

# Two years to save the world from catastrophe

**CLIMATE CHANGE TRACKER**  
BIBEK BHATTACHARYA  
UN climate chief issues a stark warning as climate crisis mounts

Two years to save the world." As far as opening lines of speeches go, that would be dramatic in any context. But when UN climate chief Simon Steill said this to outline the plan for action in 2024 to avert a climate catastrophe, he certainly couldn't be accused of exaggeration.

Steill was speaking at the Chatham House in London, effectively setting the agenda for the crucial COP29 international climate summit, to be held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November. These include stronger and more effective commitments from nations to stop emitting planet-heating greenhouse gases (GHGs), and a larger quantum of climate finance from richer, more polluting countries to poorer countries. Steill stressed on the point that it is the G20 countries—primarily the US, EU and China, but also India—that need to decarbonise the fastest, since these countries account for 80% of global emissions.

The next two years are indeed crucial, especially if the world were to stay on track to fulfil the commitments laid out by the UN's science body, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). These are that global emissions need to be cut by nearly half by 2030, and reach net zero by 2050. However, the current carbon-cutting commitments, called the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) fall well

short of this goal.

Steill's speech comes at a time when the news on the climate crisis front has been uniformly grim. Globally, temperature records are crumbling every month and carbon emissions show no sign of slowing down. In fact, there's growing disquiet among climate scientists that it is possible that the rate of climate impacts may have been understated—the world seems to be heading for runaway temperature rise; and climate "tipping points" that had seemed far in the future may actually be closer at hand.

At this crucial juncture, the climate crisis seems to be conspicuous by its absence from the electoral agenda of the two biggest democracies that will vote in 2024: India and the US. And while some election manifestos in India do include policy prescriptions to mitigate against and adapt to climate change, these are by and large hidden from view.

## THE HEAT IS ON

Recently, Europe's climate science body, the Copernicus Climate Change Service (CCCS), noted that March 2024 marked the 10th consecutive month of heat records crumbling around the world. The global average temperature for the past 12 months is 0.70 degree Celsius above the 1991-2020 average. Data released by the CCCS showed that



Antarctica could be melting faster than estimated.

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global surface temperatures for March were 0.1 degree Celsius higher than the previous record, set in March 2016. And it was over 1.6 degrees Celsius higher than the pre-industrial era, which forms the benchmark.

The past year have consistently seen average global temperatures higher than 1.5 degrees Celsius. For context, the aim of the world's governments under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is to restrict global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by 2100.

It is no different for India. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), 2023 was the second hottest year

on record, after 2016. The agency has also forecast heatwave conditions for most of the country for the months of April, May and June. India's new reality is chronic heat, with the average number of heatwave-days rising steadily every decade, from 90 days in 1990-99 to 139 in 2010-19. According to the IMD, the total annual average heatwave days for 2022 was 190.

Although climate science models have predicted that the global average temperature may breach the 1.5 degrees mark temporarily in this decade, the continuing hot temperatures are leading scientists to worry if the current spikes in temperature mean that we are in danger of passing this crucial climate

tipping point way earlier than expected. "Is this within the range of climate variability or signal of accelerated warming? My concern is that it will be too late if we just wait to see," said Diana Ürges-Vorsatz of the UN's apex climate science body, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in a social media post recently.

While there could well be other reasons for the long temperature spike—from the El Niño weather phenomena to increasing solar activity and the fall-out from volcano eruptions—scientists are warily monitoring data. Writing in the journal *Nature*, the director of Nasa's Goddard Institute of Space Studies, Gavin Schmidt, wrote that "If the anomaly does not stabilise by August...then the world will be in uncharted territory. It could imply that a warming planet is already fundamentally altering how the climate system operates, much sooner than scientists had anticipated."

## TIPPING INTO THE RED

If global emissions aren't slashed drastically, one of the major indicators of worsening climate catastrophe will be when certain "tipping points" are passed. These are natural limits beyond which it is impossible to predict how natural planetary systems will behave. Human beings have been blessed with a clement climate for the entirety of our existence, and these tipping points will mark a profound change in planetary conditions. These changes will, quite simply, pose an existential threat to humanity.

One such tipping point is the health of the vast sheet of ice that covers Ant-

arctica. While Arctic summer sea ice has been decreasing and the Greenland ice sheet has been seriously stressed in recent years, Antarctica's ice sheets as well as the extent of sea ice has been considered fairly stable, for now. However, recent findings in the frozen continent have sparked concerns that this might be changing faster than anticipated.

In 2022, scientists working in Antarctica's Concordia research station found that the daily average temperature of 18 March that year was nearly 40 degrees Celsius above average. In the years since, scientists have recorded many more such cases of anomalous heat, and some fear that this might be pointing to more lasting changes in Antarctica.

A paper published last month by an international team of scientists in the *Journal Of Climate*, titled *Observational Evidence For A Regime Shift in Summer Antarctic Sea Ice*, points to a number of concerns. These are that glaciers on the borders of the west Antarctic ice sheets are calving into the ocean at an increased rate. Concurrently, sea ice levels have also decreased sharply.

For the longest time, Antarctica was considered too cold to be a concern when it came to climate change. However, the study now says that there is evidence of an "abrupt critical transition" in Antarctica, and that the southern ocean is changing, leading to worries that Antarctica could be melting faster than estimated. As to how the health of Antarctica constitutes a tipping point, the answer is fairly evident: global sea levels would rise by about 65m (approximately 210ft). It's frankly unthinkable.

# The small voices of history

Sarmistha Dutta Gupta's new book on Jallianwala Bagh grapples with the idea of erecting memorials versus memory

Somak Ghoshal

On this day, exactly 105 years ago, a peaceful crowd gathered at Amritsar's Jallianwala Bagh during the annual Vaisakhi fair to protest against the draconian Rowlatt Act. Formally known as the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, this British law gave the police the power to detain, arrest and imprison without trial any person suspected of committing "revolutionary crimes", a nebulous and all-encompassing category of offences.

Punjab had already faced the worst brunt of colonial brutality since the early decades of the century, as hundreds of men were rounded up and conscripted for the British effort in World War I. But on 13 April 1919, the atrocities peaked to an unprecedented level. Under instructions from Brigadier General R.E.H. Dyer, the police opened fire on the gathering, killing hundreds in the next few minutes and unleashing a reign of terror on the citizens for days on end. The official figure of casualties was 379, though the actual number is likely to be in the thousands.

Cut to the 2000s and the fields of death have transformed into a tourist spot. As writer Sarmistha Dutta Gupta recalls in her powerful new book, *The Jallianwala Bagh Journals*, during her visit to the site in 2016, she saw, "people swarming inside the Jallianwala Bagh. The lawn inside was curated, and even topiaries of sepoy soldiers stood with guns. People were busy taking pictures in front of the topiary and clicking selfies in front of the bullet-marked wall. Some people had opened their picnic hampers in the garden and listened to loud music. The inside thrummed with crowds, and flashy shops lined the outside."

The people of a country are a product of their times. Most of them take their cues from the state. In 1961, under Jawaharlal Nehru's government, a memorial was built on the killing fields of Jallianwala Bagh, a move that Rabindranath Tagore, who relinquished his knighthood to protest against the tragedy, had strongly objected to until his death in 1941. The poet was not opposed to preserving the memory of the event, as Dutta Gupta points out, but rather to the idea of "monumentalising memory". In his prescient address to the Congress in April 1920, later published in *Modern Review*, he had made his position abundantly clear: "Let those who wish, try to burden the minds of the future with stones, carrying the black memory of anger, but let us bequeath to the generations to come only those



SAMEER SEHGAL / HINDUSTAN TIMES

memorials which we can revere."

Tagore's apprehension about the generational burden of the "black memory of anger" has come to haunt us in more ways than he could have imagined. One of the unique strengths of Dutta Gupta's book is her ability to connect the dots between 1919 and 2020s India, via the Partition of 1947, tracing the bitter legacy of state oppression from colonial times to the present. Contemporary India is riddled with "Jallianwala Baghs", a stand-in for the myriad forms of violence that citizens have had to face at the hands of subsequent governments in independent India.

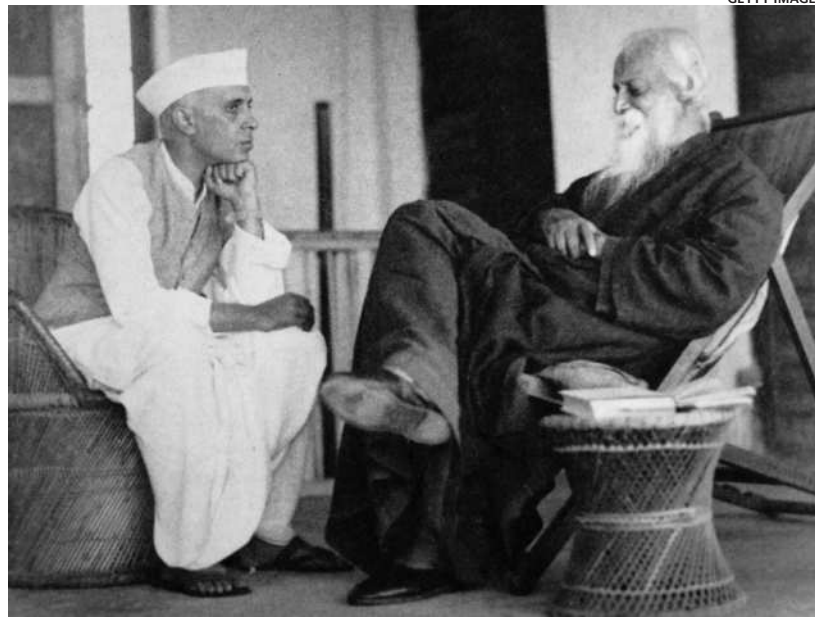
From the farmers' protest against the agricultural black laws to the plight of migrant workers during the pandemic, the spectacle of suffering crowds appears with a terrifying regularity in the annals of India's living history. However, instead of taking a dry academic look into the social and political narratives of Jallianwala Bagh, Dutta Gupta presents her years-long research in the form of a journal. The result is refreshingly authentic and powerful. Not only does she bring in a profusion of unheard voices, along with images, through her extensive use of oral history, but she also contextualises many of modern India's present crises in the light of its complicated past.

Dutta Gupta's journals trace their origins in an earlier project that she had co-created with artist and scholar Sanchayan Ghosh in 2020. Bringing history and art together, *Ways Of Remembering Jalli-*

Amritsar's Jallianwala Bagh; and (below) Rabindranath Tagore with Jawaharlal Nehru in 1940.

*anwala Bagh And Rabindranath Tagore's Response To The Massacre* had opened at the Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata in March 2020. It was an ambitious installation project, drawing on a massive collective effort of researchers, artisans and artists. The entire setup, laid out on a blood-red carpet, subverting the usual symbolism of the red carpet, was audaciously imagined. Images, recordings, texts, stories in multiple media brought together a whole tapestry of feeling inside the Portrait Gallery, looked over by the

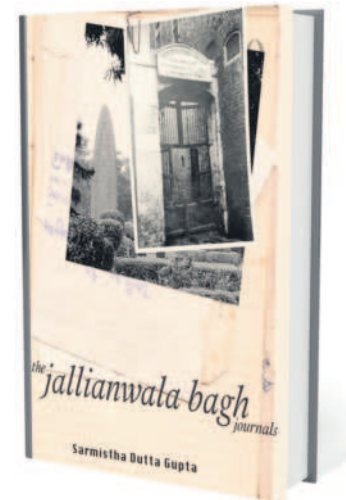
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watchful eyes of long-dead colonial gentry. Sadly, the show, which was meant to be a public history project, was shut down within days due to the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic.

In its afterlife as a book, the project has not only gained more definition, through the descriptive passages that Dutta Gupta puts in to elaborate the concept, its scope and execution, but also in its ability to trigger a wealth of emotions in the reader. Particularly, her close attention to the forgotten faces of history is deeply affecting. In an early chapter, for instance, she describes meeting the late Prof. V.N. Datta, then in his 90s, one of the great historians of Jallianwala Bagh. The elderly man, who could only speak for 10 minutes due to his failing health, broke down remembering the events that happened a century back.

Especially moving are Dutta Gupta's attempt to record the voices of women, who have been erased from the narrative of the massacre. The story of Attar Kaur, the widow who sat all night with the corpse of her husband and offered water to the dying, is part of the lore of Jallianwala Bagh. But the moment suddenly leaps out of the pages of history as Dutta Gupta and her fellow researchers track down, after much effort, the house where Kaur had spent her final days. From Usha Devi, a former tenant of the house, Dutta Gupta learns about the British government's attempts to "compensate" Kaur twice, only to be rebuffed by the brave widow. "She didn't sell her husband's sac-



**The Jallianwala Bagh Journals:** By Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, Jadavpur University Press, 256 pages, ₹1,200

rific in lieu of ₹50,000," Usha Devi says, even though Kaur was expecting her youngest son at the time and was already a mother to two other children.

History, in the eyes of the nation-state, tends to reside in the monuments and memorials that have stood the test of time. But a truly human history is made of the small voices of ordinary men and women like Kaur or, as Nehru noted in shorthand on his visit to the site, "Remarkable case of little boy age 5 or so who remained on open roof right through the firing and escaped unhurt. Thought they were fire-works. Walls round about him riddled with bullets."

Dutta Gupta's book, taking Tagore's cue, leaves the reader to grapple with the question of erecting memorials versus memory. In recent years, our government has spruced up the killing fields of Jallianwala Bagh, not only sanitised it into a picnic spot but also twisted the narrative of its heroes. For instance, Udham Singh, a follower of Bhagat Singh who killed Michael O'Dwyer, believed to be the chief architect of the massacre, in 1940, has been depicted at the memorial site as a turbaned Sikh. In reality, he called himself Ram Mohammad Singh Azad, a true embodiment of our syncretic and secular roots. Narratives of our past get rewritten through such subtle but insidious distortions.

As Dutta Gupta puts it with ringing clarity, "Jallianwala Bagh is a symbol of unity among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs against an oppressive regime. Perhaps this commercialisation of history by transforming Jallianwala Bagh is an attempt to keep the visitors distracted. Those who are spending taxpayers' money today to reorient a historic site, may tomorrow hand over the responsibility of the Bagh's maintenance to a private company."

All things considered that day may not be far away.

*The Jallianwala Bagh Journals* will be available online and in bookstores end April. Somak Ghoshal is a writer and editor based in Delhi.



## A thought for today

The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them. If your dreams don't scare you, they're not big enough

ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF

## The Naveen Way

BJD shows how more women can enter Parliament

Naveen Patnaik's BJD will field 33% women candidates, that is seven women, to contest in Odisha's LS polls to 21 seats. Five of the seven fielded in 2019 had won. Pramila Bisoyi, now 75, made history – a first-time MP from Odisha's Aska constituency, who studied till Class 3 and was married off at age 5. Faced with hardship millions of Indian women are familiar with, Bisoyi grew to be an active social worker. In her selection, Naveen also marked a personal milestone. He had entered politics winning the Aska LS bypoll in 1997 following his father's death.

Odisha's grassroots govt programme Mission Shakti of self-help groups, launched by Naveen's govt in 2001, vaulted Oriya women into economic activity, helped them access credit. From banking to making decisions, the panchayat-block-district-level network enabled women. The govt scheme became a social movement; it took savvy Naveen no time to mobilise political support, a pipeline for women's political empowerment – making the 50% women in panchayati raj institutions all too possible.

The outgoing LS has 14% women. Five of BJD's 12 MPs are women, including three from SC seats and one from an ST seat. Two of BJP's eight Odisha MPs are also women. Total women candidates in 2019 were 720 (9%), a two percentage-point increase from the 665 women (7% candidates) who contested in 2014. Trinamool had 37% women candidates in 2019; among BJP and Congress candidates, just 13% were women.

One would have expected the passage of the women's bill would inspire parties to field more women – but ADR shows the first phase has barely 8% women nominees. We don't know whether the number will improve after all nominations are in. But we do know, from Naveen's decisions, that political will is the key that'll open the lock men have on legislative representation.

## Game On

Online gaming is tailor-made for India

There were two moments last year when even the indifferent would have registered that there's a new phenomenon sweeping across the world. Saudi Arabia, which is pumping money to disrupt the world's sports pecking order, announced it would host an annual Esports World Cup from 2024. Separately, govts in India, always on the lookout for new avenues of taxation, decided to levy 28% GST on online games. No one can ignore gaming any more.

**Leaving rest behind** | PwC estimates that gaming revenue will rise from \$227 billion in 2023 to \$312 billion in 2027, y-o-y growth of 7.9%. That's just a dry forecast. What makes it relatable is that content creators such as Paramount and Netflix are making movies based on gaming IP because of its popularity. We will all soon consume gaming in some avatar.

**Looking for young India** | A recent FICCI-EY report had a nugget on where youth are hanging out. Online gaming has overtaken filmed entertainment to become the fourth largest segment. India has 450 million gamers, with over 90 million paid to play. Gaming appears to provide an income to more Indians than manufacturing.

**Broadband blues** | South Korea is sometimes described as the "cradle" of competitive gaming. That's on account of easy access to high speed broadband. Gaming is more than entertainment. At the backend is cutting edge computing capability and infra. It's India's world, if it plays its cards right.



## They Make Humans' Lives Worth Living

Mired in everydayness, we forget the value of awe &amp; wonder

Awe and wonder sound like rare and fleeting emotions, experienced at big moments like childbirth. But diary studies indicate that people experience awe or wonder twice or thrice a week. **Wonderstruck: How Wonder & Awe Shape the Way We Think** by the philosopher **Helen de Cruz** shows us how essential these emotions are to human culture.

Awe is a sense of vastness, size or complexity, it could be evoked by the night sky, a grand monument, a great theory or a superlative feat. Wonder, meanwhile, is about a glimpse of the unknown terrain at the fringes of our understanding, the intricacy of an insect under the microscope, or a

## mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



They help us see something as if for the first time. This 'firstness' is what Descartes called a 'sudden surprise of the soul'. In human culture, there are three arenas where this plays out: magic, religion and science.

Magic may have fallen out of favour now, but anthropologists show how it appeals to something deep. The power to work miracles on the stage, and the willingness to believe them, are rooted in wonder. Religious practices, too, with their hymns, blessings, rituals and phrases, help you cultivate wonder. When you stay receptive to these 'awe-technologies', you go through the world in an altered state. Buddhist masters, for instance, try to make you aware of the emptiness of things but without instructions, just with practices or riddles that spur a surprise.

Science is not that different – it borrowed its experimental methods from magic. Does science cause us to lose a sense of wonder? Many scientists like Richard Feynman and Richard Dawkins argue that it is the other way round. Wonder and awe take us outside our usual thought patterns, which is useful for scientific practice. When scientists harness their sense of awe, and look beyond tired schemas, paradigm shifts happen. Established theories are suddenly seen to be built on sand. For instance, the current geological consensus of drifting continents was a minority position once, as was the idea of heliocentrism, of planets revolving around the sun. To adopt a new paradigm involves some leap of faith, and emotions play a role in it.

Scientific expertise, or knowing how something works, does not take away the capacity to feel the sublime. Rachel Carson, the marine biologist who had immense influence on the environmental movement, evokes wonder at the precious, fragile world. Her writing on the sea is not about how to control nature but to re-enchant it. Immediacy and suddenness force you into the moment, they bring new answers to old questions.

It is also necessary to wonder at social conventions. Looking at the antique postcard of a city, you are moved, but you can also contrast it with current conditions and infra, and wonder whether it had to evolve exactly this way. The world is strange and paradoxical, but we're too mired in everydayness to see it, the book argues. Philosophy is a tool to take our attention back, look beyond productivity and use-value. Wonder and awe are the catalysts to reclaim what makes life worth living.

## When Judges Turn Their Back

CJI's spotlight has drawn attention to what a judgment being 'reserved' means and who benefits. Certainly not aam litigants. They often have to re-engage lawyers, re-file documents, re-appear in courts

Arghya Sengupta and Aditya Prasanna Bhattacharya



One Latin expression that has seamlessly moved from a court of law to everyday conversation is *ex tempore*.

Used to describe judgments that were delivered immediately as hearings concluded, so common is its usage today that it is a full-fledged adjective in English to denote speeches made on the fly.

In contrast, is the quaint Latin expression *curia advisari vult*. Originally used to denote cases where the court "wishes to be advised" or needs more time to reflect before giving its judgment (the opposite of *ex tempore*), *curia advisari vult* has remained entirely obscure. Paradoxically, the practice of courts needing time to reflect on cases before writing judgments has become almost entirely the norm.

**Waiting for Justice** | Consider this fairly typical example. In 1977, a dispute arose over a plot of land on Mount Road in Madras. Both parties claimed that the plot had been sold to them by the former owner. Courts were moved and the land fenced off as disputed. In 1989, after 12 years of traversing through subordinate courts, the hearing in HC came to an end. But the judgment was only delivered in 1994, over five years later.

Surely, even if the court wished to be advised, it could not possibly be mulling over the matter for half a decade. Lest it seem like a waste of time, the legal fraternity has invented a serious-sounding phrase to describe such long waiting periods – it is a time when the judgment is "reserved".

**CJI tries to end the wait** | Recently, the Chief Justice of India tried to check this practice of judgments being reserved for long periods. According to reports, he sent a letter to HCs seeking details of cases in which judgments had been reserved for over three months. In response, possibly to reduce the enormity of these numbers, some judges ingeniously declared some matters "part-heard". This meant hearings would have to start again. While drawing necessary attention to the issue of reserving judgments, the intervention has boomeranged, leading to litigants in many cases having to wait longer for justice.

**When to reserve** | On the face of it, reserving judgments seems like a good

idea. When the case is complex, judges should carefully consider both sides of the issue, appreciate the submissions made, and take a well-reasoned position. This is especially true if a large bench of judges is hearing the matter, as can happen in important constitution bench cases in SC.

But the reality is the reverse. In a complex matter like the Article 370 case, verdict was delivered a little over three months after it was reserved. In the Maharashtra assembly defection case, with an extremely complicated set of facts, the court took only two months. Even when multiple judges were involved and drafts had to be circulated, SC kept the waiting period limited. This shows that writing judgments quickly is possible, even in complex cases, without any compromise in quality.

The bulk of litigation in Indian courts, however, is not complex. In run of the mill cases, as well as those relating to bail and matters pertaining to personal liberty, judges ordinarily should not require time for further deliberation. Yet this is what happens almost entirely across the board.

**Remedy worse than the disease** | Recognising this malaise, the Code of Civil Procedure laid down a deadline of one month to pronounce judgments under ordinary circumstances, and two months in exceptional cases. For criminal cases, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita fixed the deadline at 45 days. These are timelines for subordinate courts.

In a landmark ruling, SC imposed a similar timeline on all HCs – after

a judgment is reserved, it must be delivered within three months. If six months have elapsed, then parties may apply to have the matter re-heard by a new bench.

But this remedy, albeit well-intentioned, has proved worse than the disease. In May 2023, an undertrial approached SC, aggrieved that HC had reserved its judgment in Aug 2022, but failed to deliver it even after 10 months. SC noted that HC had, in fact, listed the matter for judgment on May 19. But since the six-month deadline had already been violated, the court ordered the matter be heard by another bench.

In this situation, litigants would have to engage lawyers again, re-file all documents, make fresh appearances – only for judgment to be reserved all over again. Unless there is an incentive for the new judges to pronounce judgment speedily without reserving it, or there are disincentives for the judge who had caused the original delay to do it again, little is achieved through re-hearing.

**Time not of the essence** | This is simply another manifestation of a more persistent issue – timelines don't seem to matter in Indian courts. Even when laws have mandatory timelines in place, courts have interpreted these to be only 'directory' – only a recommendation, not a deadline.

Given how overworked Indian judges are, the phenomenon of reserved judgments becomes understandable. One needn't look further than the disproportionate assets case filed against Jayalalithaa – by her own description, one of the finest extempore speakers in modern politics. The ultimate judgment of SC in appeal, was not only delivered eight months after it was reserved, but also two months after she died. Reserving judgments clearly has its benefits, both for overworked judges and controversial politicians.

Sengupta and Bhattacharya are Research Director and Senior Resident Fellow, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

## Don't Forget The Jawan At Siachen

Forty years since Operation Meghdoot, can India and Pakistan disengage from the highest conflict zone in the world? There are no easy answers

Manmohan Bahadur



Aristotle once said that "We make war so that we may live in peace." More recently, predictions of the end of war have been made by security strategists at the culmination of certain conflicts. The most famous being at the end of Cold War, when Francis Fukuyama predicted "the end of history". Most such predictions have had to eat crow as wars have continued, some with increasing ferocity. While the Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Hamas and the numerous conflicts in West Asia and Africa continue, the world, and indeed India too, has almost forgotten the Siachen conflict, whose 40th year commemoration happens today.

**Conflict at icy heights** | The Siachen Glacier combat zone has been christened as the highest battlefield in the world, with the Indian army manning posts at dizzying altitudes – some at 20,000 feet and above. This glacier is a slowly creeping river of ice and its treacherous and inhospitable terrain has claimed hundreds of lives and maimed scores forever. Is this frozen terrain worth fighting for? Before answering, a bit of history is necessary.

**Pakistan's treachery** | Post-Partition, in the Karachi Agreement of 1949, the ceasefire line with Pakistan was drawn in the north till map coordinates NJ9842 – and then it was stated as "...northwards up to the glaciers". Pakistan mischievously took it as a straight line joining NJ9842 to Karakoram Pass, while India stood by the international acceptance of borders as per the watershed principle, which had the glacier under its control. International mountaineering expeditions started getting sponsored by Islamabad from its side and soon maps began showing Siachen Glacier as part of Pakistan.

## Calvin &amp; Hobbes



AS THE WAGE EARNER HERE, IT'S YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO SHOW SOME CONSUMER CONFIDENCE AND START BUYING THINGS THAT WILL GET THE ECONOMY GOING AND CREATE PROFITS AND EMPLOYMENT.



HERE'S A LIST OF SOME BIG-TICKET ITEMS I'D LIKE FOR CHRISTMAS. I HOPE I CAN TRUST YOU TO DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR OUR COUNTRY.



I'VE GOT TO STOP LEAVING THE WALL STREET JOURNAL AROUND.

## A Stirring Call To Fearlessness On Baisakhi

Pranav Khullar

The heroic lines from the poetic composition 'Deh Shiva Var Mohi' in the Bichitra Natak, wherein Guru Gobind Singh asks for a boon of fearlessness in combat, along with the prayer to never eschew doing good deeds, can be seen to embody the spirit of Baisakhi itself. It was this clarion spiritual call to fearlessness to fight injustice and oppression, on Baisakhi day of 1699 at Anandpur Sahib, which took forward Guru Nanak's own radical vision of the new Sikh way of life.

Tradition has it that Guru Gobind Singh called for a special assembly of the Sikh followers on the morning of the Baisakhi festival at Keshgarh Fort at Anandpur Sahib. Sri Gur Sobha, splendour of the Guru, written by Sainapat, one of the court-poets of Guru Gobind Singh, alludes to the intensity of the

Guru that day and the anxious expectations of the assembly. After the morning prayers, the Guru suddenly gets up with a drawn sword in hand and thunderously exhorts the sangat, assembly, that there has arisen a need to show devotion and faithfulness. "While the entire sangat is dear, which Sikh will give me his head?" the Guru roars.

There is stunned silence. The Guru repeats his call, but the sangat seems paralysed at this command-request. On the third call, it is said that Daya Ram, a Khatri caste man from Lahore, gets up and offers his head. "O noble king, my head is at your service." Guru Gobind Singh takes Daya Ram to a tent backstage and reemerges a few minutes later with blood dripping from his sword. "I want another head," the Guru thunders, and the sangat becomes even more

unnerved now. But this time, Dharam Das, a Jat from Delhi, offers his head.

Traditional Sikh accounts state that Bhai Mokham Chand, a tailor from Dwarka, Himmat Chand, a cook from Jagannatha Puri, and Sahib Chand, a barber from Bidar, subsequently come forward to offer their heads to the Guru. As the assembly grew restless, Guru Gobind Singh reemerged from behind the stage with the five men whom he had presumably beheaded.

He then proceeded to initiate the five men, baptising them with khande-di-pahul, holy water stirred by the double-edged khand, a sword, and the recitation of sacred verses from the Guru Granth Sahib, and sweetened by patashas, jaggery candies, by Mata Sahib Kaur. This baptism with Pahul-Amrit, holy water, touched now by

ing the Siachen engagement. But first, what has India done to establish its claim over Siachen after the 1949 Karachi Agreement? The general consensus is that India started its moves with the 1978 'Bull' Kumar expedition and then launched Op Meghdoot on April 13, 1984. But very few know that there was a full-fledged expedition of the Geological Survey of India that mapped Siachen Glacier, without any Pakistani protest, 20 years earlier in 1958.

Be that as it may, the question is whether a peace deal can be arrived at with adequate safeguards to ensure that if Indian troops pull out, Pakistan would not capture the high grounds and passes that have been won with sweat, blood and treasure. This is not an easy question to answer especially since Beijing's presence in POK (per the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) brings in an additional threatening variable.

**Strategic imperative** | Nations go to war for reasons that can be categorised into two broad groups. First, if the contentious area has economic or strategic importance; second, if it has religious, political or even just symbolic import. The great power conflicts and proxy wars for Gulf oil are examples of the former while conflicts flowing from the religious and political importance of Jerusalem constitute

the latter. In which quadrant does the Siachen conflict lie? An opinion piece cannot decide this, but suffice to say that if strategist Stephen Cohen trivialised Siachen as "two bald men fighting over a comb", my response is that if the head is Indian, albeit bald, we have a duty to protect it.

And even as one wishes that a way is found by politicians to usher in peace, our armed forces personnel deployed on the highest battlefield deserve the nation's eternal gratitude for their sacrifices, and wishes for a safe tenure.

Air Vice Marshal Bahadur (ret'd) is a military thinker

## Sacredspace



Thou art the Supreme Knowledge, Maya, intellect, memory, delusion and the great prowess of the gods as well as of the demons... O Thou Self of everything... whether cause or effect. Thou art the power behind that; how canst Thou be praised?

Devi Stotram



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Why a Free Kick Can Work for Some

Niche marketing works better in mass segment

European football clubs lower down in the pecking order are experimenting with free stadium entry for fans to work their way up the league tables. Paris FC, perpetually under the shadow of the city's star club Paris St-Germain, has been getting 'good results' since it started the move five months ago. This, after Germany's 2nd div side Fortuna Düsseldorf introduced the practice. Money these clubs lose on ticket sales is made up by fuller stands that bring in greater merchandise and sponsorship revenue. The more intriguing marketing innovation is reimagining the spectator sports to include cheering followers. Since sport, football or cricket, is funded by a far bigger TV audience, crowded stadiums are as much part of the show as the lead characters on the field. From the perspective of entertainment, fans provide the supporting cast, and need to be compensated for their effort.

The innovation is yet to work its way through spectator sports. In cricket, for instance, BCCI will be loath to cannibalise stadium receipts in IPL matches where demand is almost always big and guaranteed. But in international football, clubs yield to the pressure of TV advertising that adjusts match timings to viewership patterns, much of which is in Asia these days. Disruptors, with lower costs sunk into hosting matches, are trying to get ahead in the game by relying overtly on broadcasting revenue that outpaces all other income streams. They are, in effect, allowing couch potatoes to pay for those at the Colosseums watching the gladiatorial bouts from stands.

If they succeed, the innovation of free entry could cascade into a bigger bounty for stadium-goers. They might come to expect their act of cheering for their team needs to be paid for by, say, free drinks along with free tickets. This may work in football. But tennis, for instance, Wimbledon, is about pricing tickets to a point where being seen in the stands becomes a social statement. Niche marketing works better in the mass segment. So, upcoming clubs and leagues may have the best shot at pulling off ticketless stadium entry. India's top football league ISL should give this a try.



## Finally, Moving Out Of Defence Colony

New Delhi's decision to post military and defence attachés to several new countries reflects India's changing assessments of strategic interests. Countering China, safeguarding critical gateways and increasing export of Indian military hardware is behind the choice of these new outposts that include several countries in Africa, East Europe and Asia Pacific. Now, GoI must ensure that defence personnel in missions abroad aren't limited to procurement, trade and training, as defence is an essential component of strategic relations.

A better understanding of a defence attaché's role is a must for the most optimum outcome. Export opportunities for India's domestic defence industry are essential to their work. Gone are the days when defence procurement and trade were the only areas of focus. Posting dedicated staff in Mozambique, Ethiopia and the Ivory Coast reflects the interest in deepening India's strategic engagement in Africa, and addressing the interest in Indian military hardware.

The military component in strategic relations must drive this engagement. Djibouti, the Philippines, Poland and Armenia aren't just potential buyers of 'toys for the boys'. Terrorism, intel gathering, defence advice and peace support require specialised engagement. The defence establishment must be ready for a broader, more strategic role. Defence personnel as foreign area officers must ensure an effective partnership with the foreign office.

Expansion must not, of course, come at the cost of reducing defence personnel in countries that are strategic partners. Rather than 'rationalising', current geopolitical challenges and fragmentation require more robust engagement, especially considering India's tightrope walk on many international flashpoints.



### JUST IN JEST

Pay heed to dissatisfied business-class passengers — especially if they're kids

## Etihad Had It Coming, Air India, Take Notes

Air India, lend us your ears: the future of high-end air travel may hinge not only on the discerning tastes of CEOs, HNIs and VIPs but also on the preferences of their well-travelled and very vocal children. Earlier this week, Mark Ross-Smith, CEO of a Singapore-based loyalty product tech company, shared on X his 6-year-old daughter's review of business-class travel with dad on Etihad. The munchkin showed her gremlin side when she gave a no-holds-barred critique of her flying experience on the much-feted UAE carrier: a measly 1 out of 10. Why this kolaveri di? Her dissatisfaction reportedly stemmed from (1) absence of her buddies onboard, (2) no chocolate in the Etihad kiddies' meal, and (3) omission of hot-towel service for pint-sized passengers.

This mini-critic also lamented the striking similarity between business and economy kids' packs — entitlement means entitled to know the diff. And let's not forget the travesty of in-flight entertainment not kicking off until — horror of horrors! — the plane was airborne, delaying her cartoon-watching. HNI Jr's feedback prompted Etihad to express hopes for a 5-star review next time. Could this signal a shift in the airline industry, where feedback from pint-sized pundits and candy-craving critics will determine in-flight amenities? Air India, read the signs of today's future.

# Let's Send a Woman to Space

India has the opportunity to select a female gaganaut this year — it must grab it



Susmita Mohanty

India is gearing up to fly gaganauts into low earth orbit (LEO), the fourth nation to do so, after Russia, the US and China. Surprisingly, the proposed crew includes only male fighter pilots, at a time when India has no dearth of commercial and military women pilots. Notably, India has the highest number of female pilots in the world. As per the Indian Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), Indian female pilots make up 14% of its pilot workforce, compared to a global average of 6%. That's not all. IAF started inducting female pilots in non-combat roles more than 30 years ago in 1993, while combat role recruitments began in 2016.

Of the women firsts from Russia in 1963 (Valentina Tereshkova, an engineer), the US in 1983 (Sally Ride, a physicist) and China in 2012 (Liu Yang, a military transport pilot), none were combat pilots, and Tereshkova and Ride weren't pilots at all. Women firsts in space from Japan and France — Chiaki Mukai in 1994 and Claudie Haigneré in 1996 — are both physicians.

Technological advancements and emergence of space tourism has made commercial space-flight routine. Last month, the Soyuz MS-25 spacecraft flew Roscosmos and Belarusian cosmonauts Oleg Novitskiy and Marina Vasilevskaya, and Nasa astronaut Tracy Dyson to the International Space Station (ISS). Vasilevskaya, a flight attendant for Belavia Airlines, is the first Belarusian to fly into space. She was one of six finalists of an nationwide contest organised by the Belarus Academy of Sciences and Belarus Space Agency where more than 3,000 female candidates applied.



Who said sky's the limit?

Dyson, in support of her Belarusian crewmate, reportedly remarked that flight attendants don't just serve drinks but are primarily responsible for our personal safety on board the aircraft, are no stranger to emergency situations, and know what to do and how to stay calm when they happen.

In the 1960s, the all-male fighter pilot school of astronaut selection was turned on its head by William Randolph Lovelace, an aerospace physician who served as head of Nasa's Special Committee on Bioastronautics. Lovelace launched a privately-funded Woman in Space Programme that tested 24 female pilots for astronaut fitness, of which 13 made the cut.

### INDIA HAS THE HIGHEST number of female pilots in the world, making up 14% of its workforce vis-à-vis global average of 6%. IAF started inducting female pilots in non-combat roles in 1993, and combat roles in 2016

The youngest, Wally Funk, was a 23-year-old flight instructor — who, in 2021 at the age of 82, became the oldest person to go to space when she travelled on Blue Origin's New Shepard suborbital spacecraft and broke the 23-year record held by John Glenn, the first American to orbit Earth, who also remains the oldest man to travel to space as a 77-year-old in 1998.

As it happens, this week, Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin announced that Florida-based Indian entrepreneur and licensed pilot Gopichand Thotakura will be part of the passenger crew of the next New Shepard space tourism mission. This is welcome news.

Last June, when Narendra Modi visited Washington DC, Joe Biden announced that India and the US will collaborate to send an Indian astronaut to ISS in 2024. We are four months into 2024, and there are murmurs that the flight that Biden promised will likely happen on a private mission run by Axiom Space, and India will probably have to pay for the ride.

Axiom Space is a Houston-based company that operates end-to-end missions to ISS. A commercial provider of human space-flight services, it has flown wealthy civilians as space tourists and newbie astronauts from countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Sweden. Axiom is also developing a habitable commercial module for ISS, under contract from Nasa.

So far, three Axiom



LAST JUNE, BIDEN ANNOUNCED

that India and the US will collaborate to send an Indian astronaut to ISS in 2024. There are murmurs the flight could happen on a private mission run by Axiom Space. Let the gaganaut be a woman

missions have taken place, with the last flight being this January. Each mission carried a quartet that flew on board SpaceX's Crew Dragon capsule, atop a Falcon 9 rocket launched from the Kennedy Space Centre. A quick scan of Axiom's first three missions reveals the crew composition. The mission commander is a retired Nasa astronaut with extensive experience. The rest of the crew can be practically anybody who can pay for the ride, or has a sponsor and can pass basic physiological and psychological tests.

Gaganyaan's first gaganaut selection round was a missed opportunity. India now has a chance to remedy that, and grandly so. Let us make 2024 a historical year for India's human space-flight programme by sending a woman to the orbiting ISS.

The writer is a spaceship designer, and has worked for the ISS programme with Boeing



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Not a Man, I'm a Hat

SUMIT PAUL

A famous line by William Faulkner goes like this, 'I'm not a man. I'm a hat.' An intriguing statement, it challenges us to think about ways in which we define ourselves and our place in the world. By presenting this unconventional perspective, 'I'm a hat', Faulkner invites us to explore the complexities of existence and the possibilities of self-discovery. He further adds, 'To be a man is to have an identity which is often fixed and unchanged. But a hat can fit on any head. I, therefore, prefer a hat over a man.'

All of us have an identity. Every man is a vortex of different labels. We're Indians, Americans, Brits, Aussies and what not. We further 'fine tune' our national identity to being a Maharashtrian, Punjabi; belonging to this caste, that caste; this faith and that faith; and so on. Different labels define our identity. French existentialist Albert Camus also said the same thing, albeit in different words. He said, 'Humans are living under a heavy burden of existence and identity. There's no lightness, no levity. We've forgotten to live with fluidity.'

Here comes the significance of a hat that's so light, fluid and non-serious. Our so-called identities are our enemies. They're labels. All these labels and identities are actually accidents of birth. You could have been born in Pakistan, proudly declared that you were a Pakistani and disliked India as a de rigueur emotion, rather a condition.

But a hat doesn't discriminate among humans. It fits on the head of an Indian as easily as it does on a Pakistani's head. It's the human head that creates all these differences. A hat remains aloof and laughs at human follies. It's unlike a man.

# Taking Fintech to the Next Level



Bipin Preet Singh

The fusion of digital payments and advanced technologies has ushered a paradigm shift. Fintech is reshaping monetary interactions, and as India progresses towards a cashless society, it assumes a pivotal role, driving financial inclusion and enabling millions to transition to the formal financial sphere.

This surge in fintech adoption has positioned India as a global fintech frontrunner. Its innovative solutions attract global investors, and position the country as a trailblazer in establishing a robust digital public infrastructure (DPI) ecosystem, a pivotal factor in enhancing financial inclusion. The dynamic DPI framework, strengthened by fintech advancements, is projected to inject a windfall of \$400 bn into the economy in seven years. With an impressive 87% fintech adoption rate, India ranks No. 1, shattering global averages and bringing financial services to unbanked populations.

However, it's important to remember that unchecked growth can be

risky. Data breaches and unfair lending practices can undermine consumer trust and financial stability.

As the world's third-largest fintech powerhouse, with about 10,244 entities growing at 14% CAGR, India's expansion highlights the importance of a robust regulatory framework to ensure that growth remains scalable and sustainable. Striking the right balance between fuelling innovation and ensuring responsible practices will be key to propelling India's fintech revolution to even greater heights. Regulatory focus should be on:

► **Data is key** In the age of big data, data privacy and security regulations are paramount. A clear framework outlining data protection protocols will help build customer trust, fostering faster fintech adoption.

► **Ensure transparency** A well-regulated market with transparent practices will, in turn, instil confidence among investors. Regulations will also deter predatory practices and ensure fair competition, ultimately protecting consumers and fuelling a thriving ecosystem. It's a win-win for all — consumers gain trust, businesses operate with clarity and the sector flourishes on a foundation of stability.

► **Catalyse innovation** By establishing clear boundaries, a framework will create a safe space for



Ready for the upswing

experimentation and calculated risk-taking, thereby incentivising fintech companies to explore innovative solutions and business models. This will benefit consumers by providing them with a broader range of secure, efficient financial products and services.

Regulatory sandboxes, for example, can provide a controlled environment for fintech startups to evaluate and refine their ideas before full-scale market launch. This fosters a culture of responsible innovation that pushes the boundaries of what's possible within the fintech landscape.

GoI's commitment to building a resilient fintech ecosystem is commendable. Recent discussions between Nirmala Sitharaman, regulators and fintech players speak of a collaborative spirit. RBI's recent regulations for payment gateways, cross-border players and digital lending startups prioritise security and efficiency in digital transacti-

ons. These guidelines, encompassing data localisation, mandatory audits and increased transparency in pricing, demonstrate a focus on consumer protection.

RBI's proposed framework for a self-regulatory organisation (SRO) for fintech companies is another noteworthy move. SRO, established and managed by the industry, would be empowered to set standards, oversee and enforce them, and provide grievance redressal and dispute resolution mechanisms. It will significantly enhance the effectiveness and flexibility of fintech's interactions with the regulators.

FM's recent meeting with regulators and fintech leaders identified critical areas for collaboration. Two particularly promising initiatives:

► **Simplification of KYC processes.**  
► **Focus on cybercrime within the upcoming Digital India Act.**

Streamlined KYC procedures and data localisation will enhance user experience and facilitate operations for legitimate businesses, ultimately safeguarding consumer data. This public-private collaboration ensures regulations evolve alongside the dynamic fintech landscape. By working together, GoI, regulators and fintech companies can unlock the full potential of India's digital financial revolution.

The writer is co-founder and CEO, MobiKwik



## Visits to The Barber

One day, a mithai shop-owner went to a salon for a haircut. After the cut, he asked about his bill, and the barber replied, 'I cannot accept money from you this week. It's Ramzan.' The mithai-wala was pleased and left the shop. When the barber went to open his shop the next morning, he found two boxes of sweets waiting for him at the salon's entrance.

Later, a mobile shop-owner comes in for a haircut, and when he tries to pay his bill, the barber again replied, 'I cannot accept money from you. It's Ramzan this week.'



The customer was happy and left. The next morning

when the barber went to open up only to find a new mobile phone inside a box waiting for him at the door.

Then, a politician came in for a haircut. When he went to pay his bill, the barber again replied, 'I cannot accept money from you. It's the last day of Ramzan today.' The politician was very happy and left the shop. The next evening on Eid, there were a dozen politicians lined up at the salon waiting for a free haircut.

### Chat Room

## Blood Following Its Speed Limit?

Appropos the Edit, 'Make BP Measuring Like Hitting the Gym' (Apr 12), in India, millions of people do not know about the importance of blood pressure (BP), leave alone how to measure and monitor it. High BP is the single biggest cause for ailments related to heart, kidney and eyes, besides the nervous system. The systolic and diastolic pressures have their own significance and unless measured and monitored regularly, may create health issues in the long term. BP measuring can be a free facility in all medical shops, hospitals, nursing homes, consulting rooms, etc. Just like polio vaccination, BP reading can be carried out as a programme in rural areas and in places where poor people live, helping identify outliers who can be given requisite treatment.

M RAGHURAMAN  
Mumbai

# Let's Fix the Dog 'Menace' We Made



Bharati Chaturvedi

Urban India's relationship with dogs — those living on streets and inside homes — demonstrates how frail, cruel and unreasonable our relationship with our transforming cities has become. In the recent past, several incidents involving packs of dogs mauling people, sometimes with fatal consequences, have caused outrage, fear and anger. Alongside these, there have been also plenty of reports of unimaginable cruelty to dogs.

Recently, GoI banned 23 'dangerous dog breeds', emphasising that they are unsafe for humans. Indians seem to be struggling to control dogs inside and outside their personal spaces, which apparently is gnawing away at the quality of life in urban India.

Street dogs have hard lives. As their numbers shoot up — reportedly now touching 35 mn — they compete for food, since what they find in garbage bins or from the feeder community is not enough. With fewer resources to live off and increased numbers, dog packs are forced to protect their territories, including feeding zones, with unprecedented

ferocity.

This explosion of 'self-maintained dogs' amid human habitation is a gross failure of municipal corporations. But some of the blame lies with us, too. As a society, we must consider planning and managing our coexistence with other urban creatures. We don't seek local solutions to protect public health and ensure the well-being of different animals.

Indian municipalities lack the skills, equipment and funds to scientifically reduce the dog population. While they should urgently prioritise sterilisation and vaccination, and develop quality homes for



It's a dog's life

abandoned and injured dogs, they can also leverage their power in other ways.

► **Feed the solution** Instead of seeking alliance, bitter quarrels break out between dog feeders and those who are against dogs and feeding them. Municipalities can create solutions by ensuring dogs are fed rather than left hungry — and angry.

Feeding points can be made outside core residential enclaves to reduce confrontation. Better waste management and a dedicated, well-resourced animal cell in municipalities can help both dog lovers and citizens who don't like dogs.

► **Ban breeding** Some dog breeds are bred for specific roles — guarding livestock, winning dog fights or being ferocious guards. Why should we expect them to behave like docile creatures just because they are no longer required to work? Indeed, it is cruel for work dogs not to be able to use those parts of themselves that are intrinsic to their breed and keep them genetically primed.

While some individual dogs belonging to 'dangerous breeds' may be gentle, others can be terrifying. State actors should not distinguish between one another. Their primary duty is to ensure public safety. This ban is correctly premised on the widely accepted precautionary principle.

Those who keep breeds unsuitable for life in concretised, cramped ur-

ban spaces should rethink. The right to own whichever breed a person fancies should not interfere with safe common spaces, regardless of an individual dog's temperament.

A mere ban cannot stop the ownership of ferocious dogs. Municipalities should also crack the whip down on ruthless reproduction shops run by breeders. While it is understandable that many people might want a pedigreed dog, paralyzing the rampant breeding and availability of dangerous dogs should be an immediate target.

► **Plan end-life** Existing dangerous breeds need a compassionate plan, too. The state, along with vets, neighbourhood associations and even owners, should plan for them to be the last generation of their kind in unsuitable urban spaces.

Let them live with dignity, but stricter norms should be imposed on their owners. And let them not be replaced with the same breeds. If anything, India needs a campaign to enable people to voluntarily slam the brakes on such practices and ownerships.

India's urban war on dogs is a preventable hostility. Investing in sound strategic planning, funds, concerted efforts and monitoring is as essential to our quality of life as having roads without potholes or having usable neighbourhood parks.

The writer is founder-director, Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group

# Opinion

SATURDAY, APRIL 13, 2024



## LAW IS BLIND

Vice president Jagdeep Dhankhar

I have seen a transformative change in the last few years, which has strengthened the concept of equality before the law, ensuring all are subject to law, none are above the law, and none can claim immunity from the law

## Rational exuberance

The lesson from some start-ups raising big money is that investors have become more prudent

**R**EPORTS THAT MEESHO, Zepto, and Navi are in the midst of big fund-raises have prompted many in the start-up world to say the funding winter is finally coming to an end. The investors are yet to sign off on the term sheets but even if the three are able to mop up \$700-800 million between them, it would be something to cheer about. In 2023, investments by private equity firms slumped to about \$8 billion, a fifth of the levels seen in 2021. Moreover, even in the March quarter, the quantum of investment at \$1.6 billion was 40% smaller than in the comparable quarter of 2023. Worse, a study by Bain & Company and Indian Venture and Alternate Capital Association noted that 35,000 ventures were shuttered during the year.

Against this gloomy backdrop, some chunky deals would be a sign investors haven't altogether given up on start-ups. However, it is at best a signal of a thaw. To be sure, as Info Edge founder Sanjeev Bikhchandani recently observed, there will always be money to back a sound business. But the days of too much money chasing too few deals and driving up valuations to stratospheric levels seem to be over. The abundance of liquidity in the global market — the result of monetary easing by the US Fed — had created an environment in which money was backing even half-baked ideas. The days of closing out a deal over the weekend are over and the timelines for sealing a transaction can now stretch to as long as six months. Promoters are no longer juggling investors, they're chasing them. That's evident from the fall in the number of deals which were down a sharp 56% in 2023 over 2021.

Indeed, private equity and venture capital players are a chastened lot and have realised there's no point backing every horse on the course. In fact, they're becoming cautious even when it comes to top-class businesses as seen in the increasing number of down rounds — 2023 saw just two unicorns. Moreover, they are also marking down the valuations of their investee companies. In Q1, investments in late-stage rounds were down 47% while early-stage rounds saw a 28% increase. It's not as though investors are short of money. Rajan Anandan of Sequoia recently indicated that an estimated \$20 billion is waiting to be put to work. It's just that PEs and VCs are no longer in a tearing hurry, they are writing cheques but after doing a lot more due diligence than they were doing earlier. The fact is that while there have been many success stories — Zomato, Honasa, Nykaa, Delhivery — there have also been some terrible casualties like a Byju's or a PayTm.

The good news is that valuations are correcting so we could expect a flurry of deals in the next few months. For their part, promoters need to temper their expectations. Many of those who are unable to raise money at their current valuations are instead opting for loans to run the business, but leveraging the business can turn out to be risky. Instead, they must rein in costs, lower the cash burn, and improve profitability as many are doing by closing down unviable operations and letting go of employees — last year, 35,000 people lost their jobs. What should give investors confidence is the strong pick-up in the e-commerce space. This would encourage them to take more bets.

## FTAs THROUGH THE DECADE

THE NDA'S FOREIGN TRADE POLICY, VIEWED THROUGH FTAs, HAS CHANGED OVER TWO TERMS

# A story of two halves

## BISWAJIT DHAR

Distinguished professor, Council for Social Development



**T**HE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC Alliance (NDA) government's foreign trade policy over its decade in power, viewed through its engagements in the bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), can best be characterised as a story of two halves. During the later years of its first term in office, the government was intent on reviewing the three major FTAs that the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government had endorsed, with the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Republic of Korea, and Japan, arguing that these were against national interests. The most defining moment of this phase was India's withdrawal from East Asia's mega-regional FTA, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In its second term and following the post-Covid recovery, the NDA government did a complete U-turn, commencing negotiations with eight countries/regions, including those that were being negotiated prior to the government took office and were stalled prior to the 2014 elections. This new-found enthusiasm resulted in the conclusion of two new-generation FTAs with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

When the NDA government took office, few could have anticipated that it would soon turn FTA-sceptic. Within a few months, the government gave a strong endorsement to the burgeoning economic relations with its partners in East Asia, which went back to the "Look East Policy" of the early 1990s by upgrading it to the "Act East Policy". Through this policy shift, economic relations with the East Asian countries were sought to be intensified by promoting economic cooperation and developing strategic relationships, thereby providing enhanced connectivity in its broadest sense. More importantly, the RCEP received political backing at the highest

level with India giving assurances to "exert efforts" for an early conclusion of the mega-regional trade agreement.

But there were also signs of strain in the process of India's East Asian integration with the implementation of its three functional FTAs. The benefits accruing from these FTAs as regards merchandise trade were highly asymmetrical and were overwhelmingly against India. In other words, India was facing growing imbalances on its merchandise trade account with almost all the partner countries. More worrisome for India was the fact that while its exports were not able to take advantage of the market opening in partner countries, its imports from these countries had escalated. Furthermore, India's exports were focused more on raw materials and intermediate products, but its imports from FTA partners were largely finished products. It could thus be argued that India was exporting jobs and value addition through its trade engagements with these countries. Unfortunately, there was no evidence of changes in India's trade in services, as disaggregated data on services trade are not available from official sources. Services trade with the East Asian partners could well have improved as India's trade in services has always been more buoyant as compared to its merchandise trade. Non-availability of

services trade data or for that matter any assessment of trade performance of these sectors from the government contributed towards worsening perceptions about these agreements.

Although the government tacitly supported the RCEP, various stakeholders in the country had voted against this proposed agreement arguing that it would increase imports of agriculture and dairy products from Australia and New Zealand, respectively, and manufactured products from China. There was, thus, a general view that endorsing the RCEP would be detrimental to the interests of India's agriculture and industry. With India and China's differences over the border issues escalating towards the end of the NDA government's first term in office, the decision to walk away from the RCEP negotiations perhaps became easier.

The second phase of the NDA government's trade engagements was initiated in the third quarter of 2021 with the announcement that India and the UAE would commence negotiations for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). This was the first of several broad-based agreements on which negotiations were initiated with several countries/regions, which included the United Kingdom (UK) and the Eurasian Economic Union. Besides,

long-stalled CEPA negotiations with the European Union, Canada, and Australia were also resumed.

Three features of the NDA government's engagements for concluding bilateral trade agreements distinguished this phase from those in its first term. First, the scepticism regarding FTAs that had dominated its earlier engagements seemed to have been diluted. Secondly, the government was willing to include several "sensitive" areas like government procurement and intellectual property rights (IPRs), which it had red-lined in the past. And, finally, there was an eagerness to conclude at least some of the deals, the best example of which was the CEPA with the UAE that was concluded in three months.

But the most significant change in the government's attitude towards FTAs was seen through the recently-concluded agreement with the EFTA. This agreement is noteworthy for the firsts from the point of view of India. One, this is the first comprehensive trade agreement that India has concluded with advanced countries. Secondly, India agreed to include areas like IPRs and labour and environmental standards that it had resolutely refused to do in any bilateral trade deal. India's commitments in these areas would involve amendment of its domestic laws. From a public interest perspective, the most critical would be the likely amendments in the Patents Act that can strengthen the rights of patent holders. With the rights-holders exercising stronger control over the market, there is a real possibility that prices of medicines could significantly increase. This is an augury that the country can ill-afford given that high costs of healthcare already pose a heavy burden on a large section of the society. The government, therefore, needs to take adequate care to ensure that trade deals do not undermine the country's development imperatives.

The most significant change in the government's attitude towards FTAs was seen through the recently-concluded agreement with the EFTA

## Have FDI flows slowed in FY24?



## SAUGATA BHATTACHARYA

The author is an economist

News reports have flagged signs of a deepening slowdown. But inflows remain strong, although underlying push and pull factors have changed

## A CEO's pay raises massive questions for London

**ASTRAZENECA PLC'S PASCAL** Soriot got his pay rise, not without some drama. The highest-paid chief executive officer of a FTSE 100 company will receive a maximum of £18.7 million (\$23.5 million) this year, up from £16.9 million in 2023, after an insufficient 36% of shareholders voted against the drugmaker's remuneration policy at its annual general meeting Thursday. That was a smaller backlash than three years ago, the last time the compensation programme came up for approval, when 40% of investors dissented.

The public debate over excessive executive pay spurred by Soriot's package reflects the tensions in the UK's efforts to shore up London's flagging status as a viable venue for globally competitive major companies. Soriot is "massively underpaid", a US top-20 shareholder of AstraZeneca told the *Financial Times* two days before the meeting. On the same day, the former head of Shell PLC said the oil company is "massively under-valued" in London. Simultaneous warning signs from Britain's two most valuable publicly traded companies are a massive headache for a market that is already losing listings to New York, where valuations are higher and executive pay is more generous.

Whether Soriot is over or underpaid is a value judgement that depends on your choice of comparison. He earned more than twice as much last year as Lars Fruergaard Jorgensen, CEO of Novo Nordisk A/S, the Danish drugmaker that has outperformed under his leadership to extend its lead as Europe's largest pharmaceutical company by market value. Soriot looks rather less well-compensated when set alongside Albert Bourla of Pfizer Inc., who took home \$21.6 million last year and has overseen a 36% share-price decline since he became CEO in January 2019. Proxy advisory firms Glass Lewis & Co. and Institutional Shareholder Services Inc. both recommended voting against AstraZeneca's remuneration policy, deeming the CEO's pay package excessive.

What is beyond dispute is that Soriot has been a successful leader of Cambridge-based AstraZeneca. The 64-year-old French national revitalised the company by investing heavily in cancer research, yielding a series of blockbuster drugs and driving a near sixfold total return in the stock (including reinvested dividends) since he became CEO in October 2012. Along the way, he also saw off a takeover bid from New York-based Pfizer, a company that AstraZeneca has since overtaken by market value.

In the US, where Soriot would rank well outside the top 100 best-remunerated CEOs based on 2022 pay data collated by the AFL-CIO union, it's hard to imagine his package causing even a ripple. Plenty of academic studies question whether CEO pay in America is a genuinely competitive market, but there is a generally higher public tolerance for extreme rewards.

Executive compensation is a more emotive and politically sensitive subject in Britain, which tends to frown on such vulgar excess at the best of times. The country has been going through a cost-of-living crisis, during which both the prime minister and the central bank have urged pay restraint. Lavish CEO remuneration awards land awkwardly in such an environment. "Every successful executive operates within the context of their company and every company operates within the context of wider society," as Luke Hildyard, director of London-based think tank the High Pay Centre, observed to me.

This is the crux of the issue. Companies such as AstraZeneca exist within a milieu of cultural norms and expectations but compete in a global market that is no respecter of boundaries. If these two aspects are in conflict, which is to prevail?

The superior economic and stock-market performance of the US is exerting a gravitational pull in favour of its model. Restricting the ability of companies to compete for talent, on grounds of social cohesion and moral justice, will only hurt the development of the globally consequential enterprises that the UK must nurture to drive innovation and economic growth, as London Stock Exchange CEO Julia Hoggett warned last year.

Sustained investor opposition to Soriot's pay award shows the exchange has yet to win this argument. The implications for London's capital market are sobering.

**ONE OF THE** most effective drivers of sustained gross domestic product (GDP) growth is private sector investment, which, to the limited extent of available data, does not yet appear to have become broad-based. But private sector investment, although concentrated in a few sectors, does appear to have started rising in FY23 itself, accelerating in H1 FY24.

One crucial channel of private investment is foreign direct investment (FDI), important not just in terms of investment commitments but even more as an indicator of sentiment, especially foreign investor interest and confidence in India's growth story and business opportunity. In this context, multiple news reports have flagged signs of a slowdown in FDI inflows in FY23, which has only deepened with the numbers for the months of April-January FY24 (10MFY24). These concerns are misplaced. This article tries to point to the flawed reasoning. The foreign investment narrative is far richer in terms of the underlying dynamics of FDI inflows and outflows.

First, in order to make sense of the data, the definitions underlying the numbers need to be understood. The reported slowdown pertains to "net FDI" flows, which is not the appropriate metric. The top line is gross FDI (that is total inflows) minus outflows on various accounting heads. The first element in outflows are "repatriations" of existing FDI investors; a component of these outflows are investors exiting because conditions of investment were not met.

More importantly, existing investors exit older investments, which is the established model for early-stage investors, particularly given the ongoing initial public offering (IPO) boom. Lastly, there are outbound FDI investments from Indian companies, looking to invest in minerals, and acquiring shares in foreign firms — in essence, looking to access consumer markets, minerals and other inputs, and acquiring technology.

Second, the following are the reported numbers of actual FDI investment inflows. Over April-January of FY24 (10MFY24), net FDI inflows totalled \$15.42 billion, compared to \$26.7 billion and \$31.7 billion over the corresponding 10MFY23 and 10MFY22, respectively. This is definitely a large drop. However, gross FDI remained more or less at the same levels over the corresponding 10 months: \$59.5 billion in FY24, and \$61.26 billion in FY23. However, these amounts remain lower than the gross investments of the 10 months of the previous two fiscal years, FY21 and FY22 (\$70.4 billion and \$69.6 billion, respectively).

Third, what explains this? The following are some potential causal factors of, and reasons for, the changes in these flows. One of the reasons for the unusually high inflow in FY21 (the first pandemic year) was a series of funds infusion from investors across the world into com-

panies of one specific conglomerate. This was augmented by private equity/venture capital (PE/VC) investors, funding start-ups and tech companies during the online boom. This flow was largely enabled by the flood of liquidity infused by the global central banks during the early pandemic years. Withdrawal of liquidity from end-2022 quickly led to a scaling back of these investments, leading to a more "normal" level of inflows. This is corroborated by official data. Among the top 10 FDI sectors, flows into computer software and hardware during 9MFY24 dropped to \$3.4 billion (compared to \$9.4 billion and \$14.5 billion in the full FY23 and FY22, respectively). Note, though, that a lot of these non-start-up investments by FDI investors were actually mergers and acquisitions of existing commercial entities, and not investments in new projects. In that context, Grant Thornton Bharat's Dealtracker records a 59% decrease in deals by value in 2023 compared to 2022.

A more notable development — the core of the FDI slowdown narrative relating to the drop in net inflows — was a significant increase in repatriation and disinvestment of FDI capital. This jumped to \$34 billion in the 10MFY24, compared to \$24.1 billion, \$24.6 billion and \$15.8 billion in the corresponding 10 months of the previous three years. The causes remain unresolved, in the

absence of specific data. The presumption is that much of this repatriation spike in FY24 were investors exiting their private (and possibly public) equity holdings at a profit with the IPOs. As a subset, some of these gross inflows might have been intended for funding equity via complex financial structures, which did not fructify.

There is one more possible reason for repatriation: investors sometimes bring in funds for certain projects, which might not ultimately be implemented due to inability to get permissions and regulatory clearances. This remains unlikely, however, in the absence of any media reports of cancellation of projects with large foreign equity investments. This presumption is also bolstered by figures on reinvestment of profits by existing FDI investors — \$16.1 billion in 10MFY24 and has been more or less stable. This implies that India investments are expected to remain profitable in future.

Given all this, what might we expect of FDI inflows in the coming years? Consider the sectors which got a third of inflows — finance (banks, non-banking financial companies, insurance, mid-office) and software (global capability centres, R&D, testing and analysis, etc.). This is likely to sustain. The challenge is to increase investments in other segments, particularly manufacturing. The performance-linked investment scheme has already led to success in the electronics and cellphone manufacturing ecosystem. The policies and administrative ecosystem which facilitated this needs to be replicated in other sectors.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Relief for DMRC

The belief that 'justice always prevails' has been proven right as the Supreme Court, using its powers, overruled its own 2021 verdict and relieve the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) of a burden of ₹7,687 crore in a dispute with a former concessionaire. The verdict absolves 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. The petition is founded on the principle that the court's concern for justice is no less important than the principle of finality. 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 Commissioner Metro Rail Safety certificate was a vital piece of evidence. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### Formulating oil prices

Apropos of 'Oil troubles' (April 12), it is true the tensions around the Gulf may not end in the near future as most of the leaders of the countries holding high stakes in the ongoing tussle are set to face elections. Therefore, the ongoing war in the region gains more importance. But the Indian condition is different. When crude oil was priced negatively worldwide, its derivatives saw sharp increases domestically. In

spite of sanctions on Russian crude oil, Indian private players under the safety cover from the government are enjoying the benefit instead of passing it on to the public. As the country is in election mode, the cost of fuel witnessed a very marginal reduction, but it will surely be hiked with vengeance after the elections. We need a scientific formula. —AG Rajmohan, Anantapur

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## OPINION

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OUR TAKE

## Leader in jail, party in crisis

AAP's corruption plank is under a cloud and the party's ability to hold its flock together amid rumours of defections is being tested

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), in office in Delhi and Punjab, is facing the worst crisis of its short life. Since the alleged Delhi liquor scam broke out in 2021, the party has been under siege with the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on the heels of its senior leadership. ED's first picks were senior Delhi ministers, Manish Sisodia and Satyendra Jain (the latter in a case not related to liquor), and the hunt climaxed with the arrest of Delhi chief minister (CM) and the party's founder-chief Arvind Kejriwal in late March. Its reputation under a cloud, the party is now staring at a potential implosion: Rumours are afoot about an exodus of leaders, including ministers, legislators and Rajya Sabha MPs (the process has already begun with some high-profile exits in Punjab and Delhi and there is speculation of more to come). It doesn't help that senior party leaders themselves are talking about threats and inducements extended to wean away their colleagues even as many of the party's high-profile leaders, including MPs and legislators, are adding grist to the rumour mills by their eloquent silence/absence at a time the party is mobilising opinion against the arrest of Kejriwal. The optics could hurt the party's electoral prospects.

Just as the party gave the impression that it could defend the arrest of Kejriwal on corruption charges and even turn it to its advantage — the Opposition's Ramlila Maidan rally was also a solidarity meeting for Kejriwal — the resignation of Delhi minister Raaj Kumar Anand has threatened to unravel its narrative. Anand, who was raided by ED, quit the party earlier this week after alleging that it was enmeshed in corruption. Two weeks earlier, the party's lone MP in Punjab had resigned to join the BJP. The scandals, allegations, and resignations suggest a party uncertain of its course amidst multiple adversities.

At the moment, the AAP is in danger of losing its core agenda and cadres. The party grew out of the 2012 anti-corruption movement and made corruption-free governance its *raison d'être*. The party's welfare politics — focussed on providing subsidised public goods including electricity and water, education and health care — grew out of the anti-corruption agenda, which it publicised as the Delhi model of governance. But the party's run-ins with the Delhi lieutenant governor and bureaucracy have slowed down the administration and hurt its governance claims. Having embraced a personality cult built around its leader, the party now appears adrift in his absence. Kejriwal, a senior party leader once said, was not just a person but an idea. However, this idea may be losing sheen following his arrest; his refusal to leave office despite his incarceration — the only CM in the history of independent India to do so — also raises questions about propriety, (it is no reflection on the merit of the case though) even if courts have refused to weigh in on the topic.

The AAP was an unusual party to begin with. Its claim to be a post-ideological phenomenon that has more in common with business start-ups than a political party has been tested severely. Some of its founding leaders left the party over differences of opinion with Kejriwal in the party's early days. The strategy to turn a movement-oriented group into an extension of a political persona may now test its resilience as a political party. The party's challenge in the coming days will be to keep its flock together and protect its brand from being tainted by the very same charge that it once hurled at the political mainstream to declare its distinct identity.

THIRD EYE

Barkha Dutt



## A Vadra twist in Congress's Amethi story

Could Robert Vadra be pitching for a nomination in party's prestige seat with the sanction of the Congress leadership?

What does one make of Robert Vadra, the businessman husband of Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, volunteering himself as the party's Lok Sabha candidate from Amethi in Uttar Pradesh (UP)? What seemed to be at first a general remark about the future has subsequently evolved into a very specific pitch for this election. Vadra told IANS, a news agency, that he received calls from across India, and such was the clamour for him that posters were springing up in different pockets of India urging him to jump into the fray.

Is it a mere, slightly amusing distraction or is there more to it than meets the eye?

Aditi Singh, former Congresswoman and today the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) legislator from the Rae Bareilly Sadar assembly segment, told me that "at a personal level..." she found it "...hilarious and at a professional level, it's baffling".

This is not the first time Vadra has expressed an appetite for active electoral politics. As far back as 2012 and well before his wife had a formal, hands-on role in the management of the party, Vadra told me in an interview that if he entered politics, it would be a full-time career. Even then he referenced the time he had spent in Amethi and Rae Bareilly. Even then, more than a decade ago, he believed people sought a role in public life from him.

While every Indian citizen is free to contest elections, it is the timing of this round of state-

ments by Vadra that is raising eyebrows. The Congress has not yet named candidates for either constituency in a state that has till now been the launch pad for the prime ministership of every single member of the Nehru-Gandhi family. By contrast, BJP's Smriti Irani has set up home in Amethi and dares Rahul Gandhi, almost every day to go head to head with her. She took her battle pointedly to Rahul Gandhi's turf with a day on the campaign trail in Wayanad, Kerala.

Sure, the delay by the Congress could well be strategic. Word is that the party has decided not to reveal its hand in UP till polling in Wayanad is over. There's nearly a month between the election in Wayanad and Amethi. The Congress thinking might be to not risk irking the Wayanad voter with any parallel talk about Amethi. In Kerala, the Left parties, who have fielded Annie Raja against Gandhi in Wayanad, have already been taunting the Congress for being afraid of taking on the BJP directly in the Hindi heartland. Apart from being a long-time activist politician in her own right, Annie Raja is also the wife of Communist Party of India (CPI) leader D Raja, who was ironically seen standing by Gandhi's side in snow-draped Kashmir at

**THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME ROBERT VADRA HAS EXPRESSED AN APPETITE FOR ACTIVE ELECTORAL POLITICS. AS FAR BACK AS 2012, VADRA TOLD ME IN AN INTERVIEW THAT IF HE ENTERED POLITICS, IT WOULD BE A FULL-TIME CAREER**



Could Robert Vadra have spoken without a go-ahead from his family? Unlikely. In that case, we should not treat his comments as either casual or off the cuff.

the end of the first leg of Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra. With Gandhi's entry, the CPI vote share in the Wayanad seat fell close to 15 points in 2019 as the Congress vote share jumped to nearly 65%. But, in 2024, with a renewed aggression by the Left and focused criticism on Gandhi's "absence", the Congress probably wants to take no chances. So, expect an announcement after the Kerala election is behind them.

That still gives us no clue to explain Vadra's utterances.

His *suo motu* chatter of a possible Amethi candidature clearly does the Congress no favours given their own prevarication. If anything, it creates an awkward situation for the Congress, which is already looking nervous and uncertain about these contests.

Unless one looks at it through another lens. Could Vadra have spoken without a go-ahead from his family? Unlikely. In that case, we should not treat his comments as either casual or off the cuff.

In this context, Vadra's comments have three possible explanations. First, he is serious and could be the Congress candidate. Any defeat is

on him and insulates the Gandhi sibling; any win is a bonus.

Second, he is speaking as a proxy for Priyanka Gandhi and seeking a larger role for her. This, while theoretically possible, doesn't make much sense given how close the brother and sister are. And yet, could it be as author Sugata Srinivasaraju told me, "a case of a husband laying claim to his wife's political inheritance?"

Finally, could it be a well-timed deflection to keep the buzz around the Congress, Gandhi and Amethi alive, while the party buys time in Wayanad, Kerala?

We don't know for sure. But no one would believe that in the middle of an existential election for the Congress party, a family member who is not formally in politics, would be permitted to be a loose cannon.

Hence, we should take Vadra's comments as sanctioned by the party leadership.

And in that case, wait for the Amethi twist in the tale.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

## How the BSP ceased to be the force it once was in UP

Recently, when I visited the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) office on Mall Avenue Road in Lucknow, the Uttar Pradesh (UP) capital, it did not seem like the headquarters of a party that had been in power in the state four times, the last between 2007 and 2012. I first visited the party office in the summer of 2008, when I was writing my Masters' dissertation at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, on the rise of the BSP. In the 15 years since, the office had never once looked deserted, as it did this time.

For all the rhetoric and outward appearances, conversations with the volunteers who were hanging around made it clear that the party, at its very best, was hoping to win a couple of seats in the upcoming general elections and to keep its vote share from falling to a single-digit number. In the 2022 UP assembly elections, which the BSP contested alone as it is doing this time, the party got a mere 13% of the votes and won just one seat.

Why does it seem like the BSP is not in contention in the battle for UP's 80 Lok Sabha seats? There is a talk among both the supporters and detractors of BSP president Mayawati that the fear of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and other central government agencies probing charges of alleged corruption has influenced her decisions. It is being argued that Mayawati is under tremendous pressure to not engage politically if she wants to avoid going to jail. The arrest of several leaders from the Opposition ranks such as Hemant Soren, K Kavitha, Manish Sisodia, and Arvind Kejriwal among others, are

cited as examples.

When asked if leaders with a genuine mass base should fear such threats since their arrest may actually generate sympathy, and, in the case of Mayawati, this might actually help the BSP revive its fortunes, the response was, "Behenji koi apne liye thodi na shant ho gayi hai, unka jeevan to sanghoshon ka hi raha hai. Kai baar aadmi sabse lad leta hai, par naate rishtedaron ki vajah se chup reh jaata hai." (Mayawati is not quiet because she fears jail. Her life has been full of such struggles. Sometimes, people can fight everything, but they have to give up if their actions can harm their loved ones). According to this logic, Mayawati has decided to not actively campaign as she fears that the agencies would target her brother Anand Kumar, and her nephew and political heir, Akash Anand.

Kumar has served as the vice-president of the party on many occasions. Mayawati appointed Akash Anand as her successor last year. To many BSP supporters, the brother and nephew are Mayawati's fatal flaw. The proponents of this "fatal flaw" hypothesis cite many examples of past and present leaders, how their blind love proved to be their tragic undoing. And they go one step further, arguing that the BSP has been selectively putting up candidates to prevent any consolidation of the anti-BJP vote in this election. This is also being cited as a reason why Mayawati did not make any effort to be included in the Opposition INDIA bloc.

This, however, doesn't explain the BSP's

crashing decline in the past decade. In the 2019 general elections, the party was very much in the fray, in alliance with the Samajwadi Party (SP). The fear of ED acting against her family members and other such threats existed then as well. So, what changed after the 2019 elections? The sharply increased tendency of the central agencies to book Opposition leaders since then may be a factor, but what matters more from an electoral-analysis perspective is the BSP's perceived strength on the ground.

The party became more vulnerable after the 2019 election results. Before this, it had received more than 20% of the votes in the state — both in the 2014 Lok Sabha and the 2017 assembly elections. Though the BSP received 19% of the votes and won 10 seats during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections from the state, it became amply clear that the party's ability to transfer its votes to allies is now limited. The BSP had merely piggy-backed on the SP's base. And this is why SP chief Akhilesh Yadav has vetoed any efforts to make the BSP a part of the Opposition alliance in UP.

There are also historical reasons for the BSP's decline. After winning the majority all by itself in the 2007 UP assembly elections, the BSP's premature ambition to launch itself as an all-India player in the 2009 Lok Sabha polls laid bare the limits of its potential. The peak of 2007 had hidden growing cracks within its rank-and-file, and it was soon clear that the party had become supremo-centred with no second line of leadership. It also seemed ideologically incoherent in its pursuit of power. While it is true that Mayawati's leadership helped the party expand its footprint, the BSP imagined and created by Kanshi Ram met its end in the process: The BSP had transformed itself from a social movement-turned-political party to a run-of-the-mill election machine. The relationship between the party workers and the

voters became increasingly transactional.

After the loss of power in the state in 2012, and the rise of Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014, the BSP started shrinking. Many leaders who had been with the BSP for decades were either shown the doors by Mayawati or left the party in search of greener pastures. In UP, Dalit voters make up ~22% of the total. Within this, more than two-thirds belong to the Jatavs, and this community has been the party's mainstay. The BJP first made inroads into the BSP's voter base in 2014 and 2017 and walked away with a substantial segment of non-Jatav Dalits. The post-poll surveys in 2019 and 2022 indicate that the BJP has succeeded in attracting a significant chunk of Jatav votes as well.

The BSP has now been completely marginalised in UP's increasingly bipolar polity. Its decline has lessons for all political parties, especially those organised around a single issue or are family-controlled and rely on a limited social base. Once the polity is polarised, the third and fourth parties in the system get squeezed further. This is what essentially happened with the BSP and Congress in 2022. The BSP got restricted with less than 13% votes and the Congress under 5%. The Congress is contesting in alliance with the SP for the 2024 general elections, and the BSP is going solo. In such a situation, it is likely the BSP may end up with a shrunken vote share.

Can the BSP revive after another loss? The short answer is "unlikely". The systemic feature of Indian politics, more often than not, fails to provide space to political parties for revival, especially when they keep getting pushed lower down the ladder. They mostly fragment, with some joining existing political formations, and others getting pushed into oblivion.

Rahul Verma is fellow, Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi. The views expressed are personal

ANOTHER DAY

Namita Bhandare



## Missing link in political empowerment of women

For all their stirring speeches while passing the women's reservation Bill in Parliament, political parties across the board have gone back to their usual stinginess in fielding women candidates.

Nobody knows when the women's reservation Bill will kick in. But until that happens, the proof of intent can be found in the number of women candidates contesting in 2024.

The picture is dismal. Of 1,625 candidates in the first phase, only 8% (134) are women.

Our outgoing Lok Sabha had the highest representation of women. But even then, at 14.72%, it was far below the global average of 26.9%.

We have a cadre of over one million women grassroots leaders thanks to reservations in the *panchayats* and local governance bodies. Why aren't we seeing these women in the state assemblies and Parliament? Or, for that matter, promoted within party organisations?

The story might not have been as depressing if it wasn't for the fact that women's rep-

resentation has been so slow to change since 1952 when we elected 22 women to Parliament. Still, that wasn't our worst year. In 1977, the women's representation in Lok Sabha plummeted to 3.51%.

But if you measure political participation in terms of voter turnout then we've done remarkably well. In 2019, we closed the gender gap with women voter participation at 67.18%, higher than male voter participation at 67.01%. There is evidence that women voters are increasingly making independent choices. In 2009, only 43% of women said they exercised their own choice. Ten years later in 2019, it was 81%.

It is these women that parties can no longer ignore. And, so, (drumroll) the resounding slogans of *nari shakti* (women's power), the free bus fares and subsidised gas cylinders, and the cash hand-outs.

As voters, women aren't a homogeneous block. We come with our individual thoughts and wishes. But if we were to generalise, then we tend to look at rising prices, gas cylinders, availability of water and electricity, roads, the state of our schools, affordable

health care, and law and order.

What we aren't demanding is that parties share power with us. What we aren't showing is our displeasure by voting out parties that systematically exclude women. Because, let's face it, if every party is guilty of exclusion, we would be left with the NOTA option. And so, it remains business as usual, Bill or no Bill. Parties feel no compulsion to give women a seat at the high table.

Women in India continue to hover on the peripheries — and not just in politics. We are less than 14% in the high courts and our labour force participation is around 30%. This is happening at a time when we've closed the gender gap in education.

We've been hearing the same excuses for excluding women for decades — women can't win elections, and there are no trained women leaders. If 2024 tells us one thing then it is this: The men won't give up power until they have to. Women will just have to wait.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

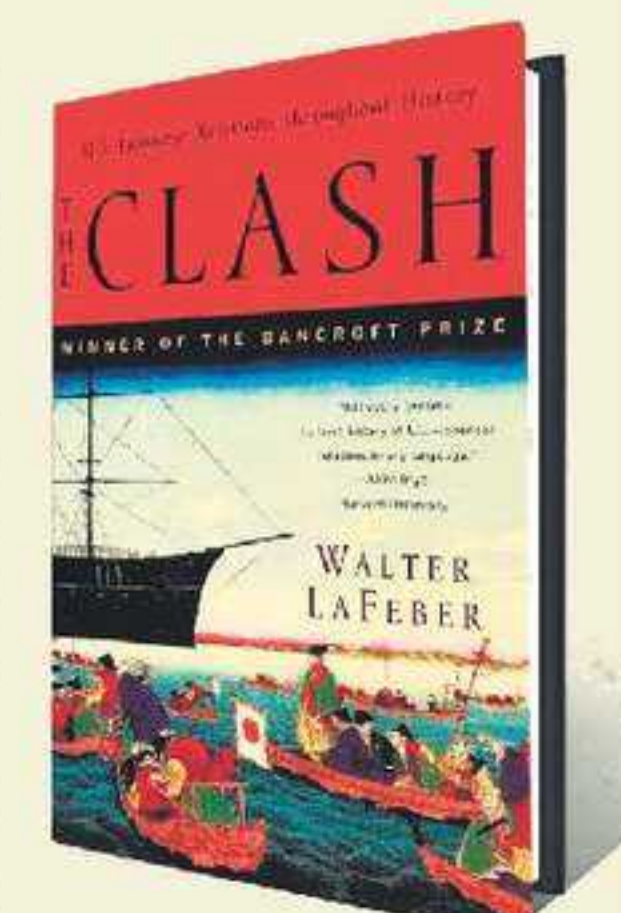
EDITOR'S PICK

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

### NAVIGATING THE INDO-PACIFIC STORM

US President Joe Biden and Japan's PM Fumio Kishida took a big leap to overhaul their bilateral partnership on Wednesday by announcing initiatives to boost defence cooperation. The announcements reflected DC's efforts to boost its ties with Tokyo in the wake of a belligerent China in the Indo-Pacific.

This week we recommend *The Clash: US-Japanese Relations Throughout History* by American academic Walter LaFeber, where the author undertakes a survey of the United States' complex relationship with Japan over 150 years. Documenting events stretching as far back as the 1850s when Commodore Matthew Perry spearheaded a campaign that ended Japan's isolationism, LaFeber explores the disagreements, tensions, and skirmishes between the two countries, leading up to the Cold War and beyond. LaFeber combines narrative flair with succinct analysis of US-Japan relations to provide a thoroughly engaging book that offers pointers to the present.



The Clash: Walter LaFeber  
Year: 1997



**WORDLY WISE**  
MONEY TAKES WINGS. THE ONLY THING THAT  
ENDURES IS CHARACTER.  
— OJ SIMPSON

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
**RAMNATH GOENKA**

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# Job number one

India is staring at an employment crisis. The solution may require reconsidering its bet on services



**BHASKAR CHAKRAVORTI**

## PROBLEM WITH COAL

Increasing global capacity of plants running on fossil fuel does not augur well for meeting Paris climate pact target

ACCORDING TO THE International Energy Agency (IEA), coal power plants produce a fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions, more than any other single source. Reducing the use of this fossil fuel is one of the most contentious issues in global climate change negotiations. The growing power station pipelines in China and India have, for long, been seen as the biggest hurdles in phasing out coal use. The latest report of the US-based think-tank, Global Energy Monitoring, shows a rise in the number of thermal power plants in the two countries. China alone accounted for two-thirds of the world's newly operating coal plants last year. The country augmented its coal power capacity at a rate not seen in the past nine years, despite promises "to contain" the use of fossil fuel. Also worrying is the slowing rate of coal power plant decommissioning in the US. At 9.7 GW, the country contributed nearly half of the capacity retired in 2023, but this was a drop from the 14.7 GW decommissioned last year. All this means that the coal-fired power capacity grew 2 per cent last year, the highest annual increase since 2016. This does not augur well for meeting the Paris Climate Pact's target of limiting the rise in global temperatures to less than 1.5 degree Celsius.

To meet the goal of phasing out current coal capacity by 2040, the world must retire an average of 126GW of coal power plants every year for the next 17 years. Barely a sixth of that capacity was retired last year. China has committed to retiring 30 GW by 2025. But last year, it decommissioned only 4 GW. The US, too, has much work to do. The country plans to retire 5 GW this year, the lowest since 2008. However, experts believe that competitive natural gas prices and expanding renewable generation capacity will lead to an appreciable reduction in coal installations in the next two years. The US Energy Information Administration estimates a 10 per cent reduction in coal use by 2025.

There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to the green transition. Emerging and developing economies are faced with the task of lifting large sections of their population out of poverty. Some of them, like India, have made appreciable strides in installing renewable energy. However, the growth of green energy hasn't kept pace with the rise in demand for electricity. In several of these countries, the coal sector is a big employer. The IEA has advocated fitting power plants "with systems that can capture carbon emissions before they are released into the atmosphere". The use of this technology has been debated for more than a decade. However, it's a costly proposition. Developmental finance institutions — national and global — have to work with key players to mitigate the social and environmental impacts of coal energy. The UNFCCC processes haven't given adequate importance to roping in these institutions to address one of the most vexed issues related to climate change. With global temperatures surging to record levels last year, this task cannot be postponed for long.

## A SOFTER LANDING

Inflation edges lower as food prices ease. Clarity over monsoon and oil prices will determine MPC pivot

DATA RELEASED BY the National Statistical Office on Friday showed that retail inflation, as measured by the consumer price index, eased to 4.85 per cent in March, down from 5.09 per cent in February. The decline was driven by a marginal softening of food prices. Despite that, food inflation remains elevated — the consumer food price index stood at 8.52 per cent in March. Core inflation, which excludes food and fuel, held steady at 3.5 per cent as per ICRA's assessment. This decline in the headline inflation in March alone is, however, unlikely to alter the stance of the monetary policy committee.

The disaggregated data shows that inflation remains elevated in cereals (8.37 per cent), eggs (10.33 per cent), vegetables (28.34 per cent) and pulses (17.71 per cent). Elevated inflation in dal, sabzi and roti before voting commences in national elections is not good news. However, rains this year could be better. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is expecting La Nina conditions to develop, as per a note by Crisil. This is normally associated with good rainfall, which should bode well for food production and, as a consequence, prices. On the other hand, in the non-food category, inflation remained subdued in most items such as household goods and services, clothing and footwear, recreation and amusement, with the exception of personal care and effects.

In his comments on the global economic scenario, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das noted that "the last mile of disinflation is turning out to be challenging." In the US, inflation edged upwards in March. Coupled with a stronger than expected growth momentum, this has led to many scaling back their expectations of both the timing and the number of rate cuts by the US Fed. On Thursday, the European Central Bank also held rates, though it signalled its willingness to cut rates soon, if there was "confidence that inflation is converging to the target in a sustained manner". In its last meeting, the MPC had voted to maintain the status quo in order to ensure that policy continues to be "actively disinflationary". The real interest rate is now at levels that some members of the committee consider as "excessive". However, any change in policy is only likely to occur when there is clarity over the monsoon, the trajectory of food inflation, and the path of crude oil prices. These could influence when and how the MPC pivots.

## MAKING OF A TRAGEDY

OJ Simpson's legacy is a complicated mix of America's anxieties over race, justice and nature of celebrity

CELEBRITY ATHLETE, a poster hero of black achievement, a television star: OJ Simpson was a man who liked to be at the centre of attention. In hindsight, it was perhaps foretold that one of America's biggest sports stars' eclipse would also make for riveting national television, changing the face of news — and what passes as entertainment — forever. It would foreground, too, America's anxieties over race, justice and the nature of celebrity. In life as in his death, on April 10 at the age of 76, it was this complicated legacy that became Simpson's bequeathal.

In 1995, Simpson's "trial of the century" for the murder of his former wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman transcended the courtroom and spilled into America's living rooms, exposing its deep societal divisions. Like the South African Olympian para-athlete Oscar Pistorius, who was convicted of killing his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp in 2013, this was a story that defied linear narratives. Simpson's case was as much about domestic violence as about race, about economic inequalities, prejudices and the loopholes woven into the justice system. And unlike the Blade Runner, Simpson managed to get away with an acquittal. Did race influence the verdict? Did fame? These are questions that have been teased out time and again in interviews and publications, talk shows and screen adaptations such as The OJ Simpson Story (1995), American Tragedy (2000), OJ: Made in America (2016) and The People v OJ Simpson: American Crime Story (2016). The case captured the blurring of the lines between tragedy and entertainment and the glutty for 24/7 television spectacle, where everything and nothing is news.

In every possible way, Simpson's story is a cautionary one — it speaks of the headiness of success but also the dark underbelly of fame. It speaks, too, of systemic prejudices and how truth stands to become a casualty when nuance is lost. In the post George-Floyd era, these are issues that continue to reverberate not just in the US but across the world.

MARK ZUCKERBERG'S META is opening its first data centre in India, on the Reliance Industries' Chennai campus. That's about 30 new jobs — give or take. That's only 30 steps towards the 90 million new non-farm jobs the country needs by 2030, according to McKinsey. We have heard that the Indian economy is on track to be the world's third largest: The fastest-growing, youngest, leading the world in the number of hours on smartphones, billionaires brandishing pop stars and beggars brandishing QR codes, and soon home to a Tesla factory. The one fly in the proverbial ointment is that the share of the working-age population actually working is 46.6 per cent. That takes some of the shine off of the economy's glitter; in other emerging markets the rate is closer to 70 per cent.

To be honest, even this modest statistic is rosier than the reality. Over half of all workers are self-employed. Even "unpaid helpers in family enterprises" are counted as self-employed.

Where are the jobs? The answer requires reconsidering India's original bet against the Asian formula for development: Conduct land reform, move excess labour from farms to factories, manufacture stuff with that abundant labour force, sell to the world. Instead, India's bet was on services.

In exporting services, it graduated from the 1990s call centres to the early 2000s outsourced IT and back-office services to a fuller menu of technology-enabled services offerings today, employing 5.4 million people. Former RBI governor, Raghuram Rajan, and his co-author, Rohit Lamba, have argued for leaning even further in this direction in their recent book. They recommend building up the skills to double down on higher-end services, such as design, R&D, conceptualisation, which, in turn, gives rise to more demand for lower-skilled services.

It's useful to remind ourselves that the working-age population is about 950 million strong. Jobs in high-end services require workers with requisite skills; however, the 2023 India Skills Report points to a massive skills deficit with only half of young Indians employable currently. This means that for the foreseeable future, low-skilled services remain the default labour absorbers: Construction, street hawking, home repair, kids doing tea

runs for a notary's cramped office, where one person is a scribe, a second person holds a stamp pad, a third sorts through stamps in a plastic bag.

Bad as it looks, there are reasons to expect worse.

The jewel in the services crown, the IT sector, shrank for the first time in 25 years. As automation and artificial intelligence pick up pace, many jobs in IT will become redundant. The slowdown is showing in cutbacks and slow hiring.

As for the rest of those "employed" in low-skilled services, earnings are so low that after the long march back home to the villages during the Covid lockdown, many preferred to remain there. Sixty million more people are in agriculture than they were four years ago. If India was planning to write its unique development story countering conventional wisdom of moving from farms to factories, it has certainly torn up that playbook with a vengeance.

With an employment picture this grim, the government that comes to power after these elections needs to make job creation its job number one. It also needs to re-think the de facto singular bet strategy — manufacturing's share has shrunk to 13 per cent of GDP with all hopes riding on services. Even Rajan, no ally of the present administration, believes the manufacturing train has passed.

I would argue that given the number of people who need employment, multiple job-creation vectors are essential. They need policy support, co-investment — especially in education, skill-building and jobs-preparedness — and tax and regulatory incentives to employers.

Consider several promising vectors. First, in high-end services exports, there's potential in Global Capability Centres (GCCs) — offshore units of MNCs that provide services to the parent that range from finance, legal and HR to high-tech innovation clusters in cyber, analytics and AI. There are already over 1,500 GCCs employing 1.6 million people, expected to grow to 4.5 million by 2030. Services out of such centres could become one of India's biggest exports, generating incomes and demand for even more services from lower-skilled tiers.

Second, there is unrealised potential in India's tech startups. If they can scale up, they

employ many people directly and indirectly. Back in 2021, hot money was seeking refuge from an unfriendly China and India provided a convenient destination. Early investors drew in others who feared they were missing out. Successive investors were pressed to overvalue a company to get in on the deal, often ignoring market fundamentals, regulatory uncertainties and talent shortages. Fast forward to now: Many high-flyers — Paytm, Byju's, Oyo — have crash-landed and investments in Indian startups have fallen to their lowest levels since 2015, while write-downs have surged.

Consider this a second chance — with fresh lessons — for Indian startups. There are growing needs in AI, SaaS, defence and greentech — solid industries that play to India's strengths. But founders have to be mindful of their seemingly reflexive capacity for hubris at the first signs of success and not assume that regulations will bend for them. As these startups grow, they will hire more people; creating a skilled talent pool is essential.

Third, consider India's urgent need for a green transition. As the third-largest energy-consuming nation, it is already fourth in the world in renewable energy installed capacity. It plans to install 500 gigawatts of renewable energy capacity, producing 5 million tonnes of green hydrogen annually, cutting emissions by 45 per cent by 2030. The World Economic Forum projects 50 million net new "green economy" jobs in India.

Fourth, given the size of the jobs deficit, we cannot afford to slam the door on manufacturing. We must look beyond the high-profile plans for manufacturing iPhones, Teslas and semiconductors and enable small-and-medium manufacturers, who are likely to be less automation-intensive and more reliable labour absorbers. India's digital public infrastructure — possibly using the Open Network for Digital Commerce that connects market players on a single protocol — can be leveraged for access to credit, resources, logistics, warehousing and customers. This can help small-and-medium manufacturers replicate the benefits of larger players.

The writer is Dean of Global Business at The Fletcher School at Tufts University

## SCALING UP TB CARE

Involving private health sector can bolster capacity for quality primary treatment



**VIJAYASHREE YELLAPPA**

THE PRIVATE SECTOR plays a significant role in healthcare delivery in India. The government's flagship initiative, Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY, recognises the sector's reach. It provides insurance coverage in secondary and tertiary care to eligible families. In recent years, wellness centres or Ayushman Arogya Mandirs have given a boost to primary healthcare capabilities. However, the private health sector continues to provide more than 80 per cent of initial primary care. It is critical, therefore, that the sector is roped in the government's programme to eliminate diseases such as tuberculosis (TB).

In 2023, India notified a record 25.5 lakh TB patients. More than 8.4 lakh patients were notified by the private healthcare sector. This is a 21-fold increase from 2013. The model pursued by India's TB elimination programme has taken the lead in terms of public-private collaborations. The Public Private Interface Agency (PPIA) is the most effective form of this intervention. The agency that came into force about 10 years ago has served as an intermediary between the national TB programme and private healthcare providers. Implemented initially in Mumbai, Patna, and Mehsana, the contemporary iteration of the model, the Patient Provider Support Agency (PPSA), has recently been scaled up across over 200 districts. It has created a network of private health sector providers, including med-

ical practitioners, retail chemists, laboratories, and corporate hospitals to ensure that diagnostic and treatment practices adhere to the "Standards of TB Care" in India. The PPSA also supports the programme in facilitating free diagnostic services and treatment to patients who seek care from the private sector. This is done by linking the patients to social support provisions such as Nikshay Poshan Yojana (a DBT scheme).

How do we sharpen this model? Two immediate measures can be useful. One, the programme can leverage a major, underutilised resource — informal healthcare providers. Rural medical practitioners and village doctors have a high trust compact with the community. A study in which this writer participated revealed that in rural Haryana, 54 per cent of informal providers were consulted by two to five TB patients every month. Another survey of 203 providers in West Bengal showed that they, on average, saw five patients with TB symptoms every six months.

The second measure pertains to engaging private chemists better. Retail chemists are often the first point of contact for patients. India has approximately six lakh retail private pharmacists who prescribe an assortment of over-the-counter drugs, including, worryingly, for TB. Their mandate includes the regular monitoring of the H1 schedule and prohibiting over-the-counter sale of antibiotics. However,

this rarely happens. Studies also show that government programmes do not engage retail pharmacists adequately in checking the indiscriminate use of medicines.

A hurdle in TB elimination has been that only a fraction of the patients come under the treatment network. The proximity of informal healthcare providers and pharmacists to the community could be leveraged to screen patients. Their support can also be enlisted to refer symptomatic TB patients to public hospitals. These providers can also play a vital role in nudging patients to continue treatment. This is particularly significant given that several studies show that patients often drop out of treatment. Such patients develop the risks of drug-resistant TB. At the same time, the government needs to ensure a mechanism for compliance with existing regulatory norms, especially pertaining to over-the-counter drug sales, record keeping and the notification of diagnosed patients to the authorities.

With the right incentives and administrative backing, informal healthcare providers and pharmacists can become partners in the country's public health missions, significantly bolstering its capacity to provide quality primary care.

The writer is senior consultant, Division TB Elimination and Health Systems Innovations, at KNCV TB Plus

## APRIL 13, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### TECH REFORMS

THE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED further liberalisation in the import of technology and several new schemes including one to promote the export of computer software in its import-export policy for 1984-85. Commerce Minister V P Singh, who announced the government's policy, said new priority areas had been identified for the import of technology and several capital goods had been placed under Open General Licence.

### MOVE TO CURB POWER

A MOVE IS afoot to bring forth constitutional

amendments to take away the rights of the judicial courts to intervene in matters connected with the decisions of Parliament, state assemblies and councils. The issue is understood to have been discussed in detail at a meeting of the opposition leaders convened by the Speaker, Balram Jakhar, in Parliament House.

### SRI LANKA BLOCKADE

SEVERAL OPPOSITION AND ruling party members expressed concern in the Lok Sabha over the decision of the Sri Lankan authorities to put up a naval blockade and demanded a statement from the government. While Era Anbarasu (Congress-I) said that the Sri Lankan

Navy had encroached on Indian territorial waters, Satyasadan Chakraborty (CPM), urged the government to make a statement in the House explaining its stand.

### PLANE MISBEHAVIOUR

THE "ADIKEPISODE" rocked the Maharashtra Assembly when K N Deshmukh (PWP) demanded the resignation of the Vasantao Patil ministry. Four notices for adjournment motion were moved in the Assembly by the Opposition on Deputy Chief Minister Ramrao Adik's alleged misbehaviour with air hostesses, hotel maids and a taxi driver on board an Air India plane and in Frankfurt.



# THE IDEAS PAGE

## US, Israel, the same old

Conclusions of a significant shift in the relationship are premature, fail to capture the pulse that animates ties



VINAY LAL

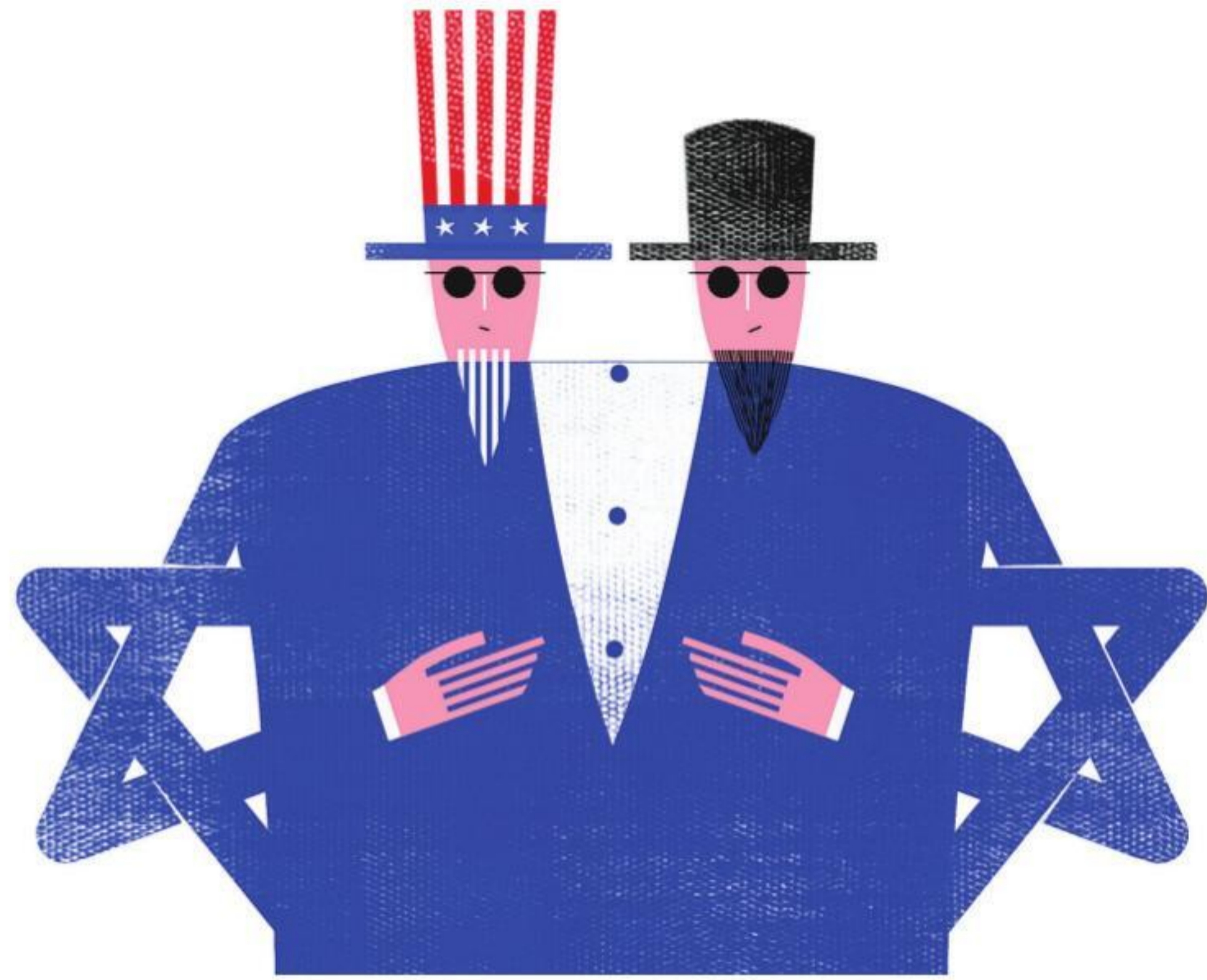
ON MARCH 25, during a UN Security Council discussion, the United States did something highly unusual: It abstained from a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. The US had vetoed similar resolutions in the past, arguing that it would not permit any measure to pass that might impede Israel's right to "self-defence" and that did not explicitly link a ceasefire to the release of all Israeli hostages from Palestinian custody.

Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, immediately pronounced the US abstention a deplorable "retreat" from the unstinting support that Israel has received from the onset of the present iteration of a long-standing conflict between Palestinians and Israel. As a mark of his displeasure, indeed of his alleged surprise that the US should in any way be signifying a shift in its position of unfettered support towards Israel, Netanyahu cancelled a planned visit by an Israeli delegation to the US to discuss Israel's planned invasion of Rafah.

Many commentators point to the US vote of abstention, as well as other recent developments such as criticism of Netanyahu by US Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer and his call for elections in Israel — angrily dismissed by Netanyahu in a sharply-worded rejoinder, "We are not a banana republic" — as significant milestones in what is being characterised as an evolving relationship between Israel and the US. The Guardian's diplomatic, for instance, described the American decision to abstain as marking "another moment in the painful, almost anguished US diplomatic distancing from its chief ally in the Middle East."

The terrain appears to have shifted quickly and considerably in the last several weeks: Having vetoed UN Security Council resolutions thrice, the US was doubtless finding that it, too, was repeatedly being pushed alongside Israel into being part of a minuscule minority. Tensions have been rising between Israel and the US over the pace and scope of humanitarian aid, especially in the face of the imminent starvation of Palestinians on a large scale. Most recently, the death of seven aid workers from the World Central Kitchen in a reportedly targeted strike by the Israel Defence Force (IDF) has ratcheted up the American pressure against Israel.

Might one conclude, then, that something significant has altered in the special relationship that Israel has enjoyed with the US since its founding? Reportedly, even as these lines are being penned, and following on what has been described as a tense call between Biden and Netanyahu, Israel has finally succumbed to the US pressure to open up new aid routes to Gaza. There is ample reason to think that American frustration with Israeli intransigence has been growing and some suspect that Israel may no longer enjoy unconditional support in the United Nations and more broadly the court of world



C R Sasikumar

public opinion. Moreover, the brute fact is that in an electoral democracy, political parties are subject to the vagaries of shifting voter sentiments. The more "progressive" sections within the Democratic party have been arguing that arms sales to Israel must be tied to the immediate cessation of hostilities and much higher standards of accountability on the part of Israel. University campuses have been rocked by unrest over the Biden administration's policies; more importantly, both recent polls and Democratic primaries being held in the run-up to the presidential election in November suggest that Biden is in grave danger of losing the support of Arab-American constituencies.

I would argue, however, that analyses which portend a significant shift in the US support of Israel are not merely premature but have failed to capture the pulse that animates the US-Israel relationship. Israel has, previous to this war, been the recipient of over \$150 billion in American largesse, or something like \$3.8 billion annually; it also has access to advanced American war technologies and weapon systems. If the pro-Palestinian demonstrators have appeared to make a splash on university campuses, it is only because the forces that lobby for both Jewish and Israeli interests have so long dominated the American university system that one barely heard of support for Palestine. The charge of anti-Semitism remains the most potent weapon that can be deployed on behalf of Israel. The indubitable fact is that Israel is held up, by Democrats and Republicans alike, not merely as the only real friend the

Israel has, previous to this war, been the recipient of over \$150 billion in American largesse, or something like \$3.8 billion annually; it also has access to advanced American war technologies and weapon systems. The indubitable fact is that Israel is held up, by Democrats and Republicans alike, not merely as the only real friend it has in the Middle East but as the only democracy in the region.

US has in the Middle East but as the only democracy in the region.

It is immaterial to this argument whether Israel is, in fact, a "democracy". The fact that some of its citizens have enjoyed liberties ordinarily associated with democratic states cannot obscure the other reality, that Israel has been an occupying power for decades and that Palestinians exist in a state of manifest and dire subjugation.

There is another and yet still more vital consideration. I have argued elsewhere that there is a certain synergy between Israel and the United States as settler-colonial states ('In this together', IE, December 21, 2023). A messianic spirit has long informed American self-perception and guided US foreign policy: As every post-World War II American president has declared at one time or the other, the belief that America is "the one indispensable nation" is intrinsic to American exceptionalism. Israel is far from having the gumption of saying the same explicitly about itself, but the state of Israel conducts itself with the supreme confidence that it exercises a moral purchase over the rest of humanity. It does so, of course, on the presumption that the murder of six million Jews gives the Jewish state of Israel a special place in history — and the unconstrained and unquestioned right to oppress others in the name of "self-defence". Given this synergy, it is extremely doubtful that anything substantive has at all changed in the US-Israel relationship or is even likely to change soon.

The writer is professor of History, UCLA

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"It is easy to see why companies that profit by monopolising the attention span of young minds want unchecked access. It is far from obvious why that access should be granted."  
— THE GUARDIAN

## Nehru's law, Ambedkar's bill

B R Ambedkar is rightly celebrated for his role in drafting the Constitution. It is also important to remember his contribution to the Hindu Code Bill



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

BR AMBEDKAR is remembered for his great contribution to the meticulous drafting of the Constitution of free India. Some seek to belittle his contribution by arguing that the drafting was done by Sir BN Rau and a drafting committee. BN Rau did indeed perform yeoman's service as the advisor to the drafting committee. He travelled extensively across the world and held discussions with many jurists before presenting the first draft in February 1948. From that point on, it was Ambedkar who steered the document's creation inside and outside the Constituent Assembly for two years.

Although seven members were appointed to the drafting committee, one resigned, and one left for America. Out of the remaining five, one passed away, one remained busy with the work of the royal court, and two others did not live in Delhi and were often unwell. No vacancies were filled. As a result, despite his ill health, Ambedkar had to shoulder much of the burden of drafting the Constitution and incorporating 2,473 amendments. Rajendra Prasad, chairman of the Constituent Assembly, acknowledged this: "I have realised as nobody else could have, with what zeal and devotion the members of the Drafting Committee and especially its Chairman, Dr Ambedkar, in spite of his indifferent health, have worked."

However, another important contribution of Ambedkar's, largely forgotten, was the Hindu Code Bill. Ambedkar had to endure caste discrimination throughout his life. At five years old, he saw that no barber would trim his hair, forcing his sisters to cut it haphazardly. He was made to sit in a corner of the classroom. He was thrashed for drinking water from a public well. While travelling to visit his father in Korea, no cart agreed to transport him and his brother from the railway. Eventually, one agreed to double the fare and insisted that the passengers drive the cart, while the driver walked along outside. "This incident holds an important part in my life. I would have been barely nine years of age then, but the mark that this episode has left can never be wiped out," Ambedkar recalled later.

Ambedkar was lucky to secure scholarships to study abroad. Within six years, he acquired an MA, PhD, DSc, LL.D, LL.M, Bar-at-Law and a host of other degrees. Yet, when he returned to India and joined a high position in Baroda Maharaja's secretariat in January 1913, the ill-treatment persisted. No one was willing to rent their house to this "untouchable". With the help of a friend, he tried to live in a Parsee hostel under an acquired Parsee name. In 10 days, the community got wind of it, and attempted to violently attack him. Maharaja Sayajirao, who was kind enough to give Ambedkar a job, was helpless in providing accommodation out of fear of reactionary elements.

Ambedkar returned to Mumbai as a pro-

fessor at Sydenham College, but there too, he was not allowed to use the pitcher and glasses in the staffroom. At the Bombay High Court, this lawyer who was called to the bar at Gray's Inn, London, couldn't get any clients from the "touchable" community, nor would other solicitors allow him to come close to them. Even as a member of the government-appointed committee to study the educational situation of the "untouchables" in 1929, he was not allowed to enter a school by the headmaster.

Such experiences convinced Ambedkar that Hinduism required major reform. His first public act of defiance was the burning of Manusmriti in December 1927, which he got done by Gangadhar Nilkanth Sahasrabudde, a Brahmin. This was followed by the famous satyagraha at the Kalam temple in Nashik in 1930.

This determination to restructure Hinduism based on equality prompted Ambedkar, as the law minister in the first government in 1950, to embark on framing a Hindu Code Bill. Before drafting the Bill, he appointed many Sanskrit scholars to translate important texts and shlokas. "The Hindu Code Bill was being sculpted with Saheb sitting in the conference with Hindu religious pundits, resolving doubts, and finding ways out", wrote Ambedkar's Saraswat Brahmin wife, Savita Ambedkar.

He got a 39-page booklet published, clarifying various aspects of his proposed Hindu Code Bill, and had it distributed among MPs. Jawaharlal Nehru was initially enthusiastic and told Ambedkar, "I will die or swim with the Hindu Code Bill". But soon a strong resistance surfaced from within the Congress as well as sections of the Opposition including Karpatri Maharaj's Ram Rajya Parishad. Nehru developed cold feet and wrote to Ambedkar in August 1951 that "you should take things easy as there is opposition inside and outside to the Hindu Code Bill, the Cabinet has decided that it should be taken up at the beginning of September, 1951". When the discussion finally began in Parliament, Congress allowed its members to vote according to their conscience. No whip was issued leading to long and meaningless speeches by members exhausting time. In the end, due to a shortage of time, Ambedkar's Hindu Code Bill was shelved.

"If you want to maintain the Hindu system, Hindu culture, the Hindu society, do not hesitate to repair where repair is necessary. The Bill asks for nothing more than repairing parts of the Hindu system which almost became dilapidated", Ambedkar fervently appealed to no avail.

In the end, Ambedkar resigned from the Cabinet in protest. But, starting in 1952, the same contents were adopted as four different Bills championed by Nehru himself — the Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, and Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act — and the Hindu Code Bill became a reality in 1958.

Could Ambedkar have inferred the rejection of the same law piloted by him as a manifestation of the deep-rooted caste prejudice? Could that feeling have led finally to his conversion to Buddhism in 1956? These questions beg answers. But Ambedkar's contribution to Hindu Code Bill should always be remembered.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the RSS



P STODAN

## Poll heat and a flashpoint

India-China must revive stalled process of clarifying LAC after India's election

THE CLAMOUR OF considerable land being lost to China in eastern Ladakh is political hyperbole — an agenda-driven narrative to bolster electoral prospects on national security grounds. The issue was raised in August last year by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi but no studies or expertise are available to verify such claims.

Ladakh certainly has been and will continue to remain a serious flashpoint. There are no borders here except a 1,597 km-long Line of Actual Control (LAC), a notional demarcation separating India and China since 1962. Even the LAC is not well defined. Both countries have differing perceptions. The patrolling is done till 65 earmarked Patrol Points (PPs) stretching from Karakoram to Chumur. The recent dispute points occurred at PP9, 10, 11, 12, 12A and 13 in Depsang, PP14 in Galwan, PP15 and PP16 in Hot Springs/Chang Chenmo, and PP17 and 17A in Gogra.

In the Chushul-Pangong sector, the situation in the Sirijap range on the north bank of Pangong, where Finger series 1 to 8 jut out, is stable. In May 2020, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered the Finger 3-4 area to prevent Indian troops from patrolling. After the disengagement agreement in February 2021, the status quo prior to May 2020 is being restored.

In the Kailash range, the PLA's provocative move in early September 2020 to capture Nyanlung Yokma/Gongma or the Kailash Heights, at an altitude of 15,000 feet located between Pangong Tso and Spanggur Gap, was foiled by the Indian Army in a ma-

major pre-emptive strategic manoeuvring. Peace was restored after both sides agreed to disengage from north and south Pangong Tso in February 2021.

PLA's intrusions in Galwan Valley, Changlung Nalla, Hot Springs and Kongru Nalla of Chang Chenmo Valley, where it had created area denial for Indian troops, are also relatively peaceful now. Both sides agreed to disengage in June 2020.

The situation in the Gogra-Hot Springs area remained volatile until September 8, 2022, when both sides agreed to disengage. There are no forward deployments in this area though a buffer zone is being created with new patrolling norms. All temporary structures have been dismantled. However, the situation in the PP15 area remains tense as China is still adamant about restoring the pre-April 2020 position.

Currently, only Depsang and Demchok remain points of friction, predating the 2020 stand-off. Since 2009, the PLA has frequently made offensive moves from Track Junction Nallah to the south at Burtse/Depsang Plains. In 2011, PLA built a 30 km road from Raki Nallah to cut into the Depsang Plains. In 2013, Burtse became a flashpoint when the PLA set up remote camps 18-19 km inside Indian Territory, preventing Indian patrolling from PP10, PP11, PP12 and PP13. The Shyam Saran Report of August 2013 made a chilling revelation of India having lost 640 sq km area due to "area denial" by the PLA.

Since 2019, the PLA has blocked the Bottleneck area, restricting India's patrolling

limits to PP10 and PP11. The Chinese road construction along Jeevan Nallah towards the south, adjacent to our Murgu post, could potentially cut off the Indian supply line to the DBO at Murgu, like in the case of Galwan. Experts suggest that the Chinese are in control of 600-800 sq km of the southern half of Depsang Plains. The situation here remains complicated and deadlocked. Therefore, complete disengagement has been elusive.

In Demchok, the PLA has been violating LAC at Charding-Nilung Nallah (CNN) junction since 2018, obstructing Indian patrolling to that point. The dispute is stalemated.

As for Ladakhi Changpas losing grazing ground, their movements were restricted along the LAC because of heavy militarisation by the Chinese as well as Indian armies. India has shored up its defences, inducting several reinforcements, including artillery brigades, after the 2013 Depsang episode.

One cannot overlook the fact that infrastructure in eastern Ladakh has been ramped up in recent years. Earlier, the Chinese bullied and coerced India because of the latter's lax attitude and grabbed a chunk of Ladakh territory between the 1960s and 1990s. The situation has changed now. India had stepped up construction activities under the UPA government but the projects were mired in corruption and scams. The BJP government has fast-tracked the connectivity projects, including the 260 km long Shyok-DBO road that was completed on a war footing. DBO can be reached from Dorbuk in eight hours now, which gives Indian troops a major advantage

in the difficult terrain.

India's growing dominance in far-flung areas has been one of the key factors that forced the PLA to react differently, accusing India of transgressions on the LAC and provoking the Galwan stand-off in 2020.

Our aviation infrastructure has also been upgraded after reactivating all the abandoned Advanced Landing Grounds (ALGs) at DBO, Fukche, and Nyoma. The Nyoma ALG is being upgraded into a full-fledged airfield capable of operating cargo as well as fighter jets. This will boost the security of eastern Ladakh apart from the economic development of the Changthang region.

In all, one cannot deny that the Indian forces gave a fitting response to premeditated Chinese aggression and denied China a strategic victory in 2020. Beijing has been made to realise the cost of engaging in misadventures. Certainly, the LAC situation remains in a stalemate, although the 21st round of Corps Commander-level meetings was held in February to reduce tension in the region.

The accusation of losing massive areas, therefore, is a gross exaggeration. Technically, there has been no intrusion on our side of the LAC. The discrepancies have occurred only in the grey-zone patrolling areas due to differences in LAC perception. Both sides should grasp fresh opportunities to revive the stalled process of clarifying the LAC after the new government is formed in New Delhi.

The author is president, Ladakh International Centre, Leh

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A BLUEPRINT FOR SEA

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Turning seaward' (IE, April 12). The geostrategic importance of the Andaman and Nicobar islands cannot be overstated in the backdrop of rising naval ambitions of the PLA navy. Indian leadership should lend serious thought to devising a blueprint factoring in all possible threats to security. India's position as a formidable power in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific regions need to be asserted by cooperation and diplomacy with littoral neighbours.

Atul Thakre, Nagpur

### TAKE THE FIRST STEP

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A call for reconciliation' (IE, April 12). During the Congress era, the BJP capitalised on the "minority appeasement" strategy. Reinforcing the BJP's minority outreach in the run-up to Lok Sabha elections, Syed Talef Taj, the custodian of Taj Bagh dargah at Nagpur, joined the BJP on March 18 followed by Syed Jaffar, a key aide of former CM Kamal Nath. Muslims seem to have realised that only the BJP can help them grow. The BJP must realise that there are over 65 (out of the total 543) Lok Sabha constituencies where Muslims make up over 30 per cent of the voters. Both must come to the table.

SS Paul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A call for reconciliation' (IE, April 12). PM Narendra Modi has repeatedly stressed, both in India and abroad, that the country does not see discrimination against religious minorities. It is ironic then that the BJP is unable to showcase its Muslim inclusivity inside Parliament and state assemblies. Surprisingly, despite the Modi wave and the BJP's Muslim outreach, none of the previous Muslim candidates won even when most were fielded from Muslim-dominated constituencies. If the BJP's election campaigns continue to revolve around communalisation, it is Muslims would not vote for the party.

I R Murmu, Delhi

### WRONG UNDONE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Back on track' (IE, April 11). The Supreme Court, in using its powers, overruled its 2021 verdict and relieved the DMRC of an exorbitant burden of Rs 7,687 crore in a dispute with a former concessionaire. Under India's arbitration law, an award can be set aside only on limited grounds. 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.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali