

Instances of candidates failing to disclose assets and income have raised questions about the transparency and completeness of affidavits.

While debarring candidates based on chargesheets could be misused, implementing stricter punishment for false affidavits and increasing transparency in disclosing criminal records are crucial steps. Ensuring voter awareness and informed choices through better disclosure mechanisms is essential for electoral integrity.

IN THE LIMELIGHT

Caste and cinema: the long shadow of Amar Singh Chamkila

Ahead of the streaming of Chamkila's biopic, a look at how his ethnic identity informed his music that continues to be relevant three decades after he was silenced along with his partner

Anuj Kumar

Amidst the ongoing debate on whether maestro A.R. Rahman and ace director Imtiaz Ali have justified the earthy flavour and emotional flux of Amar Singh Chamkila's music in the upcoming biopic of the phenomenal Punjabi singer, the discussion about the role of Chamkila's ethnic identity in shaping his art has resurfaced.

A section on social media has questioned Diljit Dosanjh for removing the turban to play Chamkila, a Dalit Sikh. They remind the artist who normalised a turbaned hero in Hindi cinema for turning back on his statement where he promised not to lose his turban for a film role.

Those who believe in cinematic *dharma*, however, feel that the actor has done the right thing by keeping his look as close to the character as possible. The previous attempts to capture the artist's journey, one of which featured Diljit in a turban (*Jodi*, 2023), were fictionalised accounts because the makers didn't have the right to film Chamkila's biopic.

Actors adopting and removing the religious and social symbols of their characters are quite common in Hindi cinema. In the past, we have seen Aamir Khan sporting a vermilion tika and the sacred thread in Ketan Mehta's *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* and Paresh Rawal performed namaz as a devout Muslim mechanic Hashmatullah in Amit Rai's *Road To Sangam*. Way back in 1936, Devika Rani, the biggest star of the time, played an untouchable in Franz Osten's *Achhut Kanya*. In Ali Abbas Zafar's *Jogi* (2022), Diljit cuts his hair on-screen to depict the plight of Sikhs during the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi. Nobody objected. So, has it something to do with Diljit's previous statement or is it about him playing a Ravidasia Sikh?

Multiple endings

Like most absorbing narratives, Chamkila's story allows for multiple endings. His assassination at the age of 27 along with his singer-wife Amarjot Kaur and his two associates evoked multiple conspiracy theories. Was he eliminated by the separatists who felt he was polluting the minds of the young generation with his 'obscene songs'? Was he killed by his rivals, who felt threatened by his numero uno status in the Punjabi music industry? Or did he pay the price for marrying a Jatt Sikh girl who moved out of her first marriage to pursue her singing career?

In all three possibilities, the role of his caste identity, a Dalit's control over resources, can't be denied. Were his songs seen as the other's reflection on the ways of a socially influential class, going through a process of purification in the 1980s? Not even an FIR was registered in the case. Around the same time, two leftist poets, Jaimal Singh Padda and Avtar Singh Sandhu, were also killed for speaking for the rights of workers at a time when religious extremism was on a high. A decade ago, Anurag Kashyap was actively considering making a film on Pash with Irrfan but it could not materialise.

Recently, a noted filmmaker from the region told this journalist that though Guru Gobind Singh asked his followers to submerge their caste identities into neutral surnames like Singh and Kaur, flaunting caste surnames is an everyday



Parineeti Chopra, Diljit Dosanjh in *Amar Singh Chamkila*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

reality in Punjab. "We know there are still gurdwaras with two entrances and in many villages, there is a clear demarcation between upper caste and Dalit households," he said.

The State has seen Dalit Sikhs in both top political as well as temporal positions but political observers have, over the years, brought out the socio-economic fallout of the Green Revolution where landless Dalit workers faced exploitation at the hands of Jatt Sikh land owners.

The Jatt-dominated Punjabi film industry has not been able to map this heterogeneity of Punjab's society where almost 32% of the population comes from Scheduled Caste groups. Like in Hindi cinema, Dalits have remained on the margins. In recent times, we have stray examples like Gurbinder Singh's *Anhey Ghorey Da Daan* (*Alms for a Blind Horse*, 2011) that depicted the plight of the rural working class finding widespread critical acclaim. Another art house attempt was Kabir Singh Chowdhry's mockumentary

Mehsampur which also drew inspiration from Chamkila's life. The short film *Chamm* (skin) tells the story of a Dalit worker in a slaughterhouse.

Strange shapes of entertainment

History tells us entertainment can take strange shapes in times of repression. Chamkila reflected on the poor farm workers but seldom talked of the matters of his caste in his songs. He commented on Jatt pride and *Jatt Ki Dushmani* (hostility of Jatt), perhaps to stay afloat in the mainstream. A multi-faceted artist who wrote, composed, and sang his songs, Chamkila offered a commentary through music on illicit relationships, alcohol, dowry, domestic violence, and drug abuse in a feudal society. These themes were present under the ribaldry of his popular lyrics. In his popular song '*Lalkara*', the girl accepts the substance addiction of her lover, something that is not permitted by religion. In the suggestive '*Mar Le Hor Try*

Jija', the sister-in-law of an aging man is pushing him to have a son with her when he says her sister is no longer fertile. Both songs capture the dark reality of the feudal society albeit in a harmless, playful manner.

Prof. Krantipal, who teaches Punjabi at the Department of Modern Indian Languages at the Aligarh Muslim University, says that Chamkila, through his songs, also hinted at how the landlord maintains social distance from the worker but likes to spend time with his wife. Shyam Benegal's debut feature *Ankur* (1974) also explores the same theme in a different setting with a serious gaze. Later, this interplay of exploitation and surrender was exposed in Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980) and Gautam Ghose's *Paar* (1984).

In Punjab, culture is often a by-product of agriculture. An *akhada* is used to describe a dedicated space for a wrestling bout as well as a musical performance in an open-air concert where Chamkila found his stardom. "Athleticism and aesthetics are conjoined in the region," says Prof. Pal.

There must be something in the music of Chamkila, he says, that has kept his songs relevant even three decades after his death. "The *sadagi* (simplicity) and *ravangi* (coherent flow) in his earthy music and his audience connect are unmatched," he says. With a tumbi in hand backed by a harmonium and dholak and accompanied by alghoza, chimta and flute, he would create magic with a basic sound system in his live shows, and his albums kept the truck driver going with the freshness of their lilt and lyrics.

Many songs of the folk artist present a strong picture of a woman in control of her desire. She taunts her lover as impotent if he is unable to cross the physical barriers to unite with her.

Breaking the barriers

Old-timers say Chamkila's songs created the image of a goodly woman, someone like Mumtaz who was in great demand when Chamkila was sharpening his skills. His lyrics evoke a strong woman who not only performed household chores but also contributed to farming. His concerts had a butch vibe to them. Still, his double-meaning songs broke the patriarchal barriers. They reached the kitchens and living rooms through tape recorders and found a loyal fan base among women seeking to find a new idiom to the naughty folk songs they grew up singing at weddings and childbirth ceremonies.

Hoping that the buzz around the film spurs interest in the stories of Punjab and folk instruments, Prof. Pal says illicit relationships have been a common theme in Punjabi literature from medieval times and Chamkila only brought it out in the open. It reflects the social undercurrents of the border state where farmer, soldier, and driver have been principal occupations over centuries. When men are out for months, it provides opportunities and circumstances for both genders to indulge in making bonds that are considered forbidden.

"Many times it is the illicit relationship that is considered the real relationship because you share your deepest emotions with someone you truly bond with. In the epic Sohni Mahiwal story, Sohni is married to a man she despises and swims across the river to meet Mahiwal who has to disguise himself to meet her love. Illegitimate relations find space in Jnanpith awardee Gurdial Singh's works; it is also there in Shiv Kumar Batalvi's poetry."

Chamkila's imagery is not layered or polished. It is out there, which made him connect with the rural folk. They found in his songs their reflection. His symbolism is not shrouded in mystical allegory, but that doesn't mean it is irrelevant. As Prof. Pal says, Chamkila's poetry may not be progressive in classical terms but it is not "*lachchar*" (base) either. Unfortunately, the current generation is trying to fit his glitter into one of the two boxes.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

'Countermand' means 'cancel (a command or order already given), especially by giving a new and opposite one.' It is a formal word. It is a combination of 'counter' and 'mandare,' meaning 'to order.' 'Mandate' is from the same root 'mandare.' It also is a formal word.

A mandate is 'an official command or instruction by an authority.' It is a Presidential mandate. A request from a Governor is a mandate. You have to reply to this letter; a reply is mandatory. 'Mandate' and 'countermand' can be used as a noun and a verb.

The General ordered the army to march against the enemy. He countermanded his order subsequently.

'Countermand' is not a new word. It was used as early as the 15th century. It was originally a military term. It is still used by the armed forces.

I care a pin for him; I don't care a pin for him. (S. N. Ramaswamy, Madras).

It is 'I don't care a pin for him.' It means I don't care for him in the least. 'I don't care twopenny for him; 'I don't care a jot for him,' 'I don't care two hoots for him' also mean the same.

Diamond jubilee, the 60th year of an event or the 75th year (Jai Singh Jain, Madras).

There was a time when it was used only to refer to the 60th anniversary. Now it is also used to refer to the 75th anniversary. Only a couple of dictionaries have recorded that it could also refer to the 71st anniversary. The names for wedding anniversaries are: first: Cotton Wedding; second: Paper Wedding; third: Leather Wedding; fourth: Flower or Fruit Wedding; fifth: Wooden Wedding; sixth: Iron or Sugar Candy Wedding; seventh: Woolen Wedding; eighth: Bronze or Electrical Appliances Wedding; ninth: Copper or Pottery Wedding; tenth: Tin Wedding; eleventh: Steel Wedding; twelfth: Silk and Fine Linen Wedding; thirteenth: Lace Wedding; fourteenth: Ivory Wedding; fifteenth: Crystal Wedding; twentieth: China Wedding; twenty-fifth: Silver Wedding; thirtieth: Pearl Wedding; thirty-fifth: Coral Wedding; fortieth: Ruby Wedding; forty-fifth: Sapphire Wedding; fiftieth: Golden Wedding; fifty-fifth: Emerald Wedding; sixtieth: Diamond Wedding; seventy-fifth: Diamond Wedding. The names indicate the kind of gifts suitable for the occasion!

Hysteron proteron (S. K. Shukla, Meerut).

'Hysteron proteron' is a figure of speech in which the word that should come last is put first. It is something which goes against the natural order. He conquered! He saw! He came! It is from the Greek 'hysteron proteron', meaning 'the latter (put in the place of the former'. I die! I faint! I fall!)

Synonyms for sad (S. K. Barua, Dibrugarh).

Pensive, mournful, sorry, distressed, grief-stricken, unhappy, miserable, cheerless, woebegone, wretched, tragic.

Published in *The Hindu* on 10 December, 1991

THE DAILY QUIZ

Ramzan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and is observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting. Here is a quiz on Ramzan

Venkataraman Srinivasan

QUESTION 1

The meal to break the fast during the holy month of Ramzan is called Iftaar, What is the meal before the beginning of the fast called?

QUESTION 2

According to the Islamic tradition, On which day of Ramzan did the Prophet Muhammad receive the first revelations of the Quran?

QUESTION 3

Where was Prophet Muhammad born?

QUESTION 4

In which month of the Islamic calendar is Ramzan?

QUESTION 5

What is the first prayer of the day called?



Visual Question:

By what name is the traditional lantern used during Ramzan called? These are bright, colourful hanging lamps that are used to decorate homes and streets during Ramzan. GETTY IMAGES

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

- This Tamil political Satire is set in the backdrop of a village panchayat election in which the local barber's vote will determine the winner of the election, the movie starring Yogi Babu and Directed by Madonne Ashwin came as a refreshing movie. Name the movie. **Ans: Mandela**
 - This compelling Indian black comedy drama released in the year 2017, is about a government clerk on election duty in a conflict-ridden jungle of Central India. Name this movie directed by Amrit Masur and Starring Rajkumar Rao & Pankaj Tripathi. **Ans: Newton**
 - Who was the Director of the 1975 Movie *Aandhi*. It was also one of the first movies about women in electoral politics. **Ans: Gulzaar**
 - This author's novel is the 2001 Kannada movie *Mathadana*, a unique political drama film. **Ans: S.L.Bhyrappa**
 - This Malayalam movie released in the year 1990 was loosely based on the real life story of Thomas Vaidyan, Gowri Amma and Thomas Vaidyan. Name the movie. **Ans: Lal Salam**
- Visual: Identify the movie. **Ans: Iruvar**
Early Birds: Rajmohan V | Jyot Prakash Gulati | Rochish Tirumala | Lekshmy Harikumar | Saheni George

Please send in your answers to dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

Word of the day

Grisly: shockingly repellent; inspiring horror

Synonyms: awful, ghastly, hideous

Usage: *The town was shaken by a series of grisly crimes.*

Pronunciation: bit.ly/grislypro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /grɪzli/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to letters@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Text & Context'

Abject surrender

IRDA surrender charges norms unfair to policy buyers

It is not often that India's insurance regulator intervenes on behalf of consumers to change the ground rules for the industry. Therefore, a round of cheers went up in December 2023 when Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDA) floated a discussion paper to rein in the hefty surrender charges levied by insurers when policyholders prematurely opt out. As opposed to the industry practice of appropriating 30 to 90 per cent of premiums as surrender penalties, IRDA suggested a threshold level of surrender charges beyond which insurers must refund all premiums to the customer.



But a pushback by the insurance lobby seems to have prompted IRDA to issue revised regulations. The new norms will allow insurers to charge 100 per cent of premiums for customer exits in one year, 70 per cent in two years and 65 per cent in three. Dropping out between the fourth and seventh years will see the buyer forfeit 50 per cent of premiums paid. Given that insurers invest their funds in market instruments that allow premature exit, surrender charges of 50-100 per cent seem usurious. Besides, none of the arguments advanced by the insurance industry in favour of sky-high surrender charges holds much water. The main one was that trimming surrender charges would badly impact profitability. This is a sad commentary on the business model of Indian insurers because the world over, life insurers derive their profits from selling protection to customers against adverse events and underwriting and pricing these risks correctly. In India, the life insurance industry and its large agent force are overwhelmingly focused on insurance-cum-investment products that offer neither adequate life cover nor reasonable returns to the consumer.

The industry claimed that hefty penalties on surrender are necessary to discourage insurance buyers from reneging on their long-term contracts. But the reality is that most buyers of traditional insurance plans in India sign up without getting a true picture of either the tenor of the product or its benefits. Unit Linked Insurance Plans (ULIPs) are (mis)sold on the premise that the buyer needs to pay premiums only for five years. Marketing literature for insurance products is rife with jargon and this actively facilitates mis-selling.

IRDA's grievance portal received over a lakh consumer complaints on mis-selling in FY23 alone. This leads to high dropout rates, with over 50 per cent of insurance buyers in India stopping premium payments by the fifth year. Higher surrender charges create perverse incentives for insurers and their intermediaries to encourage dropouts. Insurers pocket hefty customer penalties that aid their profitability, while agents benefit from front-loaded commissions that encourage constant churn. With such perverse incentives, the ball was really in IRDA's court to streamline surrender charges. Ultimately, India's insurance penetration cannot improve without their products delivering a better value proposition to the customer. The IRDA should revisit the surrender charges issue.

FROM THE VIEWROOM.

Pet owners — act responsibly

PT Jyothi Datta

A recent Karnataka High Court directive on the breeding and import of "ferocious and dangerous" dogs, has rightfully pointed to "responsible pet ownership" — something that gets lost in high-pitched discussions on dogs.

Be it pets or community dogs, it always whittles down to responsible behaviour — from the owner, government departments in charge of getting animals registered and sterilised, and the larger community of people.

The HC has called for a re-examination of the ban on import and breeding of dogs identified as dangerous, besides calling for wider consultations with stakeholders like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta), according to media-reports. Peta India has called for strengthening of the Centre's circular to protect pit-bull-type dogs (used and abused in illegal dog-fights), and to safeguard humans from attacks.

The need is to proceed with knowledge and empathy here.

Animals have been bred and their behaviour manipulated to fight, race or just be props. People working with animals recount numerous instances of breed dogs (cats/parrots etc) being abandoned for being too aggressive, expensive to maintain or too sick to bear more young ones. Animals behave as they do, as they're often bred in unhealthy/unsavoury environments — bringing us back to responsibility. Authorities need to have a registry to map ownership, births, death, breeders etc — just as in humans. A person owning an "aggressive" pet is accountable for its well-being and should be identified (and blacklisted) if it is abandoned. A person unable to keep a pet for some reason should be able to responsibly put it up for adoption. Municipalities and residents need to work with animal organisations to ensure systematic animal birth control initiatives, and encourage responsible living — be it with pets or community animals.



ABHISHEK JHA
ANJANI KUMAR

Negotiating trade deals and concluding them with developed nations is challenging due to numerous complex clauses, conditions, and terms that need to be met and agreed upon. The government's efforts in finalising these agreements are commendable.

It has been over five years since the agri export policy was introduced with the aim to diversify our export basket destinations, boost high value- and value-added agricultural exports, and to strive to double India's share in the world's agri exports by integrating with global value chains. Surely, the route of trade agreements specially with developed nations will espouse the intentions of policy makers.

India's total merchandise exports to EFTA states for FY 2023 was \$1.9 billion out of which 70 per cent is shipped to Switzerland, followed by 25 per cent to Norway. Over the decade, the growth rate was near about 4 per cent per year including the peak pandemic years.

Top products exported by India to EFTA includes organic chemicals, value added gems and jewellery, electrical related appliances, flour of dried leguminous vegetables, and medical instruments.

India's agri exports in FY 23 stood at \$0.13 billion, which is just less than 7 per cent of India's total merchandise exports to EFTA. EFTA's imports of agriculture products from world are also quite substantial.

To highlight, their agri imports are around \$29 billion, growing by 10 per cent CAGR over last three years. EFTA's top agriculture imports include spirited beverages (mainly wines), food residual for animal feed, coffee, fresh fruits and vegetables, edible oil and fats, and wafers, snacks, and biscuits. Indian agri products do not feature significantly, with only modest visibility for flour of dried leguminous vegetables.

With the trade agreement coming into existence, will the tariff reduction, if any, by EFTA provide hope for Indian agri exporters in the coming time

EFTA's non-tariff measures may hinder India's agri exports. But farm exports to the UAE and Australia have zoomed post the FTAs

FTAs and farm exports: A mixed bag

TRADE MATTERS. Along with tariff cuts, streamlining of non-tariff measures too would play a role in India's agri-export growth



frame? Interestingly, Switzerland allows tariff-free entry for all industrial goods including chemicals, consumer goods, vehicles, clothing coming from all countries. This policy came into effect from January 1, 2024 and will anyway make the utilisation of India-EFTA trade agreement insignificant.

For agricultural goods (AG), tariff commitments of EFTA nations are not that lenient. We can understand this better by creating three categories.

THREE CATEGORIES

One, for which no commitment have been made in the trade agreement and have been excluded (there are roughly 40 per cent of the tariff lines within agri chapters).

Second, these are a set of agri commodities with higher tariff rate commitments (from dairy, meat and vegetable chapters to list a few).

Third, with either zero or low import tariffs — these are the products for which the domestic production capacity in EFTA is not robust and demand has

to be met by imports. For e.g. beer made from malt, sweet wine, miscellaneous edible preparations.

For first and second category, this FTA offers minuscule relief, if any, in making Indian agri products competitive in their market. For the third category, where there is some relief, complementarity between Indian agri products with competitiveness and imported agri products by EFTA is limited. In this set, products such as coffee, cereals, sweet biscuits, residual/waste grains do feature.

The congruency is not comprehensive, thus limiting the scope of leveraging the opportunity for Indian agricultural exporters. In previous years, the story of import tariffs was similar. The simple average most-favoured nation (MFN) rate was 5.6 per cent in 2022 applied by the regional bloc. While non-agricultural goods from MFN countries only faced a simple average tariff rate of 1.3 per cent, duties of 32.4 per cent were applied to agricultural goods on average, and these

rose to 137.7 per cent for dairy products.

Furthermore, the determination of product's competitiveness is not solely dependent on import tariff rates. Numerous non-tariff measures including sanitary and phytosanitary and technical barriers to trade, also influence exporters' abilities and capacities. Fulfilling the requirements of these measures, which are often intricate and challenging, significantly impacts market participation.

While trade agreements typically include provisions addressing trade facilitation aimed at streamlining the implementation of non-tariff measures, it remains uncertain whether these measures have been beneficial for Indian exporters, particularly those in the agricultural sector.

A COMPARISON

Now, let's compare some post-trade agreement figures for India-Australia and India-UAE. Both FTAs were signed in 2022. Encouragingly, in both trade agreements, Indian agricultural exports have surged compared to the period before the agreements were signed. In the case of India-Australia, where the FTA took effect in December 2022, our agricultural exports increased by 23 per cent from April 2023 to January 2024 compared to the preceding period.

This growth is higher than the overall merchandise exports of India which grew by 16 per cent for the said period. Interestingly, our agriculture imports from Australia jumped by nearly 50 per cent during the same period. This includes massive boosts in products like sheep meat, seafood, broad beans, citrus and almonds.

For India-UAE as well, there has been a notable increase in India's agricultural and overall exports during the first year after signing the FTA in 2022-23. Now, the question arises: is this increase in agricultural exports solely attributable to the reduction in tariffs, or does it also reflect a positive impact from the facilitation of non-tariff measures?

If the rise in agricultural exports is solely due to lower tariff rates resulting from the FTA, then this growth may not be sustainable and could diminish once the benefits are exhausted. However, if exports are supported by both the reduction of tariffs and the streamlining of non-tariff measures, along with enhanced technical capacity to produce quality products, then the growth trajectory could be sustainable.

The government needs to evaluate whether the streamlining of non-tariff measures is effectively happening on the ground to facilitate agricultural exports or if it remains merely a provision in the text of the FTAs.

Kumar is a senior research fellow at International Food Policy Research Institute, New Delhi; and Jha is a research scholar in economics area at JNU, New Delhi.

In defence of RBI's calibrated pause

The pause on policy rates is a pragmatic option. Monsoon will determine the inflation dynamics

Amarendu Nandy
Sankalpa Bhattacharjee

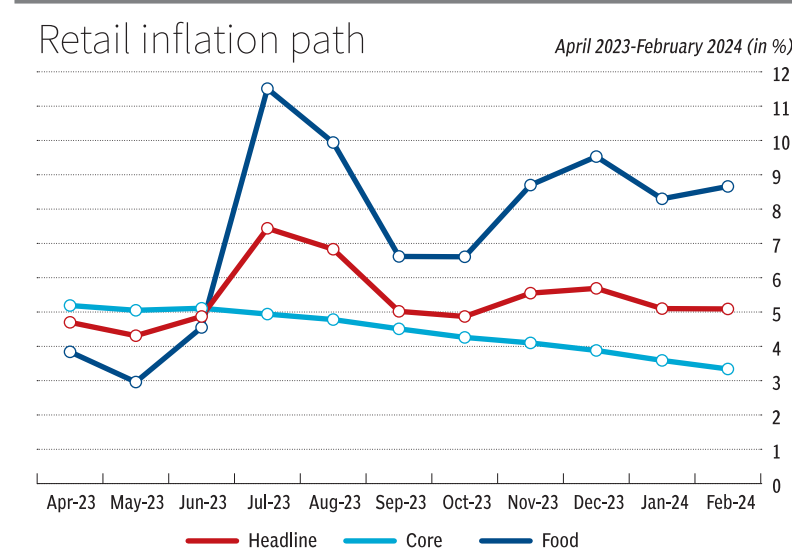
The Reserve Bank of India decision to maintain status quo on interest rates, keeping the repo rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent for the seventh consecutive time, has sparked debates around its policy stance.

The central bank's position of calibrated caution is a pragmatic response to the myriad challenges confronting the Indian economy, both on the domestic and external fronts.

Firstly, let us consider the inflation dynamics. Despite the headline consumer price index (CPI) inflation moderating to 5.09 per cent in February 2024, the trajectory remains precarious. The average consumer price inflation, projected at 4.5 per cent for 2024-25, above the central bank's 4 per cent medium-term target.

Food inflation, which has a weighted contribution of nearly 40 per cent in the CPI basket, continues to be elevated at 8.7 per cent, driven by rising prices of cereals, vegetables, and protein sources like meat and fish, posing a considerable risk of broader price pressures and the de-anchoring of inflationary expectations.

Secondly, what complicates the policy canvas is the uncertain outlook for food inflation, which has been the primary driver of headline inflation in recent months (see graph). The RBI has rightly highlighted that the inflation trajectory



will critically depend on the monsoon season this year. A normal or above-normal monsoon could open up room for monetary easing in the second half of the fiscal year.

Moreover, though core inflation, which excludes volatile food and fuel components, touched a series low at 3.34 per cent in February 2024, it has averaged 4.43 per cent over the past 11 months. This core stickiness reflects underlying demand-side pressures that could impede disinflation if left unchecked. Given India's robust GDP growth forecast of 7 per cent for 2024-25,

sustaining positive real interest rates is a prudent measure to anchor demand-pull inflationary forces.

Thirdly, the global economic landscape remains uncertain, with the trajectory of the US Federal Reserve's policy normalisation process still evolving. As noted by various analysts, the RBI's policy stance has been somewhat pegged to the Fed's actions over the past two years, reflecting the interconnected nature of global financial markets and India's external sector vulnerabilities.

India's inflation trajectory is heavily

influenced by global commodity prices and the strength of the US dollar. By exercising caution and not front-running the Fed's anticipated rate cuts, the RBI is mitigating the risks of potential capital outflows and currency volatility. This cautious approach is pertinent given India's import dependence on commodities like crude oil, where recent geopolitical tensions have fuelled price surges, posing upside risks to the inflation outlook.

Fourthly, some analysts have argued that the RBI's stance risks "falling behind the curve", particularly if global central banks like the Fed pivot to rate cuts sooner than anticipated. However, RBI's recent track record demonstrates its ability to swiftly adjust its policy stance in response to changing economic conditions.

Indeed, its latest stance of "withdrawal of accommodation" appears to be an attempt to buy time and maintain flexibility. As of now, the strong US jobs data in March has tempered expectations for an immediate rate cut by the Fed.

Finally, meteorologists predict above-average temperatures across India this summer. These factors can exacerbate inflation through supply-side bottlenecks, driving up costs for businesses and consumers.

RBI's status quo stance will likely be a bulwark against potential internal and external shocks.

The writers teach Economics at IIM, Ranchi. Views are personal

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

Smart nutrition hubs

Refers to 'Post poll, ration shops to get a 'smart nutrition hub' makeover' (April 11). The Centre's proposal to distribute millet and millet-based items through Fair Price Shops would ensure a balanced diet for consumers. The 5.38 lakh FPS serving about 80 crore beneficiaries need tech-oriented upgradation in its operations. Linkage of Aadhar of the beneficiaries on an ongoing basis is crucial for targeted delivery. The issues relating to the biometrical examination of beneficiaries while

distributing the items are not uncommon and therefore must be addressed to avoid hardships. Arrangements for working capital facilities from banks at concessional rates will incentivise FPSs to trade millet and millet-based items. The direct supply of the millet and related items by Farmer Producer Organisations will be cost-effective and also facilitate regular supply.

VSK Pillai
Changanacherry

Microplastics threat

With reference to the article 'The

unseen threat of microplastics' (April 11), plastic, which has invaded the human lives in the guise of the most convenient packaging material, is wrecking havoc and silently destroying human health, irreparably. Human health is under severe threat, because the microplastics, once they enter the human body, cannot be expelled completely through gastrointestinal tract, but they can enter and remain in the blood stream.

After the advent of food delivery platforms, ordering food online has

become most common and the food, including steaming hot food, is packed and delivered in plastic pouches. And hot food packed in plastic pouches is contaminated by the chemicals released by heated plastic, which can cause diseases like cancer and severely harm the heart and reproductive systems. It is high time, the governments and research institutions focus on funding research to find an equally convenient and versatile alternative to plastic.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

Water woes

The article 'Water crisis: Farming the culprit?' (April 11) made for a useful read. Karnataka water crisis has demonstrated the need for judicious use of water at all times. Conserving water is the prime responsibility of every individual. The governments should take stock of the water situation across the country and ensure efficient distribution.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Heat on US pharma firms

A new law allows health ministry negotiate prices

Rita McGrath
M Muneer



PRICING. A thorny issue

It is astonishing that a 100-year-old product like insulin has seen prices rise steadily, to the point at which one study found that obtaining the life-saving drug was an extreme financial burden to a vast number of people — 14 per cent of Americans for instance, and over 40 million Indian diabetics.

Why? Partly, the drug companies are granted patents on treatments, essentially a temporary monopoly to let them recoup their R&D investments. Those temporary monopolies are very sweet, prompting lots of strategies to extend them through a variety of practices that have come under heavy criticism.

PAYING FOR R&D

Manufacturers argue that they need high prices to pay for the R&D that creates miracle drugs in the first place. There are essentially no regulations around what a pharma firm can charge for a new drug, leading to eye-popping prices — Gilead Science charges \$84,000 for a full course of its hepatitis medication, Sovaldi.

While that's pretty high, remember that the drug cured Hepatitis-C, preventing eventual liver transplants or other expensive treatments. Gilead argued that the high price was needed to recoup the investment they made to find the cure, and a curative drug is less lucrative than a drug that has to be taken on an ongoing basis. One may argue that the company was motivated by profits, rather than providing a relief to a greater number of patients suffering from Hep-C.

In the US, things are a bit weird. Just like the MRP in India, there is a "list price." But, the pharma company then negotiates extensively with Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs), who negotiate on behalf of insurers and payers. The PBMs are supposed to remove administrative burdens from insurers and the plan sponsors who actually pay for the whole system.

In reality, PBMs have become incredibly powerful, making much of their money on rebates that they negotiate. To appease them, many manufacturers raise the "list" price and offer a bigger rebate, which is unfortunate for those who actually do have to pay the list price. This is a totally different system from most

developed countries, where national health systems do the negotiation.

And, in a uniquely American twist, when prescription drug benefits were added to Medicare under a 2003 law, Congress specifically forbade the two large public payers from negotiating, instead implementing a sort of "most favoured customer" clause. This clause effectively gave pharma companies an out when other players tried to negotiate hard, by saying they couldn't afford to offer discounts to the two biggest payers!

The new Inflation Reduction Act in the US essentially ends the most favoured customer clause on a few drugs, granting the health ministry to negotiate prescription drug prices for Medicare patients.

EXCLUSIVITY PERIOD

But another shift, embedded in the Act, helps the government negotiate pricing for drugs after a window of exclusivity for nine years (for so-called small-molecule drugs that you typically take in pill form) and 13 years for large-molecule drugs (that have to be injected/infused). What that means is that the lifecycle during which a pharmaceutical company can enjoy a 'monopoly' is going to be truncated.

Will this make manufacturers look for products that face less impact by the Inflation Reduction Act? Plans and programmes with a shorter exclusive "expiry date" are likely to be de-emphasised by pharma decision-makers.

A new challenge will come from payers like Caterpillar, which has been able to tame the growing cost of prescription medicines. This could create a watershed for payers, who seem to have the least amount of control over the system, despite footing the bill.

McGrath is professor at Columbia Business School; Muneer is Fortune-500 advisor, startup investor and Co-Founder of the non-profit Medici Institute for Innovation

Tasks before RBI consumer cell

CHALLENGES AHEAD. While the RBI Ombudsman Scheme has fared well, it needs to adapt to complex products



MANAS R DAS

The Annual Report of the Ombudsman Scheme 2022-23, released on March 11, 2024, is the first standalone report under the Reserve Bank-Integrated Ombudsman Scheme (RB-IOS), 2021 depicting the activities of the 22 Offices of the RBI Ombudsman (ORBIOs) during 2022-23.

The RB-IOS came into being in November 2021 through the merger of three earlier ombudsman schemes, namely, Banking Ombudsman Scheme, 2006, Ombudsman Scheme for Non-Banking Financial Companies, 2018, and Ombudsman Scheme for Digital Transactions, 2019. From September 1, 2022, RB-IOS covered Credit Information Companies (CICs), too.

Since the complaints received at ORBIOs from the banking sector alone constituted the bulk of the total complaints received from the banking and non-banking sectors, this article focuses on the former sector. As in the Annual Report, the three-year period — 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23 — is considered for discussion.

Table 1 presents the position for seven bank groups: (a) public sector banks (PSBs), (b) private banks (PvBs), (c) payment banks (PyBs), (d) small finance banks (SFBs), (e) foreign banks (FBs), (f) regional rural banks (RRBs), and (g) urban co-operative banks (UCBs).

Within the banking sector, PSBs and PvBs constituted 90 per cent of the complaints, serially down from 94 per cent in 2020-21 and 93 per cent in 2021-22.

In aggregate, the YoY decline was steeper in 2022-23 (26.6 per cent) than in 2021-22 (16.4 per cent). All but FBs, and RRBs and UCBs revealed similar trends.

Table 2 presents category-wise position of complaints. Category-wise, serial numbers 1 to 5 constituted the top complaints accounting for 93-95 per cent of the total complaints. Of particular concern were serial numbers 2, 3 and 8 which consistently increased with huge jumps recorded in 2022-23.

The Annual Report attributed 1, 4 and 5 to: (a) occurrence of fraudulent digital transactions due to absence of strong cybersecurity mechanisms in banks and gullible or financially illiterate customers disclosing confidential information; and (b) inordinate delay in reversal of failed transactions by banks.

Loans-related complaints were due to: (a) banks' inability to properly communicate the terms and conditions of loans to borrowers; (b) inordinate delay in updating CICs precipitating in wrong credit report; and (c) banks' failure to educate their recovery agents on extant recovery guidelines.



Deposit accounts-related complaints proliferated due to levying charges on non-maintenance of minimum balance in accounts. The rise in para-banking complaints is largely due to prevalence of large-scale mis-selling in non-banking products.

The jump in serial number 9 in 2022-23 could be due to unavailability of smaller denomination notes/coins and/or inability of bank branches to exchange soiled notes.

NOTEWORTHY DEVELOPMENTS

In addition to the above, the following two points are noteworthy:

Over the years, increasing number of complaints were sorted out at banks' levels, perhaps owing to the Internal Ombudsman Scheme.

Of the total maintainable complaints (i.e., the complaints which are not vague and fall within the functional perimeter of RB-IOS) disposed during 2022-23, a majority, of 58 per cent, was resolved through conciliation/mediation/issuance of advisories.

RB-IOS has evidently performed well over time. However, the job of ORBIOs becomes increasingly critical, as the number of banking players multiply, more innovative and complex products evolve, and last but not least, customers become increasingly knowledgeable and informed. Therefore, the capacity of ORBIOs needs to be continuously augmented.

Moreover, as electronic transactions further widen and deepen, a tech-enabled, robust dispute resolution mechanism aimed at delivering speedy redressal on 'least cost' basis, especially to retail customers, would remain paramount. Increased financial literacy will be supportive.

Finally, RBI may consider bringing out the RB-IOS Annual Report/s by December of the 'reporting year' instead of March of the next year. Besides, the 'Complaints per branch' data presented in Annex 1, if given per 'complainant' branch, instead of 'total' branch, it would be more meaningful, statistically.

Das is a former senior economist, SBI. Views are personal.

Complaints received* TABLE 1

Bank group	2020-21			y-o-y variation	
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	22/21	23/22
PSBs	1,74,974 (55%)	1,54,725 (58%)	1,02,144 (52%)	-11.60%	-34.00%
PvBs	1,26,303 (39%)	94,275 (35%)	73,764 (38%)	-25.40%	-21.80%
PyBs & SFBs	6,918 (2%)	8,076 (3%)	7,888 (4%)	16.70%	-2.30%
FBs	6,157 (2%)	4,464 (2%)	5,639 (3%)	-27.50%	26.30%
RRBs & UCBs	6,382 (2%)	6,508 (2%)	7,200 (4%)	2.00%	10.60%
Total	3,20,734 (100%)	2,68,048 (100%)	1,96,635 (100%)	-16.40%	-26.60%

Category-wise complaints* TABLE 2

Complaint category	2020-21			y-o-y variation	
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	22/21	23/22
1 Mobile/electronic banking	44,385 (24%)	39,388 (24%)	39,855 (23%)	-11.30%	1.20%
2 Loans and advances	20,218 (11%)	24,507 (15%)	39,579 (22%)	21.20%	61.50%
3 Deposit accounts related	8,580 (5%)	16,388 (10%)	33,612 (19%)	91.00%	105.10%
4 ATM/Debit cards	60,203 (33%)	41,375 (25%)	28,635 (16%)	-31.30%	-30.80%
5 Credit cards	40,721 (22%)	32,162 (19%)	24,549 (14%)	-21.00%	-23.70%
6 Pension payments	4,966 (3%)	6,179 (4%)	4,377 (2%)	24.40%	-29.20%
7 Remittances	3,394 (2%)	3,235 (2%)	2,937 (2%)	-4.70%	-9.20%
8 Para banking	1,236 (1%)	1,480 (1%)	2,476 (1%)	19.70%	67.30%
9 Notes & Coins	332 (0.20%)	296 (0.20%)	505 (0.30%)	-10.80%	70.60%
Total	1,84,035 (100%)	1,65,010 (100%)	1,76,525 (100%)	-10.30%	7.00%

*at Offices of the RBI Ombudsman Figures in brackets give percentages to total.

As electronic transactions further widen and deepen, a tech-enabled, robust dispute resolution mechanism aimed at delivering speedy redressal on 'least cost' basis would remain paramount.

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

April 12, 2004

Investors shying away from SIP funds

Inflows into equity funds have picked up sharply over the past six months. But few investors are routing their investments through the Systematic Investment Plans offered by fund houses. Many fund houses exempt SIP investments from the usual entry load of 2 per cent to other investors.

'Asian-owned firms are worth £8 b in UK'

The Asian-owned businesses in the UK are worth about £8 billion, according to a study by *Eastern Eye*, Britain's Asian newspaper. Mr Mike Jatania, whose Lornamead business owns a number of household brands, tops the list with an estimated £500-million fortune. The brothers Mr Vijay and Mr Bhikhu Patel, who founded Waymade Group, a pharmaceutical company, are ranked second in the list with a £425-million fortune.

'Dishonoured' contracts hit cotton yarn shippers

Many cotton yarn exporters are ruing over "unhonoured" contracts they had entered with the importers from the FarEast, especially in Korea and Hong Kong. These importers have failed to open the letter of credit for the contract they booked with the Indian spinners/cotton yarn shippers, trade sources say.

Raw deal for women in the fisheries sector

Saurabh Bandyopadhyay
Laxmi Joshi

India is second only to China in fish production. In 2022-23, India produced around 18 million tonnes, accounting for 8 per cent of global production. About 32 per cent of this came from marine sources, and 68 per cent from inland sources. The fisheries sector contributes 1.09 per cent to India's GVA, and over 6.7 per cent to agriculture GVA.

Water bodies are an important source of inland fishery. Per the Census of Water Bodies by the Ministry of Jal Shakti (Census conducted during 2018-19 and reported in 2023), there are 2.4 million water bodies in the country, of which 97.1 per cent are in rural areas and 2.9 per cent in urban. The distribution of water bodies is as follows: 59.5 per cent are ponds; 15.7 per cent, tanks; 12.1 per cent, reservoirs; 9.3 per cent, water conservation schemes/percolation tanks/check dams; 0.9 per cent, lakes; 2.5 per cent, others.

Inland fisheries provide employment and livelihood support to over 28 million people in India, of which women are an integral part, helping with pre-

and post-harvest work — peeling, seafood processing, community care, etc. An NCAER study observed that women's concerns and interests are frequently disregarded.

For instance, women workers in the fish *mandi* of Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh complain about not having separate toilet facilities despite shouldering equal responsibilities in the entire marketing activities. There are still significant gaps in our understanding of gender relations in the fisheries sector.

WORK OVERLOOKED

In India, women make up 72 per cent of the fisheries workforce (FAO, 2016), with 57 per cent engaged in seed collection, 73.6 per cent in marketing, and 75.7 per cent in curing and processing (CMFRI, 2010). Despite their significant contributions, women's work is often overlooked. Processing industries often employ women, but rigid working hours, household responsibilities, and distance from the workplace make it difficult for them to attend work on time, leading to stress and even injuries.



BIG CONTRIBUTION. Poor rewards

The Central Institute for Women in Agriculture (CIWA) has calculated the Gender Work Participation Disparity Index in fisheries, which varies from State to State. In Nagaland, Manipur, and Himachal Pradesh it is < 0.15, whereas in Punjab, Haryana, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Odisha, it is between 0.34 and 0.59 (CIWA, 2015).

Ownership of land and other productive resources is primarily male-dominated; in developed countries, women hold 20 per cent of land, and in underdeveloped countries, it is only 2 per cent. Due to several

collateral factors or male dominance, women do not have access to financial facilities or marketing agreements. Women's engagement in agriculture and related fields has been restricted by technological improvements that have primarily benefited men.

In 97 countries, just 5 per cent of agricultural extension services are received by female farmers, indicating that women's access to these services is restricted. Women are left behind at home when males migrate elsewhere in search of employment, which results in excess workload and less prospects for income generation. In fisheries, women are under-represented on official decision-making platforms, which makes sustained reforms challenging. Sensitivity to gender issues, women-supportive marketing infrastructure, gender-responsive research, gender main-streaming of course curriculums, and gender-disaggregated data collection are crucial for sustainable transformation of the fishery sector.

The writers are Senior Fellow and Fellow, respectively, at NCAER

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2416

EASY

ACROSS

- Hub (6)
- Chit-chat (6)
- Shake with fear (7)
- Strung-up (5)
- Handle of axe, etc (4)
- Hindu garment (4)
- To be read as printed (3)
- Onion-related vegetable (4)
- Stylish elegance (4)
- An advance (3)
- Smooth material (4)
- Continent (4)
- Religious images (5)
- System of wireless telegraphy (7)
- Just so much (2,4)
- Render one unhearing (6)

DOWN

- Awkward poser (5,8)
- Necessary (7)
- Teases (4)
- All at once (8)
- Airs (5)
- Abstraction of mind (13)
- Settle loan (5)
- Keeps on and on (8)
- Finish knitting (4,3)
- Wretched dwellings (5)
- Way to cook (5)
- Gratuitous (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Being in the middle, foreign coin must be re-finished (6)
- Sponsor at baptism will go in for idle talk (6)
- Boy singer taking in a number will show his fear (7)
- 'X' half-seen to be strung-up (5)
- Handle the end of the launch toward the stern (4)
- Garment necessary to dress a rice-grower (4)
- Namely one inside: read that the way it is (3)
- Vegetable upsetting to essential part of craft (4)
- Elegance shown by half the domestic poultry (4)
- Advance the coach - in reverse! (3)
- QC's material to witness finally - the same in Scotland? (4)
- Where China is backward in opera is alarming (4)
- Is about to do religious pictures (5)
- First in wireless telegraphy, spoil one of 24 mistakenly (7)
- Just as much of a lesson, put a different way (2,4)
- Make one hear too much to make one hear nothing (6)

DOWN

- 'Any luck?' angler may consider something to trap him (5,8)
- What's necessary to end fuel distribution (7)
- Wives going spare at the Chinese takeaway, perhaps (4)
- Unqualified, the dismissal? Correct! (8)
- Noted utterances (5)
- In advance, trade causes state of engaged mind (13)
- Being concerned with wages, settle the loan (5)
- Person, on leaving, is set up heartlessly - still keeps on! (8)
- Untie the craft and finish the knitting (4,3)
- In Scotland, chimney in only half the mess of wretched housing (5)
- Cook one way, cook another right inside (5)
- It's for nothing to let one go (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2415

ACROSS 1. Overmuch 7. Might 8. Muffled 9. Delight 10. Lost 12. Earache 14. Seeming 17. Spit 18. Buffalo 21. Corsair 22. Large 23. Pretence

DOWN 1. Ormolu 2. Effusive 3. Malt 4. Cuddle 5. Agog 6. Statue 7. Mildred 11. Private 13. Complain 14. Subtle 15. Grocer 16. Starve 19. Fort 20. Grit

Needed an Apple encore

India can do better in electronics exports

The World Trade Organization has revised its merchandise trade volume growth projection for 2024 to 2.6 per cent, down from its October estimate of 3.3 per cent. While slower global trade growth will affect prospects, India should focus on emerging possibilities. The US and China, for instance, have been in a trade war — alternately hot and cold — for at least the past five years. The US initiated this shift by imposing a 25 per cent tariff on certain Chinese imports into the country, especially intermediate goods, in July and August of 2018. Further tariffs were imposed over the course of the next year. In total, the import lines affected were approximately \$350 billion in value. But, recognising the effect that such tariffs might have on consumer prices, then President Donald Trump stopped short of extending the tariff hikes as planned. Thus, for example, laptop computers, computer monitors, mobile phones, video game consoles, and toys were not covered by higher import duties, an extension that had been planned for December 2019. Although many items were never covered by higher tariffs, there was nevertheless a shift in the supply chains for those items. While imports of mobile phones from China continued to increase, by 10-15 per cent, imports from the rest of the world shot up by over 70 per cent.

What is relevant for India is that it seems to be a relatively minor player in this derisking process. Several reports published by the industry group India Cellular & Electronics Association (ICEA) over the past years have underlined the point that while Indian exports have indeed increased, the lion's share of any benefits from this restructuring of trade has gone to countries like Vietnam. As this newspaper has reported, the latest data shows that Vietnam's electronics exports rose from \$12.1 billion in 2018 to \$51.2 billion in 2023, over 28 per cent of the total non-Chinese incremental electronics imports into the US in that time. India's, by comparison, rose to \$8.9 billion from \$1.3 billion — only 5.5 per cent of the non-Chinese increment in electronics imports. Companies are choosing voluntarily to reduce Chinese components in those parts of their supply chains that service the US market — and several of them choose countries other than India for this purpose.

Why are other countries performing better than India in substituting for China in this supply chain? Two reasons stand out. First, if they have low, stable tariff and trade regimes. Naturally, this favours countries like Mexico, which are in existing trade pacts. It also benefits those, like Vietnam, which have pursued predictable, low-tariff trade policy. Companies do not like being ambushed by shifts in duties or tariff restrictions. India, however, has increased tariffs with a view to increasing domestic production. The second reason is the broader business climate. India has successfully wooed Apple and its subcontractors, and the seven-fold increase in electronics exports since 2018 can be laid at the doorstep of this achievement. But its peers have done better in their pro-business policy. Vietnam, for example, was the chosen relocation destination for both Samsung and LG. The former entity exports from Vietnam to 123 countries, but from India to only a couple of dozen. There remains a window of opportunity for India to take advantage of companies' anticipating US-led decoupling from China. But, as investments in Indian competitors fructify, that window of opportunity could close.

Reviving disinvestment

This must be a top priority for the next govt

At a *Business Standard* event last month, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman reiterated the central government's commitment to the privatisation policy. Some concerns in this context emerged after the Interim Budget, presented on February 1, did not explicitly provide the disinvestment target for the year. The minister's statement thus is reassuring. The new public-sector policy was announced as part of the Aatmanirbhar Bharat package during the pandemic. It was also part of the Union Budget 2021-22. The policy envisages disinvestment in all strategic and non-strategic areas. The government will maintain a bare minimum presence of central public-sector enterprises (CPSEs) in strategic areas, such as atomic energy, power, petroleum, and financial services.

However, there is no clear timeline for the implementation, which is perhaps understandable because disinvestment and privatisation can be complex exercises. Some CPSEs may take time because of various issues, such as protecting employee interests. Yet, despite the potential complexity, the government would be well advised to move swiftly on this path. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that the next term of his government will take big decisions and various ministries are reportedly making a road map in this regard. Irrespective of the shape of the next government, there are strong reasons why reviving disinvestment should be at the top of the agenda.

The government has supported economic revival from the pandemic by increasing capital expenditure. While it did push up growth in recent years, higher government expenditure slowed the fiscal consolidation process. The Union government is targeting to bring down the fiscal deficit to below 4.5 per cent of gross domestic product by 2025-26. Accelerating the fiscal consolidation process will help the Indian economy if the proceeds of disinvestment fund part of capital expenditure. Lower government demand for financial savings will leave funds for the private sector. There are tentative signs of private-sector capital expenditure revival. However, if the government continues to absorb a large part of surplus savings, the revival of private capex will be at risk. It may be forced to import capital, which may not be desirable at this stage. Thus, large-scale disinvestment can not only help sustain government capex but also help revive private investment, which is necessary to sustain growth.

Further, stock markets are booming and the outlook is positive. Assuming India elects a stable government, which looks likely at this point, things could improve further. Global inflation has peaked and financial conditions have eased comparatively. Investors expect the US Federal Reserve to start cutting policy interest rates later this year. A lower cost of money in global markets will support capital flows to emerging-market economies like India, which could further push up stock-market valuations. Increasing demand for stocks and favourable valuations mean the government will get a better price for its assets. It must capitalise on this opportunity. Notably, although stock prices of CPSEs, as reflected by the S&P BSE PSU Index, have doubled over the past year, valuations in terms of the price-to-earnings ratio are still much lower than the benchmark S&P BSE Sensex. Significant disinvestment would likely increase investor participation, making it easier for these firms to raise capital for expansion. Thus, pursuing aggressive disinvestment and privatisation will augment growth in more ways than one.

The RBI is fighting fit at 90

When the central bank demonstrates performance, when it takes on board the concerns of all stakeholders, including the government, the political authority is more than happy to let it get on with its job

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



At 90, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) shows not just poise but an alertness and agility unusual at that age. The praise it has received on the occasion from the Prime Minister and the finance minister is well deserved. The RBI has had a stellar record throughout the economic liberalisation process. Yet, the record of the past four or five years stands out because of the enormity of the challenges the RBI faced in a relatively short period.

The Covid-19 crisis hit the Indian economy in 2020, when the banking system was still in deep trouble with gross non-performing assets (NPAs) at 8.5 per cent of loans in 2019-20. The Ukraine conflict, which commenced in February 2022, created huge uncertainties in the global economy. Global growth decelerated to its lowest level in two decades.

In this extremely stressful period, the RBI acquitted itself creditably in all the critical areas: Monetary policy, foreign exchange management, and financial stability. It is the management of financial stability that is, perhaps, the most remarkable achievement. Nobody could have imagined at the onset of the pandemic in 2020 that gross NPAs as a proportion of loans could fall to as low as 3.2 per cent in about three and a half years. Many of the policies that have contributed towards financial stability have evolved over time; others arose in response to the pandemic. It is worth looking at both sets of policies.

Among the policies that have evolved over time, there is, first, the unified approach to regulation and supervision. Regulation and supervision are housed in the same entity. The RBI in recent years moved towards unified regulation of banks, non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), and urban cooperative banks (UCBs). Both these enable the regulator to better understand the inter-connectedness of these players and quickly identify weak spots.

Secondly, the RBI has eschewed "light touch" regulation. It does not believe that risk management can be left entirely to the boards and management of banks. It has not hesitated to make detailed prescriptions where necessary, for example, the Large Exposure Framework for banks.

Thirdly, the RBI has chosen to stay ahead of the regulatory curve on bank capital. Whereas the Basel norm is for a minimum capital of 8 per cent, the RBI has specified a requirement of 9 per cent. This anticipated the post-Global Financial Crisis (GFC) wisdom that more capital in banking is better than less.

Fourthly, the RBI has tightened the regulation of NBFCs. Its position is that large, systemically important NBFCs must convert into banks and bring themselves within the ambit of the stricter regulation that applies to banks.

Fifthly, the RBI, unlike many central banks, has long followed a multiple indicators approach. It sees its remit as covering not just price stability but economic growth, financial stability, and financial inclusion. These indicators are mutually reinforcing. Focusing on all indicators helps achieve better outcomes on each one of them.

Sixthly, there is the framework for private and foreign ownership in banks whereby the limits on a single entity's ownership in Indian banks are defined. There is also the policy for foreign banks, under which they can expect the same treatment as domestic banks provided they come in through the subsidiary route.

Then, we have the RBI's many creative responses to the pandemic. Three deserve special mention.

The first is the moratorium of six months on loan repayment. Analysts thought almost everybody would jump in to take the facility. They were wrong: The moratorium was taken for only 40 per cent of the loans outstanding. Those who did not have liquidity problems



FINGER ON THE PULSE

T T RAM MOHAN

Borrowing to consume

Unlike many developing countries, India is blessed with a high rate of domestic savings. The ratio of gross domestic savings (GDS) to gross domestic product (GDP) rose from 15 per cent in the 1960s to peak at 35 per cent of GDP in 2012. It has since fallen to settle at around 30 per cent.

This has meant that India is able to afford high rates of investment. Hence, despite low productivity, we can expect the floor growth rate to be around 5 per cent. It also means that the government can borrow entirely domestically to finance the fiscal deficit (and can counter attempts like in 2019 by anti-national Cassandras to incur sovereign foreign debt and fall into a debt trap like so many other countries).

However, structural rigidities in the Indian economy mean the composition of GDS is fragile. The savings that enter the financial system (and is, therefore, available for borrowing by the organised sector and by the government) is a fraction of GDS. The rest (historically called physical savings) is deployed in various assets like housing, land, agriculture, and gold, but despite countless committees, we can only guess at the precise composition. What we do know is that today physical savings constitute more than 60 per cent of household GDS despite the increased financialisation of the economy. This means that the "modern" economy has to compete for a much smaller pool of savings than the GDS number indicates — raising the cost of capital considerably, or resorting to financial repression with interest rates on savings administratively kept low relative to their scarcity market value.

This conundrum can be resolved only when the share of financial savings rises appreciably. But this has not happened despite occasionally hopeful trends. Unable to address the root cause, policy has sought to manage the consequences. Using administered interest rates and the government's privileged position as borrower of first resort, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)

has kept lending rates at reasonable levels though this has eroded the value of financial savings and reinforced the incentive to undertake physical savings. Cognizant of this problem, various Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) committees have placed restraints on government borrowing (contrary to the WhatsApp myth, FRBM limits are set based on macroeconomic analysis, not by mimicking Maastricht, etc). In addition, using instruments like priority-sector lending, the RBI also effectively deploys a credit-rationing mechanism. All these things have helped keep the cost of capital at reasonable levels. Enhanced inflows of foreign investment over the past 40 years have also helped manage the situation.

There are now new challenges on the horizon as work by the brilliant economist Nikhil Gupta^[1] makes clear. Better-off households are the major net savers (savings minus borrowings) in any economy. In recent years there has been a sharp rise in household borrowings, currently 5.8 per cent of GDP. It seems that this happened because there was weak income growth in FY23 and so households maintained their investment and consumption aspirations by reducing savings and borrowing more in FY24. Mr Gupta expects this to persist in FY25.

Most household liabilities are bank loans, up from 3.1 per cent of GDP in FY19 to 4.4 per cent in FY23 and projected at 4.8 per cent in FY24. This rise in household borrowings puts pressure on macro management because it raises the cost of capital for formation by the government as well as the private sector. It is bound to hit the limits of the RBI-administered financial repression and rationing system, which is not designed to cope with rising household borrowings.

If these borrowings were largely for housing mortgages that would be an ameliorating factor. But Mr Gupta shows that the bulk of the rise in debt is non-

saw no advantage in not paying their loans on time.

Secondly, there was the scheme for restructuring corporate and personal loans. Analysts warned as much as 5 per cent of outstanding loans would be restructured. Half of that, they said, would go bad later, adding NPAs of 2.5 per cent of loans to an already distressed sector.

Nothing of the sort happened. On average, only 1.5 per cent of all loans were restructured. A mere 0.2 per cent of corporate loans were restructured. That is because the conditions to qualify for restructuring as well as the monitoring plans for corporate restructuring were stringent. They were intended to filter out bogus cases and help only the genuine ones. As mentioned earlier, NPA levels have declined, not risen.

Then, there was the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) announced by the government, in consultation with the RBI, in May 2020. Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) facing economic distress were given additional funding of up to ₹3 trillion in the form of a fully guaranteed emergency credit line (GECL). Naysayers saw the ECLGS scheme as another "loan mela" that would again cause NPAs to rise in the banking system. It turns out that NPAs in the ECLGS scheme are 5 per cent of the total amount disbursed. NPAs in MSMEs in general were 6.8 per cent of loans in March 2023. Over the years, NPAs in the MSME sector have been more of the order of 9 per cent.

"Regulatory forbearance" is a dirty word for many economists. It is seen as a means of "kicking the can down the road", deferring problems to a future date. The RBI has proved them wrong. It has shown that regulatory forbearance, if well designed and executed, can generate positive outcomes.

The turnaround in banking has had an expected outcome. Talk of privatising public-sector banks (PSBs), which had gained momentum at the height of the banking crisis, has subsided. The improvement in financials of these banks is not the only reason. No government would like to privatise PSBs in a way that compromises the framework for private and foreign ownership that has been crafted to ensure stability in Indian banking.

RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das assumed office following the controversial exits of two successive governors. In both the domestic and foreign media, there were loud laments about the possible erosion of autonomy at India's central bank. Mr Das has shown that it is possible for the RBI to exercise the necessary autonomy and achieve a high degree of credibility worldwide without getting into a confrontation with the political authority.

There's an important lesson here. Autonomy is not something the central bank can expect to be given on a platter. When the central bank demonstrates performance, when it takes on board the concerns of all stakeholders, including the government, the political authority is more than happy to let it get on with its job.

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RATHIN ROY

China's strongman party



BOOK REVIEW

GUNJIAN SINGH

The Communist Party of China (CPC) has always been shrouded in opaqueness, which has deepened under Xi Jinping. Mr Xi, who belongs to the fifth generation of Chinese leadership, has amassed so much power that he has made himself synonymous with the CPC. His goal is the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, a task he believes no one except him is capable of achieving. Since taking over as General Secretary of the CPC in 2012, he has consistently changed the outlook of the party and the government. When he became President in 2013 there was some optimism that he would be leaning towards

openness and reforms. However, by establishing himself as a leader for life, Mr Xi has turned the narrative around CPC and China with the spotlight on him.

The *Party of One: The Rise of Xi Jinping & China's Superpower Future* is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding Xi Jinping the leader. The book provides a look at Mr Xi's childhood and how the Cultural Revolution impacted him. His father's role and how he perceives this is also discussed and analysed. His commitment to become a party member even after multiple rejections underscores his perception of the Party.

During his early years as provincial leader, Mr Xi's policies and decisions were not that successful, the author argues. The author cites the examples of Fuzhou's Changle Airport and the Sanfang Qixiang development which were mired in controversies. The media narrative around them changed after Mr Xi became president. Mr Xi has consistently concentrated power, making him one of the most powerful leaders since

Mao while raising speculations about the future of the party. "In Xi's own words, as well as the words of those who knew him, his ambitions led him not to wealth, but to power," Chun Han Wong writes.

He has also used the propaganda department to build his image. "He presented himself as a humble figure who earned the right to rule through his hard-earned experiences, affinity for common folk, and loyalty to the party. His elite background, once disdained by some peers, was repackaged to portray Xi's sense of mission and filial piety," Mr Wong adds.

Mr Xi's first action was the anti-corruption drive. The general belief was that it was an attempt to consolidate power since every leader before him had resorted to this rise to boost their position. But "... rather than a ritual bloodletting, Xi unleashed a veritable bloodbath." The major goal being weeding out all opposition to Xi Jinping thought and hitting the flies as well as the tigers. No one seems to be safe from his wrath. This coupled

with China's weak judicial system forces one to conclude that "The party can play judge, jury, or even the executioner."

Another major challenge for Mr Xi has been the economy. The four decades of reform and opening up had boosted the position of the private sector, but also raised questions about the credibility of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs). For Mr Xi the onus to drive the economy should be on the public sector and SOEs. One could argue that the balancing of private and public enterprises is crucial for the Chinese economy. But under Mr Xi the private sector has been losing its advantage. "What Xi wants, some experts argue, is a hybrid system that combines central planning with market mechanisms, where state and private enterprises act in concert to advance the party's economic agenda" Mr Wong suggests.

The way Jack Ma's fate turned out set the tone of how Mr Xi was going to

deal with the growing private sector and entrepreneurs. The author writes "The question of ownership wouldn't matter as long as they sing in tune with the party. Going off key would be costly." Mr Xi believes there is an urgent need to boost wages and create jobs and to do this "he would first put politics back in command".

Managing the historical discourse has always been crucial for the party and its legitimacy. Every Communist leader has contributed towards this rewriting and Mr Xi is no different. Since taking office, Mr Wong writes, "...

Xi Jinping waged battle for China's hearts and minds: to secure the Communist Party's future, he was exerting an iron grip on the past By portraying the party as an indisputable guarantor of China's ascendancy over a fading West, Xi hopes to secure his own power, and entrench Communist rule for generations to come".

Unsurprisingly, the one core challenge the Party is facing today is succession. Mr Xi has abandoned the timely process of leadership change put in place under Deng Xiaoping. He has still not identified any probable successor. Some scholars have argued that "Strongman leaders prefer pliant successors who won't outshine or betray them. Whomever Xi chooses as heir may well be a relatively weak ruler who struggles to assert himself". As the author underscores, "The biggest threat to an autocrat's legacy may well be himself".

The author was one of the journalists who has been at the receiving end of Xi Jinping's tightening control over the media. He, however, rightly argues that the reducing space for journalism is not helping Xi Jinping's goal. The CPC's working has always been shrouded in mystery and Mr Xi has shut the curtains even tighter. The title is apt; with reducing space for alternative views and opinions, the CPC is increasingly becoming Mr Xi's party. The question that looms large is whether the party will survive Xi Jinping.

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PARTY OF ONE: The Rise of Xi Jinping & China's Superpower Future
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OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

Diplomacy with a defence angle

Defence attachés in multiple foreign missions should help India boost defence exports

New Delhi's move to appoint defence attachés in several foreign missions is of a piece with India's rising economic clout and its self-perception as a leader of the Global South. It also needs to be seen in the backdrop of New Delhi's plan to open 26 new missions, of which 18 will be in African countries. A third factor that provides context to the decision is India's focus on self-reliance (*atma nirbharta*) in defence production, which is focussed not only on restricting imports but also on exporting Indian products, especially to African countries.

Defence attachés in friendly nations such as Russia and the US are involved in efforts to acquire new weapons systems and also facilitate military-to-military cooperation. The current push seems particularly focussed on the trade aspect, especially linked to the ambitious targets set in defence production. The defence ministry disclosed that India's defence exports grew 32.5% and crossed the ₹21,000-crore mark for the first time last fiscal. New Delhi has set a defence export target of ₹35,000 crore by 2024-25; India exports military hardware to around 85 countries. There could be a wider market for marquee products such as the Tejas light combat aircraft (LCA) and the BrahMos cruise missile jointly developed by India and Russia. The decision to appoint defence attachés in the Philippines and Armenia reflects this new metric in diplomacy: In 2022, Manila inked a \$375 million deal with New Delhi to acquire three batteries of the BrahMos cruise missile and Armenia became the first foreign customer for Pinaka rocket launcher.

The appointments in African countries — Mozambique, the Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, and Djibouti — follow New Delhi's outreach to the continent, which was visible during the G20 summit when India aggressively championed the African Union's inclusion. India's trade relations with the African continent date back to ancient times. In the recent past, it was shaped by the idealism of a post-colonial third world, with New Delhi backing the many national liberation struggles in Africa and inviting newly independent countries to be a part of the Non-aligned Movement. This has now been replaced by a hard-nosed economic realism wherein India sees Africa emerging as a major market. This amplified engagement also has a security dimension since Beijing has been aggressively courting Africa and investing in infrastructure there as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative.

America's tough talk on trade balance

There are no standout outcomes of United States (US) treasury secretary Janet Yellen's just-concluded visit to China, but it remains a crucial piece in the broader engagement between the two countries. This has been gaining momentum since presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping met last year in November. In fact, a Biden-Xi call days before Yellen landed in Beijing was seen as a prologue of sorts to the visit, with the leaders appreciating the progress made on a range of issues, including counternarcotics cooperations, AI-related risks, and the climate crisis. However, for the US, areas of considerable discomfiture remain. Be it the State subsidies fuelling China's overcapacity in battery, electric vehicle, and solar manufacturing or the concerns over data and national security surrounding Chinese-owned apps like TikTok, these needed to be communicated to Beijing.

Against this backdrop, Yellen's visit underscores a carefully considered approach to engaging on pain points. Given her image as a top economic mind rather than a politician packing rhetoric and her personal connection with her Chinese counterpart, He Lifeng, China is more likely to have understood if not appreciated the US's strident stand on Chinese overcapacity and the dragon needing to push domestic consumption. How China responds will be interesting.

While commerce minister Wang Wentao has termed the overcapacity concerns "groundless", some Chinese leaders are reported to privately agree that some industries are heating up. But a pivot seems unlikely, given the weak growth China has registered. There are indications that the most it is willing to wager is to allow market forces to correct the situation — that is, weaker companies going under. But China can't complain that it wasn't warned if the US and other economies then prefer the more active route of tariff barriers.

From NCERT to IITs, science takes a knock

It is undesirable and tendentious on the part of educational institutions to ask students to internalise fanciful hypotheses and inadequately proven opinions

The immortal closing lines of Shelley's 1820 poem *Ode to the West Wind*, "The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind/If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" though not their juxtaposition of the undesirable and the desirable, came to my mind when I read about modifications in Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) history texts introduced by National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT). Shocking as it is, NCERT's insistence on establishing that the Harappans later emerged in India's protohistory as the Vedic people, I did not feel shocked by the distortion since that is precisely what the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur (IIT-K) did in its 2022 calendar. Is it because the imagination of a larger part of CBSE students is fired by the dream of getting into an IIT that NCERT wants to indoctrinate them by way of preparation towards that goal?

First about IIT-K. Created in 1951 with Sir JC Ghosh as its first director and BC Roy and SS Bhatnagar among its board members, its vision was to "produce global leaders in science, technology and management" and "to

be a hub of knowledge creation". Seven decades later, the calendar, dedicated to the Centre of Excellence for Indian Knowledge Systems, was devoted to what it called the "recovery of the foundations of Indian knowledge systems". Its stated aims are: First, recognition of the secret of the Vedas; next, reinterpretation of the Indus Valley civilisation (IVC); and last, to provide a rebuttal to the Aryan invasion myth. Towards this end, it offered 12 "evidences", never mind the awkward plural. What it offered as "evidence" was a series of biased claims: The currently accepted chronology of Indian civilisation is dubious and questionable; the chronological gap between the IVC and the Vedic period is a calumny of some European scholars, a conspiracy hatched by them in order to "downgrade the cosmological and altruistic foundations of the Vedas". The calendar tried to show how the Aryan invasion myth resulted from the works of Max Muller, Arthur de Gobineau and HS Chamberlain.

It is well established that Adolf Hitler accepted the ideas of Aryan superiority from the works of de Gobineau (1816-82), who turned the name of a language (Indo-Aryan) into an ethnographic term (Aryan), and Chamberlain further made the idea accessible to the Germans. Therefore, it is clear beyond doubt that the Aryan invasion of India is not a historical fact. It is also established though that the term "Aryan" in Sanskrit had been used previously by speakers of Indo-Iranian in the Mitanni period for referring to a person, just as the term "sir" is used. How absurd it

would be as a scientific observation if centuries from now a future anthropologist were to dig up files in government archives and claim to the existence of a people called "sir"! Something similar has happened in the case of the term "Aryan".

However, there is a vast difference in the ways languages migrate and large populations do. The Rakhigarhi skeleton research opens up the question of the five-century gap between the end of the Harappan era around 1900 BCE and the beginning of the Vedic era around 1400 BCE, but a vast amount of further research will be required to close it. Demonsifying European scholars of Indian civilisation does in no way prove that the historically non-existent Aryans "went out from here" rather than "came here from outside". To harbour such a belief amounts to committing the same ghastly blunder that Adolf Hitler



GN Devy

committed but from an Indian end of the fantasy. During the last two decades, genetics have helped in arriving at a granular grasp of prehistory which had earlier remained surrounded in mystery and open to wild guesswork. In the context of India, works like David Reich's *Who We Are and How We Got Here* (2018) and Tony Joseph's *The Early Indians* (2018) have presented cogent accounts of different waves of migrations. Similarly, David Anthony's *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* has established a precise sequence of the rise of horse-driven wagons in the Eurasian



During the last two decades, genetics have helped in arriving at a granular grasp of prehistory

HT ARCHIVE

steppes and the successive stages of the evolution of the language which, after its arrival on the western border of India, came to be known as Sanskrit. The turning point in this history was the use of copper, the control of horses and the use of wheel-run wagons which allowed ancient Eurasian steppe people to move out towards the South and the West. In the process what is described as the "Proto-Indo-European" (PIE) branched into Indo-European, Indo-Iranian and Indic. Indic was subsequently named Sanskrit. Its earliest form was related to the language of the *Avesta*. One notices that at least 380 words — such as Indra, Mitra, Varuna, and Homa — used in the *Avesta* are found in the Rig Veda.

The claim that the recent ancient DNA study of a Rakhigarhi skeleton disproves the previously established understanding of the language movement is hasty, far-fetched and agenda-driven rather than a dispassionate scientific analysis. In a 2019 paper published by archaeologist Vasant Shinde and others based on DNA study of a Rakhigarhi skeleton, the conclusion states that the DNA sample shows no presence of Iranian farmers' ancestry among IVC. It points to new directions for research on the history of agriculture in India. But it also states, "Our analysis of data from one individual from the IVC, in conjunction with 11

previously reported individuals from sites in cultural contact with the IVC, demonstrates the existence of an ancestry gradient that was widespread in farmers to the northwest of peninsular India at the height of the IVC, that had little if any genetic contribution from Steppe pastoralists or western Iranian farmers or herders, and that had a primary impact on the ancestry of later South Asians. While our study is sufficient to demonstrate that this ancestry profile was a common feature of the IVC, a single sample — or even the gradient of 12 likely IVC samples we have identified — cannot fully characterise a cosmopolitan ancient civilisation."

Accounts of evolution of languages are based on comparative and historical linguistics. They firmly indicate that Sanskrit is historically a later stage of the PIE and that it has had no pre-Harappa existence in South Asia. Given the current state of various disciplines — human genetics, ancient DNA study, linguistics, archaeology and history of food and agriculture — it is undesirable and entirely tendentious on the part of NCERT to ask students to internalise fanciful hypotheses and inadequately proven opinions.

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Despite polls, India-US ties set to get stronger

In 2024, around 3.5 billion people out of the planet's eight billion will head to the polls. Two of the most widely anticipated elections will be in two of the world's largest democracies, India and the United States (US). Washington picks a new leader every four years, while New Delhi picks a new government every five, and once in two decades, by the laws of mathematics, the election year coincides. Electioneering, campaigning, and political sloganeering are underway in both nations.

Democracies are inherently noisy, and vibrant media houses and cantankerous social media throw up all sorts of prognostications. Some political pundits have pontificated that India-US relations are on a downward spiral. This is far from the truth. In all democracies, on a normal day, there are contrasting opinions, colourful conversations, and loud debates. In both the US and India, there are political figures that go astray and are subject to legal jurisprudence. Recently, in both countries, leading political figures fell out of favour with the political establishment. Much has been spoken about in the media and critiques of the political system have been brought to the forefront.

However, the legal precedence in all democratic establishments takes its course and it behaves allies and strategic partners to not intervene.

The India-US strategic partnership is truly bipartisan and politically agnostic. While some independent commentators may differ on sentiment, the statistics speak for themselves. Since India's 1991 reforms, the onset of liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation has meant that the allure of a large global commercial market has fruited economic relations between the two countries.

India-US trade went from a negligible \$2 million over three decades ago to a point now where Washington is New Delhi's top trading partner, with bilateral trade currently estimated at approximately \$200 billion. It is expected to reach \$500 billion in the coming years, with growth in newer areas such as defence, agriculture, space, climate, energy, health, and education as well as critical and emerging technologies like semiconductors, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and quantum computing. In 2023 alone, India-US relations culminated in one of the most productive years for the partnership. An epochal year marked by only the third State visit by an Indian leader to Washington.

The diplomatic momentum gained from a historic State visit extended beyond pomp and platitudes. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden put together a strategic roadmap with new dialogues and initiatives in multifaceted areas such as clean energy cooperation, education, space collaboration, semiconductors, quantum computing, drone technology, and AI. There were monumental agreements in accelerated joint projects such as manufacturing GE F-414 jet engines in India, putting India in the elite club of countries with such manufacturing capability.

Washington and New Delhi have continued to build on deep defence synergy in new areas of critical and emerging technology with initiatives launched in 2023 such as the

Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), and INDUS-X. Together, with their Quad partners Australia and Japan, both India and the US continue to remain steadfast in securing a free and open Indo-Pacific. They have also been successful in building new economic corridors of trust in the landmark India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC), which complements a West Asia Quad in I2U2 (featuring India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US). The successes of 2023 continue this year as both countries work on building new trade links, enhancing digital connectivity, creating clean energy corridors, and strengthening the I2U2 collaboration in West Asia.

Furthermore, Biden was supportive of India's presidency at the 2023 G20 summit, which capped a monumental year for India and marked Biden's first visit to India as US President. At a time of global conflict, India's adroit diplomacy at the G20 summit saw world leaders make a clarion call for peace and use diplomacy as a primary tool for conflict resolution. New Delhi was successful in speaking for global equity and a more egalitarian world, battling for the Global South, particularly for the inclusion of the African Union in the G20.

In the past, there have been valid critiques about India's system being far too protectionist and bureaucratic. Today, the country is the fastest-growing major economy and the most populous nation in the world. With a demographic dividend, the country has a bolder vision on the world stage and global aspirations. It continues to engage other partners both bilaterally and through multilaterals and multilateral forums.

India has privatised traditionally protected sectors such as defence and space, and even its national carrier Air India. India's historic landing of Chandrayaan-3 paves the way for deeper space collaboration between the two countries, and under INDUS-X, room for more growth for investors in space startups.

The US and India will further cement their bilateral partnership at this year's 2+2 dialogue between the foreign and defence leaders and the Quad Leader's Summit, which New Delhi will host. But, of course, foreign policy temporarily takes a backseat as six weeks of voting begin.

The US elections, while some months away, present Herculean hurdles for the incumbent president. While President Biden has had domestic success to boast of in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and CHIPS and Sciences Act, the deteriorating situation in West Asia, extended wars in Ukraine, hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the rise of a belligerent China continue to see his poll numbers dwindle. The larger story is that while the US and India news cycles will be dominated by political discourse, the commercial trajectory remains on an upward trend. Irrespective of political fortunes changing, the economic fortunes remain the same, reinforcing the strong bonds between the two nations.

Mukesh Aghi is the president and chief executive officer of the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum. The views expressed are personal

FUMIO KISHIDA } PRIME MINISTER OF JAPAN

Unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force are absolutely unacceptable, wherever it may be.

The US and Japan will continue to respond to such actions

In the backdrop of Beijing's military claims in South China Sea

Libraries can force the case for liberty, justice

When Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III visited the United States (US), he may have encountered the phrase "palaces for the people," a term often used to describe US public libraries. He was certainly convinced of the importance of the public libraries system he encountered there; he appointed an American to create one in Baroda in 1910 — and thus, William Alanson Borden, created a system of free libraries in modern India.

A publisher recently told me this about Kerala, which has close to 10,000 libraries: "*Wahan ki baat hi alag hai*" (Kerala stands out from the rest of the country). She reasoned that the state's near-total literacy came first, and then came the books and the culture of reading. So, if we could just hurdle ourselves forward the Kerala way, then, only a century after Gaekwad and his love of free libraries, we could set about establishing the public library system that India needs.

The publisher is right. Kerala is different from the rest of the country which has an abysmal ratio of one urban library for every 80,000 people and one rural library for every 11,500 people. But she is also wrong because people don't acquire literacy first and then books. They acquire books first and literacy follows. Kerala's literacy movement was preceded by a century-long library movement.

And even Kerala may no longer be able to exercise the autonomy of the Kerala way. R Bindu, Kerala's minister of higher education, at the Union ministry of culture's Festival of Libraries, voiced her state's objection to the Centre's plan to move the library question from the state to the concurrent list. Kerala is worried that if they lose control over their libraries, they will no longer be able to maintain the quality of their system, which provides libraries at a ratio of one per 3,500 people.

The library movement in India has mostly not been led by *maharajas* or government officials. It has been a people's movement, led by those who undoubtedly understand that people have a right to places where they can meet, talk, read and think together. Leaders in the movement have come from various places and times in India: Motibhai Amin in Baroda, Sir Iyyanki Venkata Ramanayya in Andhra Pradesh, PN Panicker in Kerala, Monindra Dev Rai Mahashaya in Bengal, Master Motilal in Rajasthan, Sant Ram Bhatia in Punjab, Kumudeshwar Barthakur in Assam, among others. SR Ranganathan, who conceived of the movement on a

national scale, understood the importance of the connection between free libraries and the nation. Ranganathan is responsible not only for the Madras Public Libraries Act, the first library legislation adopted in India, but also for a Model Library Act, which alas was never adopted nationally.

The present library movement in India is also a people's movement. It is led by over 300 library practitioners and leaders from around the country and operates over 200 free library organisations. Nearly none of the libraries in the Free Libraries Network have access to the resources that would allow them to do what they do, which is to welcome all people and bar none from free membership in libraries in which literature and community thrive. The seemingly miraculous has less to do with miracles and more to do with a commitment to meet the urgency of people's need for access to information.

The free library movement describes itself as an anti-caste movement because it recognises the role caste has played in keeping people outside libraries. It recognises the role of libraries in annihilating caste. It begins with the assertion that libraries must be free to be anti-caste.

These are combative words in India, where active exclusion of people from a reading environment occurs when a child in Rajasthan is beaten by his teacher for reaching for the 'wrong' container of water.

The People's National Library Policy 2024 (PNLP24) of the Free Library Network begins with the premise that libraries should be free of cost to all people, of all castes, religions, genders, classes, ethnicities, abilities, and should bar no one whatsoever, and further that people should be free to choose from the ideas curated within the library. The importance of freedom to choose what to read necessarily begins with adequate public funding and adequate ratio of libraries per capita and books per capita, and most importantly with local autonomy over libraries.

We can trust autonomy to create the libraries people need and good national policy, on the lines of PNL24, to ensure a baseline rooted in the Constitution's promise of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. The Constitution could as easily have been describing the best public library system as it described the nation we are trying to become.

Mridula Koshy, a writer, is a board member of Free Libraries Network. The views expressed are personal



OUR VIEW



Should parents pay for the crimes of their kids?

Where does parental responsibility begin and end in juvenile crime? Parents held guilty in America for lives taken by their 15-year-old son raises this thorny question even in India

The news that Jennifer and James Crumbley, parents of 15-year-old Ethan, held guilty of the 2021 killing of four fellow students in Michigan, US, have been convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to 10-15 years in prison, is a wake-up call for all of us. Jury trials of the hapless parents held them guilty for deaths caused by their offspring. Their crime? Failing to prevent their son from committing the heinous crime. In a day and age when many parents, even in relatively traditional societies like ours, bemoan the loss of parental 'control' over their kids, the growing incidence of juvenile crime is a sad fact of life. But the conviction of an offender's parents, a first in US history, is a call for parents and kids—and indeed for society at large—to introspect. Where does parental responsibility begin and end in the context of juvenile crime?

Sure, America's failure on gun control—a big bone of contention between Republicans and Democrats—must share a large part of the blame for such killings. Mass shootings are distressingly frequent in the US. Still, that leaves us with the more disturbing question of parental responsibility. "Parents are not expected to be psychic," said Judge Cheryl Matthews of the Oakland County Circuit Court in Pontiac, Michigan, before issuing the sentence, "But these convictions are not about poor parenting. These convictions confirm repeated acts or lack of acts that could have halted an oncoming runaway train—repeatedly ignoring things that would make a reasonable person feel the hair on the back of her neck stand up." One may not agree with an anguished parent of one of the victims that "the tragedy was completely preventable." Yet, as the Crumbleys' trial showed,

there was enough evidence that they seemed to have not only ignored worrying signs of their son's mental distress, but worse, did not take care to ensure dangerous weapons were kept out of his reach. We in India are better off in this respect; access to guns is not easy. Consequently, such heinous crimes by juveniles are rare. However, as the growing number of cases of under-age and sometimes fatally reckless driving shows, there is a societal cost to kid-glove treatment of minors. Just last week, the horrific case was reported of a Class 8 student in Delhi who suffered intestinal injury in school after a group of classmates allegedly tortured him sexually with a stick. According to the National Crime Records Bureau's *Crime in India 2021* report, 31,710 crimes involving minors were filed in 2021, a jump of 4.7% from the previous year. Under Indian law, anyone under 18 years of age is regarded as a 'minor.' The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and related 2021 amendment allows juveniles in the 16-18 age bracket to be tried as adults in cases of heinous violations of law. But only after a preliminary hearing by the relevant Juvenile Justice Board. Also, under Indian law, no child can be sentenced to life imprisonment for any crime without the prospect of release, or to death. In the Michigan case, the offender was tried as an adult and sentenced to life behind bars without parole.

India's law is silent on parental culpability. But as we wrestle with an increasingly violent world, where parents often have less influence over their kids than social media, for instance, maybe it is time for us to examine the difficult question of parental responsibility: Where does it begin—and end—in the context of juvenile crime? There are no easy answers.

ISTOCKPHOTO

MY VIEW | TECH WHISPERS

Crystal ball gazing scorecard: AI has evolved partly as predicted

Tech wars are brewing mostly as forecast but not everything is going as it had seemed in January



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Even as humanity frets about all the jobs AI will impact, one profession clearly under threat is that of predicting the future. What job does a futurist have if everything changes every now and then as an AI company unveils a product that makes our jaws drop. Every January, I would predict the top 10 things that would happen in tech that year; and then go back with some trepidation at year-end to score how I fared in my fortune-telling abilities. I did the same this January and whipped out my 10 AI predictions for 2024. However, given the onslaught of innovation, I have resolved to do a quarterly scorecard. With the year's first frenzied quarter having drawn to a close, here it is:

Tech wars would rage: The AI race would accelerate, I said, with the Microsoft-OpenAI alliance in fierce contest with a resurgent Google. OpenAI would launch GPT5, which will outpace Gemini Ultra. *Verdict:* It's still to play out, but the signs look promising. Sam Altman has spoken of GPT5 in the "middle of the year." Gemini Ultra seems to have had a major hiccup and has been temporarily withdrawn. So, this one seems right on the money, 10/10.

AI moves to the edge: Gemini Nano on the Pixel and an AppleGPT on iPhones could be the sleeper hits, dislodging OpenAI from the lead. Mobile access and integration would win over the PC. *Verdict:* Samsung AI Phone launched in

February. Microsoft Surface AI version was announced, followed by Intel AI PC. Qualcomm predicts \$99 AI phones by the end of 2024. No AppleGPT. But AI is hurtling towards the edge. So it's 7/10.

Race to regulation: This race is as big as the race to develop AI. Following the EU AI Act, many other countries will release AI regulations. There will be an effort for global regulation modelled on the nuclear IAEA or CoP climate summits. *Verdict:* The EU AI Act came right on time. Otherwise, we had more noise than action. India and the US are still to announce comprehensive rules. 4/10.

The future of work: AI will start transforming work, especially with the launch of Microsoft Copilot and similar products. Work will be the biggest use case for GenAI. *Verdict:* Microsoft is all in now, with CoPilots for everything, including a copilot key on its Surface keyboards. Github Copilot is doing well, but 365 Copilot still underwhelms. 3/10.

AI will impact jobs: Jobs will not be directly hit, but many companies across the world will use AI and GenAI as a cover to retrench for efficiency. *Verdict:* Everyone across tech is shedding jobs and blaming 'AI related efficiencies.' Every country is preparing for a great shift in jobs with AI. 7/10.

Open and proprietary LLMs: The other race will be between proprietary

and open-source GenAI, with performance trading off against decentralization. Proprietary tech will continue to have the upper hand, at least in 2024.

Verdict: Open source seems to be edging out proprietary. Grok has gone open, Meta Llama is going gangbusters. There is momentum out there. Sticking my neck out, I think 2024 still belongs to OpenAI and non-open models. 5/10.

Big Tech reshaped: There will be new entrants to the Big Tech league of Microsoft, Meta, Netflix, Alphabet and Amazon. *Verdict:* The Nvidia juggernaut rolls on. It's the No. 3 Big Tech firm now, and its recent Developer Day had intriguing announcements. Google seems to be slipping. 7/10.

AI threatens democracy: With 2 billion-plus people going to polls in 2024, technologies like deepfakes will be used actively by many players to change narratives and voters' minds. *Verdict:* I have teeth gritted on this one. It's too early to call since both the US and Indian elections are later in the year. But the signs of deepfake destabilization still look promising, if that is the word. 5/10.

Microsoft and OpenAI: Microsoft may buy OpenAI or break up with it. Some of the big funded GenAI startups may close (Stability?), and some may merge. *Verdict:* Ah, this is an interesting one. Microsoft poached Mustafa Suleyman and Inflection in a massive hedge move against OpenAI. Altman has looked a bit shaky. Emad Mostaque is out; Stability not that stable anymore. 8/10.

Chief AI officers: More companies will appoint CAIOs, like many of them had chief digital officers. The CAIO will become the new hot ticket in town. *Verdict:* Well, one must go wrong somewhere. There aren't many CAIOs, as business is yet to embrace GenAI. 0/10.

They say that one should never make predictions, especially about the future. But the tech world would agree with Peter Drucker when he said the best way to predict the future is to create it. And no single thing is creating the future like AI is.

QUICK READ

With technology changing by the week, a quarterly review of start-of-the-year predictions would be reasonable. So far for 2024, plenty has gone as had been forecast but a lot simply hasn't.

Tech wars are heating up, AI on smartphones is closer to reality and preparations are underway for an AI-led job shift, but we still don't see chief AI officers as AI adoption has been a little slow.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

AI is likely to be either the best or worst thing to happen to humanity.

STEPHEN HAWKING

GUEST VIEW

Amul in America: Let's take Indian cooperatives global

GEORGE SKARIA



is a columnist and co-author of the recent book 'Beyond Three Generations: The Definitive Guide to Building Enduring Indian Family Businesses'.

Last week, the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF) announced a partnership with the Michigan Milk Producers Association (MMPA) under which branded Amul milk will be made available to thousands of Indians and Americans in the US. This is significant for many reasons.

One, even though Amul products are already being exported to about 50 countries, this is the first time that Amul's branded fresh milk range is being launched anywhere outside India. Two, though this step is presently limited to the US, it has the potential to open the gates for the Amul brand in other regions and take it global. Three, it sets an aspirational template for other Indian cooperatives—which are largely regional or sub-national organizations—to bloom into global institutions. Indeed, in the last two decades, corporate India has seen global companies emerge, but that has not been the case with cooperatives. This is the time to change that.

History of India's cooperative movement: Even before Independence and formal cooperative structures came into being through the passing of a law, cooperative activities were prevalent in several parts of India. For example, village communities would collectively pool resources after food-grains were harvested to lend to needy members of the group before the next season's harvest.

The Cooperative Societies Bill was enacted on 25 March 1904. On 14 December 1946, the Khera District Cooperative Milk Producers Milk Union, known as Amul, was registered. After India attained freedom in 1947, the cooperative movement received a shot in the arm, with it forming an important aspect of the Five-Year Plans.

On a visit to Anand, Gujarat, in October 1964, impressed by the socioeconomic transformation brought about by milk cooperatives, India's then prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri envisioned the setting up of a national-level organization, the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), to replicate the Anand pattern of milk cooperatives throughout the country.

With the economic reforms of 1991, cooperatives came under intense pressure. But in a bid to give them more focus, the Union

ministry of cooperation was created in July 2021 by carving it out from the ministry of agriculture. Presently, there are more than 850,000 cooperatives, with about 300 million members at national and state levels, covering scores of fields like dairy, agriculture, housing, credit, fisheries, handloom and sugar. Two of them, GCMMF and Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative (IFFCO), are among the world's leading cooperatives.

Indian cooperatives, global reach: The move by GCMMF to introduce fresh branded Amul milk in the US could be an inflection point to take other Indian cooperatives global. How can this be done? Taking a leaf out of the Amul chapter could be a useful and easy first step. The charismatic leadership of Verghese Kurien, the first and former chairman of GCMMF and the widely acknowledged 'father of India's white revolution,' was hugely instrumental in the success of Amul. The University of Michigan

alumnus oversaw Amul for more than five decades and created a strong brand, partly through the 'Amul girl' mascot. While the longevity of his tenure was an important factor in his leadership, he was also able to get political support from the likes of Sardar Patel, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Morarji Desai and Jawaharlal Nehru. By transforming India from a milk-deficient country to a surplus one (with a current 24% share of global milk production), he gained world recognition.

Although corporations are currently among the dominant forms of organization, cooperatives have flourished in a few other countries like Malaysia, New Zealand, Canada and Kenya. Learning from cooperatives in these countries and collaborating with them would be useful. Coincidentally, the United Nations has declared 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives. Therefore, there is a special context for the globalization of India's cooperative movement.

QUICK READ

The launch of Amul in the US could be a pivotal moment not just in opening gates for the brand to enter other regions but also paving the way for other Indian cooperatives to go global.

This requires policy support. We can learn from practices in countries where cooperatives have successfully globalized. Let's start with a few by offering them a framework for the aim.

New Zealand has strong global cooperative organizations like Fonterra (for dairy), Walnut Cooperative and Zespri (for kiwi fruit). All of them are part of an umbrella organization called Cooperative Business NZ, which supports its member institutions to go global through workshops and activities for governance, marketing, technology support, advocacy and partnerships. It also conducts a programme to develop next-generation leadership for cooperatives so that these institutions have longevity. India could learn from such practices and partner with such organizations.

Finally, instead of trying to develop the entire cooperative sector together for global reach and recognition at one go, it would be useful to create a select group of champion cooperatives from different sectors. Currently, there are 19 national and state cooperatives in some 21 states and Union territories. Like the 'navaratna' concept for public sector enterprises, the government could select about 10-12 national and state cooperatives as global Indian cooperatives.

The journey is not going to be easy, but creating a framework for Indian cooperatives to go global would help in employment, wealth generation and thus overall national development.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Question hour: Have opposition parties done well in Parliament?

Analysis reveals differences between the NDA and UPA in their use of a device designed to hold the government accountable



YUGANK GOYAL & SHREYAS RAMKUMAR are, respectively, an associate professor and founder-director of Centre for Knowledge Alternatives at Flame University, and a student at Flame University.

Question Hour (QH) is a powerful tool in the hands of the Legislature to question the Executive. In India, each Lok Sabha session begins with the QH from 11am till noon, in which parliamentarians pose a range of questions for various ministers to answer on a range of policy matters. The questions need to be given around two weeks in advance, so the ministers who respond have adequate time to prepare their answers. Televising this hour can also mean significant electoral gains and losses. Despite the large amount of policy and political information it generates, the QH has not been subject to much scholarly or data-driven media scrutiny.

As the country approaches general elections to the next Lok Sabha, we thought it relevant to explore the data on all the 'starred' (oral) questions asked during the last four Lok Sabha terms and look for underlying patterns. Insofar as QH reflects legislative inquiries of the executive, such an analysis can reveal party dispositions and how queries are distributed across ministries.

Note that QH is used by not just the opposition, but also the ruling party. This is because the latter may use it as an opportunity to highlight its strengths. To draw the essence of QH in advancing democratic ideals, however, we focus on questions from opposition parties and members.

We only look at unique questions—those asked by only one member and are non-supplementary. These account for 80%+ of all oral questions. Interesting patterns emerge. In the last four Lok Sabhas, there were about 10,000 questions asked during QH: 2,466, 2,059, 2,864 and 2,347 respectively, with opposition parties asking 67%, 63%, 31% and 51% of these. Clearly, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was a more 'pronounced' opposition than the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Specifically, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which leads the NDA, asked 1,217 questions during the 2004-14 decade, when the UPA was in power at the Centre. The UPA leader, the Indian National Congress (INC), asked only 644 questions during 2004-24, the span in which the current BJP government has been in power. But this may simply be reflective of their respective strengths in the Lok Sabha. The BJP had an average of 127 seats during the period of 2004 to 2014, while the INC's average from 2014 to 2024 was just 52.

Therefore, to effectively examine the opposition's role, we need to adjust for total seats in opposition, and also go beyond the BJP-INC rivalry. A questions-per-seat calculation yields a measure for how effective the opposition has been in the context of asking questions. From the

The right to question

In opposition, the BJP (and NDA) asked more Lok Sabha questions of the ruling Congress (and UPA) in 10 years than it was asked by the latter after the 2014 power switch, although the scale tilts the other way on queries in proportion to MPs

Lok Sabha	Percentage of questions by opposition	Opposition
14	67	NDA et al
15	63	NDA et al
16	31	UPA et al
17	51	UPA et al

Lok Sabha	Party	Seats	Questions	Questions per seat
14	BJP	138	647	4.69
15	BJP	116	570	4.91
16	INC	44	276	6.27
17	INC	52	368	7.08
14	CPIM	43	210	4.88
16	CPIM	9	70	7.78
17	CPIM	3	23	7.67
14	SP	36	127	3.53
15	SP	23	72	3.13
16	SP	5	24	4.80
17	SP	5	1	0.20

mint

Source: Authors' research, Lok Sabha data

SATISH KUMAR/MINT

data, it is clear that the opposition was weakest in 2014-19, when its share of questions was less than its share of seats (its questions-per-seat was 0.815). This measure took the value of 1.15 and 1.21 during 2004-09 and 2009-14 respectively, and 1.37 in 2019-24, indicating strong opposition in the latest Lok Sabha. Note, however, that a decision to give the floor to a Member of Parliament (MP) is largely up to the Speaker of the House.

We can analyse this for each party. Adjusting for party size, we look at the number of questions per MP from a party to see how each party fared during QH while in opposition. The graph above is instructive. The BJP, for instance, was a 'quieter' opposition during 2004-14 than the INC was in 2014-24. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) was the 'loudest' and its questioning has increased over the years. The Telugu Desam Party and Shiv Sena were very strong during QH in 2004-09, but their questioning weakened in the next Lok Sabha (even though they remained strong overall). The Biju Janata Dal has played a consistent role as an opposition party, although it has also quietened during later Lok Sabhas. The Samajwadi Party, while asking most questions in 2014-19, seems to have fizzled out on this front in 2019-24.

Since opposition parties use QH to scrutinize specific ministries, the data also reveals which of these faced the most opposition QH queries as

well as trends in the share of questions directed at the 'most scrutinized' of them. The numbers show that as an opposition alliance, the NDA was especially focused on questioning ministries for the petroleum sector, human resource development, agriculture and commerce and industry under the ruling UPA coalition of 2004-14. Interestingly, when power changed hands in 2014, so did the direction of questions, which focused thereafter more on matters related to health, finance and rural development. This data

is also reflective of the nature of policies that may have been put in place by the respective ruling coalitions, and is therefore a useful signal of the changing policy landscape at the national level.

There is a compelling case for extending this research to include state-level legislative assemblies, and perhaps making a metric to estimate a party's opposition performance within state Houses of representation.

Research on the Lok Sabha's QH, though still in its infancy, holds critical importance in the national context. It informs people of the role that representatives have played in using a device designed to hold the Executive accountable and keep ministries on their toes. Questions posed on behalf of people lend dynamism to the business of legislation, which is crucial for policymaking. QH research will hopefully raise the sensitivity of parties to how voters may be appraising their performance.

QUICK READ

The BJP raised 1,217 Question Hour queries during the decade that the Congress was in power while the latter asked 644 from 2014 to 2024, though it also had far fewer seats in the Lok Sabha.

The ministries that were put to most scrutiny in Parliament saw a significant shift after the BJP won power in 2014. This may partly reflect changing policies in the country's political focus.

A four-day work week will not be on the horizon for decades

It can't be enforced harmlessly but markets may evolve to enable it



ALLISON SCHRAGER is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering economics.



Keynes had forecast a better work-life balance long in the future
GETTY IMAGES

Billions and Senator Bernie Sanders agree on at least one thing: They see a four-day work week in America's future. Hedge fund manager Steve Cohen is investing in golf courses because he anticipates a big increase in leisure time, and IAC founder Barry Diller is expecting people to be in the office only four days a week. Sanders has even proposed legislation to reset the work week to 32 hours.

Mark me as sceptical. Some big technological innovations promise to make people more productive, but a four-day work week will not be the norm anytime soon. And legislation imposing it over the next four years would harm the economy.

The first question is what a 'four-day work week' means. Sometimes it means working 40 hours in four days instead of five, though this tends to be less efficient. Or it may mean working an eight-hour day four days a week, which is what Sanders has in mind. Both kinds of arrangements have become more common over the years in the US and elsewhere—though much of the increase is among people who work fewer than 40 hours.

As for the merits of the idea: There are basically two arguments for a shorter work week. One presumes that people waste so much time at work that working 20% less won't make a difference if they use the time more efficiently. A few small studies, mainly in non-customer-facing service jobs, find that a 20% drop in hours does not result in a decline in revenue.

But whether this finding applies to more labour-intensive jobs is doubtful. The only large experiment comes from France, which imposed a 35-hour work week in 1998 on large firms in the hope that it would increase employment. Studies show it did not raise employment or happiness and France later tried to repeal it.

The Sanders proposal is in many ways worse than the French law. Like that law, it does not force people to work fewer hours. Instead, it lowers the threshold at which overtime pay kicks in. The Sanders bill also stipulates that employers can't reduce pay if people work fewer hours as a result, so for some workers, it would be akin to a 20% pay increase on an hourly basis.

That is a remarkable burden to impose on the economy (though some workers will be exempt). Perhaps some very profitable companies will be able to accommodate such a big pay increase. Advocates insist that people will be so happy and productive, companies won't notice any difference. But a 20% productivity increase just from being happier and more engaged?

And for many firms—in manufacturing, say, or industries where face time is necessary—the productivity gains from higher morale are more limited.

The labour-time-intensive jobs also tend to be at companies with lower margins. When Iceland reduced the work week by just a few hours for 1% of its population about a decade ago, the Icelandic government had to hire more people, increasing labour costs. A 20% wage hike will force many private firms to either close, increase prices or replace workers with technology. The gains from the Sanders bill will mostly benefit high-skill and well-paid workers in already productive companies.

Besides which, imposing fewer hours may not be necessary. The 40-hour work week has been the full-time standard since 1938 in the US, but even without big legislative changes, work hours have fallen as technology and wealth have shortened the work week for many people in the developed world. There are reasons to believe this trend will continue.

The other—somewhat related—argument for a shorter work week is that technology makes people more productive, enabling them to work less. In 1930, for example, John Maynard Keynes envisioned a 15-hour work week.

That did not pan out. But Keynes was not totally wrong: People are working fewer hours than they did in his day. Back then, low-wage workers tended to work more. Today, high earners do. Technology does not always mean people work less. What matters is how technology affects their job. In the last 50 years, technology has tended to benefit high-skill workers, so working more brought them greater gains.

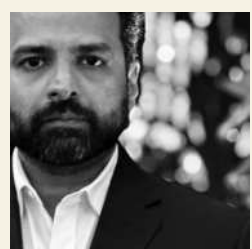
Now technology allows work from home (WFH) and more flexibility—i.e., for white-collar workers. This will probably enable more part-time work and fewer hours for high earners, and perhaps a convergence towards everyone working less.

Overall, however, when it comes to economic matters, I have more faith in John Maynard Keynes than in Bernie Sanders. By which I mean, we will all probably be working fewer work hours in the future. But it will be several decades before the 32-hour work week is standard and moving to it prematurely by force will make a lot of people worse off. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Investing for absolute returns can liberate investors

SWANAND KELKAR



is managing partner at Breakout Capital.

In my early days as an investment analyst, I was once pitching a stock to my fund manager boss. Two minutes into the pitch, he asked me "What's the weight?" I had no idea what he was talking about and so I later asked one of my senior colleagues what he meant. Most institutional investing in India is of the relative return type, which means that every fund is benchmarked against an index and a fund manager's competence or otherwise is measured by how well he or she performs against the benchmark. Hence the oft-asked question in investment discussions is the one my boss had asked me. It meant: How large is the stock in the benchmark index?

Before becoming a buy-sider, I was an amateur equity investor, and this weight question had never crossed my mind. One bought what one liked and didn't buy what one didn't like. But as I got steeped in the world of institutional investing, the term 'index weight' became the centre of many

portfolio discussions. When you are incentivized to beat a benchmark, you quickly adapt to this new way of investing.

This shift has several implications. One ends up spending a lot of time analysing heavyweights: i.e., stocks that have a large representation in the index. Those stocks may not be the best money-making ideas, but getting them wrong will impact the fund's relative performance, your annual bonus and even your career. HDFC Bank, Reliance Industries, ICICI Bank, Infosys and Larsen & Toubro are the five largest stocks in India, accounting for almost a third of the Nifty 100 index by weight, and it's no surprise that they are some of the best covered stocks by equity research houses. Again, not because the sell side thinks they are the best investment ideas, but because they know that their large clients care a lot about them.

Apart from 'index weight,' other words that entered my investing lexicon were 'overweight' and 'underweight.' If the index weight of a certain stock is 3% and it is 5% of your fund, you are 2% overweight. Similarly, if it is just 2% of it, you are 1% underweight. To be honest, I struggled to grasp the concept of 'underweight,' as it suggested that the fund manager does not like the stock

and yet holds it. The buy side marketing machinery will spin some version of 'the fund manager is cautiously optimistic' to justify the weightage, but the truth is that such positions are risk management place-holders. If, for whatever reason, the stock does well, the fund manager does not want to lag the index and so allocates some capital to it. It might be worthwhile to check what proportion of your fund portfolio comprises underweight names because that is a sub-optimal way of allocating money.

The other outcome of the relative return framework is that portfolios tend to cling to the benchmark. The 12 biggest large-cap funds in India that together account for over 90% of large-cap assets under management own all the five index heavyweights. Twelve of India's top investing professionals having congruent views may seem surprising, but it's not, given the incentive structure.

The motivation of retail investors who entrust fund managers with their money is to beat inflation. For institutional investors, it could be being sufficiently funded to meet wage and pension commitments, or to meet the stability and development needs of an educational institution, a town or even a country. These objectives require an absolute-return hurdle to be met. Retirees cannot be told that their pensions are going to be reduced by 10% because the benchmark against which the fund was being measured is down 10%.

Apart from aligning the end goals of the investor and money manager, absolute-return investing has other advantages as well. Efficient time allocation of investment professionals is the most important one. What stocks and sectors an investor decides to analyse is not dictated by index composition, but by the probability of making absolute returns.

If specific financial targets are to be met, then we must aim for absolute returns, and that grants asset managers the liberty to focus on what's within their zone of investment competence.

Also, it allows investors to stay within their circle of competence and relegate other stocks, sectors and markets to the 'too hard' pile.

However, an absolute-return mindset requires some modification in approach. Warren Buffett's advice to "never lose money" becomes paramount, which means an absolute-return investor thinks a lot about downside risks. These include what we call stroke-of-the-pen risks, like sudden regulatory changes, penal actions or the risk of a key employee abruptly leaving. An effective absolute-return strategy requires the ability to periodically hedge stocks or entire portfolios because short-term market downsidings are inevitable, and an absolute-return manager cannot hide behind the excuse of a negative index return.

This distinction between relative and absolute return approaches may not matter much in India, where there is a long history of robust index returns. But for an asset class like emerging-markets equity, where the annualized total dollar return for the past five and 10 years has been less than 2% and 3%, respectively, discarding the relative-return mindset is probably the only way to generate respectably large returns.



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

TURNING SEAWARD

Delhi has woken up to the need for developing its ignored island territories. Focus on Andaman and Nicobar is welcome

A REPORT IN *The Indian Express* revealed the government's expansive plans to transform the Andaman and Nicobar Islands into a genuine security sentinel to the east of peninsular India and a crucial node for peace and security in the Indo-Pacific. The report points to the rapid expansion of military infrastructure in the island chain that will allow the basing of advanced military platforms, improve communication and surveillance infrastructure, and the permanent deployment of troops. These plans mark the end of Delhi's prolonged strategic neglect of these islands. Tucked away under the control of the Union Home Ministry, the islands were treated as closed territory, with limited access to the Indian mainland and no connection to the neighbouring South East Asian nations. The NDA government deserves credit for recognising the strategic and economic significance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep.

Given its deep maritime orientation and a global primacy rooted in naval power, the British Raj was conscious of the value of island territories — as crucial places for trans-oceanic commerce and the projection of power in the emerging age of capitalism and great power competition for markets and geopolitical influence. The innocent internationalism of independent India, its inward economic orientation, preoccupation with the consequences of Partition, and the Chinese occupation of Tibet, saw India pay little attention to its vast possibilities at sea despite a long coastline and the vital location of its two island chains. As Delhi's economic reforms began to change the picture in the 1990s, it was the Indian Navy that called for a fresh perspective on sea power. It was hard to change landlubbers that dominated India's policy establishment in Delhi. Even when they moved, for example, with the setting up of the first and only joint tri-service command at Port Blair in 2001, it was never given the financial and military resources to realise the full potential of the Andaman and Nicobar island chain.

Successive coalition governments did not have the strategic bandwidth or the bureaucratic energy to do justice to the island territories. It needed a strong government in Delhi, with a full majority and the political will of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to force policy changes in the maritime domain. Delhi's maritime push to develop the islands was reinforced by China's naval pull. Since the turn of the 21st century, a rising China began to send regular naval squadrons into the Indian Ocean and develop bases and dual-use facilities at key locations in the littoral. Like the British Raj, a rising China had the geopolitical sensibility of a great maritime power and understood the strategic value of islands. It made consistent political outreach to island states in the Indian Ocean — from Sri Lanka and Maldives to Seychelles and Mauritius. Even as it began to compete with China, Delhi has woken up to the possibility of developing its own ignored island territories. It is for a good reason that the Chinese strategic community calls the Andaman and Nicobar Islands a "metal chain" strung right down the Bay of Bengal to the mouth of the Malacca — with the potential to block China's access to the Indian Ocean. A bestirred Delhi will hopefully waste no time in turning its impressive plans into concrete outcomes.

HOLDING BACK

With inflation higher than expected and American economy faring better, US Fed is unlikely to cut rates in a hurry

IN ITS MARCH meeting, the US Federal Reserve had decided to hold rates steady. The minutes of that meeting released now show that policymakers had expressed concerns over the trajectory of inflation, noting that "recent data had not increased their confidence that inflation was moving sustainably down to 2 per cent". The inflation data released by the US Labour Department on Wednesday seems to confirm those fears. CPI inflation rose to 3.5 per cent in March, up from 3.2 per cent in February, surpassing expectations. The increase was driven by fuel, housing, and clothing, among others. Core inflation, which excludes food and fuel, remained at 3.8 per cent. As RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das had noted in his comments on the global economy at the last monetary policy committee meeting, "inflation is moving closer to targets, but the last mile of disinflation is turning out to be challenging."

Until now, there were expectations that the Fed would cut interest rates three times this year, with the first cut likely to be in June. However, recent macroeconomic data seem to suggest that this may not be the case — the rate cuts may not come as soon or in the magnitude that many had previously expected. Data shows that non-farm payrolls rose by 3.03 lakh in March. Alongside, average hourly earnings were up by 4.1 per cent, and the jobless rate fell to 3.8 per cent. A stronger-than-expected economy, and continued uncertainty over the trajectory of inflation, with higher-than-expected readings, could possibly delay the much anticipated Fed pivot. Even though inflation has fallen from the high of 9.1 per cent in June 2022, the absence of clear and convincing evidence of it falling sustainably back to the target, only raises the odds of the Fed having to keep interest rates higher for longer. As per reports, the markets are now pricing in two rate cuts this year, beginning in September. Some are less optimistic. The minutes of the FOMC meeting did, however, reveal that "all participants" thought that it would be "appropriate" to shift to a "less restrictive stance" this year, if economic conditions were in line with expectations.

More clarity on the possible trajectory of interest rates will perhaps emerge during the next Fed meeting, between April 30 and May 1. But for central banks in countries around the world looking to the US Fed for policy clues, the situation has become more complicated.

IN DARKNESS OR IN LIGHT

Resurgence of Bonnie Tyler's 1983 song shows there's no eclipsing this ballad's shine

ONE COULD BLAME it on cosmic coincidence, unrequited love or the power of nostalgia but the complete solar eclipse in North America on April 8 has given Bonnie Tyler's 'Total eclipse of the heart' a renewed moment under the Sun 40 years after its debut. The Welsh musician's 1983 ballad surged back into the spotlight, becoming the preferred background note to the recent astronomical phenomenon.

In all fairness though, this isn't the first time that the song, an MTV staple back in the day, has experienced a resurgence during an eclipse. The last time Tyler's powerhouse vocals and — let's admit it, moony lyrics — saw a popularity bump was in August 2017, during the previous solar eclipse in the region. When it had debuted, the song had trended at number one both in the UK and the US as well as in several other countries in the world. What could be common between a natural phenomenon and a song about a love gone wrong? Not much really, except that the receding of love, poets, philosophers and the jilted will say, can sometimes feel like a dimming of the light. Or, as Tyler sang, "Once upon a time there was light in my life/ But now there's only love in the dark/ Nothing I can say/ A total eclipse of the heart". If, however, one likes it darker, and has a sense of humour like the song's writer and producer Jim Steinman obviously did, hold the sneer right there. In a 2002 interview, Steinman had revealed why the eclipse was central to his scheme of inspiration: He had conceived of the song as a vampire love story.

Fans of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* or Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* would find this par for course but for generations of fans tripping on the song, its legacy was burnished as a heartbreak anthem. Whatever the reason for its longevity or its association with successive generations, one thing is clear: There is no eclipsing Tyler's shine.



ARUN PRAKASH

A maritime bastion

Government's focus on Andaman and Nicobar should extend to making region central to peace in Indo-Pacific

THE AFTERMATH OF the 1857 War of Independence saw the British establish a penal colony in the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) islands, where many Indian revolutionaries and freedom fighters were incarcerated for life. The dark symbolism of kalapani, as the A&N came to be known, coupled with the remoteness of the islands, led to years of benign neglect by a distant New Delhi. It was only in 1962, when the Indian Navy (IN) raised an alarm about the reported sighting of a Chinese submarine, that the government sanctioned a detachment of 150 sailors to form a "naval garrison" to guard this huge archipelago of 836 islands spread across 450 miles of sea.

Against this backdrop, recent reports regarding the government's heightened security focus on these strategic islands are to be welcomed, especially because in the past, these islands nearly slipped from India's grasp.

In February 1942, just a month after the fall of Singapore, the islands were occupied by the Japanese as a prospective springboard for the invasion of India. Towards the end of 1943, they became the first part of India to be "liberated" from British rule, when Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose visited Port Blair and hoisted the INA tricolour. However, this was mere symbolism because the British reoccupied the A&N after the Japanese surrender in 1945. On the eve of Independence, the fate of these islands hung in balance. It is not commonly known that the British Chiefs of Staff had recommended that, given their strategic oceanic location, the A&N should be retained as a Crown possession. According to contemporary accounts, so relieved was British PM Clement Atlee when Indian leaders reluctantly swallowed the bitter pill of the Partition plan that he overruled the Chiefs of Staff and let India have these islands.

In September 1965 after the commencement of India-Pakistan hostilities, President Ayub Khan sent retired Air Marshal Asghar Khan as an emissary to seek support from fraternal Indonesia. In his memoirs, Asghar Khan records his surprise when the Indonesian navy chief, Admiral Martadinata, asked him: "Don't you want us to take over the Andaman

Islands? They are an extension of Sumatra and are, in any case, between East Pakistan and Indonesia. What right have the Indians to be there?" As it happened, the Indo-Pak conflict concluded before the Indonesians initiated any action.

In 1976, the A&N naval garrison, having been supplemented by army troops, was upgraded to Fortress Andaman & Nicobar. In 2001, the post-Kargil War security review saw the establishment of India's first joint/unified operational command — the Andaman Nicobar Command (ANC) in Port Blair. By placing forces of all three services and the Coast Guard, under the command of the newly-created position of commander-in-chief, A&N, the military had taken a great leap of faith. In the 23 years that have elapsed, the ANC has proved an unqualified success, as a "theatre" in microcosm and provided tangible proof that the concept of "jointness" can work successfully in the Indian environment. Regrettably, the tried-and-tested ANC template has not found favour in the military's vain, four-year-old quest for "theaterisation".

Turning to other security-related aspects of the A&N islands, note must be taken of their unique geography. In the north, the islands are separated from Myanmar territory by a mere 22 miles. At the southern end, Indira Point is just 90 miles from Indonesia's Aceh province and the coast of Thailand lies 270 miles to the east. In stark contrast, Port Blair is about 850 miles from Chennai, as well as Kolkata. Although the surface area of these islands is only 8,300 sq km, they add 300,000 sq km to India's exclusive economic zone with the promise of undersea hydrocarbon and mineral deposits. Only 31 of the archipelago's 836 islands and islets are inhabited. This means there is a possibility of surreptitious occupation — a la "Kargil heights" — by a covetous neighbour.

To obviate the possibility of intrusions by state and non-state entities, ANC will need to maintain three-dimensional maritime domain awareness through networked assets, including radars, aircraft, satellites and unmanned vehicles. The command must be in-

To obviate the possibility of intrusions by state and non-state entities, ANC will need to maintain three-dimensional maritime domain awareness through networked assets, including radars, aircraft, satellites and unmanned vehicles. The command must be invested with adequate defensive and offensive firepower, as well as rapid-reaction forces with amphibious and airlift capabilities. The frequent transits of PLA Navy (PLAN) warships, submarines and research/intelligence-gathering vessels in these waters portend a sustained Chinese naval presence, including nuclear attack-submarines. This would require the IN to maintain a substantial anti-submarine warfare capability in the A&N.

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The severe disruption and re-routing of shipping, occasioned by the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, have served as yet another harsh and expensive reminder that "maritime choke points" constitute critical vulnerabilities for world trade and commerce. In this context, the Malacca Strait — more than 90,000 merchant ships carrying about 30 per cent of the world's traded goods pass through it every year — presents a challenge as well as a latent opportunity for India. Of significance for Indian strategists is the location of the Great Nicobar Island, which sits astride the western entrance/exit of the Malacca Strait and can comprehensively dominate all shipping — merchant as well as naval — in transit. This was the reason that as far back as 2003, Chinese Premier Hu Jintao warned the PLAN about a future "Malacca Dilemma".

One hopes that the reported security infrastructure upgradation is part of a cohesive strategy, which aims to convert the A&N islands into a formidable maritime bastion that will not only extend India's defensive perimeter but also bestow the ability to project power or extend a hand of friendship to maritime neighbours. Such a strategy must acknowledge that for the foreseeable future, India would need to enlist the cooperation of like-minded partners to maintain peace and tranquillity in the Indo-Pacific. In this context, Port Blair could become a regional hub for navies to acquire interoperability in areas like disaster-relief, medical aid, countering piracy and human smuggling, aircraft/submarine search and rescue and other such cooperative maritime endeavours.

The writer is a retired chief of naval staff



SUANSHU KHURANA

IN ISHQ MITAYE, composer A R Rahman's marquee piece in Imtiaz Ali's biopic *Amar Singh Chamkila* that releases today, lyricist Irshad Kamil takes a deep dive into the folklore surrounding the life of the slain Punjabi musician. Kamil comes up with the phrase, "Main hoon Punjab" (I am Punjab), which echoes through the song. It is followed by "Thirakta reh, mataakta reh, jo hona ho wo ho" (Keep dancing, keep strutting, whatever may happen). Kamil grew up in Punjab too. Perhaps, that is why he captures the essence of Chamkila's song as well as what made him a representative of something unique perhaps to Punjab — revelry in times of unrest.

The 1980s took away a lot that the people of Punjab had built with sweat and toil after Partition. The militancy and the state's ruthless response to it prised open old wounds and created new traumas. Punjab had to turn to its culture for sanity and resilience — to its food and music, *kirtans*, Bulleshah's poetry, the songs of Baisakhi and the music of weddings.

Under the rule of the gun, which deemed TV and tapes sinful, dictated that songs could only be devotional, a young Dalit textile factory worker from Dugri near Ludhiana made an appearance on the music scene. He wanted to be an electrician but became Amar Singh Chamkila instead — the star of the masses.

Born in 1960, Chamkila began his career by sitting in at the music sessions of artistes such as K Deep and Muhammad Sadiq from Sangrur — now an MP from Faridkot. He met Surinder Shinda, a noted folk artist and wrote songs and sang chorus for him, and accompa-

DEFIANCE IS A SONG

Amar Singh Chamkila's music reflected the dichotomies of militancy-hit Punjab

nied him on tours. But the money wasn't enough to feed Chamkila's family. So he decided to sing. He sang duets, first with Surinder Sonia and then with Amarjot, an upper-caste singer whom he married later. The two sang with rare fluidity on stage, as if they were having a conversation. The music touched a chord with people, who would throng *maidans* and climb terraces to listen to them. Many checked Chamkila's dates to fix a wedding in the family. He was charging Rs 4,000 per show when others got about Rs 500. Popularity also bred rivalries.

The compositions were superbly tight, the harmonium and dholki were on point and Chamkila's confident, rustic voice had the people's attention. But what contributed to the lore around Chamkila — and invited criticism — was the rawness of his songs. Many of them were innuendo-laden, sexually explicit and touched themes like drug use, illicit relations, Jatt pride and masculine rage.

Songs like 'Maar le hor tiji' — a woman exhorting her brother-in-law to have a child with her after he calls his wife infertile — were about forbidden subjects. They reflected society's underbelly. They were also about a subculture that wasn't always acknowledged by the feudal and patriarchal society but was true nevertheless.

Many women, too, lapped up Chamkila's songs because some of its themes resonated with some of the "ladies sangeet" fare. The music was entertainment at a time when life was desperate and demanding, under the shadow of the gun, and there were restrictions

on what people ate, how they dressed, worked and who they married. Other musicians too were singing forbidden stories about illicit relationships. Highbrow literature too wasn't impervious to these motifs. In Ajmer Singh Aulakh's *Sat Begane*, for instance, a woman enters an illicit relationship with her brother-in-law to stop him from marrying and avoid further division of the family land.

Chamkila's poetry was, however, rustic *fuhad* as many call it. This is probably why many urban, educated people in Punjab weren't aware of him. His music was different from the polished presentations of Gurdas Maan, or Surinder Kaur and Asa Singh Mastana.

This was a time when militants were trying to force their puritanical version of religion down people's throats. Chamkila received death threats. He came up with devotional albums. And, the militants backed down. But in his live concerts, he continued to sing what was considered decadent. Chamkila's purpose wasn't to defy diktats — the audience wouldn't let him leave without singing the "hit numbers". He was the entertainer who provided the diversion that people craved for.

Chamkila and Amarjot were shot dead by gunmen in Mehsampur in March 1988, just before the couple was to get on stage. He was 27 at the time. The assailants were not caught. Chamkila's legend has lived on, continuing to symbolise the existence of opposites — and their intermixing in fact.

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APRIL 12, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

HONOUR FOR SHARMA

INDIA'S FIRST COSMONAUT, Sq'n Ldr Rakesh Sharma, returned from his maiden space flight, 60 km from Arkalik in Kazakhstan, in a spectacular finish to the flawless Indo-Soviet mission. The Soyuz T-10 landing module was carrying Yuri Malyshev, Gennadi Strekalov and Sharma. Sharma and his two Soviet crew mates have been awarded the Ashok Chakra.

SL NAVAL BLOCKADE

SRI LANKA CLAMPED a virtual naval blockade along its maritime boundary with India

as security forces kept up their offensive against militant Tamil extremists. The National Security Minister, Lalith Athulathmudali, described the blockade as "a sea surveillance zone" and insisted it had been located "well away from the Indian maritime boundary."

THREE DEAD IN PUNJAB

TERRORISTS SHOT DEAD three persons and indulged in widespread violence and arson in Punjab during the last 24 hours, as the Akalis observed a protest day against alleged killings by the CRPF. Raghbir Chand Mittal, a brick kiln owner, and his employee, Joginder

Pal, were shot dead by six terrorists in the Jalandhar district. Two armed men shot dead a shopkeeper of in Amritsar district.

PRESIDENT CHERNENKO

KONSTANTIN CHERNENKO WAS unanimously elected President of the Soviet Union at the opening of the new Supreme Soviet of the USSR's first session in the Kremlin. He will thus combine in his person the position of the head of state as well as chief of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Besides being CPSU general secretary, he has already assumed the key position of the chairman of the defence council.



THE IDEAS PAGE

Decoding state budgets

Capital expenditure by states will be slow in the first half of the year. Spending could pick up after the Union Budget and the monsoon



ADITI NAYAR

THE ONGOING ELECTION season has drawn sharp attention to India's fiscal health. While the Government of India's fiscal metrics are keenly dissected and well understood, the fiscal situation of state governments tends to be less scrutinised. However, the rise in market borrowings of state governments and key policy changes in recent years have rekindled an interest among market participants on the fiscal health of states.

State budgets are a rich source of publicly available information on state government finances. A web of factors among states makes analysing their budgets both interesting and challenging. Additionally, the publication of monthly fiscal indicators by the CAG, albeit with modest lags, is useful in assessing emerging trends in state finances. Two additional sources of information are data on the states' usage of ways and means advances and overdraft facilities extended by the Reserve Bank of India, and their market borrowings that are also facilitated by the latter.

The 2024-25 budgets or votes on account (VoA) are available in the public domain for 26 states (except Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim). An analysis of the data they contain reveals that the states expect a 9.2 per cent growth in their combined revenue receipts this year. While this growth appears moderate, it hinges on the correctness of the base revenues indicated in the revised estimates for 2023-24, among other factors.

Around half of the total revenues of states is from states' own tax revenues (SOTR). Therefore, a material deviation between the actual and indicated growth of own taxes can impact the expansion in the total revenues of the states. In the FY2025 Budget estimates (BE), the combined SOTR of the 26 states is set to expand by 13.8 per cent on the back of an even higher 15.4 per cent growth estimated in the previous year's revised estimates.

Disappointingly however, the provisional data of many of the sample states for April-February 2023-24 indicates that the growth of key components of own taxes such as sales tax, state GST and excise duty was far below the levels included in the revised estimates. This implies that a much higher growth would be needed to meet the absolute level of targets in the FY2025 budgets if the actual revenues last year turn out to be lower than those assumed.

Another 40-45 per cent of the revenues of the states is accounted for by transfers from the Centre, taxes and grants. Taxes devolved by the Centre to the states are projected to increase by 10.4 per cent this year, in line with the growth indicated by the GoI in the interim Union budget presented in February 2024. States received an upside in their revenues on account of higher-than-budgeted tax devolution for three consecutive years during FY2022-24. Possible lack of prior knowledge about the timing of inflow of such additional devolution from the Centre may have been the reason for a deviation in the states' planned and actual borrowings in many instances since that period. It would be interesting to see whether the GoI revises the amount of tax devolution for FY2025 in



CR Sasikumar

its final Union budget which is expected to be presented around July 2024.

Actual grants from the Centre to the states have consistently displayed significant variation from the revised/budget estimates made by the latter, particularly in the case of the Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS). The actual amount received from the Centre depends on the state spending its share under the CSS, adherence to the other guidelines of the Centre including submission of utilisation certificates etc. During April-February 2023-24, the combined grants of a sizeable subset of the sample states declined by a considerable 22 per cent, led by factors such as lower revenue deficit grants and the phasing out of GST compensation. Despite this, the 26 states have indicated a high 18 per cent expansion in grants in their revised estimates, followed by a 7 per cent contraction in their combined grants this year. We anticipate both of these figures to display a meaningful deviation from the estimates available right now.

On the expenditure side, the states have pencilled in a growth of 7 per cent and 11 per cent in their revenue and capital expenditures respectively.

The states' capital expenditure had shown an impressive 27 per cent expansion in April to February 2023-24 according to the CAG data. However, the revised estimates built in a sharper 34 per cent surge in capital spending, which we suspect will have been missed, pushing up the required growth in capex in FY2025 into double-digits. We anticipate capital spending to kick off on a slow note in the first few weeks of the year with parliamentary elections underway and the lull to sustain until the final Union Budget is presented. The tepidness may unfortunately extend further during the monsoon months. Overall, capital

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spending by states this year is likely to end up being heavily back-ended, which may influence the timing of the states' market borrowings over the course of the year.

Last year had ended on a particularly curious note on the state borrowing front. For the fourth quarter, the states had initially indicated a massive borrowing of Rs 4.1 trillion. This looked set to be under shot until February 2024, especially with the additional devolution released by the Union government at the end of that month.

However, the actual debt issuance during March 2024 amounted to a surprisingly large Rs 1.9 trillion, 51 per cent higher than the indicated amount of Rs 1.3 trillion. Several factors, such as a preference to hold larger cash going into the period of the model code of conduct, may have driven some states to expand their borrowings. It is also possible that some states have chosen to use up a larger part of their borrowing limit for 2023-24 before the year ended. Subsequently, in the first two auctions of this fiscal year, eight states have raised Rs 226 billion, nearly 40 per cent lower than the Rs. 373 billion indicated for this period.

With the fiscal deficit budgeted to be steady, and a slight step up in redemptions of state government securities, we project their gross borrowing to inch up to Rs 10.5-11 trillion in the current year. The anticipated FPI funds related to the bond index inclusion will ease the supply-demand dynamics in the government bond market as the year progresses. Further, with modest rate cuts foreseen from the Monetary Policy Committee in the second half of the year, the states' borrowing costs are likely to trend lower during that period.

The writer is chief economist, head, Research & Outreach, ICRA

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"For China, we don't form small cliques; instead, we are striving to unite over 190 countries to form a large homeland of human society. Such mindedness may be hard for some Western political elites to imagine, but... they will have to accept the reality of a multipolar world in the future." — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

An encounter with Delhi Police

Peaceful protestors, current and former MPs, being detained and moved to unknown location, without any explanation, raises questions



ZERO HOUR

BY DEREK O'BRIEN

THIS WEEK, FOR the eighth time in my life — or was it the ninth? — I was picked up from the streets and detained by the Delhi Police. What was our crime? We had dared to hold a peaceful *dhama* outside the headquarters of the Election Commission of India (EC). We were urging the EC to ensure a level playing field for the 2024 general elections. To make this happen, our demand was that the chiefs of the NIA, CBI, ED and IT be immediately transferred. Also, we were requesting the EC to allow the government of West Bengal to release funds for humanitarian relief to people who were affected by a recent cyclone.

After our 10-member delegation met with the full bench of the EC and submitted our memorandum, we addressed the media outside the main gate. We then sat down, away from the main entrance, and began a peaceful *dhama*. Within minutes we, Members of Parliament, current and former, were dragged, roughed up, and bundled into a waiting police bus. No request. No conversation. No engagement with peaceful protestors. Just the immediate use of brute force.

Do not take this columnist's word for what transpired in those ten minutes. Instead, take a look at the pictures and the video footage. The visuals tell you the story of what happened to a 10-member delegation of the third-largest political party in India within moments of beginning a peaceful *dhama*. (Of the multiple photographs that appeared in newspapers across the country the following day, there were two that perfectly captured the hostility and aggression of the Delhi police. One was by Anil Sharma of *The Indian Express* and the other by Manvender Lav of PFI — good old-fashioned political photojournalism in print is alive and well.)

Among those bundled into the rickety Delhi Police bus was a trio of three-term MPs — Dola Sen, Nadimul Haque and your columnist. There were two former journalists who had recently joined politics: Sagarika Ghose and Saket Gokhale. Sagarika's was a baptism by fire. She had been elected an MP, but was still 36 hours away from taking her oath. Saket worked as a journalist in Europe and East Asia for

eight years before deciding to come back home with suitcases filled with idealism and optimism.

The 10 of us were told we were being taken to the Mandir Marg Police Station — which is less than 10 minutes away from the EC office. After reaching the main gate of Mandir Marg Police Station, the police did not take us inside. Instead, the bus started again and we were told that we were now being taken to Connaught Place. After about 20 minutes on the moving bus, one of my colleagues, Vivek Gupta, MLA, familiar with Delhi roads, looked outside and alerted us that the route being taken was definitely not the one to Connaught Place.

When we questioned the police constables inside the bus, we were told that they were taking us to "Jaffarpur", which they said was "only about 30 minutes away". We checked Google Maps which told us that the place they were taking us to was in fact about two hours away!

What was going on here? Was a delegation of MPs and former MPs literally being taken for a ride by law enforcement? Illegally being moved to an unknown location? Why was no information given? This unlawful detention went on for over an hour.

Under Section 50(1) of the CrPC, anyone being arrested needs to be immediately informed about the grounds for their arrest. None of us were even once informed during these 90 minutes. Also, the law requires that a detained or arrested person be taken to the police station closest to where the alleged offence occurred. Forget the nearest police station, we weren't even told where specifically we were being taken even after we learnt that it was someplace about two hours away.

Saket is quite a pundit on all this. Tough nut. He had spent 151 days in Ahmedabad Central Jail last year, on a trumped-up charge in a money laundering case. He was also arrested by the Gujarat Police four times in 15 days and is an authority on what being taken into custody entails. When the police were taking us to some unknown place, Saket demanded that we either be taken to Mandir Marg Police Station or be produced before a magistrate immediately.

Very quickly, the bus was stopped. The junior policemen worked their mobile phones. The seniors arrived on the spot. Their bluff had been called. We headed back to Mandir Marg Police Station where we were with the Delhi Police for 24 hours. But that is a story for another day, another column.

The writer is Member of Parliament and Leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (Rajya Sabha)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TAKE ACTION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Hepatitis warning' (IE, April 11). It's distressing that India accounted for the second-highest number of hepatitis cases. There is no cure for this illness, though treatment can help manage symptoms to some extent. The National Viral Hepatitis Control Program (NVHCP) provides free testing and medication. However, the WHO report indicates that the programme hasn't reached most patients. The report outlined a series of actions to accelerate progress towards ending the epidemic by 2030. These include expanding access to testing and diagnostics; shifting from policies to implementation for equitable treatment; strengthening primary care prevention efforts; using improved data for action; and engaging affected communities and civil society among others.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

PROBLEM OF BIAS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Don't blame the elites' (IE, April 10). Reading this article alongside another article carried by this paper, 'Listen to the people' (IE, April 4), exposes the current political regime's antipathy towards those who ask critical questions. Here, the term elite is not equivalent to intellectual. Intellectuals come from both the ruling and the ruled. The former is an ideological milieu to persuade the people to align their interests with the dominant class. The other, organise and mobilise their non-dominant class for political action against the ruling bloc. Depending on the side one is aligned with, both sides can be condemned as the "elite".

LR Murmu, New Delhi

A FEE ISSUE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'To be a doctor' (IE, April 10). Why are students of medicine forced to go to Ukraine and

other countries for higher education? This is because, in India, seats in government medical institutions are not sufficient in comparison with the demand. Private medical colleges charge astronomical fees, which is beyond the capacity of students belonging to the middle class or lower middle class of the country. So students have no option but to go to Ukraine and other countries where medical education is comparatively very cheap just in comparison to that of private medical colleges in India. It was unfortunate that students in Ukraine had to return home due to the war and leave their education midway.

Shantanu Bhadra, New Delhi

A WELCOME VERDICT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Back on track' (IE, April 11). Correcting one's own mistakes does not make someone weak. The Supreme Court of India correcting its miscarriage of justice is a message to the people that the law will always do justice. It's not the first time that the Court has allowed a hearing on a curative petition. However, there also has to be an acknowledgement of the apex court's previous injustice. It erred by announcing a judgment in favour of the Delhi Airport Metro Express Pvt Ltd.

Devansh Das, Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Back on track' (IE, April 11). Anil Ambani's Delhi Airport Metro Express Private Limited terminated the agreement with DMRC in 2012 on the pretext of the latter not fixing structural defects identified. But in reality, the DMRC had ratified these in the stipulated time of 90 days. The CJ-led special bench's decision will be a huge relief to DMRC. This decision underscores the Court's commitment to providing justice. Apart from that, investor confidence in infrastructural projects in India will increase as well.

Bal Govind, Noida

A call for reconciliation

BJP should reach out to Muslims. The community should also take a step forward



FIROZ BAKHT AHMED

WHEN IT COMES to Muslim votes, the lines seem to be clear in the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections. The ruling establishment has made it clear, without being explicit, that it doesn't need the community's votes. Its "400 paar" isn't dependent on Muslims. The Opposition's attitude appears to be the opposite: "Who will the beleaguered Muslim vote for, if not for us? Surely, they won't vote for the BJP".

The writer is reminded of the remarks of Jag Pravesh Chandra, Delhi's Chief Executive Councillor from 1983 to 1990. Even though he used crude words, what he said was that parties exploit Muslims for their votes, but once in power, they forget about the community's aspirations for representation in governance.

Almost eight decades after independence, Muslims who had expressed loyalty to India and rejected Muhammad Ali Jinnah's Pakistan, believing that they would be prosperous in a Hindu-majority India, haven't got their due. Instead, their loyalty is often doubted. This is ironic. Bharat Ratna Maulana Abul Kalam Azad had said that Muslims had rejected Partition because they believe in the Hadith mantra, *Hubbul watani, Nisful imaan*: Love for the homeland is half of the Muslim's faith.

The relationship between the Sangh Parivar and Muslims remains fraught, espe-

cially during elections, because it's marked by mutual mistrust. The BJP says that in every election, the Muslim community issues a call to vote for the candidate who can defeat the party. This knee-jerk response, its leaders argue, is unhealthy in a democracy and it's for Muslims to understand that in the world's largest democracy, no political party should be treated as untouchable.

On its part, the Muslim community continues to wait for the formidable BJP machinery to move a little towards the Centre, as the party aims for a third term after its resounding victories in 2014 and 2019. Why doesn't the BJP field credible and competent Muslim candidates? "Even if we vote for the BJP, the BJP won't acknowledge our vote," is the community's refrain. What will it take for the BJP to include us in its political plan, they ask? Could saying that we are not discriminated against in central schemes be the answer?

Muslims have seen terrible acts of communal violence, from the lynching of Mohammed Akhlaq to the treatment meted out to Bilkis Bano and her family. They have seen the accused in the Bilkis Bano case being garlanded, hate messages being forwarded on WhatsApp, the houses of some members of their community being bulldozed, the number of Urdu-medium schools shrinking. Scarcely any-

one from their faith is in the highest echelons of power, be it the Cabinet or a top boardroom.

That's why, for the BJP to give tickets to Muslims will be a significant statement. It will affirm that their India story cuts across religions and that the strength of Indian democracy is its inclusiveness. It will send a positive signal and bring down the bitterness between different faiths.

Muslims, too, need to take some steps forward. They should announce their support for competent and credible candidates in the BJP and vote for them, especially the ones who have eschewed hatred, speak of development and try to transcend ideology. Muslims should have a charter of genuine demands — providing affordable education for children, modernisation of *madrassas*, adequate healthcare facilities and economic support. They should ask — and be seen as asking — hard questions of the so-called "secular" brigade about what they have done to uplift the community and give them representation in governance. Where are the prominent Muslim leaders in the INDIA bloc?

This may sound like a platitude but the time has come for the world's third-largest Muslim population to decide that they need to engage with politics in the world's largest democracy. Withdrawing is not an option. That will be doing a disservice to the gen-

eration of Muslims who will grow up in today's India.

Given its position of strength, it's also incumbent on the BJP to take more than a step forward.

One of my enduring memories from primary school is competing with my classmate Rajkumar Sharma to draw and colour the "mukut" (crown) of Lord Rama and then arguing over who made the better one. The story of Ramayana gripped me and the generosity of Rama shone through to me — a child who was glued to the pillars of my own faith. My parents had underlined that the Islamic Hadith taught reverence and regard for other religions. On January 22, as an invitee to the consecration of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya, I heard an echo of what my parents had always said. Describing the four major qualities of Lord Ram, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat said that we have to be truthful, compassionate, sacrificing and self-effacing.

Significantly, the Muslim community took the occasion in their stride, guided by the words of the Holy Quran, *Lakum dinukum, waliya deen* — to you your religion, to us, ours. Can the next step be to participate in democratic politics together, not just during elections?

The writer is former chancellor, Maulana Azad National Urdu University

EXPLAINED HISTORY

WHY KERALA BJP CHIEF WANTS SULTHAN BATHERY RENAMED

SHAJU PHILIP
 THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, APRIL 11

THE RENAMING of Sulthan Bathery in Kerala's Wayanad district is "inevitable", state BJP president K Surendran, who is also the party's candidate for the Wayanad Lok Sabha seat, has said.

"The name Sulthan Bathery emerged as part of [Tipu Sultan's] invasion. Sulthan Bathery should be renamed as Ganapathyvattam. This is not the land of Tipu Sultan who massacred Hindus and Christians... Congress and CPM want the place to be known after a criminal," Surendran said.

Surendran is contesting against sitting MP Rahul Gandhi (Congress) and Annie Raja (CPI) in the Wayanad seat. What is the history of the town and its names?

Where does the name Ganapathyvattam come from?

Sulthan Bathery, one of the three municipal towns in Wayanad (the other two being Mananthavady and Kalpetta), has a stone temple that was once known as Ganapathyvattam. The temple, built in the architectural style of the Vijayanagara Empire, was constructed by Jains who migrated to Wayanad from areas in present-day Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, in the 13th century.

The temple was partly destroyed during the invasions of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysuru, in the second half of the 18th century. Between 1750 and 1790, Tipu and his father Hyder Ali carried out several raids into what is today northern Kerala. The temple remained abandoned for



The Jain temple in Sulthan Bathery. Wikimedia Commons

nearly one-and-a-half centuries. Later, it was taken over by the Archaeological Survey of India, which has declared it a monument of national importance.

And what is the history of "Sulthan Bathery"?

The armies of Tipu destroyed temples and churches, and forced many in the path of its invasion to flee to escape forced religious conversion.

"It is believed that 25 churches were demolished... As the churches fell, Tipu's hand came down strongly upon a significant population of Roman Catholics that had made western Karnataka their home," *The Indian Express* had previously reported.

Tipu Sultan used the Maha Ganapathy temple in Sulthan Bathery as a battery or store for weapons for his army in the Malabar region. This led to the British recording Ganapathyvattam as "[Tipu] Sultan's Battery". The name today survives as Sulthan Bathery.

Of India's 969 mn electors, more than 18.4 million are between the ages of 18 and 19. This is the story of elections to India's House of the People, for the younger readers of *The Indian Express*.



DECISION 1952-2019
 A HISTORY OF LOK SABHA ELECTIONS PART I

Jawaharlal Nehru on campaign in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, on December 19, 1951. PMML, New Delhi, donated by Nayantara Sahgal

(Below) *The New York Times* report on the election, "Unprecedented Experiment in Democracy", published on January 20, 1952.

Nehru in 'haste', a sceptical CEC: 4 yrs after freedom, first election

1951-52: Ballots the size of a rupee note, boxes in many colours, 318 out of 489 seats for Congress

SHYAMLAL YADAV
 NEW DELHI, APRIL 11

INDIA'S FIRST Lok Sabha election, conducted over four months in 1951-52, began the democratic process by which the reins of the newly independent nation were put in the hands of its people. Votes were cast for 489 Lok Sabha and 3,283 state Assembly seats around the country.

Besides the Indian National Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru, others in the race included the Socialist Party, with Jayaprakash Narayan as one of its leaders; Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP) of J B Kripalani; Communist Party of India (CPI); Akhil Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS, precursor of BJP); Hindu Maha Sabha (HMS); Karpatri Maharaj's Akhil Bharatiya Ram Rajya Parishad (RRP); and Tribid Choudhuri's Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP).

The elections represented a remarkable ambition — "an act of faith", as Ramachandra Guha wrote in *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (2007). Of the 176 million electors of age 21 and older (the voting age was brought to 18 only in 1989), about 82% were unlettered.

There weren't many precedents to follow. Very few countries had universal adult franchise at the time — the US, for instance, granted all adult citizens the right to vote only in 1965. Four years after throwing off two centuries of colonial rule, India had to chart its own course.

The ECI's unique challenges

The office of the Election Commission of India (ECI) was set up on January 25, 1950. Sukumar Sen, an officer of the Indian Civil Service and a former Chief Secretary of West Bengal, became Chief Election Commissioner on March 21, 1950. On April 19 that year, while proposing The Representation of the People Act, India's election law, Prime Minister Nehru told Parliament that polls would be held in the spring of 1951.

But neither the government nor the people had any experience of conducting or participating in such an exercise. The 1937 elec-

tion in nine 'Part-A States' — Assam, Bihar, Bombay, Madhya Pradesh, Madras, Orissa, Punjab, United Provinces and West Bengal — were smaller, with limited franchise based on land ownership, literacy, etc.

CEC Sen viewed Nehru's "haste" in holding elections "with some alarm", Guha wrote. "For no officer of state, certainly no Indian official, ever had such a stupendous task placed in front of him," Guha wrote.

The challenges were formidable and unique — not only was the electorate spread over more than a million square miles, there was a peculiar social problem. "Many women in northern India... wished to register themselves as A's mother or B's wife [and not by their own names]," Guha wrote. CEC Sen was outraged, "and directed his officials to correct the rolls by inserting the names of the women..."

Ultimately, 17.32 crore voters across the country (excluding J&K) were enrolled, and 45% were women.

Colourful ballot boxes

Some 1.32 lakh polling stations with 1.96 lakh booths were set up, and 3.38 lakh policemen were deployed on election duty. The first mock polling drill was held in Udaipur on August 5, 1951.

Over a dozen manufacturers were contracted to supply 19 lakh steel ballot boxes, with the price per box fixed at between Rs 4 and Rs 6.12. The boxes for the Lok Sabha election were in four colours — olive green, meadow green, pale green, and Brunswick green; those for Assembly candidates were in shades of chocolate, mahogany, teak, dark tan, and bronze.

Given that India's literacy rate in 1951 was

only 18.33%, the idea was to have ballot boxes in different colours, each representing a candidate. But this was not practical, and it was finally decided that there would be a separate ballot box for each candidate at all booths, with the candidate's election symbol on it.

The ballot papers were the size of a Re 1 currency note. They were pink in colour, with "Election Commission India" inscribed on them. They displayed a serial number with two letters of the alphabet denoting the state — 'BR' for Bihar, 'AS' for Assam, etc.

The ballots also had serial numbers printed in black, and the national crest in white. The papers for Lok Sabha elections had a thick vertical bar of olive green colour; those for state Assemblies had a chocolate-coloured bar.

Voters were to collect the ballots at the polling station, and put them in the boxes of candidates of their choice.

Himachal was the first to vote

After delays, polling finally took place between December 1951 and February 1952. However, votes in Chini and Pangri Assembly constituencies of Himachal Pradesh were cast in October 1951, before snow could cut these areas off from the rest of India. On December 10, 1951, voting began with the Thiruvella and Trichur Lok Sabha constituencies of Travancore-Cochin (present-day Kerala).

The first election had 1,874 Lok Sabha candidates and 15,361 state Assembly candidates. Kottayam (Travancore-Cochin), Alleppey (Travancore-Cochin), and Gudivada (Madras) saw the highest voter turnouts of 80.5%, 78.1%, and 77.9% respectively.

When the results were declared on April 2, 1952, the Congress won 318 seats, the Socialist Party won 12, KMPP 9, CPI 8, HMS

4, and BJS, RRP, and RSP won 3 seats each. Independents won 37 seats.

Expected wins, shock defeats

The likes of Nehru and Syama Prasad Mookerjee expectedly won. But Morarji Desai lost in Bombay, and Jai Narayan Vyas in Rajasthan. The biggest upset, however, was the defeat of B R Ambedkar, who lost to his former personal assistant, Narayan Sadoba Kajrolkar, by around 15,000 votes at the Bombay North Central seat.

The first Lok Sabha also had multiple-member constituencies, a practice that was abolished from the 1962 election onward. Under this, some constituencies returned two members — one from the general category, another from the SC or ST categories and, in one case, one each from all three categories.

The ECI had granted 14 parties the status of 'national parties', and designated more than 50 parties as 'state parties'. After the elections, only the Congress, Praja Socialist Party (formed with the merger of the Socialist Party and KMPP), CPI, and BJS were able to retain their national party status.

Elections a remarkable success

The "biggest experiment in democracy in human history", as CEC Sen described the elections, ended as a resounding success, putting to rest the doubts that many, including even Nehru on occasion, had.

After the elections, Nehru said: "My respect for the so-called illiterate voter has gone up. Whatever doubts I might have had about adult suffrage in India have been removed completely." (Guha: *India After Gandhi*)

CEC Sen's initial scepticism too dissipated. The Election Commission's Report on the First General Elections 1951-52 quoted Sen as saying, "Adult suffrage was a remarkable success and proved a potent factor in itself for advancing the political education of an illiterate mass which had little or no background of political experience."

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THIS WORD MEANS

ADJUDICATING AUTHORITY (PMLA)

The ED's attachment of National Herald's assets has been confirmed. What happens now?

THE ADJUDICATING Authority under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA) has confirmed the attachment of assets worth Rs 751.9 crore of the Congress-promoted *National Herald* newspaper.

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) had provisionally attached these properties in November 2023 in a case against Associated Journals Ltd (AJL) that publishes *National Herald*, and Young Indian (YI), which owns the newspaper. Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi hold 38% shares each in YI, which is being investigated after accusations that it acquired AJL and its assets for a "pittance" against an alleged loan extended by the Congress.

Adjudicating Authority

Section 5 of the PMLA provides for the attachment of any property that is suspected to have been acquired with the proceeds of crime. The attachment order is issued if the ED Director feels that "such proceeds of crime are likely to be concealed, transferred or dealt with in any manner which may result in frustrating any proceedings relating to confiscation of such proceeds of crime".

This provisional attachment order must be confirmed within 180 days by an

Adjudicating Authority appointed by the central government, failing which the property is automatically released. But there is hardly any attachment under PMLA that the Adjudicating Authority refuses to confirm. The accused can continue to enjoy the property until the Adjudicating Authority confirms the attachment.

What happens afterward

The accused can challenge the confirmation order at the PMLA's Appellate Tribunal within 45 days. If unsuccessful, the accused can then move the High Court.

Unless the property is released along the way, it remains out of bounds for the owner until the trial is completed. In case of a conviction, the trial court may order confiscation of the attached property, and vest its rights to the central government.

Attached properties may remain locked for years and start to decay and crumble. Attached vehicles are sent to warehouses owned by the Central Warehousing Corporation, where the ED pays to park the vehicle. As cases drag on, these vehicles too rot. In the end, neither the accused nor the ED recovers anything from the vehicle, with the agency often paying up more rent than the value of the vehicle. **ENS**

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Like chital in Andamans: How invasive species threaten natural ecosystems

NIKHIL GHANEKAR
 NEW DELHI, APRIL 11

IN A bid to manage the teeming population of chital (spotted deer) in Ross Island, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands administration recently sought help from the Wildlife Institute of India. Native to mainland India, chital were brought to the Andamans by British game hunters in the early 20th century. Having no natural predators or competitors, the deer have spread across the islands.

Over the past two decades, studies have examined the herbivores' deleterious impact on the Andamans' native flora and fauna.

What are invasive alien species?

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) defines invasive alien species (IAS) as "species whose introduction and/or spread outside their natural distribution threatens

biological diversity". These include animals, plants, fungi, and microorganisms.

The CBD, the United Nations' global treaty on safeguarding biological diversity, sums up characteristics of IAS as follows: "arrive, survive and thrive". This means that these species are introduced either through natural or human intervention, survive on native food resources, reproduce at a fast rate, and eventually edge out native species.

In India, the legal definition of IAS under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (amended in 2022), is narrower. They are defined as "species of animal or plant which is not native to India, and whose introduction or spread may threaten or adversely impact wildlife or its habitat." This leaves out species within India which might be invasive to a particular region — like the chital in Andamans.

What are some examples of IAS in India?

The list of invasive wildlife in India is



(From left) Red-bellied piranha, from South America; red-eared slider, from North America; and chital. Wikimedia Commons



dominated by certain fish species such as the African catfish, Nile tilapia, red-bellied piranha, and alligator gar, and turtle species such as red-eared slider.

The red-eared slider, for instance, is a favourite among India's exotic pet owners, and many have been abandoned in local water bodies. The turtle, native to North America, edges out local freshwater species, owing to

their fast rates of reproduction, and subsequent competition for food.

Many invasive fish species, such as the African catfish, were introduced in India to cater to aquarium owners.

How do IAS impact native species?

K Sivakumar, a professor in the Department of Ecology and Environmental

Sciences, Pondicherry University, said that invasive species act as disruptors in the food chain and disturb the balance of the ecosystem. In habitats where there is no competition, invasive species can dominate the entire ecosystem, he added.

For instance, "in Keoladeo Park, Bharatpur in Rajasthan, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site, the African catfish has been

known to prey on water fowl and migratory birds as well," Professor Sivakumar said.

Studies have shown that the proliferation of chital in the Andamans has affected the regeneration of native vegetation, as the deer are known to consume seeds and seedlings.

What are IAS' economic impact?

In September 2023, the UN-founded Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) brought out a report on invasive species which showed that around 37,000 established alien species were introduced worldwide, with roughly 200 new alien species introduced each year.

The global economic cost of IAS was over \$423 billion annually in 2019. These costs arise out of the damage IAS inflict on an area's natural ecosystem. For example, as per India's National Biodiversity Authority, the cotton mealy bug (*Phenacoccus solempsis*), an invasive species from North America, has severely affected cotton crops in the Deccan, leading to yield losses.

Opinion

FRIDAY, APRIL 12, 2024



THE SUCCESS OF UPI

Union minister for external affairs S Jaishankar

Today, we do cashless payments through UPI. We have transactions worth ₹120 crore in a month. While the US makes digital transactions worth ₹40 crore in a year. You should see how we have progressed in some areas and the world commends that

Oil trouble

Supply-demand imbalance and heightened geopolitical tensions trigger elevated prices

OIL PRICES ARE hovering around \$90 a barrel due to simmering geopolitical tensions in the Middle East following the assassination of Iran's two generals and five military advisors in Damascus. Markets have remained on the edge as Iran has vowed revenge and has even asked the US to "step aside" as it readies its response to Israel, which carried out that deadly air strike in Syria. The uptick in Brent crude spot prices is also due to diminishing prospects of a ceasefire in the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas forces since last October. The oil rally marks a departure from the last six months when prices did not flare up despite the conflict. Although in the initial weeks, Brent crude spot prices remained elevated at \$90-plus a barrel, they settled down to lower levels of \$77.6 a barrel in December 2023. The attacks on shipping in the Red Sea by Yemeni Houthis forces contributed to some upward pressure as oil prices edged up to \$85.4 a barrel in March. But they were range-bound as the assumption was that conflict will not engulf the Middle East that accounts for a major proportion of the world's oil production.

Besides heightened geopolitical risks, an equally important factor behind higher oil prices is the imbalance between supply and demand. The Saudi Arabia-led OPEC+ alliance is constraining supply when the global demand for oil is growing. Last month, several members of OPEC+ agreed to extend additional voluntary cuts of 2.2 million barrels per day (bpd) till end-June 2024 to prop up prices. The oil cartel and its allies reaffirmed this decision at their joint ministerial monitoring committee meeting on April 3. Oil prices flared up with the prospect of tighter supply.

Leading hedge funds believe that the cartel has regained control over the market. OPEC+ has been reducing output since November 2022, which has taken 5.3 million bpd or 5.2% of global supply out of the market. Constrained production at a time global consumption is expected to grow is a recipe for higher Brent spot prices of \$90 a barrel and \$91.4 a barrel in the April-June and July-September quarters this year according to the US Energy Information Administration.

The outlook on prices could be much worse if Iran targets Israel and US assets. Besides a military response, the US could impose further sanctions on Iran, including curbs on its sale of oil. Iran is the third largest OPEC producer generating 3.23 million bpd in January-March 2024 or 3.2% of global crude supplies. It is true that past sanctions during November 2011 to October 2012 and ongoing ones since July 2018 led to only small declines in global oil supplies by 0.9% and 1.2% respectively, resulting in limited price spikes. But the current situation portends a more dismal scenario if Iran retaliates by blockading the Strait of Hormuz — located between Oman and Iran and connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea — through which a fifth of global oil supplies pass daily. Oil prices then would sky-rocket and bring the world economy to its knees. International diplomacy must therefore prevail to contain a wider spread of the Israel-Hamas conflict to the Middle East. The prospect of higher oil prices is definitely not good news for India that imports the bulk of its energy requirements.

UBS' capital fears in Switzerland have arrived

UBS GROUP AG had hoped that the Swiss government wouldn't make onerous demands for more capital in the wake of its hyper-profitable rescue of Credit Suisse last year. But with a balance sheet now twice the size of Switzerland's economy, the understandable nervousness among officials has fuelled their desire for better defences.

Alongside the capital demands, the government proposes to boost the powers of the Swiss financial watchdog, Finma, mostly along the sensible lines suggested in several reports into the Credit Suisse failure, which I discussed last month. Switzerland will follow the UK in making individual executives answerable for specific risks and practices in the bank. It will also give Finma powers to intervene earlier when a bank is stubbornly refusing to recognise its own problems.

However, the government has mystifyingly chickened out of giving the watchdog powers to impose serious fines for bad behaviour. It said it will look at the possibility of introducing penalties for banks, but not for people. The Swiss parliament inquiry into Credit Suisse's collapse could still call for tougher penalties when it reports later this year. It should do so.

But back to capital. Credit Suisse didn't fail through a flood of losses on bad assets that burned up its equity, and it still had a strong regulatory capital ratio right up until the point when the run on its deposits threatened it with insolvency. The argument that has been made by Colm Kelleher, UBS chairman, and others is that higher capital requirements wouldn't have saved Credit Suisse — and in one sense that's true.

In another sense, however, Credit Suisse was short of capital: That undermined investor confidence and limited its ability to get out of the hole that years of bad management had left it in. Regulators played their part in this, too.

The problem was that Credit Suisse didn't fund the capital needs of its subsidiaries with equity raised from investors; instead it borrowed that money. At the same time, it was allowed by Finma to value its subsidiaries in a less punitive way for capital purposes than accounting rules strictly required. At the end of 2023, the so-called regulatory filter that gave Credit Suisse capital relief for this valuation gap was worth 6.2 billion Swiss francs (\$6.8 billion) of common equity to UBS, according to its annual Pillar 3 report. That would not be subtracted one-for-one from UBS' equity under the government plan, and the bank did start 2024 with about 11 billion francs more than its regulatory requirement, but the change won't be trivial.

The upshot of the borrowing and relief for Credit Suisse was that the bank had less true capital than its headline numbers suggested. Some investors had worried about the quality of its capital making it more vulnerable to a loss of confidence when it came, according to an experts' report prepared for the Swiss finance ministry last year. Fewer investors were willing to give it the benefit of the doubt when things went south.

Worse than that, according to the Swiss government, the lack of real equity in Credit Suisse's foreign subsidiaries was deadly when the crisis struck. Sales of foreign units are normally a fast route to cut assets and raise cash, but these were in effect impossible at Credit Suisse because they would have weakened the bank's overall capital rather than strengthen it, the government said on Wednesday.

Its proposal is to force banks to fully capitalise all foreign subsidiaries in future, starting from next January. UBS will likely protest, but this seems sensible, too.

There are several other parts aimed at improving the quality of capital by giving banks less credit for assets like software that could quickly become worthless in a failure. The government also proposes to use stress tests to add an extra, more forward-looking chunk of capital for each bank. This is where a real fight will likely be had, especially if it double counts any risks. The devil will be in the detail.

These adjustments will be slightly painful for the bank and its shareholders, but given the shadow that UBS now casts over Switzerland, they could have been so much worse.



PAUL J DAVIES
Bloomberg

AS THE NORTH Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) marked its 75th anniversary this month, celebrations were accompanied by a sobering reality — the alliance's raison d'être has seemingly circled back to its origins without significant alteration. Lord Ismay, NATO's inaugural secretary-general, famously stated that the alliance was formed to "keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down". Nearly three-quarters of a century later, with the exception of the German factor, the fundamental purpose outlined by Ismay remains largely unchanged. Established on April 4, 1949, in response to the "very real possibility of a Soviet invasion of Europe", NATO finds itself once again confronting Russia as a potential threat that requires deterrence.

When comparing the current geopolitical landscape of Europe to the circumstances in the years following NATO's establishment, it becomes apparent that very little has changed. Russia maintains a significant presence in Europe, while NATO pursues further expansion. Additionally, new alliance and partner clusters may be emerging around the world, reshaping the landscape of global security.

In principle, within the context of a great power competition, collective security organisations may not always function as stabilising forces. At best, they establish deterrence through the dominance of militarily superior collectives. At worst, they can be destabilising, with impacts that reverberate widely and persist for decades. The establishment of NATO in 1949 prompted a retaliatory mutual defence treaty, the Warsaw Pact, in 1955 by the Soviet Union. Specifically, the inclusion of West Germany into NATO triggered the Soviet Union to enact a counter mutual defence treaty.

HARSH V PANT VIVEK MISHRA

Respectively, vice president, studies and foreign policy, and fellow, Americas, ORF



Throughout history, global crises have often served to galvanise collective security organisations, fundamentally altering their nature. NATO, initially little more than a political association, saw a significant shift in its role with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950-53. Its efforts to establish peace and security, first in Kosovo in 1999 and later in Afghanistan over two decades under the auspices of the United Nations, have been met with controversy and mixed results. Prior to 2014, NATO had been grappling with its purpose and struggling to revitalise its role in European security. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by the ongoing conflict starting in February 2022, has spurred NATO to undergo substantial transformations.

On one hand, the Ukraine crisis has injected new vitality into NATO, with fresh commitments from its European Union (EU) members and, more significantly, a revitalised era of trans-Atlantic solidarity. On the other hand, the ongoing conflict has brought Europe closer to the brink of another world war. Amidst the prolonged war in Ukraine, one predictable deduction emerges: neither side appears prepared for negotiations. Ukraine's demand to restore the pre-2014 status quo seems unlikely to be accepted by Russia. Indeed, Russia may perceive an opportunity amid waning

Western support and a resulting shortage of ammunition in Ukraine.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has placed significant financial pressure on NATO member countries. The United States, currently NATO's largest contributor accounting for over 65% of the organisation's total spending in 2023 and having provided over \$75 billion to Ukraine since the war began, finds itself in a structural asymmetry compared to other European treaty members.

Consequently, one of the primary objectives of the Vilnius summit of NATO held in July 2023 was for member countries to commit to spending at least 2% of their GDP on defence annually. This commitment aimed to transition from the existing asymmetrical burden-sharing

model. While some progress has been made in this regard, challenges persist.

NATO faces immense challenges spanning political, financial, and security domains. Politically, NATO and Europe confront uncertainty with the upcoming US presidential elections in November. Donald Trump's suggestions that he could swiftly end the Russia-Ukraine war and his warnings that if European NATO members don't increase contributions, he might encourage Russia to act as it pleases regarding NATO, cast doubt on trans-Atlantic solidarity. This stance not only

Ukraine's potential membership, recently hinted at by US secretary of state Antony Blinken, stands as the last and most consequential move for NATO

Where is China+1?



NAMRATA MITTAL VARNIKA KHEMANI

Respectively, chief economist, and economist, SBI Funds Management Ltd.

THE PREVALENT NARRATIVE is around shifting of manufacturing capacities out of China with the objective of reducing the world's dependency on Chinese exports. If this were to be playing out, then there should be some signs of slowing exports out of China or a loss in market share for Chinese exports. But data seem to suggest otherwise.

Contrary to the running rhetoric of China+1, China has gained exports market share by 1.7% in the last five years. China's exports mix has also shifted away from consumer goods and increasingly towards capital goods.

At present, India is promoting its manufacturing sector largely by providing a subsidy to a specific set of companies in identified sectors. The subsidy grants are conditional on yearly milestones in investment, production, and domestic value addition in specific cases.

On the other hand, the Chinese government has identified a few strategic sectors, specifically in the realm of new-age industries, and appears much more aggressive than other countries in its industrial policy support. As a share of gross domestic product (GDP), China spends over twice as much as South Korea on its industrial policy. And in dollar terms, China spends more than twice as much as the United States does (as of 2019). The main mechanisms of support are tax incentives, subsidies, and preferential access to funding. These factors work in combination with other state assistance to potentially improve the return on

invested capital and make it more attractive for private investment.

And consequently, we can see significant capacity addition and production out-performance in the automobile, electrical machinery, chemical, nonferrous metal, railway shipbuilding, and aerospace sectors. Gradually, the production capacity is outpacing demand, leading to reduced capacity utilisation in a few sectors. At the current pace of industrial capex push, the problem of overcapacity could accentuate in the future. And hence, Chinese manufacturers with excess capacity, and cost advantages, will have adequate incentive and capability to price competitively.

This means that at least one of the factors (i.e. China's cheap exports) that contributed to structurally lower inflation over the past two decades is not going away, and potentially even getting stronger.

China's real estate boom drove the commodity upcycle in 2003-2011. However, the current policy focus is strictly towards industries which are less material-intensive (barring a few exceptions). More so, even as manufacturing investment is on the rise, overall fixed asset investment in China is growing at low single digits (3% in 2023). Thus, the current investment cycle in China may

not lead to a parallel surge in commodities. Neither does it have the potential to completely pull out the country of its growth struggle and put it back on a 10% nominal growth path.

In the past, other countries gave in to the Chinese industry following out their own manufacturing sector. Today, they are pushing back. After the US, Europe is aiming at more aggressive anti-dumping policies against Chinese automobiles and solar equipment exports.

India has been increasingly active in blocking Chinese investment and banning mobile apps and attempting to enforce import restrictions on electronics imports. And since August 2023, Mexico has temporary import duties of up to 25% on goods (including steel, aluminium, textiles, footwear, tires, plastics, glass, paper, cardboard, electrical equipment, and ceramic products) from countries with whom it does not have a preferential or free trade agreement, of which China is by far the most prominent. However, it wouldn't be a one-way battle. China would likely impose countervailing duties and try to arm-twist nations where it has significant loans.

Today, globally, policy making is focused on the industrial capex. Knowing the competition is critical for India while designing its policy framework

If Indian manufacturers do not receive sufficient policy support, the Chinese manufacturing process could hollow out India's production potential

and for us as an investor while riding on the manufacturing sector and industrial capex theme. Some of the sectors like electric vehicles, solar panels, semiconductors, and other high-end equipment manufacturing may face stiff competition from increased Chinese supply in the future. At the same time, China is indeed vacating the space in some of the low-value consumer products.

Secondly, China+1 has so far been a limited exports opportunity for India. It provided an increased market share gain in the US market. But more than the China+1 policies or shift in sourcing, there has been the reduced industrial production in Germany and a few other European countries (probably driven by the energy crisis after the Russia-Ukraine war) which has played out favourably for Indian exporters.

Third, we often debate industrial policy support and whether taxpayers should subsidise "rich" businesses. In today's environment, if Indian manufacturers do not receive sufficient policy support, perhaps the Chinese manufacturing process could hollow out India's production potential and leave India as a permanent import-dependent and current account-deficit nation. No nation is playing by the fair rule of comparative advantage. In fact, we find that other countries (both the US and China) have increased support to R&D spending by the industries. Perhaps, India could also design its policy with a greater bias towards innovation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Unemployment, inflation in focus

As the campaign heats up and voters in some parts of India gear up for voting, unemployment and price rises have emerged as serious concerns for nearly half the electorate. It is a continuing trend and no government has been able to fathom it. Two points have emerged distinctly from a survey, which provides visible evidence of the concerns about

limited employment opportunities, spiralling prices, increasing corruption, rising rural distress, and perception of deteriorating economic conditions of households. The other point is the visible class divide. The poor and lower middle classes appear to have been more adversely affected by the emerging economic distress. All others found it difficult to make both ends meet. Simply put, citizens do not perceive their economic condition as very comfortable as

things stand. —CK Subramanian, Navi Mumbai

Sailing in two boats?

Apropos of "Sensex@75K", even as the Sensex went past 75,000, the Indian market cap touched a record at ₹400 trillion. This gives our bourses a Buffett indicator that measures m-cap to GDP ratio of 1.3 compared to the 10-year average of 0.93. Advanced economies have seen ratios of 1.8/1.9 without much damage. Developing

ones, being more volatile, need to be alert at a lesser ratio. Elections in India and the US, the two ongoing wars, and the climbing price of crude oil, to cite some, will be major factors ahead. A 20-25% rise in bullion prices in less than six months may mean that the market is trying to ride two investment boats, which is seldom advisable. —R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

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People from a planet without flowers would think we must be mad with joy the whole time

Iris Murdoch

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

— Rammath Goenka

DMK WORKING HARD TO AVOID A REPEAT OF CRUEL SUMMER OF 2011

THE power sector continues to give nightmares to the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu. In 2011, when the party suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the AIADMK, persistent power cuts across the state were blamed as one of the prime reasons. The industrialised state, which has always grappled with power shortages, had somehow managed the show while incurring a huge debt burden. But in the cruel summer of 2011, scheduled power cuts of up to three hours and frequent unscheduled outages during the election season sealed the DMK's fate. While many stalwarts floundered, M K Stalin, then the deputy chief minister, won with a narrow margin of 2,800 votes from Kolathur.

This summer is unforgiving too. But the ruling DMK is not leaving any stones unturned. Tangedco, the loss-making state power utility, has the unenviable task of ensuring a steady supply without burning a big hole in its kitty. The state has apparently recorded a 50 percent drop in hydropower generation in 2023-24 from the previous year. The state-owned hydropower plants produced a little over 3,000 million units in 2023-24, making it the lowest output in seven years. Lack of water from Karnataka and scanty rainfall in the western districts, where most of the hydropower plants are located, have created the mess. For Tangedco, which pays over ₹13,000 crore a year in interest on loans, the drop in production is indeed crucial.

Since the demand has shot up, the company has been scrambling to lap up electricity from outside the state. In anticipation of a further spike in demand, the utility has signed power purchase agreements with private players to procure about 4,500 MW up to May. For the four months between February and May, Tangedco's power purchase cost has hit a record high of ₹4,600 crore, almost twice the ₹2,400 crore spent during the same period last year.

While Tangedco is yet to finalise the accounts, its power procurement cost for 2023-24 is projected to reach ₹65,000 crore. There is only one way electricity consumption will go in the coming weeks, possibly forcing the company to shell out even more this fiscal. The move to restart the practice of collecting security deposits after a gap of two years may not bode well with the state's domestic consumers. But Tangedco may not have too many options at hand.

ANDHRA SIDES FACE DISPIRITED CADRES

THE ruling YSRC and the opposition alliance of TDP, Jana Sena and BJP have a real problem on their hands. With Andhra Pradesh going into assembly and Lok Sabha polls simultaneously, the stakes are much higher for everyone. The logic behind the TDP and Jana Sena partnering with the BJP is sound—they want Narendra Modi's credibility to add that extra bit of zing to their campaign. But any strategy can be termed successful only if it works on the ground. Going by what is unfolding ever since seat-sharing was announced, it would take a lot of doing to ensure a seamless translation to vote-sharing.

A substantial number of Jana Sena and BJP leaders and cadre are unhappy with the 31 assembly and eight Lok Sabha seats they have been allotted. Several saffron leaders are seething that out of the six Lok Sabha seats the party is contesting, quite a few have been given to those who migrated from the TDP. Similar is the complaint of Jana Sena. Prominent state BJP leaders are missing in action, in contrast to Telangana where their counterparts are active. In private, many admit that their party leadership has displayed a weak hand in bargaining.

In the case of Jana Sena, quite a few have left the party and many of the remaining are fuming over being 'short-changed' by the TDP. Pawan Kalyan appeared stronger when TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu was behind bars, but then committed what his aides say is a blunder—he agreed to the alliance right outside the jail, without first holding talks on seat-sharing. Adding insult to injury, the anticipated number of seats came down from at least 40 to a meagre 21. That even Pawan himself had to cajole a TDP leader to help him win is seen as a big climbdown for a superstar.

For the YSRC, the problem is of a different kind. Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy is heavily banking on the goodwill of the 2.6 lakh volunteers he recruited for the smooth delivery of schemes instead of his party cadre. Many YSRC leaders are displeased with the way the volunteer system has diminished their clout. Ground reports suggest their cadre are not as active as TDP workers are. How the two sides deal with these issues will impact the outcome of the polls.

QUICK TAKE

FUSING MINDS & RESOURCES

THE US and Japan have announced a partnership to accelerate the commercialisation of nuclear fusion. For decades, scientists have been trying to harness fusion, the kind of nuclear reaction that powers the sun, to provide carbon-free electricity. Now, some of the world's research powerhouses will fuse efforts to make it possible. There are two lessons for India. We must heed the benefits of fusion before betting too heavily on the hazardous fission, for which we are planning to build 18 more reactors by 2032. And we can learn from the collaborative model of putting cross-border universities, labs and private firms together to provide a game-changing solution.

THE recent resignation of the prime minister of Portugal, António Costa, occasioned a number of chagrined headlines in India along the lines of 'Goan-origin prime minister quits'. Costa's origins in our coastal state of Goa—a former for us, and the recipient of a Pravasi Bharatiya Samman, the highest Indian honour for foreign citizens of Indian descent for being the first Indian head of a European government. Now he was gone.

This sad news was followed by the shock resignation of 45-year-old Leo Varadkar, the son of an Indian immigrant, as prime minister of Ireland, "for personal and political reasons". When Varadkar, then just 38 years old, became prime minister of Ireland in 2017, it was hailed in India as if it represented some sort of national triumph. "See—one of our boys has become their leader," a Mumbai friend told me with great pride. I was impolite enough to remind him that he had opposed the election of Sonia Gandhi as prime minister of India on the very same grounds that he was hailing Varadkar's anointment. "That's different," he replied lamely, before changing the subject with a crestfallen look on his face.

Most recently, the rise of Rishi Sunak as the prime minister of the United Kingdom has been widely celebrated in India, even by those who do not share his conservative brand of politics. But there, too, an election in the second half of this year is widely expected, and at least judging by the polls, to be likely to end his stint at 10 Downing Street.

A year that began with three prominent prime ministers of Indian descent in Europe is likely to end with none.

Most Indians will experience a sense of regret. Varadkar overcame what would once have been impossible odds to rise to the top. A generation ago, he would have been seen as too young, too "different" (he is gay), and too brown to aspire to head a Western democracy. His name marked him out, too, as foreign. And yet his victory showed how much the world had moved on from those sorts of prejudices, even while other tendencies suggested that xenophobia was on the rise.

And yet, was this such a new development in the world, after all? The founding premier of the Irish Republic was a man of Portuguese descent, Éamonn Da Valera. And he was hardly a rarity in Europe, where France has had

A year that began with three prime ministers of Indian descent in Europe is likely to end with none. It's perhaps time to indulge in a few hypothetical scenarios

LEADERS WITHOUT BORDERS: IDEA WHOSE TIME MAY HAVE COME

SHASHI THAROOR



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



SOURAV ROY

a president named MacMahon in the 19th century, and another named Sarkozy, son of a Hungarian count, more recently. Indeed, national identity in Europe has long been rather fluid—the current dynasty of English monarchs hailed from Germany and the Swedish ones from France. The French and the Germans have fought innumerable wars with each other for centuries, but just over a decade ago the French had a finance minister with the German name Strauss-Kahn, while his German counterpart bore the French name Lafontaine.

The election of Barack Hussein Obama in 2008—the son of a Kenyan immigrant with what he cheerfully admitted was a "funny name", as well as

a Muslim middle name—showed American broadmindedness at its best. After all, it was impossible to imagine a non-Japanese prime minister in Tokyo, or a non-Chinese in Beijing. And yet America was hardly a global pioneer; Argentina had elected the son of a Syrian immigrant, Carlos Saul Menem, as president, and Peru had done the same with Alberto Fujimori, whose parents were Japanese, though both are overwhelmingly white-majority nations. In Jamaica, Edward Seaga, the son of a Lebanese immigrant, was elected prime minister in a country 97 percent black, while Janet Jagan, a white Jewish American woman, became president of Guyana, whose population consists entirely of either blacks or Indians.

So why, indeed, shouldn't political talent be hired across national borders? Multinational corporations do it all the time and everyone applauds. Indians rejoice that seven major MNCs are headed by Indians who left our country to make good abroad.

Mediaeval kings hired their warriors where they could—Indian armies, well before the colonial era, had Turkish artillery gunners, Uzbek horsemen and French generals, and no one found it odd. It's only more recently that we have expected our leaders to conform to a national identity stereotype.

But that could be breaking. In 2015, the outgoing president of Georgia (2004-2013), Mikheil Saakashvili, denied a third term by his country's Constitution, decided he could not merely languish in retirement when he was not yet 50. So he switched countries, adopting Ukrainian citizenship and taking on the governorship of the Oblast (province) of Odessa. After a successful first year, he ran into trouble in his second and resigned. But he's only 54 now, and someone might want to suggest he try, for example, Bihar next.

When Libya's late dictator, Muammar al-Gaddafi, promoted a union with Egypt (under the name of the United Arab Republic, or UAR) in the 1970s, he indiscreetly said that his idea came from the fact that Egypt had people but no real leader; whereas Libya had a leader but no real people. The Egyptian authorities naturally balked at a merger on such assumptions, and the UAR died stillborn.

But the precedent Saakashvili has set could well apply to more consensually successful figures like Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, who never got to apply his vision and self-discipline to a bigger country than his tiny city-state. The number of admirers of Singapore on Indian WhatsApp groups suggests that he would have been welcome to many here.

The logic would work even better today. Imagine if, say, Barack Obama, unemployed since turning 53, were to be recruited to run Britain after the shambolic shenanigans around its bizarre Brexit? Or if those of China's fearsome technocrats, who (unlike their supreme leader, Xi Jinping), are obliged to retire from office by their party's rigid 10-year rule, were invited perhaps to sort out Pakistan? The possibilities boggle the mind.

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

WHY THE CAPTAIN NEEDS TO BE HUMBLE WITH THE RANKS

IT is easy to advise a future leader to develop humility, but how should a leader develop humility? It is not easy. The reader could watch Nestle Chairman Suresh Narayan's television interview with Shireen Bhan on his three Is of Inayat, Ibadat, Insaniyat. From my many years of observation and reflection, I have found some ideas to be helpful.

The general perception of and pedagogy on leadership suggest that humility and leadership do not sit well together, though humble leadership is touted as an essential feature of the 'Tomorrow Leader'. This is not true in my experience.

Humility as a mindset

Power is an asset to be sensibly deployed. Humility is a mindset. A leader is bestowed with power to use it for some larger purpose. Humility is a mindset that requires three intrinsic beliefs—that the leader is not smarter than those who are around him or her; that it is possible for the leader to be wrong, and that vulnerability may be a leadership virtue.

Look at nations and companies. Try to identify political or corporate leaders who display a humble mindset. Don't be disappointed if your list is miserably small.

Leadership is remembered by others for kindness and affection, and for taking genuine interest in others. I term this as 'great relationship leadership', which is as important as 'great decisive leadership'.

Since the leader is constantly exercising authority that is derived from power, he or she is most likely unaware of the occasions when narcissism or inadvertent offence has crept into his or her behaviour. That is why the leader needs a 'psychological mirror' that reflects back the images of his or her narcissistic behaviour.

I brand this psychological mirror as 'Clementine Mirror', so named after Clementine, Winston Churchill's wife. There are some stories that adduce to the calming effect she had on her temperamental and irascible husband. This surely helps a leader improve behaviour and build more durable relationships at work.

Say sorry and move on

Learn from acts of humility by great leaders. Here is a story of yesterday that Harish Bhat, the former Tata brand custodian, narrated in a social media post, Short Tata Stories.

R GOPALAKRISHNAN



Author and business commentator; his new book is Embrace the Future: The Soft Science of Business Transformation

When JRD Tata was the chairman of Tata Sons, one of the key members of his leadership team was Sumant Moolgaokar, who led Tata Motors (then called TELCO). They met once a week to discuss various issues. During one such weekly meeting, Moolgaokar disagreed with JRD Tata on an important matter. In fact, he expressed his strong reservations about a particular



JRD Tata led Tata Sons with great humility. There are many stories of him showing this softer side, from apologising unprompted for losing his temper to working around differences with employees. Some of his letters are part of Indian corporate history now

point of view that JRD expressed. When this happened, JRD lost his temper at Moolgaokar, and said a few harsh words.

Moolgaokar went away distraught that JRD was not appreciating his point of view. "What is the use? Jeh does not understand," he said to one of his colleagues. A few days later, JRD Tata, of his own accord, went across to Sumant Moolgaokar's office. He spoke to Moolgaokar at length, to understand and discuss his dissenting point of view. Then, he sent Moolgaokar an extraordinary handwritten letter, expressing his deep regret for having lost his temper. A copy of this letter is reproduced below. It said, "Dear Sumant, I apologise for my outburst. I have been under great pressure at home and on my trip to Jam-

shedpur; and am a bit of an insomniac to boot. So, I am unduly sensitive and was hurt by your criticism that I know was well meant. My affection and admiration for you will never change. Yours ever, Jeh."

Among the many Tata stories, one pertains to an incident involving group chairman JRD Tata and senior Tata director A D Shroff in the early 1950s (from Six Lenses, 2015).

The incident involved a heated exchange between JRD and Shroff during a board meeting of Tata Sons. It appears JRD referred to a view expressed by Shroff as 'a dishonest opinion'. Shroff felt offended that he had been referred to as being dishonest. The incident threatened the continuation of his association with Tata.

A D Shroff sent in his resignation but the matter was patched up by JRD with a great sense of egalitarianism and humility. This is what he wrote in a letter to Shroff dated August 23, 1951: "I was surprised and upset at receiving your letter. I do not remember exactly the words I used during the somewhat heated exchange at the meeting, but my complaint to you was merely that an argument you used to score a debating point over me was not an honest one. That is surely a far cry from questioning your honesty and I am surprised that you interpreted it in that way. You have a right to resent my speaking angrily or showing you discourtesy as a result, and for that I sincerely apologise, but if friends and associates decided to part every time they had an argument, life would become very difficult. You refer to my firm. Except that I am personally a relatively minor shareholder. I don't think there is any difference on that account in any of us. We all work for it and we should think of it as our firm. The trouble with both of us is that we both have a hell of a temper!"

Shroff did not press his resignation. In fact, he served Tata thereafter in his old spirit of trust. Authenticity is the currency one uses to generate trust. Learning to develop and exhibit humble leadership is worthwhile.

(Views are personal) (rgopal@themindworks.me)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Unemployment data

Ref: Opposition doesn't have any reliable data on joblessness (Apr 11). One would like to know whether the government itself has authentic data on unemployment in India. Unless educational institutions and the job market work in tandem, the problem of educated unemployment, which is assuming alarming proportions in the country, cannot be mitigated. S Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai

Unrelated answers

In her interview with TWIE, the finance minister avoided tough questions and replied with something else. When asked about criminals getting relief after joining the BJP, she said the relief was given by the court. Were the courts waiting for them to join the BJP before taking action? She said the allocation of funds to states were not the business of the central government but of the Finance Commission. Is the Finance Commission above the government? V O Harindranathan, email

Death chambers

Ref: Cap defunct borewells to save children's lives (Apr 11). Borewells left uncapped are death chambers camouflaged with human apathy. Such criminal negligence surfaces only after an accident traps an innocent child. Recurrence of such inhuman neglect indicates that both punishment and awareness of the problem are not as extensive as it should be. Sachidananda Satpathy, Sambalpur

Regular checks

The authorities seem to have a lethargic attitude in covering borewells. If an accident happens, they wake up from their sleep and try to save the baby. Proper instructions must be given to landowners and periodical visits must be done by the concerned officers. S Chockalingam, Kottaram

Climate accountability

The SC has expanded the scope of fundamental rights to include "the right to be free from adverse effects of climate change". This highlights the responsibility of the nation to mitigate climate change. The judiciary is taking proactive steps to hold governments accountable for their actions in addressing climate change. Vishal Mayur, Bengaluru

Other defuncters

Ref: SC junks Ramdev apology, roasts Uttarakhand govt (Apr 11). The SC's ruthless handling of the Patanjali case is a pointer to the government to set right the medical ecosystem flooded with fake medicines, misleading claims and unqualified experts. Regulations have to be effectively enforced. Rajarao Kumar, email

No More Loopholes, Only Fair Taxation

India-Mauritius FPI treaty is a template

India and Mauritius have amended their tax treaty to make it compliant with international conventions on treaty shopping. New rules to dissuade companies and investors from locating capital or intellectual property in tax-advantaged jurisdictions are meant to curb around \$200 bn in taxes forgone by countries. Efforts led by OECD and G20 are directed at ensuring MNCs pay bigger shares of taxes in countries where they operate. This is to the benefit of economies receiving capital and technology transfers that are more dependent on corporate taxes. With Mauritius agreeing to set a higher threshold for availing treaty benefits, India is moving to foreign investment facilitation that de-emphasises tax avoidance. Similar amendments with other tax havens will make India more compliant with the OECD's anti-abuse provisions, the base erosion and profit-sharing (BEPS) framework.



Both countries will have to notify a principal purpose test that would need to be satisfied before the benefits can be applied. The test raises the bar on establishing that tax benefits are not one of the main purposes driving investment from Mauritius to India.

The Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) with Mauritius was amended in 2016 to allow India to tax capital gains arising from investments in the country. This prospective change in tax jurisdiction tightened anti-avoidance capability. The new tweak goes beyond that. There is scope for arbitrage, with tax administrators needing 'reasonable' assurances for benefits to be granted.

If India transmits to the new dispensation without turbulence in capital flows, it will have moved closer to its objective of encouraging foreign investment from home economies. The new tax avoidance regime is taking shape as part of internationally coordinated efforts, so effects on capital flows could be dampened. Changes to the treaty with Mauritius will serve as a template for amendments with other tax jurisdictions.

Make BP Measuring Like Hitting the Gym

An ICMR study found that 30% of Indians between 18 and 54 have never had their blood pressure (BP) measured. This comes as no surprise, not just because of the relative lack of access to primary healthcare but also because of the general ignorance even among the well-heeled about BP measurement's life-saving value. Measuring BP is like an early warning system for cyclones — information provided early enough to save lives. Measuring BP should be treated like a service, not a medical procedure, at par with going for a haircut or to the gym.

Lack of time is why so many in the working-age cohort fail to measure their BP. Between managing work and home, people are, indeed, hard up for time. Which is why providing BP measurements should be made available — and advertised — as a service in hotels and clubs, places where 'time-out' is taken. It is likely that had ICMR asked the question, 'How many 18-54-year-olds have their BP measured once a month?', the share of nays would be far higher. An accessible primary healthcare service with a GP and registered nurse at its core is the perfect solution, not just in clinics and hospitals but in recreational places as well. However, perfect cannot become the enemy of good. Waiting for 'perfect' comes at a high cost, something that the spate of 'young' people with cardiac disease makes clear.

Much like a thermometer, people are encouraged to buy BP machines. Using it can be cumbersome. But scheduling a measurement, much like waiting for a home delivery, would see more people sign up. Offering it as a service provided at a convenient location — a home visit, on the next Uber ride, at the office rec room, in a hotel — would ensure larger numbers lining up for this early-warning life-saver service.

JUST IN JEST

Indian names for Chinese places should not be seen as aggro proper nouncing

Naam Ke Vaaste, Let's Call Tibet Dalailabad

Rajnath Singh, wearing his semiotician's pagdi at an election rally at Namsai in Arunachal Pradesh on Tuesday, made an excellent suggestion, without actually suggesting it — changing names of Chinese provinces. The defmin was actually making a point about how Beijing continuously referring to Arunachal Pradesh as 'Zangnan' makes the Indian state as much a Chinese territory as giving Indian names to Chinese provinces will make them 'Indian'. But to sidestep Singh's version of the Bard's 'What's in a name?' reasoning, we think it's a great idea to Indianise those proper nouns 'up there'. The exercise can jolly well start with Tibet — or, as the Chinese call it, 'Xijiang Autonomous Region' — being named Dalailabad. Guangdong would, in the spirit of Gurgaon, be Guangram. Shanghai can be shanghai into Bheemtalaiya, for no reason other than it sounds robust. Instead of calling Beijing 'Peking' again, the Chinese capital can sound rather piquant if renamed Jijingapatnam.

If the nomenclatura from the Muddle Kingdom are outraged, they can be calmly told that this isn't about challenging Chinese territory by aggressive proper nouncing, but it's just how the world's most populous country's citizens will call these places. After all, the French calling Deutschland 'Allemagne' and English-speakers calling it 'Germany' don't threaten the Deutsche.

ECO CHAMBER The economy looks good – now to get straight 'A's over the long term

Believe It or Not, We're Hot



Abheek Barua

India's surprisingly high growth for 2023-24 has caught analysts off guard. Compared to the average forecast of around 6% at the start of the fiscal year, growth is likely to print at 8%. Without unforeseen shocks, 2024-25 GDP growth is expected to remain in a respectable 6.5-7% range, given that it comes on a high base.

Some eyebrows have been raised about the credibility of the numbers, and others about technical niggles. One is the effect of an exceptionally low GDP deflator — the index that is used to filter price effects and arrive at a measure of 'real' growth — that has jacked up the growth rate. However, the fact is that all granular indicators of activity point to strong growth momentum. It is perhaps sensible to recognise this unexpected traction in the economy, rather than get bogged down in technical quibbles.

What is happening to the economy, and why has it beaten expectations by a mile?

To begin with, it is sensible to see growth in conjunction with inflation data, especially inflation that has been shorn of volatile components, such as food and fuel. This adjusted, or core, inflation has been dropping steadily over H2 2023-24, down to 3.3% in February, suggesting that even



As of now, there seems little reason to expect rate cuts. Cuts, when they do happen, could be shallower than in the past



Ramp it up

with such high growth rates, the economy has not 'overheated'.

If one goes by economic theory, this could happen if there are gains in productivity. This seems like a plausible argument, given the sustained improvements in physical and social infrastructure over the last few years. This would also suggest that India's potential growth for the medium term has risen.

What could this suggest to policymakers? Economic theory suggests that higher productivity should produce a higher neutral interest rate, the rate at which central bankers hit the jackpot — with inflation remaining stable at a desired rate while keeping growth at a comfortable clip.

However, enhanced potential growth also means that RBI can breathe a little easier at much higher levels of growth than in the past, and not fret over excess growth straining markets and rekindling inflation. The upshot is that in deciding when and how much to cut rates, RBI needs to get a handle

on the likely productivity gains and changes in potential output and growth. As of now, there seems little reason to expect rate cuts. Cuts, when they do happen, could be shallower than in the past.

The composition of growth also needs to be looked at more closely. Investments, particularly infrastructure-building led by GoI, have led the charge, while consumption growth has significantly lagged. Average GDP growth has been close to 7.4% in 2022-23 and 2023-24, while consumption growth has averaged only 4.9%. In previous high-growth phases such as 2005-08, a popular reference period, consumer spending grew at a much healthier pace, 6.2% on average in this period, with headline growth averaging 7.9%.

This is somewhat puzzling given the massive push for infra, especially roads. Construction is highly labour-intensive. Thus, infra projects lead to lar-

ge hirings of workers, money in their hands and spending on consumer goods. The fact that this relationship has weakened could mean that construction has become more equipment-intensive, and job push from construction has waned.

A calculation by HDFC Bank, based on RBI's KLEMS data and GDP statistics, shows that the labour input per construction unit has fallen from 2015 to 2019 (when the data series ends). Thus, to ensure that growth generates jobs, we need to supplement construction with other employment engines.

That said, sluggish consumption growth is not surprising. The debate on whether the economy is exhibiting a K-shaped recovery, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, is a trifle misplaced. What might be happening is a dual-speed recovery, with the poorer households and small firms recovering slowly from the effects of the pandemic than those closer to the top of the income and size pyramid.

It does not take rocket science to understand why the proportional damage to poorer households' and smaller firms' balance sheets would be greater with a non-discriminatory shock like a pandemic. Prudent programmes like free food might have prevented acute distress. But all 'discretionary' spend-

ing for the less affluent has suffered from the Covid shock that has lingered.

Hence, mass-market consumption would take longer to perk up than premium products. Rural spending, which has a proportionally larger share of the mass market, is now showing signs of recovery, which should pull consumption growth closer to the historical trend.

The economy's report card looks good. The challenge is ensuring it gets straight 'A's over the long term. One way to ensure that is to analyse the 'structural' changes that have happened along the way and recast policies appropriately.

The writer is chief economist, HDFC Bank



THE SPEAKING TREE

Dealing With DKE

ULLHAS PAGEY

The Dunning-Kruger effect, or simply the DKE, a phenomenon discovered by the psychologists duo at Stanford in 1999, is a cognitive bias wherein individuals with limited knowledge in a particular domain tend to overestimate their abilities that stems from their lack of metacognitive ability, the capacity to recognise one's own incompetence. Conversely, those who possess expertise in a field may underestimate their own competence. In spirituality, the DKE manifests in various ways, impacting individuals' understanding of their spiritual wisdom and enlightenment.

King Parikshit in the Mahabharat having been cursed to die within seven days, embarks on a quest for spiritual enlightenment. Despite his limited time, he demonstrates humility and seeks guidance from sages like Shuka. Parikshit's willingness to acknowledge his ignorance and learn reflects a positive response to DKE. Conversely, Krishna from the Bhagavat Purana, driven by fear and ego, believes himself to be invincible despite numerous warnings about the prophecy of his demise at the hands of his nephew, Krishna. His arrogance blinds him to the reality of his vulnerability, leading to his downfall.

While the DKE can lead to arrogance if left unchecked, seeking guidance from mentors enables spiritual enlightenment, as demonstrated through timeless lessons. Resonating the spirit, William Shakespeare avers, 'The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.'

Chat Room

Posterity's Wealth Is Our Creation

Apocryphal 'OPS... They Did It Again!' by Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar (Apr 10), trapped in neoliberal cobweb, the article has one-dimensional logic, ignoring Indian sociocultural realities, at a time our social structure is passing through a drastic transition. The demand for OPS has been put in perverse logic through a quote, 'Why should I worry about posterity?' What did posterity ever do for me? Strangely the question disconnects intergenerational obligations. The wealth that posterity enjoys is not solely its creation. And, nobody is asking what posterity has done for me, they are sharing what they have done for posterity. In India, the joint family is collapsing and old age is becoming a serious problem. OPS is to provide a dignified life in old age. The argument in the piece is a part of dehumanisation that neoliberalism seems to be committed to.

G HARAGOPAL
Hyderabad

Politics is All About Assets

This refers to the news report, 'No Need for Candidates to Disclose Every Movable Property Owned by Them, Rules Supreme Court' (Apr 9). The voter has no right to delve into the finer details of a candidate's assets shouldn't become a bad precedent when it

comes to declaration of real assets when one enters politics. This needs to be a mandatory requirement that can be the basis of calculating future accumulation. When politics has neither a qualification to enter nor an age to retire, the politics of business becomes the individual choice to convert the same as family business later to amass personal wealth.

A P THIRUVADI
Chennai

Life's Particles, One at a Time

I've been a regular reader of ET for close to two decades. The column 'Bliss of Everyday Life' brings parts of our daily routine into microscopic focus. The presentation of the column turns the most mundane into the most esoteric. However, the column has been missing for four days now. 'Bliss' was the first column I turned to every morning. Please bring it back so that we can enjoy the bliss of everyday life.

PRAKASH GUPTA
Byemail

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

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

Before polls, we're meant to be in a craze,
But it's not happening this IPL phase.
With speeches that drone,
And ads widely blown,
We're counting runs, not votes, as we laze!

Ocean Health

The health of an ocean ecosystem can be gauged by the benefits it can provide to individuals and societies at large. The Ocean Health Index, first published in 2012, attempts to rank countries on ocean health on the basis of its analyses of studies connected to 10 overarching goals like biodiversity, clean waters and carbon storage as well as food provision or tourism and recreation. A snapshot...

Countries with the highest/lowest scores on the 2023 Ocean Health Index*

Overall Rank	Highest	Score	Overall Rank	Lowest	Score
5	Seychelles	86.6	214	Philippines	58.3
6	UAE	84.7	217	Syria	56.2
7	Mayotte	83.9	218	Rep. of Congo	55.9
8	Portugal	83.6	219	Ivory Coast	54.9
9	Qatar	83.5	220	Eriteria	54.8

*Only countries with more than 100,000 residents displayed; Index is based on a review of studies Source: Statista

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



PETER HIGGS 1929-2024

That Particular Particle



Debkumar Mitra

What is mass? Physics tells us that mass of a body is a measure of its inertial resistance to a force acting on it. What it means is, when the same force is applied to two different bodies, the body that moves with greater acceleration will have less mass than the other body. From the entire Earth to subatomic particles — electrons, protons and neutrons — all have mass.

The question that bugged physicists was: how do particles that make up all matter acquire mass? Sixty years ago, a British physicist and another group of theoretical physicists in Belgium came up with an answer that changed the face of modern physics. Edinburgh University professor and 2013 Physics Nobel Prize winner Peter Higgs, who passed away at the age of 94, suggested a mechanism in 1964.

According to Higgs, elementary particles — which are not composed of other 'smaller' units — in general, could get their mass from the broken symmetry in 'electroweak theory'. His proposed mechanism focused on two such particles, W and Z bosons, named after Indian theoretical physicist Satyendra Nath Bose. The Higgs mechanism, or Brout-Englert-Higgs mechanism, was also independently proposed by Belgian physicists Robert Brout and François Englert.

What Higgs achieved is nothing short of revolutionary. Despite his first paper on the idea being rejected, he hinted at another article, particle, a type of boson, that might be responsible for particles having mass. His revised 1964 paper,

'Broken Symmetries and the Masses of Gauge Bosons', published after Englert and Brout's, was the first to state the existence of a new particle.

That particle became famous among physicists as the 'Higgs boson' and then as the 'god particle' for the world at large. Higgs, an atheist, hated the term 'god particle' — a coinage made in the 1993 book, The God Particle: If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question?, by Nobel Prize-winning physicist Leon Lederman and science writer Dick Teresi. But the media lapped it up. Incidentally, Higgs' colleagues agreed that evidence-based science should avoid such nomenclature.

So, what was the missing piece in the physics jigsaw puzzle that a reclusive physicist from Newcastle upon Tyne discovered? According to modern physics, all matter — visible or invisible — is made up of a set of particles that act as their building blocks. These elementary particles are held together by forces — weak and robust, among others — and another set of particles mediates these forces.

A fundamental property of most of these particles is that they have mass.

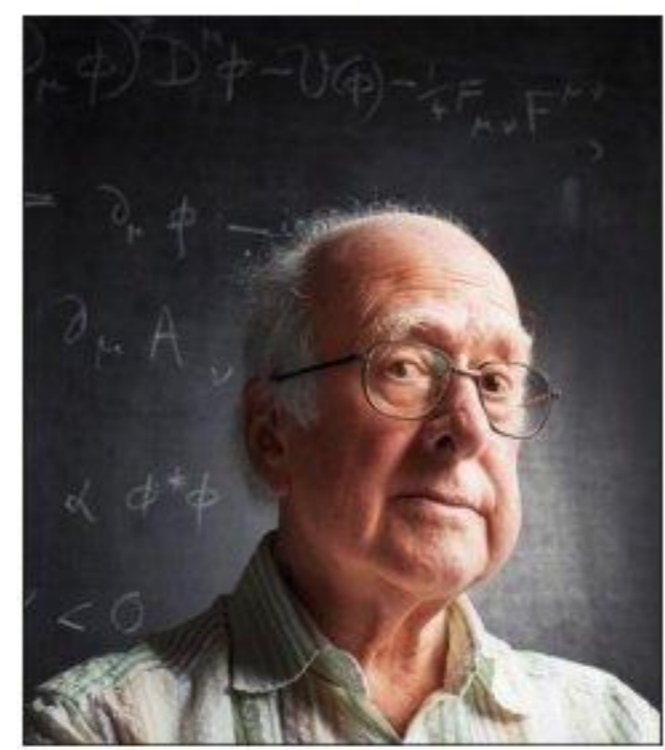
Higgs and his team proposed a theory about the existence of a particle that explains why other particles have mass independently of one another.

All these particles are part of what is considered the centrepiece of theoretical physics: the Standard Model. The model is often graphically represented in a chart that looks like the periodic table of elements. The Higgs boson is the most significant member of this chart. What he did was like discovering a new element in the incomplete periodic table created by Dmitri Mendeleev in 1869, but one without which the entire table had to be redrawn.

Like all other sciences, physics is always a work in progress. At least for now, Higgs' contribution seems to have put a lid on the Standard Model. However, the man egged on by his friend, quantum physicist Paul M Dirac, to take up theoretical physics instead of chemistry had to wait nearly five decades to have his particle 'discovered' in the debris of the 'atom smasher' synchrotron at CERN (European Organisation for Nuclear Research) in Geneva, Switzerland.

In a post-Nobel Prize interview, Higgs said he didn't hope to 'see' the boson bearing his name in his lifetime. But that did not bother him much. The 2013 Nobel Prize that he shared with Englert — Brout had died in 2011 — made the world take another look at Peter Higgs. Even in the world of physics, Higgs has lost the battle to the 'Higgs boson'.

Not that he was unduly perturbed. A silent man, who many of his colleagues believe could have done more for theoretical physics, Higgs seemed to have been content with what he had done. But with his idea, the Standard Model would still be looking for its crown jewels. Higgs simply decided to give the post-Nobel media glare a miss. He didn't have a mobile phone. He got the news of the award from his neighbour. To which he asked, 'What award?'



Boson bossman



CONTRAPUNTO

Politics: A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles

-AMBROSE BIERCE

Now Playing, In Mumbai

Maharashtra's LS contests are a semi-final to assembly polls later. It's politics of intricate footwork

Finally, the dust seems to have settled within MVA, the opposition coalition in Maharashtra, on who contests how many, and which seats. Not that anything in politics is ever a done deal — Sangli's again a wrangle — but the final count is UBT Sena 21, Congress 17 and NCP (Sharad Pawar) 10.

UBT Sena | It's an election of reckoning for UBT Sena. In 2019 LS, as part of NDA, undivided Sena contested on 23 seats and won 18. In events that roiled the state after 2019's assembly polls, Uddhav lost his govt, the original party name, and symbol too — issues that are now in court.

Of Sena's 18 MPs, only 5 remain with UBT. That UBT Sena is contesting on almost as many seats for MVA this time is a measure of Uddhav's clout in Maharashtra's opposition coalition.

Not the same Sena | Shiv Sena's come a long way from its Marathi regionalism of 1960s-1970s and its Hindutva aggression of mid-1980s to now. A curious thing happened with the party's split — their politics took somewhat a backseat. Shinde has focused on trying to stand up to state BJP and Ajit Pawar. Keen to contest 16 seats, Shinde has nine candidates in the fray so far. For the two Senas, the LS results will be a semi-final before the Big Fight for the assembly later this year.

Congress in slo-mo | In 2019, it won a single seat (its MP died last year, just 47). Relegated to margins of state politics for decades, it's yet resisted total collapse, and has claimed higher moral ground to give away prestige seats to Uddhav. As things stand, Congress poll results can't get any worse.

Talkingheads | In defenders' camp Mahayuti, things seem iffy on three seats, talks are underway for a few more. Ajit Pawar and Eknath Shinde are both laying first rights to Nashik as the constituency's 'traditional party' for two decades. They're both correct — only, it was true till they were in opposing teams. Whoever gets to contest Nashik, be sure there'll be some sour grapes. While BJP let go of Kalyan, held by Shinde's son, the party's taking the negotiations to CM's door when it seeks Thane — Shinde's hometown, in fact, his fort.

UP's dance of democracy on 80 seats pales in comparison to the intricate footwork by each party in Maharashtra ahead of elections. Results will not only decide winners for 48 LS seats, but also influence the future of the state's politics.



Battle Of The Yamuna Doab

In 2019, the 26 Lok Sabha seats in western UP & Rohilkhand saw a spirited SP-BSP joint campaign. BJP still pocketed 18. In 2024, BJP's challenge comes from within

Uday Chandra and Shikoh Zaidi



Once upon a time, the old Mughal heartland in the Yamuna Doab presented a formidable barrier for Hindu nationalism. Muslims constituted a quarter to nearly half of the population in Rohilkhand and Awadh. Wealthy Jat farmers who grew sugarcane had caste pride and little interest in abstract nationalism. Kanshi Ram's clarion call for Dalit-Bahujan unity promised a new era of social justice. The historic diversity of Braj Desh and the expanding Delhi National Capital Region (NCR) seemed a world away from Nagpur's RSS ideology.

But over the past decade, since the Muzaffarnagar riots, everything changed in western UP. In 2014 and 2019 as well as in 2017 and 2022, Jats, non-Yadav OBCs, and non-Jatav Dalits started to identify with Modi's Hindutva 2.0. This political brand was built around an inspiring tale of upward mobility, a commitment to development (vikas) via infra-building, and the absence of nepotistic familism (parivar/vadi).

BJP's new cross-caste coalitions made up roughly half the voters across western UP. Brahmins, Jats and Dalits could now endorse one party at the state and national levels. Around a tenth of the 50 million Muslims across the state followed suit in 2019 and 2022, despite BJP fielding no Muslim candidates on both occasions.

In 2024, UP's 80 seats undoubtedly form the bedrock of BJP's re-election campaign. Last time the 26 Lok Sabha seats in western UP and Rohilkhand saw a spirited joint campaign of SP and BSP. All five Muslim MPs from the region won on BSP tickets. This time, BSP fielded the largest number of Muslim candidates of all opposition parties. It is counting on a combination of Dalit and Muslim votes and the disaffected Kshatriyas and other upper castes to defeat both BJP and SP-Congress.

Muslims are, of course, far from a homogenous bloc, divided deeply in western UP by sect, caste, gender and class. But in the upcoming elections, three-way

contests in Muslim-dominated constituencies will favour BJP, reducing the threshold for victory to a third in a region where it won over half the voters in 2019 and 2022. Even where most Muslims, Yadavs and Dalits vote for the opposition, BJP and its ally Apna Dal, a BSP breakaway group, stand to gain.

BJP is also likely to benefit from its alliance with Jayant Chaudhary's RLD, which was part of the opposition alliance in 2019 and 2022. As RLD hitches its precarious future to the BJP bandwagon, Jat farmers

electoral strategy.

Public goods — better law and order, infra, and universal welfare benefits — are just as important, if not more, especially when they are not limited to any particular caste or religious group. The Covid pandemic demonstrated vividly the difference that universal welfare can make in a state notorious for its lack of healthcare, education, and employment.

This is also the state where SP and BSP have dealt in patronage that favours particular groups at the expense of others. Akhilesh's SP has responded with a PDA strategy, which signals an alternative coalition of Picchda, Dalit, and Alpasankhyak, to mobilise the bottom half of society. It faces an uphill struggle to persuade the majority that this is no mere slogan, but a viable model of welfare and governance.

BJP's greatest challenge will come from within. Brand Modi may overlap with Brand Yogi, but they are far from identical. Regardless of the 2024 election results, Modi's eclectic ensemble of fractalised communities is fragile. For his potential successors, including UP's powerful CM, retaining or shuffling caste coalitions will not be easy in the longer run.

Adityanath, a firebrand priest from Gorakhpur in eastern UP and rank outsider in BJP-RSS, offers a darker political vision based on the supremacy of dominant Hindu castes. He may face opposition coalitions that push for universal welfare with communal animity in one of India's poorest states, and its most populous. It is useful to remember that Modi and his critics agree that inclusive development matters to voters and the country's image.

This is why we must listen to the Muslim woman voter in Haridoi who told Shikoh: "If govt really wants to empower Muslim women, they should focus on their education, employment, and healthcare...BJP needs to understand that we do not hate them, it's not that we will not vote for them, but if you keep targeting our mosques and azaan...I don't think this is right."

The writers are with Georgetown University, Qatar, and have been part of a field study on Indian politics

UP votes on April 19 in the first (8 seats) of its 7-phase election

POLITICS
Special Series on Elections

east of Yamuna continue to depart in their politics from their caste brethren in Haryana and Punjab. The category of "farmer" (kisan) is thus far more ambiguous across north India than its spokespersons suggest.

Bharat Ratna for well-known kisan-politician Charan Singh signals to Jat voters in and around Meerut that caste pride, agrarian politics, and Hindu nationalism are wholly compatible in Modi's India. Voting for the opposition is even less attractive to Jats, young or old, than it was in the previous national and state elections.

Still, a victory in western UP will be an impressive achievement for BJP, which won 18 seats here in 2019. Despite the inauguration of Ram temple in Ayodhya, it holds little appeal for those beyond core BJP supporters. Hindutva alone is not a winning

'Uttarakhand state licensing body didn't register a single case. Ayush ministry did flip-flops. All this emboldened Patanjali'

For over two years, Dr KV Babu, Kerala-based ophthalmologist and RTI activist, has pursued the issue of Patanjali issuing misleading ads. On Wednesday, Supreme Court strongly reprimanded the Uttarakhand state licensing authority (SLA) for its inaction on this — "We will rip you apart." Following this, Babu spoke to Rema Nagarajan about his struggle to get authorities to uphold the law.

● Why did you file a complaint against Patanjali's ads?

My friend's mother, who suffered from glaucoma, abruptly stopped coming for consultations. When she returned to me after one-and-a-half years, she was nearly blind. She had switched to an ayurvedic medicine and her condition had worsened. That's when I realised the dangers and the public health cost of misleading ads. Patanjali is one of the biggest advertisers and it had been issuing misleading ads well before Feb 2022, when I filed my first complaint.

My complaint to Ayush ministry was under two laws. The Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954 lists 54 diseases, disorders, or conditions for which ads are prohibited, especially those claiming "diagnosis, cure, mitigation, treatment or prevention". Similarly, the Drugs and Cosmetics Act and Rules, 1954 list 51 diseases that "a drug may not purport to prevent or cure". Allopathic manufacturers avoid ads for such drugs due to these laws, but almost all Patanjali ads violated both laws.

● What happened to your complaint?

Ayush ministry received several complaints that month, not just mine. Every time they would forward these to the Uttarakhand SLA, stating that the ad is contravening DMR Act, and seeking action. Initially, in May 2022, Patanjali said that it had immediately

stopped publication of the impugned ads. But in July it again advertised five drugs meant to treat diabetes, glaucoma, goitre, high/low blood pressure and cholesterol, in violation of both DMR Act and DCA.

I again wrote to SLA flagging these ads. Every time, SLA would write to the company asking them to withdraw the ad and threatening to cancel their licence to produce the drug. But SLA did not register any case, despite repeated violations. Conviction under DMR Act can entail up to six months imprisonment or fine or both for the first conviction and up to one year imprisonment or fine or both for subsequent convictions.

● Why do you say Ayush ministry and SLA stalled action against Patanjali?

Though all the complaints were filed under DMR Act, SLA insisted on issuing show-cause notice under Rule 170 of DCA. Rule 170, introduced in Dec 2018, stipulated review of all Ayush ads by the licensing authority before release, to prevent misleading ads from being published. This is important because by the time a company withdraws an ad, if millions have already seen it, it has served its purpose. But Ayush medicine manufacturers challenged Rule 170 in Bombay HC, which stayed its implementation.

Patanjali claimed in its response that no action could be taken against it because Rule 170 was stayed and SLA accepted this. On Sep 27, 2022, it informed Ayush ministry of its inability to act. The very next day SLA issued Patanjali a show-cause notice under Rule 170, knowing it was stayed, and totally ignoring the fact that my complaint was specifically against violation of DMR Act. Ayush ministry, which had till then sought action under DMR

Act, did a U-turn and concurred that no action could be taken as Rule 170 was sub judice.

However, after several letters challenging this decision and a letter from an MP seeking action on misleading ads, in Feb 2023, the ministry did another U-turn and told SLA that while Rule 170 had been challenged, action could be taken under DMR Act. These flip-flops seemed to be a deliberate attempt to avoid acting against the company, which emboldened it.

● In what sense was Patanjali emboldened?

Despite SLA notices and ministry letters, on Oct 8, 2022 Patanjali again advertised a drug for blood pressure. Ayush ministry told Rajya Sabha in Mar 2023 that there were 53 complaints against Patanjali ads from the govt's own centres, in the preceding eight months — which would mean from Aug 2022, the month when SC had issued notices to govt and Patanjali on the Indian Medical Association's petition against Patanjali's misleading ads. Patanjali issued several ads in the following months.

Again, after giving an undertaking to SC on Nov 21, 2023 that it would not issue misleading ads anymore, it advertised on Dec 4, 2023, and then on Jan 22, 2024. It assumed it could treat the apex court like it had treated SLA and Ayush ministry.

This case is important as there are several companies and individuals doing misleading and dangerous advertising of cures and treatments on social media, in print and on television. It has already drawn a lot of attention to this menace. Now govt should indicate serious intent to protect the health of the public. And court should give exemplary punishment to Patanjali to deter others from publishing misleading medical ads.



Gold Plus Cash

World Athletics' decision to offer prize money to Olympic winners is welcome. IOC & others should follow suit

In a path breaking move, World Athletics (WA) will offer \$50,000 prize money to each of the 48 track and field gold medalists at Paris Olympic Games. This is a break with the Olympics tradition of celebrating amateur sportspersons. But it's a long awaited break. Today's high-performance Olympians are nothing like those of the past. The Games themselves have changed radically.

It's not just sports | Olympics are the acme of international sports. But they are also big business. Between 2017 and 2021, International Olympic Committee (IOC) made \$7.6bn in revenue through broadcasting and marketing rights, and other sources. It distributed \$540mn to 28 international federations at Tokyo Games.

WA got \$40mn. Why shouldn't some of that money go directly to athletes, the real stars of Olympics? **Performance needs money** | Besides, producing Olympic medalists today is an expensive proposition. From special training and diet to getting the latest equipment and creating the right environment, huge resources need to be mobilised. This simply isn't possible without state, private and corporate sponsorship. The reality is for elite athletes the distinction between amateur and professional has either blurred or been completely obliterated.

Long time coming | Let's not forget, IOC way back in 1985 had allowed professional tennis, ice hockey and U-23 soccer players to compete in the 1988 Games. So, professionalising Olympic participation has been an ongoing trend.

Athletes approve | The argument that all of this will undermine the Olympic spirit also doesn't fly. Athletes' main motivation is still winning Olympic laurels, not the cash. The latter is simply their due. Indian javelin ace Neeraj Chopra and Norway's 400m hurdles champ Karsten Warholm have already welcomed WA's decision. IOC should run with the times and help underfunded federations in offering similar prize money in their disciplines.



Q&A

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Megabucks HQ

The Maximum City now has the maximum dollar billionaires in all of metropolitan Asia

Jug Suraiya



To underline the observation that India is a rich country in which several hundred million live in abject poverty, Mumbai has overtaken Beijing to become the Asian city with the highest number of dollar billionaires.

The financial capital of the country is now home to 92 billionaires as compared with Beijing's 91, its megabuck ranking all the more impressive in that its 600-sq-km size is much smaller than the Chinese city's sprawl of 16,000 sq km. A veritable plenitude of plutocrats.

Overall, China has 814 billionaires compared with India's tally of 271, but in the billionaire ranking Mumbai comes third after NYC (119) followed by London (97). What makes Mumbai's billionaire status particularly noteworthy — or note-worthy — is that it is set against the stark poverty in which much of the city, as well as the country, remains mired after more than 70 years of Independence.

While millions have been lifted above the poverty line, the monetary chasm between the haves-too-much and the haves-too-little has deepened and widened.

The mathematics of money has changed radically since my boyhood in Calcutta. In those far off days a lakh of rupees was considered a fortune and its possessor, a lakhpati, deemed to be a person of enviable substance.

The surname Naulakha advertised the status of the family like a public balance sheet displaying a nine-lakh entry on the credit side of the ledger.

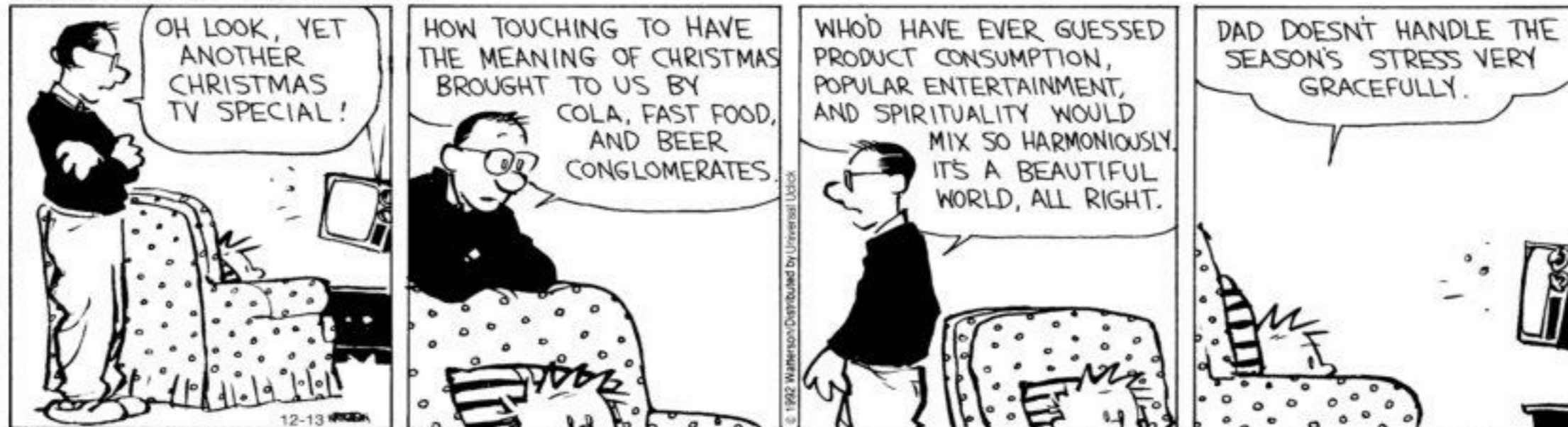
No one spoke of crores, possibly because the mention of such an enormous entity, like the blood-curdling giant in folklore, might frighten small children.

Today, for the great and growing Indian middle class, a crore is peanuts, time-pass. Kaun Banega Crorepati should be renamed 'Kaun Nahin Hai Crorepati'. The crore, which is 10 million, has been left at the starting post by the billion, which is a thousand million, or a hundred crore. One followed by nine zeroes.

And that's just in rupee terms. The dollar billionaires of Mumbai and other parts of India need to multiply their billions by 83 to gauge their wealth in rupees. Lakhpati? Change that to lackpati, denoting not affluence but lack of it.

jugularvein

Calvin & Hobbes



Two Aspects Of Ambedkar's Notion Of Freedom

Ashok Vohra

Being a practical and pragmatic philosopher, Baba Saheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's priority was to achieve real freedom for everyone in their 'lived life'. He recognised the two aspects of the notion of freedom: 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'.

For him 'freedom from' meant freedom from the Chaturvarnya, the Varnashrama Vyavastha propounded in the Hindu treatises on the organisation of the personal and social life of an individual. These treatises in the Sanatan Dharma are known as the Dharma Shastras. Therefore, negatively, Ambedkar's main aim was to get freedom from the dictates of the Hindu dharma shastras.

Unlike Gandhi who by adopting evolutionary reformatory measures wished to reform Hindu practices and, thereby, Hindu dharma by eliminating

the 'aberrations', 'the corruption of the original Hindu system', Ambedkar upheld that the practices, especially that of untouchability, was neither rational, nor moral.

Like a revolutionary, Ambedkar, as far back as the year 1936, argued, "You must not forget that if you wish to bring about a breach in the system then you have got to apply the dynamite to the Vedas and Shastras, which deny any part to reason; to Vedas and Shastras, which deny any part to morality. You must destroy the religion of the shrutis and smritis. Nothing else will prevail."

In condemning the Hindu religion, Ambedkar was following what Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx had said about the factors to be removed from society to achieve liberty. They said, "When we demand the liberty of the people, we do

not in the least claim to abolish any of the natural influences of any individual or of any group of individuals which exercise their action on them. What we want is the abolition of artificial, privileged, legal, official, influences." In agreeing with them Ambedkar was implicitly stating that religion is man-made, and therefore, artificial.

He was against the Shastras and Vedas because he recognised that the Hindus observe caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed, but because they are deeply religious. "In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy, you must grapple with, is not the people who observe caste but the shastras that teach them this religion of caste."

Ambedkar's abhorrence for the Chaturvarnya system was so strong that

he did not hesitate to call Manu the Hindu lawgiver as an 'audacious person'. Manu is the one who divided the Hindus into the four castes — Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, the Dvijans on the one hand, and the Shudras.

He upheld that the system propounded by Manu denies equality and individual freedom. It is based on the 'compulsory and arbitrary' principle of graded inequality. Such a system is not merely notional, it is legal and penal. Under the system of Chaturvarnya, "the Shudra is not only placed at the bottom of the gradation, but he is subjected to innumerable indignities and disabilities to prevent him from rising above the condition fixed for him by law." This for several millennia has led a large section of society to live a life of penury, exploitation, and oppression and left them at the mercy of the well-to-do upper castes. Ambedkar Jayanti is on April 14

Sacredspace



I do not think...you have any right to command me...because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience.

Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Southern comfort

The BJP must win seats in south India to reach the desired strength in the Lok Sabha

The ever-evolving politics often demands course correction and compels politicians to test uncharted waters for building on their electoral successes. In recent times, the BJP has been intensifying efforts to expand its footprint beyond traditional strongholds in the Hindi heartland. As political pundits advise the BJP to register wins in the northeast and down south, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's southern push is becoming increasingly pronounced, with keen focus on States like Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where the party has never won. The BJP's southern foray is not an impulse but a calculated strategy. Traditionally, the southern States have been dominated by regional parties with strong linguistic and cultural identities, presenting a formidable challenge to national parties like the BJP. However, the BJP has been prudent enough to adapt its approach to resonate with the aspirations of the southern electorate. One of the key battlegrounds is Tamil Nadu, known for its vibrant political culture and fierce regionalism. Historically, Tamil Nadu has been dominated by the Dravidian parties, primarily the AIADMK and the DMK. However, recent years have seen a shift in the political dynamics, with the BJP making inroads and hoping to enhance its vote tally. Modi's proactive approach has been instrumental in bolstering the BJP's prospects in Tamil Nadu. Inaugurating infrastructure projects to addressing public rallies, Modi has been actively engaging with the people of Tamil Nadu. The party has an alliance with the AIADMK, strengthening its position in the State.



Kerala is another significant opportunity for the BJP to expand its presence down south. Though it is traditionally dominated by the LDF and the UDF, the BJP has been steadily making inroads in certain pockets. Modi's increased focus on Kerala is indicative of the BJP's long-term strategy to emerge as a credible alternative there. The BJP has been actively highlighting its vision for inclusive development and good governance in Kerala. This southern push, however, is not without challenges. The party faces formidable opponents entrenched in the political landscape of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Moreover, the diverse linguistic and cultural fabric of the region necessitates a nuanced approach that respects local sensibilities and identities. However, by aligning its agenda with the aspirations of local people and leveraging Modi's leadership, the BJP aims to emerge as a formidable force in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. But that is easier said than done. The BJP, with a marginal presence in the south, will take time and effort to change that. Modi's forays into the southern parts of the country may bear some fruits but it would be naive to think that the results will be immediately delivered; it will happen perhaps only sometime in future. Indeed, the BJP has managed to break ice in the northeast and southern India but that has taken considerable time and effort. Of course, efforts done now in the south would not go in vain and will pave the way for success in future elections.

PICTALK



Children at the Jama Masjid on the occasion of the Eid ul-Fitr festival, in New Delhi

Education's cultural impact is profound



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Knowledge, behaviour and spirituality are pillars of personal development. Yet, crucial aspects of learning often lack sustained attention in educational systems

The entire Greek tradition, going through Aristotle, Socrates and more, has subscribed to the theory that 'man is a learning animal'. This belief has been carefully nurtured and left a deep impact on the Greek-Roman tradition. As the Greek-Roman tradition spread through North Africa, Asia and different parts of Europe, it left its mark on human thinking and learning. That 'man is a learning animal' graduated to the level of a belief and paradigm. Deep thought makes it necessary to take a closer look at this statement.

Palpably, this is a compact thought. There is some recognition and some empirical evidence to the effect that different phases of the life cycle have different intensities and content of learning. One learns comprehensively in youth and adulthood and as one grows and mellow, some of the earlier vestiges of the learning remain. What does not remain is a similar impact of that learning on behaviour or a continuance of learning in thought and deed. Thus, like all total statements, they need to be modified, adapted and fitted into the context.

What type of learning remains in sequence and continuance and why does, some of it it remain neither in sequence nor in continuance? Indeed, what kind of learning remains in patches needs to be realised with the content itself getting lost. This kind of exploration should be one of the central contexts of human growth. It is worth pondering why this kind of approach has not received the kind of attention, for learning, as other domains of scholasticism have earned.

At the end of it, knowledge, behaviour and spirituality are the three basic elements that go into a man's personality. There is a general need to create awareness of these elements amongst the general literate community that matters in this land. That will be an essential element in India becoming a 'Jagat Guru' and leading the



world through to a better future.

That may be a matter of emphasis at an operational level. To an extent that has not been sufficiently aligned with the skills that should arise out of educated knowledge and behaviour. Thus there is a need to take a yet deeper look at the foundations of Indian education and reflect it in processes of observed learning. It is also obvious that the human being has to be taught over and over again. As it happens, learning fades away and needs continuing renewal, to prevent it from slipping off. This needs intervention in many ways, including how the curriculum is designed, how it is imparted in any classroom and how it becomes a useful input to face the challenges of life and the profession.

Learning has many manifestations and begins with automotive behaviour, such as learning how to eat, how to use one's fingers and how to maintain hygiene and other values. This has to be a life-long process. However, as said earlier, there are certain



UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS THE CORE OF A SUCCESSFUL INTERNALISATION OF SKILLS, BEHAVIOURS AND INFORMATION THAT COMES OUT OF LEARNING A SUBJECT WILL MAKE TEACHING FAR MORE EFFECTIVE

aspects of life where repeated attempts at internalising learning have to be made. In certain areas of life, one cannot afford to make mistakes over and over again. This situation must be addressed and collectively corrected in the life cycle of the individual. It is about time 'learning' as art was made an integral part of all disciplines. To understand this proposition clearly, one needs to recognise that learning mathematics requires certain unique methods and abilities. Those methods and abilities are not the same for learning English or Hindi as a language. There are other transformations and angularities in the requirements and characteristics of the learning process, itself. Illustratively the method of learning when it comes to learning history or geography, may require its uniqueness. It is therefore plausible to argue that for each subject matter, there needs to be an orientation to the learning method of that subject. In other words, a teacher of

mathematics needs to be very clear and explain to the students how to learn mathematics. The orientation of a teacher while teaching a language, as mentioned above, would be different and the teacher needs to explain to the students the learning methods of a language. The examples can be multiplied. Understanding what is the core of a successful internalisation of skills, behaviours and information that comes out of learning a subject will make teaching far more effective. It will also give the approach of 'man is a learning animal' far greater reach. Like much else, learning theory needs to be made a part of the teaching plan. Somewhere it will mark the beginning of a more realistic practical orientation. It would be useful to remind ourselves that all learning affects all of us and remains a part of the life of the land we live in. (The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

STUDENT DEATHS OVERSEAS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "One more Indian student dies in US; 11th so far," published on April 10, this is my response. Indian student Mohd Abdul Arfath is not a one-off incident given that ten more Indian students have already met with the same fate in the not-too-distant past in the United States. Ironically, they go there to gain education and knowledge but are sent back dead in the coffins. This state of affairs underscores the abysmal plight of law and order over there, having a toll on the US's international image and causing thereby the corrosion of public confidence in the US administration. New aspirants will think twice before dreaming of getting an education in the US now. Thankfully, the Indian Consulate is, reportedly, in touch and working with the US law-enforcing authorities. As per reports, Mohammed Abdul Arfath from Hyderabad reached the US in May last year to pursue an M-Tech(IT) from Cleveland University but, for some time, was not responding to his parents' calls. Amid the search operation, Arfath was found dead to the shock of life to his frantic parents. However, the Consulate General of India in New York while offering 'deepest condolences' to the empty family, has promised a thorough probe into Arfath's death, besides extending all possible assistance!

Azhar A Khan | Kotwala

MODI OPENS UP ON MANIPUR

Madam — Apropos the editorial, "Lost Chance," published on April 10, this is my response. The edit points out the PM's sphinx-like silence when the violence in Manipur was at its peak, even afterwards. Eventually, he was forced to break his silence by the combined efforts of the Opposition parties. Even then, he did not elaborate on the issue as was expected but made a rather brief reference to it. It was a huge surprise to hear him speak about Manipur and that too of his own volition. It was almost as if the PM had broken his vow of silence on Manipur.

International court steps in



Apropos the news article, "Germany rejects allegations that it's facilitating acts of genocide in Gaza at UN court," published on April 10, this is my response. There is so much to be learned from the internal policy of the United States of America and Germany. But their policy of giving utmost respect to human rights has unfortunately been confined only within their territories. In a recent development, Germany reiterated its sensitivity against even a faint trace of racism when it stopped the sale of German jerseys with the

number 44 because of a resemblance to the logo of the Nazi Party's notorious SS paramilitary units. Unfortunately, just like America, Germany leaves its commendable sensitivity against human rights violations far behind in their foreign policy. Nicaragua has recently brought a case against Germany at the International Court of Justice. In the case file, Nicaragua said, "Germany is facilitating the commission of genocide" in Gaza and violating the Genocide Convention by providing Israel with military and financial aid. The International Court of Justice has already asked Israel to take steps to prevent genocidal acts in the Gaza Strip. The Ministry of Health in the Gaza Strip said that over 33,000 Palestinians including many children and women had been killed in Gaza. It has laid bare the contrast between the internal and the foreign policy of Germany.

Sujit De | Kolkata

However, what he said had to be taken with more than the proverbial pinch of salt. PM Modi claimed that "timely intervention" of the Centre and the state government helped diffuse the situation. Sad to say, but this "timely intervention" miserably failed to prevent the loss of nearly 300 lives and left many others wounded and displaced. Above all, the state had to bear the brunt of deep and dangerous ethnic scars, which may never heal. Because it is not customary for anyone to challenge the PM on facts, I will only quote Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a US politician and diplomat, who had said "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his facts."

Avinash Godbole | Dewas

HUM DO, HAMARE EK YA DO

Madam — Inflation has been rising recently. Apart from this, the parents have to spend a lot of money on the education and upbringing of their children. Apart from this, recently both the husband and wife are working, so various problems of child rearing are arising. Take the exam-

ple of Pune city alone. Pune is the home of education and citizens from many parts of the country come here for various types of jobs. According to a survey, there are 4 lakh 46 thousand fertile couples in Pune. Interestingly, 37 percent of the couples are satisfied with 2 children and 27 percent of the couples are satisfied with only one child.

This means that 64 couples have made the slogan "Hum Do, Hamare Ek Ya Do" a reality. About four to five decades ago, every couple had four to five sons and daughters. Recently, various issues have arisen and couples are trying to keep the population under control, but now one thing has come to light the children will have to see the relationship of aunt, uncle and uncle in the book. Now the survey for 2024-2025 will be started soon in Pune and it will be completed in the next two months. More information will follow.

Shantaram Wagh | Pune

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Elevate higher education with philosophy's power

The National Education Policy 2020 acknowledges philosophy's importance but falls short in its implementation



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

Have you ever stared up at the night sky and wondered if we were alone? Or maybe you've pondered what it truly means to be "good" or "bad"? Or why do millions of birds fly in perfect unison across the sky? Philosophy isn't some stuffy subject locked away in a library. It's like gazing at a breathtaking sunset and questioning everything you thought you knew. Is that fiery orange glow "real" or just a trick of light? Does the beauty of a sunset exist even when no one is around to witness it? These are the kinds of questions that philosophers love to ask. Throughout history, philosophers from all corners of the globe have wrestled with these big questions. They've debated the nature of existence, the power of our minds and the best way to live a fulfilling life.



The scope of philosophy is vast, encompassing various subfields such as metaphysics (the study of the nature of reality), epistemology (the study of knowledge and belief), ethics (the study of moral principles), logic (the study of valid reasoning), aesthetics (the study of beauty and art), political philosophy (the study of governance and justice) and many others. Philosophy also engages in interdisciplinary dialogue with other fields, enriching both philosophy and these other disciplines. The importance of philosophy in higher education is immense. The decline in the quality of higher education that we always ponder on in higher education is due to a lack of imparting philosophy in our curriculum. Students and teachers of the present generation lack an understanding of learning and teaching philosophy. Though the National Education Policy (NEP)-2020 is constructed with philosophy as the background, it fails to infiltrate the minds of students or teachers. Teaching philosophy is essential for fostering intellectual growth, ethical awareness and critical engagement with the

world, ultimately enriching both individuals and society as a whole.

Even in the PhD programme, though the degree is Doctor of Philosophy, most universities do not teach philosophy. Philosophy equips doctoral students with the intellectual toolkit needed to excel as independent researchers. Exposure to diverse philosophical perspectives cultivates open-mindedness. Doctoral students learn to consider different viewpoints, fostering intellectual curiosity and a willingness to learn from others.

This is crucial for collaboration and navigating the ever-evolving world of academic research. For instance, a science student might explore the philosophical underpinnings of the scientific method, while a literature student might delve into the concept of truth and interpretation. Philosophy hones critical thinking skills essential for doctoral research. Students learn to analyse arguments, identify biases and evaluate evidence. They develop the ability to ask probing questions, deconstruct assumptions and construct sound

arguments supporting their research. Many doctoral programs involve research with ethical considerations. Philosophy provides a framework for ethical decision-making. Students grapple with ethical dilemmas in research design, data analysis and publication, preparing them to navigate the ethical complexities of their chosen field. Students learn to articulate their research questions, defend their findings and engage in scholarly debate with colleagues. The absence of philosophy education in higher education centres could result in a less intellectually engaged, ethically informed and critically minded society, potentially hindering progress in academia, governance and societal development. Even when new branches of science emerge over the years, one subject that stays relevant in every society, even in a space colony, will be philosophy. It is high time we include Philosophy as a compulsory subject in our higher education.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

US-CHINA TRADE TALKS HEAT UP

US Treasury Secretary Yellen raises concerns over China's trade practices



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

China is back on the Western radar with several high-profile visits to and from the Asian country. This week US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, rounded up her second trip to China, in less than a year, where she was firm and polite with Chinese government officials regarding the deep concerns the US has with the nation on several trade issues. One of the biggest concerns highlighted by Yellen is the disruptive trade practices of China, harming US interests and impacting the productivity of its factories, especially in electric vehicles, solar power equipment and lithium-ion batteries to name a few. Speaking at a press conference in Beijing, Janet Yellen said "There are features of the Chinese economy that have growing negative spillovers on the U.S. and the globe. I am particularly worried about how China's enduring macroeconomic imbalances, namely its weak household consumption and business over-investment, aggravated by large-scale government support in specific industrial sectors-will lead to significant risk to workers and businesses in the United States and the rest of the world."

What she intended to highlight was the huge supply glut created by the gigantic manufacturing complexes in China. She said that huge quantities of cheap Chinese products flooding the global markets were threatening domestic manufacturing not just in the US but all around the world. Chinese government's industrial policy push was unduly influencing the prices of several items around the world. She mentioned that nearly a decade ago the PRC government support led to cheap steel prices, which decimated several industries in the US and the world and a repeat of the same would not be tolerated.



The tricky issue of national security also came during Janet Yellen's China visit. She carefully worded the US's concerns regarding Chinese support to Russia and said "We also had difficult conversations about national security. President Biden and I are determined to do all that we can to stem the flow of material that is supporting Russia's defence industrial base and helping it to wage war against Ukraine. We continue to be concerned about the role that any firms, including those in the PRC, are playing in Russia's military procurement. I stressed that companies, including those in the PRC, must not provide material support for Russia's war and that they will face significant consequences if they do."

Even as Janet Yellen was winding up her China tour, the Chinese commerce minister had reached Europe, to convince European lawmakers that the excess electric vehicle capacity/supply was a myth and was merely, the result of efficient factories in China. Wang Betao, Chinese commerce minister during an interaction in Paris, issued a statement later that stated "China's electric vehicle companies rely on continuous technological innovation, perfect production and supply chain system and full market competition for rapid development, not relying on subsidies to gain competitive advantage." India is scaling up its electric vehicle production rapidly although it faces several supply-side constraints, primarily on components whose major exporter is China. India will have nearly a decade of catch-up to match Chinese electric vehicle capacity and would need huge investments from US and European companies to shift to a greener fuel. The next Indian government is likely to tweak the existing electric vehicle policy in its first 100-day agenda. The pending Europe India Technology and Trade Council meeting is not likely to be scheduled before the end of the year. Similarly, any significant US-India trade policy forum conversations would have to wait for early next year. However, a clear policy outlook and out-of-the-box thinking by the Indian government could still win the day for India for cleaner vehicle fuel.

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

RBI maintains status quo despite inflation optimism



UTTAM GUPTA

RBI's commitment to 'last-mile disinflation' has prompted a continued tight monetary policy stance, raising questions about its impact on economic growth

On April 5, 2024, announcing the decisions taken by the six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) in its first bi-monthly meeting of the current financial year (FY), Governor Shaktikanta Das observed "The elephant has now gone out for a walk and appears to be returning to the forest. We would like the elephant to return to the forest and remain there on a durable basis."

Das was using the elephant analogy to characterise the trajectory of retail inflation as represented by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Having scaled to a high of 7.8 per cent in April 2022, CPI has declined to 5.7 per cent in December 2023 and further down to 5.1 per cent during January/February 2024. He wishes that the downward movement in the CPI will continue and that it will stabilise at the 'target' level on a sustainable basis. To put things in perspective, let us look at some basics.

In 2016, the Union Government put in place an institutionalised framework to enable the MPC to formulate monetary policy and determine the key interest rates for inflation targeting. It mandated the RBI to fix the policy rate (the interest rate at which the RBI lends to banks) in such a manner as to maintain CPI within the target range of 4 per cent (+/- 2 per cent) for five years ending March 31, 2021. The mandate has since been extended till March 31, 2026.

The RBI uses the two prime monetary policy instruments namely the policy rate and liquidity (a jargon for the quantum of credit available in the banking system) for management of inflation. It is also committed to maintaining high and inclusive economic growth. But, in practice, it gives disproportionate attention to inflation targeting. Yet, when it comes to the outcome of inflation, it doesn't get much success. Let us look at some facts.

In December 2018 when Das took charge, the economy was on the downswing even as GDP growth during the third quarter of FY 2018-19 onwards, was dipping. Then, the policy rate reached a peak of 6.5 per cent, courtesy of a tight stance taken by his predecessor Urjit Patel. Beginning in February 2019, Das went for an aggressive cut in the policy rate which had plummeted to 4 per cent by May 2020. Despite the cuts, growth didn't revive.

During 2019-20, GDP growth reached a historic low of 4 per cent. During 2020-21, it was negative at 6.6 per cent, courtesy of the overpowering effect of the Corona pandemic. During 2021-22, GDP growth rebounded to 8.9 per cent. Though one might argue, low-interest rates helped revival, the fact remains that it was primarily the resumption of economic activities — following the lifting of Corona-related restrictions — that made it possible. Pertinently, inflation remained within the target range during the first three-quarters of that FY despite a low-interest rate.

From January 2022 onward, there was a spurt in inflation that continued through most of FY 2022-23. The spurt prompted the RBI to invoke its pet theme of 'inflation targeting'. Beginning May 2022, it delivered a cumulative hike of 1.4 per cent in the policy rate during the first half of the FY (in three lots i.e. May/June/August). It continued to deliver more hikes during the second half adding to 1.1 percent (October/December



THE RBI USES THE TWO PRIME MONETARY POLICY INSTRUMENTS, NAMELY THE POLICY RATE AND LIQUIDITY (A JARGON FOR THE QUANTUM OF CREDIT AVAILABLE IN THE BANKING SYSTEM), FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF INFLATION. IT IS ALSO COMMITTED TO MAINTAINING HIGH AND INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH

2022 and February 2023). A total hike of 2.5 per cent thus restored the rate to its earlier peak of 6.5 per cent by February 2023. Yet, inflation remained stubborn almost throughout 2022-23. This was tacitly admitted by Das in his April 2023 policy statement: "When we started the rate cut cycle in February 2019 to provide support to growth, the CPI inflation was around 2 per cent and the policy repo rate was 6.50 per cent. Now, the policy rate is 6.50 per cent but inflation is 6.4 percent."

In other words, he accepted that the RBI was unable to bring down inflation even after increasing the policy rate to 6.4 per cent. After February 2023, during the six policy reviews in a row April/June/August/October/December 2023 and February 2024, the RBI kept the policy rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent.

This was despite the CPI inflation decreasing from a high of 7.4 per cent in July 2023 to 5 per cent in September 2023, 4.8 per cent in October 2023 and 5.1 per cent during January/February 2024. For the whole of FY 2023-24, at 5.4 per cent, it was lower than the outer (albeit target) limit of 6 per cent.

In its April 2024 review, yet again the RBI has kept the policy rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent. This is despite its assessment that the CPI inflation will be 4.5 per cent during FY 2024-25 which is well within the target range of 4 per cent (+/- 2 per cent). Yet, the decision is driven by the central bank's commitment to what Das describes as 'ensuring last-mile disinflation', saying there is no need to start reducing interest rates until inflation reaches the target of 4 per cent. If, that indeed was the intent then why keep (+/- 2 per cent)?

The RBI has also retained a policy stance focused on "withdrawal of accommodation".

The terminology was coined by Das way back in June 2019 when he talked of an 'accommodative' stance pointing towards a cut in policy rate and an increase in credit availability. Since, June 2022 the RBI has reversed this stance and has stuck to the withdrawal of accommodation to date. Das has coined a new terminology in the December 2023 bi-monthly policy review and now calls it "actively disinflationary". Why doesn't the RBI want to give up its tight policy stance? Even as Core inflation (CPI excluding fuel and food) at 3.4 per cent continues to be below RBI's 4 per cent target and fuel prices have remained unchanged throughout the year, its main worry is food inflation. After declining from a high of 11.8 per cent in July 2023 to 6.6 per cent in October 2023, in recent months, it has gone up the most recent reading being 8 per cent.

Too much focus on food inflation is misplaced. First, the current CPI basket gives a weight of around 39 per cent to food. But, that is based on the Consumption Expenditure Survey (CES) of 2011-12. Summary statistics from the 2022-23 CES show that this has fallen significantly. With this correction, the impact of food inflation on CPI will significantly weaken. Second, the spurt in prices of food items has a lot to do with disruption in supplies caused primarily by seasonal factors.

During the last two years, wheat output was affected by unusually high temperatures during 2021-22 and rains accompanied by hailstorms in 2022-23. The high inflation in July 2023 was due to a spike in the prices of vegetables - again caused by seasonal factors. Third,

RBI can achieve little by increasing the policy rate or restricting credit availability as these measures work primarily on the demand side whereas the problem lies at the supply end.

Meanwhile, continuing with a tight monetary policy stance could pose a serious risk to growth due to a rise in lending rates, an increase in EMIs of millions of borrowers and higher cost loans to industries, especially MSMEs. While, everyone — like the governor — would wish that the elephant returns to the forest and stays there permanently, the RBI doing it alone could boomerang. "Wheat harvesting is by and large over... wheat availability will not be affected as much as it did 2 years ago when heatwave conditions were starting from March. So, in wheat, there is not so much concern.

But vegetable prices will have to be watched and any other impact that heat wave conditions may produce," Das said at a post-policy press briefing. "As compared to the previous three years, the INR exhibited the lowest volatility in 2023-24. The relative stability of the INR reflects India's sound macroeconomic fundamentals, financial stability and improvements in the external position," he said.

The headwinds from protracted geopolitical tensions and increasing disruptions in trade routes, however, pose risks to the outlook, Reserve Bank Governor Shaktikanta Das said. Governor Das added that the outlook for agriculture and rural activity appears bright. Governor Das added that the outlook for agriculture and rural activity appears bright.

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

Ignored at home, legendary football coach gets global honour

Rufus D'Souza, a 90-year-old coach from Fort Kochi, Kerala, has been honoured by Borussia Dortmund for his lifelong commitment to the sport

Whenever the Indian national football team gets thrashed by its rivals in international hustings, the national coach Igor Stimac has a readymade answer. "This result is on expected lines. There is nothing unusual in this result," Stimac tells the media. He has been the chief coach of the country since 2019 and according to FIFA, the world body that controls the game, India's ranking is 121. At a time when India is on an all out war to emerge as the third largest economy in the world, out national football side reminds one of a rudderless ship getting battered and bruised in the high seas.

There is nothing surprising about the performance of the Indian football team in the



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

international arena as since the late 1960s, the quality of the national side is always on a downward journey from which it has not improved. The introduction of Indian Super League and arrival of players from foreign countries gave some hope to the average football lovers in the country but it has been fizzled out. Most of the players donning the boots in the ISL are those who

had had failed to make it to the national or club teams of their country. Hence ISL became a dumping ground for burnt-out players and discarded coaches. It is not known whether Stimac belongs to the lot of discarded coaches. But the Croatian has failed to make any impact in Indian football. This is being written in the backdrop of a recent development that took place in Fort Kochi, Kerala's football nursery. Rufus D'Souza, the 90-year old football coach based in this picturesque town, was honoured by Borussia Dortmund, the world famous football club in Germany that plays in Bundesliga, the top tier of the country's professional league. The honour was in recognition of the hard work and dedication with which Rufus has

taken up football coaching. Every morning at 5.30 sharp Rufus reaches the colonial era Parade Ground and coaches hundreds of students. It does not matter for Rufus whether it is raining or the blowing of cold wind from the adjacent Arabian Sea. Football Uncle, as he is addressed in reverence by children and their parents, is an uncompromising task matter. Punctuality and discipline are his forte. Rufus does not charge any fees or donation from the players. But the condition is that they should be at the stadium at the stroke of 5.30 without fail. Latecomers have no place in Rufus' classes. He is not an ordinary football coach. For eight decades he has lived only for football and hockey. Coaching is an act of Tapasya



for this former professional footballer who had donned boots for teams like Netaji Sporting and WIMCO of Madras. He is the first Keralaite who has teamed up with Brazilian DaCunha while playing for WIMCO, one of the bigwigs of Indian football in the 1950s. After hanging his boots for good in late 1950s, Rufus took up coaching in a big way. The players moulded

by him resembles the who's who of Indian football. Xavier Pious, Hamilton Bobby, Sebastian Netto, former Kerala captain T A Jaffer and the list goes on. Rufus revived and rejuvenated a club Santos in his neighborhood. "The name was my tribute to the all time great of world football, Pele. The great master sent me a letter of appreciation when he came to know that we have a club by name Santos," says Rufus with his childlike enthusiasm. In his hectic schedule of coaching and taking Santos throughout South India to play in tournaments, Rufus forgot his own life. His passion for soccer kept him away from marriage and family. Here is a football guru who breathes, sleeps and lives football. Many reputed coaches

from Europe had come to Fort Kochi after hearing about the football odyssey of Rufus who adores S A Rahim, the Hyderabad man with the Mida's Touch. "There were good coaches like Rahim, Manna, Chuni Goswamy, Sukhwinder and Jarnail Singh. Instead of foreign coaches we should opt for foreign managers who know the intricacies of football," says Rufus. Strange as it may seem, this desi guru has never been approached by the football bosses of the country to coach the national side for reasons they only know. Rufus, who is walking briskly to the sunset, is sad about the state of affairs of Indian football. He describes Indian Soccer League as a major fraud committed on the country. The period from

March to May was the football season of India. Each of the 14 districts in the State had an all-India football tournament. All teams including the Big Three of Calcutta (Mohun Bagan, East Bengal and Mohammedan Sporting) were regular features in these tournaments and the players were household names. "The tournaments and the teams died a natural death for lack of sponsors. When there are no tournaments and teams, there would not be players anywhere. The ISL does not offer any chance to upcoming players," says Rufus who is getting ready to fly away to Dortmund as the guest of the football giant.

(The writer is special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Righting a grave wrong

SC rules in favour of Delhi Metro corporation

SETTING aside its own 2021 judgment, the Supreme Court has ruled that the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) is not obliged to pay Rs 8,000 crore to the Delhi Airport Metro Express Private Ltd (DAMEPL), a Reliance Infrastructure firm, in pursuance of a 2017 arbitral award. The court observed that its previous verdict had caused 'grave miscarriage of justice' to a public utility, which was saddled with an exorbitant liability. Stating that the award had 'suffered from the vice of perversity and patent illegality', the court has ordered that the amount already paid, if any, by the petitioner (DMRC) as a result of coercive action should be returned to it.

Commendably, the apex court has admitted that it had erred in interfering with the 2019 decision of a Division Bench of the Delhi High Court. The case has had its fair share of twists and turns. The arbitral award had been upheld by a single-judge Bench of the HC in 2018, only to be struck down by the Division Bench. The Anil Ambani-owned Reliance Infrastructure then approached the SC against the Division Bench's order. A two-judge Bench of the top court restored the award. The DMRC's plea seeking a review of the 2021 judgment was dismissed, forcing it to file a curative petition.

In 2008, the DAMEPL had entered into a contract with the DMRC for running the airport Metro line till 2038. However, the private entity stopped operating the Metro on the airport line, presumably over safety concerns; it invoked an arbitration clause, alleging violation of the contract, and sought the termination fee. The DMRC bore the brunt of the DAMEPL's 'illegal' decision to terminate the concessionaire agreement. The apex court has finally righted a huge wrong and also demonstrated its ability to do self-correction. This augurs well for India's justice delivery system. The judiciary at all levels should treat this judgment as a benchmark, especially in commercial matters where corporates browbeat public utilities.

Safeguard students

Tight security on campus a must to curb abuse

THE incidents of sexual abuse at two educational institutions in Punjab underscore the need for measures to safeguard the students on the campuses. The gangrape of a student at Government Ripudaman College, Nabha, was reported earlier this week; in early January, several minor girls had accused a teacher of sexual harassment in a Majitha school. These crimes serve as a stark reminder of the vulnerability of students, particularly girls, in an environment where they should feel secure and comfortable. It is unacceptable that institutions which should serve as temples of learning and knowledge have become hunting grounds for criminal elements due to rank negligence and apathy. The revelation that the perpetrators of the Nabha college incident were outsiders who frequented the campus exposes a glaring security lapse. The absence of stringent checks and the outsourcing of security duties highlight systemic failure.

The reluctance of traumatised victims to report these crimes is a major cause for concern. Students must be encouraged to speak up and seek justice without fear of retribution or stigma. In the light of the distressing reality, it is imperative that the authorities take swift and decisive action. The district administration should reach out to colleges and schools to stop outsiders from entering their premises and to ensure the safety and wellbeing of every student. Regular safety audits and counselling sessions can help empower students. A zero-tolerance approach to crimes on the campus must be adopted.

Proactive measures must be taken to sensitise both teachers and students to the importance of campus security. Training programmes should be conducted to spur the staff to respond promptly whenever any complaint is received. The future of our society hinges on the nurturing of our youth. We cannot afford to fail them.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, APRIL 12, 1924

A happy family

IN one of his farewell speeches, Lord Willingdon congratulated himself, the Government and the Province which he was about to leave that he and his colleagues, both in the reserved and transferred departments, had always been and were still a happy family. Lord Willingdon had evidently no idea that in uttering these words, he was passing the severest condemnation upon the whole order of things of which he had been the most eminent representative in the Province for the last three years. The Reforms, whatever might be the letter of the law, did not contemplate the reserved and transferred halves of the administration constituting "a happy family." One has only to go through the Joint Committee's report, and particularly that part of it which earnestly exhorted the Governor to compose differences between the two halves of the Government to realise that the idea of a happy family was far from being the dominating idea in the minds of the authors of the Reforms. In reality, it is the most absurd of all things to believe that the ministers can realise their true responsibility to the Legislature and through it to the people and yet be constantly at peace with themselves and their colleagues under a condition of things when the forces of autocracy are still in the ascendant. Everyone who has any idea of the exact position in India today will agree that it is not through peace but through the sword of animated and bitter struggle between the claims of the past and those of the present, between representatives of vested interests and exponents of progress, freedom and equality that the present era of irresponsibility can be terminated.

Hope for a change of heart

A no-nonsense IPS officer from Maharashtra, known for his adherence to truth and justice, is new NIA chief

TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

SADANAND Date of the Maharashtra cadre of the Indian Police Service (IPS) is easily one of the brightest gems the IPS has produced over more than seven decades of its existence. He has functioned as a senior police officer in very difficult times, when loyalty to the party in power takes precedence over loyalty to the Constitution and the law. My generation of officers were not asked to do that.

The community to which he belongs was known for its adherence to truth and justice, for its value system, for a simple living but high thinking. Sadanand has encompassed in his personality all those traits. He overcame poverty as a child and cracked the Union Public Service examination to enter the august portals of the IPS.

The residents of Mumbai would have been truly blessed if he had been appointed Commissioner of Police. But those in the know ruled this out as Sadanand was incapable of saying 'yes' to irregular requests. So, it was nothing short of a surprise when it was announced that he was to succeed Dinkar Gupta of the Punjab cadre as Director General of the National Investigation Agency (NIA).

In a recent article, 'The Back-Room Mischief Makers', Mathew John, a former IAS officer, has castigated the bureaucracy, especially the IPS and IRS officers in charge of Central investigative agencies, of "crawling when asked to bend" before "the brute power of a political executive". The Enforcement Directorate (ED), an IRS-led agency, was, of course, mentioned, but so were two IPS-led agencies, the



NEW RESPONSIBILITY: Sadanand Date (left) recently took over from Dinkar Gupta as the NIA chief. r11

CBI and the NIA.

Another excellent officer of Maharashtra's IPS cadre, Subodh Jaiswal, was picked to head the CBI three years ago. He kept a low profile during his tenure. That he did not get an extension or a post-retirement sinecure is a tribute to his integrity. It is an acknowledged fact that those who toe the line are handsomely rewarded. Obviously, Subodh toed nobody's line.

I am absolutely sure that the Sadanand-led NIA is not going to dabble in any form of injustice even if the pressure becomes intolerable. He is a man who must have spelt out his terms even before honouring the trust placed in him. If Sadanand has done that, which I am sure he has, the NIA is one agency that the likes of Mathew will have to eliminate from their list of Central agencies which have turned into appendages of an overbearing political executive.

Mathew has categorised the ED, the CBI and the NIA as 'back-room mischief makers'. Actually, these agencies are essentially the visible 'front' of

Only the sins of those who cross over to the ruling party before the polls are forgiven.

politicians who want "corruption to be abolished from the Opposition ranks". What is even more relevant is that these 'corrupt' Opposition leaders should be shown up as such and incarcerated just before the Lok Sabha elections. Only the sins of those who cross over to the ruling party before the polls are forgiven.

Incidentally, Mathew will forgive me if I point out that many among the 'back-room' collaborators are members of his service! Secondly, Mathew should keep in mind that our successors in the

premier civil services are operating in infinitely more difficult and dangerous times than we did. When well-meaning citizens hail me and want me to come back as the policeman in charge of the city, I immediately admit that I would not be able to handle the present dispensation.

The choice is between conforming and quitting. Not many are in a position to quit when they are approaching 50 or have crossed that landmark. An officer of the calibre of Sadanand should have been appointed Police Commissioner of Pune, Thane or Nagpur three years ago. The people of those cities and the cops keeping order there would have benefited from his integrity and competence. But those in power are not comfortable with such officers. This is the reality.

Newspapers say that the great majority of would-be first-time voters have not cared to register themselves for that duty. Is that surprising? If you mention the name of Rahul Gandhi to them, loud guffaws follow. And after Narendra Modi's cameo in Ayodhya for the Ram Temple's inau-

guration and his dive into the sea off Dwarka, guffaws are heard, though not so loud. Students are clearly disappointed with the 'mother of democracy' in action.

The spectacle of 'corrupt' Opposition leaders wending their way to the BJP's office has become a daily routine. Their admission to the ranks or even elevation to the high echelons of the party has disillusioned our youth. They seek better employment prospects rather than the 're-employment' of Opposition politicians searching for greener pastures or attempting to evade the tentacles of the law.

Another alarming piece of news I read is that over 60 per cent of the Sainik schools will be run by the Sangh Parivar or its associates under a public-private partnership scheme. These Sainik schools had been set up to prepare mainly the children of junior commissioned or non-commissioned ranks for entry into the National Defence Academy or the Indian Military Academy as directly recruited commissioned officers.

Introducing a political ideology into these impressionable minds at so early an age is a recipe for disaster. Gen Zia-ul-Haq, who ruled Pakistan for 10 years as President, had Islamised the armed forces. The consequences of his action were truly disastrous. A good, disciplined body of men trained in the British colonial tradition were transformed into a force of religious bigots. Pakistan slowly deteriorated to the status of a failed state.

Some concerned officers, long retired, have voiced their fears in public. Will their voices be heard? In the present state of religious frenzy at the top of the political pyramid, I seriously doubt if anyone is even willing to listen.

But there is a ray of hope. If Home Minister Amit Shah could appoint a fair-minded officer like Sadanand to head a crucial agency that reports to his ministry, why can we not hope for a change of heart and of reasoned thinking?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Corruption is a cancer, a cancer that eats away at a citizen's faith in democracy.— Joe Biden

Short-lived brotherhood

RAJBIR SINGH

IF something seems too good to be true, it probably is. On a scorching day, I was waiting for an autorickshaw on a highway. I was sweating profusely. All of a sudden, a Mercedes stopped right in front of me. One of its windows rolled down and a man sitting on the front seat enquired about a place. I replied: 'Sir, it is 9-10 km from here. You just need to go straight on this road.'

'Thank you, brother,' he said humbly.

As I had been waiting for over 30 minutes, I asked him: 'Sir, can you give me a ride as I have to reach there as well?'

'Sure, we will drop you there,' he said. I heaved a sigh of relief and expressed my gratitude to the man and his friend. They said in unison: 'People of Punjab are very honest and helpful. They believe in brotherhood.'

I chipped in: 'You are right. I was waiting for an autorickshaw, but you came from nowhere and gave me a ride. Travelling in a Mercedes is a dream come true for me.' The man's partner said: 'Brother, these are material things. Instead, we are grateful for your help.' It seemed that we just could not help admiring each other.

Out of the blue, the man said: 'We are going to Focal Point for a business deal.' The moment I heard this, I was dumbstruck. This was the very place from which they had picked me up! I had been thinking about my own destination (a chowk that was about 10 km from Focal Point) and had absentmindedly assumed that they also wanted to go there. Perhaps the heat had fuddled my brain.

I was on the horns of a dilemma as we had already covered 4-5 km. Initially, I thought that it would be wise not to disclose anything and simply leave the car after reaching the chowk. Then, I decided to tell the truth and face the consequences. I somehow gathered courage and requested them to stop the car.

'What happened?' one of the passengers asked. 'Sorry, sir, I made a mistake. Actually, you picked me up from Focal Point,' I said. The whole edifice of goodness and brotherhood crumbled like a house of cards.

'So, this is how you fool people?' the man yelled. 'Sir, I thought you asked me about that chowk. I don't know how this happened,' I tried to clarify. Both looked at each other with anger writ large in their eyes.

Suddenly, the car came to a screeching halt. 'I think you have reached your destination. That is why you told us to stop here,' the man said. Again, I tried to convince them that I had not misled them, but in vain.

I quickly opened the door and said: 'Thanks for pardoning me.' The two passengers shouted in one voice: 'Dafaa ho ja' (get lost). I marvelled at the human knack for changing colours faster than a chameleon.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rein in hate crime

With reference to the editorial 'Indian students in peril'; the death of yet another Indian student in the US is a matter of concern. It calls for effective steps to rein in racially motivated crimes and anti-social activities. The Indian-origin students in America must be assured of their safety. Such incidents need to be thoroughly investigated to determine the root cause, and the perpetrators should be dealt with sternly. US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti's assertion that his government is 'very committed' to making Indians realise that America is a safe place to study will ring hollow if such criminal activities are not curbed on priority.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Check anti-Indian propaganda

Refer to 'Indian students in peril'; the recent spate of deaths of Indian students in the US has sparked concerns about the safety of members of the Indian diaspora there. Many young Indians migrate to countries like the US, the land of opportunities, for higher education. Some of them face racial discrimination or become targets of hate crime. There is a need to counter the negative propaganda against the Indian community in the West, leading to racially motivated attacks on innocent Indians. It is unfortunate that American laws often fail to protect the interests of the victims of such attacks and their families.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

Protection from climate crisis

Apropos of 'Climate change'; the verdict given by the European Court of Human Rights affirming protection from the impact of climate change as a human right is historic. India's Supreme Court has also stressed that citizens have a right to be shielded from the detrimental effects of the crisis. This will encourage activists to hold governments accountable for all types of environmental disasters, ranging from floods to droughts. Nations should make joint efforts to limit global warming. More needs to be done to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There are critical gaps in the environmental sustainability policies being followed by several nations. The recent legal vic-

tories can help deliver justice to billions of people affected by natural disasters.

GAURAV KOCHHAR, YAMUNANAGAR

Hit the brakes on speeding

With reference to the news report 'Bathinda schoolboy crashes speeding car into tree, killed'; the boy's parents are to blame for the incident. No parent should allow their underage wards to drive cars. The youngster, who was reportedly obsessed with speed had posted videos showing his car being driven around 160-180 km per hour. He was driving the car at a breakneck speed, and it ultimately ended in his death. The traffic police need to do more to check the menace of rash driving before it claims more lives. Any person crossing the speed limits must receive strict punishment.

BIR DEVINDER SINGH BEDI, SANGRUR

Parents' negligence costs life

Refer to the report 'Bathinda schoolboy crashes speeding car into tree, killed'; the youngster could have hit pedestrians with his car, injuring or killing them. He could have also crashed into a bigger vehicle, like a bus or truck, embroiling the driver in a legal case without any fault on the latter's part. It is telling that the deceased was a minor. The incident was a direct outcome of gross negligence on the part of his parents. In such cases, legal action must be taken against the parents. They must not be spared.

RAVINDER MITTAL, BY MAIL

A fatal obsession

Apropos of 'Bathinda schoolboy crashes speeding car into tree, killed'; the death of Uday Partap Singh, a 16-year-old student of Class XI, is tragic. It has come to light that the teenager had posted videos that showed him driving his car around at a speed of 160-180 km per hour. The boy's parents and the traffic police personnel are to blame for the tragedy. Besides, it was not an isolated incident of overspeeding. Such cases involving youngsters have occurred in the past. It is time for the authorities concerned and parents to make efforts to help youngsters get over their obsession with speed.

VIJAYA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Knotty issues delaying integrated theatre commands



RAHUL BEDI
SENIOR JOURNALIST

THE recent Parivartan Chintan (contemplation regarding change) related to the long-planned creation of integrated theatre commands (ITCs), presided over by the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), Gen Anil Chauhan, was yet another instance of the military top brass examining extant proposals but expecting vastly different results.

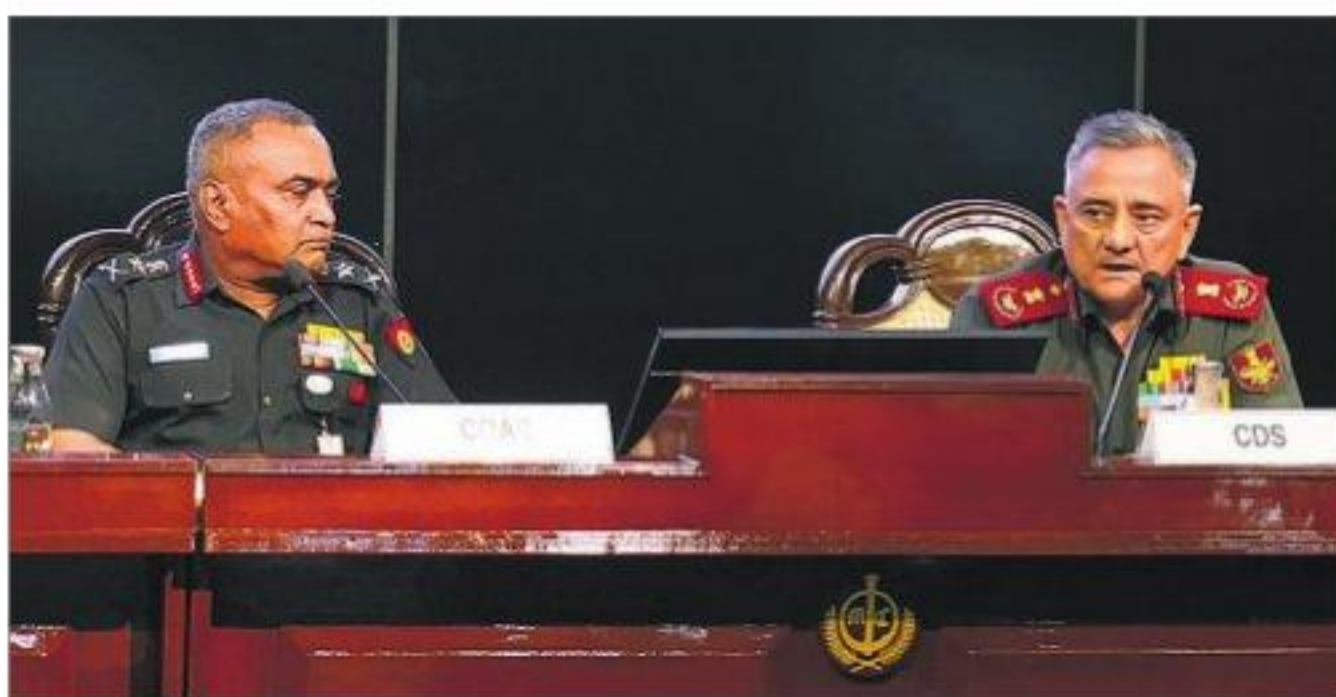
According to the government, the day-long 'brainstorming' session on April 8 in New Delhi, attended by senior officers from the three services, highlighted the need to adopt a 'de novo' (fresh) approach towards developing operational 'jointness' in the armed forces. It was mentioned that these deliberations underlined the necessity of augmenting interoperability and 'jointness' to enhance the Indian military's overall efficiency and war-fighting prowess.

The takeaways from the Parivartan Chintan, however, remained nebulous, except to confirm that the ITC matter

remained unresolved and that the 2022 deadline declared by Gen Chauhan's predecessor Gen Bipin Rawat for their creation was long past. Numerous ITC models had been prepared by the Department of Military Affairs (DMA), which the CDS heads, that broadly envisage fashioning three tri-service commands — one each for the country's northern and western borders and an overarching maritime or peninsular command, alongside options for 'additional others', but these, it now appears, are seemingly inadequate.

All three provisional ITCs had been tentatively designated their headquarters — Lucknow, Jaipur and Karwar (Karnataka). But a cross-section of veterans claim that numerous challenges persist for the DMA, pending the ITCs' final endorsement by the Cabinet Committee on Security headed by the Prime Minister. The foremost is the issue of the ITCs' overall operational command and control that was inherently 'hobbled' by hierarchical inter- and intra-service rivalries, conflicts of interest and ambitions of personnel involved in this planned revised military architecture.

By virtue of his employment charter, the CDS himself is not part of this operational equation, despite being India's seniormost military officer. Under his terms of appointment, the CDS exercises no



DELIBERATIONS: Chief of Defence Staff Gen Anil Chauhan (right) with Army Chief Gen Manoj Pande. The onus of validating the ITCs' operational command and control framework is on the DMA and the CDS. PH

direct operational military command, including that over the three service chiefs. His remit, among a host of myriad responsibilities, includes enabling and augmenting jointness, prioritising materiel buys, forces' modernisation and giving the government impartial military advice.

Recent media reports and analyses by security experts indicate that the role of the three four-star service chiefs, in a revised ITC setting, would be limited to recruiting and training manpower and logistically supporting it. This reportedly 'miffed' the individual chiefs and possibly the Parivartan Chintan debated a more proactive operational role for them than merely a supportive one.

Besides, in consonance with

The CDS's remit includes enabling and augmenting jointness, prioritising materiel buys, forces' modernisation and giving impartial advice to the govt.

the US theatre command model, on which the Indian ITC template is largely believed to be patterned, the chain of military command flows from the President to the Secretary of Defence and onto the theatre commanders and back. The latter were overseen by another four-star officer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who, like India's CDS, performed an advisory role to the US political leadership.

If localised, this concept, centred on US expeditionary doctrines, would incorporate ITC commanders reporting directly to the Defence Minister, who, like the US Secretary of Defence, would then be the deciding operational authority, but obviously in the Indian context with no military or battle-ground experience. To over-

come this handicap, a former Indian Navy chief of staff had in a recent seminar suggested appointing someone with deep knowledge of military affairs with multi-party consensus as Defence Minister.

The other, more critical issue, and one that reportedly dominates discussions within the services and the DMA over delays in confirming the ITCs, is the parity in status and seniority of officers presently heading the 17 single-service geographical and functional commands. The Army and the Indian Air Force had seven such commands, and the Navy had three.

And, with these 17 commands to be eventually subsumed into three, four or even five ITCs, one immediate fallout would be the 'placation' of some 13-14 three-star officers in a rank-conscious environment. Overnight, these officers would be 'dispossessed' of not only their elevated statuses, but also of their numerous perquisites, including the use of aircraft and rotary assets.

Additionally, some 10-odd Principal Staff Officers at the respective service headquarters, three vice-chiefs of staff and the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) head would also need to be 'adjusted' without further engendering disaffection or any loss of their sheen in the revised ITC setting. The numerous three-star heads of directorates at

each of the three service headquarters would need to be similarly accommodated in this massive revamp guaranteed to radically alter the Indian armed forces' structure. Other related measures that were believed to be delaying the ITCs' formation included the appointment of a Vice CDS and Deputy CDS to oversee assorted 'verticals' in military planning, like intelligence gathering, procurements and joint training.

Presently, India has two tri-service commands — the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) to safeguard India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean Region and the Strategic Forces Command tasked with ownership of the country's nuclear assets, deliverable by land-based mobile platforms, by air and via underwater assets. These came into being soon after the recommendations of the Group of Ministers in 2001, following the 1999 Kargil War, and were placed under the IDS with the express intent of crafting a future blueprint for ITCs, which, a section of former service chiefs claim, has been bypassed. In conclusion, the onus of validating the ITCs, especially their operational command and control framework, is on the DMA and the CDS, not on the political leadership, which green-lighted the project and now awaits its outcome.

Need to carry out deeper research into ayurvedic medicines



RAKESH KOCHHAR
FORMER PRESIDENT, INDIAN SOCIETY OF GASTROENTEROLOGY

THE Supreme Court has pulled up Patanjali Ayurved for its advertisements against allopathy and for making false claims about its own ayurvedic medicines. The court had earlier restrained Patanjali from advertising its products as a 'permanent relief' for hypertension, asthma and heart disease, among other health issues. The Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954, prohibits advertisements for 54 such diseases. Patanjali has also been questioned over its claim about Coronil, its product that was touted as a cure for Covid-19.

There are two issues that arise from this controversy. The first one is unsubstantiated claims about ayurvedic medicines. There has been limited research into such medicines. Unlike the stringent criteria of clinical trials for modern medicines governed by the Drug Controller General of India, the norms for other medical systems are lax. The second is the occurrence of adverse effects due to ayurvedic drugs. If proper

scientific clinical trials (Phases 1, 2 and 3) and post-marketing surveillance are carried out, the reporting of adverse effects is already incorporated into them.

It is important to differentiate between herbal and dietary supplements and complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). The former are defined by the US FDA (Food and Drug Administration) as "products taken by mouth that contain a dietary ingredient intended to supplement the diet", for example, vitamins, minerals and herbs. On the other hand, CAM therapies are based on principles derived from ancient texts and traditional beliefs, such as the Chinese, ayurvedic and unani medicines.

Ayurveda is an ancient medicine system that originated in India. It is believed to owe its existence to Hindu god Dhanvantari and is detailed in *Sushruta Samhita* and *Charaka Samhita*. Ayurveda is based on the premise that diseases are the result of an imbalance between *doshas*, *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*. The vast majority of ayurvedic medicines are plant-based or herbal. The addition of minerals or metals like gold, arsenic, lead and sulphur to herbal medicines is called *rasashastra*.

In contrast, allopathic medicine is described by the WHO as "the broad category of medical practice that is called Western medicine, evidence-based medicine or modern medicine". While modern medicine



RISK: Ayurvedic products are not always safe and have sometimes drawn attention due to their side effects. ISTOCK

first investigates and establishes the diagnoses and then treats them, ayurveda relies more on treating the symptoms. Because of the widespread use of allopathic medicines in the Western world, there has been much scientific investment in the understanding of disease causation and its treatment. Consequently, we know the chemical structure of each medicine, the exact site of its action and its side effects. The same can't be said about ayurvedic medicines.

Till the beginning of the last century, most medicines used the world over were plant-based or natural products. There was widespread use of heavy metals like gold, mercury and silver. Modern medicine has been in existence for the past 80 to 90 years, with antibiotics having been first used during World War II. However, since then, there have been rapid strides in the

While modern medicine investigates and diagnoses the disease before treating it, ayurveda relies more on treating the symptoms.

discovery of new treatments. New drugs acting at specific receptors or targeting precise disease-causing mechanisms are being developed. Some genetic disorders can now be treated with gene-editing. This requires enormous funding and the corresponding infrastructure.

However, knowledge about ayurveda has not progressed at the same pace. We know that the bark of the arjuna tree can be useful in treating hypertension, high cholesterol and heart diseases, but there is not enough scientific evidence on the exact mechanism, how it helps, its dose and the duration of treatment. Reserpine, an alkaloid from the plant *Rauwolfia serpentina*, was earlier used to treat hypertension in allopathy. Though it is no longer in use in allopathy because of its side effects, it continues to be used in ayurveda. Similarly, a number of nat-

ural substances like *tulsi* and *ashwagandha* have been used widely but without diligent documentation and validation. There are ayurvedic medicines for diabetes mellitus too that have shown promise. There is a need to investigate ayurvedic medicines with modern technology to explore the active ingredient, mechanism of action, drug interactions and adverse effects. Equally important are regulatory mechanisms for good manufacturing practices, quality control and standardisation. The government recently gave a push to alternative medicines by opening an Ayush (ayurveda, yoga, naturopathy, unani, siddha and homoeopathy) unit in all new AIIMS campuses. But much more needs to be done.

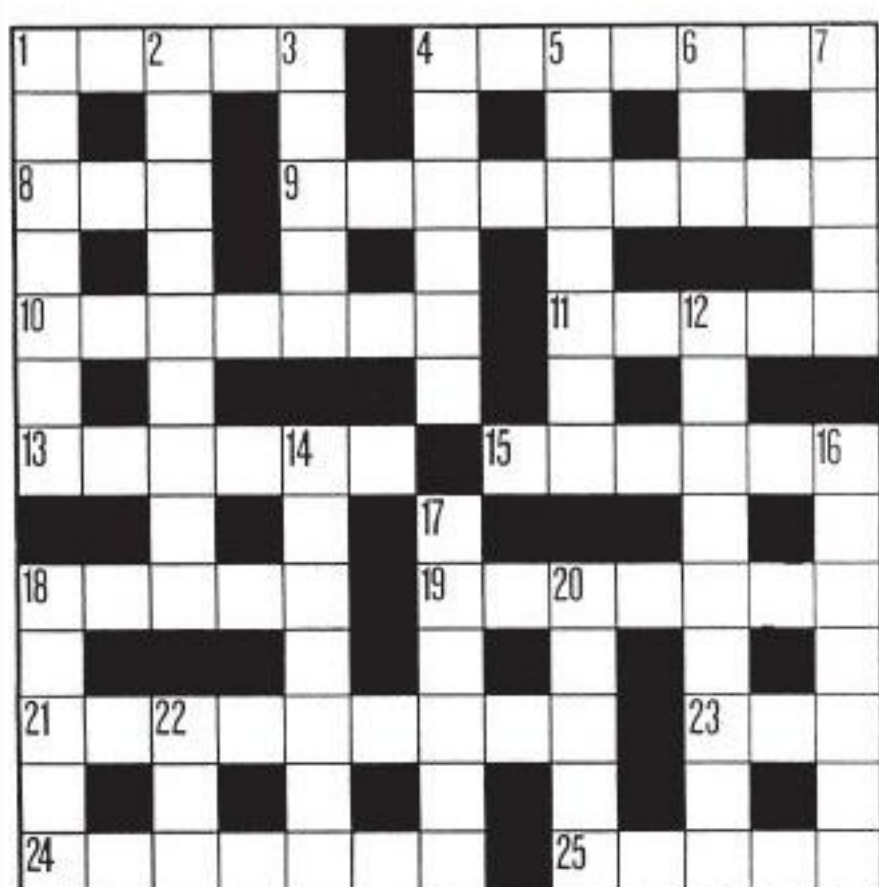
What can be done is exemplified by an anti-malarial drug of Chinese origin. A Chinese traditional herb, qinghao (*Artemisia annua* or sweet wormwood), was in use for over 2,000 years to treat fever caused by malaria. Its anti-malarial principle, qinghaosu, was discovered by Chinese scientist Tu Youyou in 1971. Its chemical structure was deciphered in 1976, leading to the development of its more effective derivatives. Currently, artesunate is used all over the world for falciparum malaria.

Ayurvedic medicines are not always safe and have also attracted attention because of their side effects. The common belief is that they are safe since they are based on natural ingredients. How-

ever, their formulations are not standardised, and they may contain impurities. A study by the PGIMER, published in the journal *Toxicology Research* (Cambridge) on 43 commonly used ayurvedic over-the-counter medicines found metal content above permissible limits for zinc, mercury, arsenic and lead in most of the formulations. In an earlier study from Boston, US, among the 230 ayurvedic medicines investigated, the prevalence of metals was equal in the US-manufactured and India-manufactured drugs (approximately 20 per cent each). The most common metals detected were lead and mercury, and the metal content was higher in *rasashastra* medicines than in *non-rasashastra* ones. There are increasing reports of CAM (including ayurvedic drugs) causing severe side effects, such as liver disease, kidney damage and skin reactions.

There is a need to carry out research into those ayurvedic medicines that are in common use for their constituents, active ingredients, efficacy and adverse effects. A multidisciplinary approach incorporating modern scientific armamentarium is called for. We need well-reasoned clinical trials based on valid hypotheses from thorough pre-clinical studies and objective outcome measures. Regulatory provisions should also be tightened and enforced diligently.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Arbour (5)
 - Diabolical (7)
 - Unlucky (3)
 - Tackle seriously (3,4,2)
 - To exhaust (7)
 - Domineering (5)
 - Alloy of tin with lead (6)
 - Lebanese capital (6)
 - Comprehensive (5)
 - Member of embassy staff (7)
 - Probably (4,2,3)
 - Female deer (3)
 - Become popular (5,2)
 - Unoccupied (5)
- DOWN**
- Accumulate gradually (5,2)
 - Self-discipline (9)
 - Scoundrel (5)
 - Sofa with back and arms (6)
 - Inconvenience (7)
 - Woman in religious order (3)
 - Close friend (5)
 - Looking smart (7,2)
 - Nonsense (7)
 - As a result of that (7)
 - Shell-firing gun in aircraft (6)
 - Pale pinkish-violet (5)
 - Name of book (5)
 - Set of tools (3)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Groundless, 8 Rapid, 9 Tribute, 10 Naviete, 11 Owner, 12 On a par, 14 Get off, 17 Abhor, 19 Holster, 21 Tangier, 22 Viola, 23 Hinterland.

Down: 2 Replica, 3 Undue, 4 Dither, 5 Epitome, 6 Spurn, 7 Terra firma, 8 Run to earth, 13 Arraign, 15 Outworn, 16 Charge, 18 Hunch, 20 Level.

SU DO KU

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

EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

APRIL 12, 2024, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Chaitra Shaka 23
- Chaitra Parvishite 30
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 4, up to 1.12 pm
- Saubhagya Yoga up to 2.13 am
- Rohini Nakshatra up to 12.51 am
- Moon in Taurus sign

FORECAST

SUNSET:	FRIDAY	18:48 HRS
SUNRISE:	SATURDAY	05:58 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	35	21
New Delhi	39	21
Amritsar	35	21
Bathinda	36	20
Jalandhar	35	17
Ludhiana	35	20
Bhivani	36	22
Hisar	38	19
Sirsa	38	22
Dharamsala	29	15
Manali	22	05
Shimla	21	12
Srinagar	19	09
Jammu	29	20
Kargil	17	02
Leh	11	0
Dehradun	36	17
Mussoorie	24	12

TEMPERATURE IN °C