



War of attrition

Despite military gains, solution to Maoist insurgency cannot rest on just violence

For a long-standing insurgency that peaked in the early to mid-2000s, the war against the Maoists has settled into some sort of pattern. Recently, the insurgents suffered a series of blows from paramilitary and police forces, which include the killing of at least 29 Maoists in the Bastar region in Chhattisgarh on Tuesday. Limited to the jungles of central India and in places of sparse tribal presence with a weaker presence of the developmental and welfare state relative to the rest of the country, the Maoists have been significantly diminished as a political-ideological force with few takers for their party's – the Communist Party of India (Maoist) – ideology or visions of an alternative state. What they have retained, however, is an ability to target security forces – evident in the killing of 22 paramilitary personnel in April 2021 and 10 jawans in April 2023. This has necessitated security forces to use unconventional military tactics and new combat routes to target the armed Maoist cadres. While these attacks weaken the military strength of the Maoists, they cannot cumulatively wipe out the threat of the insurgents as claimed by the Union government. This is because the Maoists are in difficult hilly terrain and have shown the ability to win over some discontented sections of the tribals, who are affected by the civil war.

After two decades of fighting the Maoists, whose strength peaked after two prominent Naxalite parties merged into the CPI (Maoist), the Indian state has long realised that the only way out is to take them on militarily while winning over tribals through welfare measures. In the late 2000s, the use of ploys such as arming tribals to take on the Maoists through flawed campaigns such as the Salwa Judum backfired. Later, in a change of tack, the reach of the welfare state and the bureaucracy gradually expanded into hitherto inaccessible areas in central India and helped negate Maoist propaganda about the Indian state being exploitative. Several tribal people, tired of the warfare and violence, refused to support the Maoists, leading to desertion in their ranks in other States as well. In Chhattisgarh, however, the constant warfare has helped the Maoists tap into some discontent. Civil society and peace activists have tried to initiate ceasefire talks between the Maoists and the security forces besides asking the insurgents to use democratic means to take up tribal causes. But the Maoists, despite setbacks, have refused to give up on their anachronistic ideology. Their unwillingness to accept that the poor tribals, whom they claim to represent, only want better engagement and outcomes from the welfare and electoral system, and not a violent overthrow that jeopardises their lives, has ensured that the war of attrition continues.

Pale green shoots

After a year of tepid demand and low prices, exports face fresh turbulence

India's merchandise exports hit a 12-month peak of \$41.7 billion last month, marginally lower than March 2023 and a tad higher than February's \$41.4 billion figure. Imports fell 6% to \$57.3 billion, taking the trade deficit to an 11-month low. The last two months' robust export numbers bolstered the tally for outbound shipments from \$354 billion at the end of January to \$437.1 billion for the full year, just 3% short of the record \$451 billion performance in 2022-23. Amid a decline in commodity prices, which averaged about 14% lower last year, this is a commendable outcome, aided by demand proving more resilient than earlier anticipated in major markets. That imports dipped at a higher 4.8% pace has also cushioned the trade deficit, and economists now expect the January-March quarter to end up with a small but rare current account surplus. Services trade data for the full year will be available later, but the Commerce Ministry estimates that total exports in 2023-24 were fractionally higher than the previous year at \$776.7 billion.

Trade mandarins believe goods exports have entered a positive growth cycle, having coped with persistent strife – from Ukraine to Palestine and the Red Sea. Last week, the World Trade Organization (WTO) downgraded its global trade volume growth projection to 2.6% from 3.3% reckoned earlier, with risks tilted towards the downside. This is despite favourable base effects from its revision for 2023 trade volumes, which the WTO says tanked 1.2% compared with a 0.8% dip expected earlier. Export volumes from Asia are expected to rise 3.4% in 2024, with imports climbing 5.6%. In India, a healthy monsoon is expected to spur domestic demand, including for discretionary imports. But sustained disruptions on two of the world's key shipping routes – the Suez and Panama Canals – along with geopolitical fault lines and an increasing scepticism about the benefits of global trade in several countries, pose creeping risks that have not fully manifested yet. Exporters do not seem so sure about the upbeat official outlook – they need to start raising prices soon to catch up with shipping cost surges, exposing them to competitive pressures. For Asia and India, any prolonged friction in the Strait of Hormuz, a key supply route for the region's oil and gas imports, is the biggest threat to trade and macroeconomic balances. The spike in crude prices already showed up in March as the petroleum trade deficit hit a record monthly high of \$11.8 billion while oil exports slid to an eight-month low. India's high energy import dependence is known, and any spurt in global energy and food prices would also derail hopes of global interest rate cuts and improved demand.

Seldom has a concatenation of circumstances across the world led to this degree of concern about the future. Many factors are responsible for this. Reckless leaders such as Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, who are at the centre of the ongoing conflicts, have neither the desire nor the understanding to try and end the conflicts they are involved in. Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, shows equal disregard for the eventual outcome of the war in Ukraine, and displays intense myopia as to what can be done to achieve his end objective. The United States, which initially hoped that by strengthening the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) it could inflict a decisive defeat on Russia, and restore the immediate post-1945 world order in Europe, finds itself in a serious dilemma.

In the meantime, Mr. Netanyahu, caught napping by the massive Hamas attack in October 2023, has reacted to it in a manner typical of his general reputation, and is venting his frustration on the citizens of Gaza – which virtually approximates to genocide. This has inflamed opinions across the world, but more specifically in West Asia, and is further widening the political and religious divide. An unexpected fallout of this has been Iran's reemergence as a key player in determining the 'roll of the dice' in the affairs of this region.

Growing chaos, an absent leadership

Since 2022, geo-politics has been in various stages of disarray. While the 'rules-based international order', basically a creation of the West, is virtually dead today, it did succeed for a time in maintaining a semblance of peace across many regions. As the West seemed to weaken, and alongside the rise of China, new alliance patterns emerged. None of them, however, possessed sufficient heft to sustain a peaceful global order.

Today, large parts of the world are in chaos, though 'shooting wars' are limited to a few pockets such as Ukraine and Gaza. What is more disconcerting is the absence of leaders with a sober mien, who command a degree of influence across nations and continents, whether it is Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin or Joe Biden. The vast majority of other western leaders clearly lack the qualities needed to sustain a peaceful international order. Many increasingly face problems in sustaining their fiefdoms. Meantime, the march of history and the progress of current technologies threaten to confine most of them to the detritus of history.

The situation is only about to worsen. The stalemate in Ukraine continues with Mr. Zelenskyy, Mr. Putin, and the West all unwilling to consider a reasonable compromise. The year



M.K. Narayanan

is a former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser, and a former Governor of West Bengal

The absence of leaders who command influence across the world, new alliances, economic issues and the progress of current technologies are some of the factors

2024 will, thus, see a repetition of what has been taking place in Europe for the past two years. Whether a continued stalemate will force leaders of these countries to consider the 'unthinkable', viz., use of battlefield nuclear weapons, is again a matter for debate.

The situation in West Asia is, meanwhile, turning critical. Israel has been acting more and more like a 'wounded tiger', inflicting unpardonable casualties on the citizens of Gaza. It now confronts a direct threat from Iran, which has already fired opening 'shots across the bow' at Israel, for the attack on its consular premises in Damascus and the killing of Iranian personnel recently. All indications point to the spectre of a resurgent Iran, thereafter, taking over the leadership of militant 'Jihadism' directed against the West and 'infidels' of different kinds. The implications of an all out Iran-Israel war are dire indeed.

A new set of alliances

Today, great power rivalry seems a little more than a shadow play, which has hardly any meaning. Outside war-torn Ukraine, and the time bomb that West Asia resembles at present, the U.S. and China are indulging in feints, using proxies to try and achieve their objectives. The U.S. has yet to overcome its hubris following the series of setbacks it has been facing since Afghanistan in 2020, which has removed much of the sheen attached to its being touted as a superpower. In the case of Europe, having leaned on NATO to protect itself from Russia's offensive, it has little to offer. Europe again has little influence on Mr. Zelenskyy, notwithstanding the huge cost to their exchequers. Seldom has the situation across the region seemed less propitious.

In the east, China's economic 'woes' have stripped it of the afterglow of being a near superpower, one well positioned to challenge the U.S. and the West, militarily and economically. Over the past several months, China has been compelled to operate under the radar and its image as a superpower has diminished. Nevertheless, this has not prevented it from forging many new alliances across West Asia. Currently, the China-Russia-Iran axis has put a question mark on the predatory tactics of the U.S. and the West across much of West Asia.

There is a well-known aphorism that stipulates that 'wisdom lies in knowing when to stop'. Even as global power politics appear to lose all meaning, we are witness to a whole new set of alliances that makes little sense. What is missing in the thought processes of world leaders, however, is that it is the economy and technologies today that are the main 'drivers' and 'spoilers' in today's world. Most world leaders are

not paying adequate attention to forecasts about the future of the world economies, more specifically when they include the economies of the more developed countries as well. For instance, experts warn that the U.S. economy is set to face problems sooner rather than later, while the economies of the United Kingdom and much of Europe are already in a parlous state. China's economy, despite Xi Jinping's efforts, is again not improving and it has had to cut back on many of its intended plans.

The disruptors

The politics of oil again is something that the world cannot ignore for much longer. The growing proximity, and the axis between China-Russia-Iran, indicate that military alliances apart, the politics of oil is set to roil the world in the near future.

In such a milieu, today's sanctions have ceased to have any meaning. The world, according to economists, should, hence, be prepared for a major slowdown. The implications of this could be far more disruptive than the current wars in Ukraine and Gaza or a potential conflagration in the Pacific.

Next, technology is all set to become the ultimate disruptor. Manifest attempts are being made by several leading countries to enhance their national security by protecting vital technologies, over which they possess a near-monopoly today. Artificial Intelligence is already a potential threat as far as conventional war methodologies are concerned, but while the U.S. and China are touted as militarily the most powerful today, smaller nations are beginning to pose a challenge, employing Artificial Intelligence, to level the playing field. This dimension needs to be better understood, alongside the havoc being caused in the battlefield in Ukraine by the military intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) revolution, and the relentless stare of visual infrared and electronic sensors carried by drones, aircraft, and space assets.

Finally, it is also necessary to recognise that with most arms control agreements having frayed, new nuclear warheads and cruise missiles are possibly, if not already, being designed, and also, possibly, being kept in readiness for use. A nuclear makeover is already in the making and it is only a matter of time that demands are raised by countries that possess them to seek their use. An intense debate is already on as to whether in response to the possible use of low-level battlefield nuclear weapons by Russia, the U.S. and the West should not raise the nuclear threshold by employing nuclear weapons of lower magnitude. Doomsday predictions are perhaps nearer than what many believe.

India's nuanced approach in the South China Sea



Harsh V. Pant

is Vice-President for Studies and Foreign Policy at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi



Pratnashree Basu

is an Associate Fellow, Indo-Pacific, at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Kolkata

New Delhi's strategic recalibration recognises the South China Sea's critical importance to regional security and the global maritime order

The transformation of India's policy orientation from Look East to Act East under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has marked a shift towards a more strategic and active engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. This policy evolution reflects India's acknowledgment of the changing geopolitical landscape and the need for a more proactive and multifaceted foreign policy approach with the Act East Policy emphasising not only economic integration but also strategic partnerships and expanded security cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific including Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore, besides the Philippines. India has also simultaneously strengthened its own capacities through forward positioning, mission-based deployments, reinforced maritime domain awareness, and deep-water maritime facilities.

India's complex ties with China

With geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea having steadily escalated, particularly due to China's assertive territorial claims and militarisation efforts, India's stance has become more nuanced while simultaneously becoming less cautious. The evolution of India's position on the South China Sea cannot be decoupled from its complex relationship with China. The two countries have a long history of border disputes which have intensified since the Galwan Valley incident of 2020, with Beijing's periodic incursions into India's territory and, most recently, even renaming Indian villages in Arunachal Pradesh.

The Galwan Valley incident also saw India sending a frontline warship to the South China Sea in a demonstration of India's capability for asymmetric deterrence. China's assertive posture and territorial claims in the South China Sea and along India's land border have substantially disruptive implications for regional stability. India's strategic engagements, including regular naval exercises and the strengthening of military cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, serve

dual purposes: they underscore India's commitment to regional security and act as a counter to China's unlawful assertions.

The ASEAN factor

New Delhi's strategic recalibration has been driven by a recognition of the South China Sea's critical importance to regional security and the global maritime order. The disputes in the South China Sea, primarily involving China and several Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, have implications for the freedom of navigation and overflight – principles that are vital for not only India's trade and energy transportation routes but also that of countries across the globe. As a responsible stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific, India can no longer shy away from taking unambiguous positions on matters of such critical importance. Its centrality in the Indo-Pacific theatre means that its periphery is no longer only the Indian Ocean but also the wider maritime domain where China's rise is challenging the status quo in ways not anticipated before. The ASEAN centrality in India's Indo-Pacific strategy also makes it imperative for India to buttress the ASEAN position, though differences within the regional grouping continue to pose a challenge to such endeavours.

New Delhi's advocacy for a rules-based international maritime order, especially its emphasis on UNCLOS, reflects a stance against unilateral actions that threaten regional stability. This stance, while rooted in India's principled foreign policy approach, also indirectly challenges China's expansive territorial claims and activities in the South China Sea and reflects India's positioning of itself as a responsible stakeholder committed to regional stability and security. India's nuanced approach in the South China Sea, therefore, is emblematic of its broader strategy aiming to safeguard its interests while contributing to a collective effort to maintain peace, stability, and respect for international law in the Indo-Pacific region.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

First phase voting begins

Voting for the 18th Lok Sabha and general election 2024 will begin shortly. The people have probably decided who they are going to vote for. There is, however, a need for people to understand that voting should not be based on the popularity of the party or the candidate but, instead, on what they can do for the citizens of the country.

There are many areas where the country needs improvement. The biggest need, however, is for people to come out and vote. There must be a realisation that it is only when you vote that actual change can begin.
Reakor Shisha Kharkrang,
Laitmynsaw, Shillong, Meghalaya

The mind boggles at the sheer scale of the giant

undertaking which is to begin shortly. Media projections and crowds may not be the gauge of the 'mood of the nation'. This Lok Sabha election is crucial as it will decide and reshape the country's future. The vote must be used sagaciously to prevent a further retreat from secularism and a slide into authoritarianism. There is a

need to protect the Constitution and democracy in India for us and future generations.
G. David Milton,
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

As a senior citizen, I have seen how the democratic festival of the nation is celebrated every five years. I have also seen how sky-high promises go into

oblivion once the election is over. But there is a key point. It goes without saying that the power to change lies in the hands of voters. Voters must exercise their vote choice carefully.

Kiruba Arul,
Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Corrections & Clarifications

The Business page story - "Bank Bazaar set to finance Montra E-3W", April 17, 2024 - was actually about TI Clean Mobility joining hands with Bike Bazaar to offer vehicle-financial solutions. Hence, the headline should have been "Bike Bazaar set to finance Montra E-3W."

The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

Is the government justified in targeting terrorists outside the border?



Rakesh Sood
is a former diplomat who served as Ambassador to Afghanistan, France, and Nepal. He was also Special Envoy of the Prime Minister on Disarmament and Nonproliferation until 2014

PARLEY

Earlier this month, following a report in *The Guardian* stating that the Indian government had killed about 20 people in Pakistan since 2020 as part of a broader plan to eliminate terrorists on foreign soil, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh responded that India will enter Pakistan to kill terrorists. A few days later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, too, said that under a strong government, “*atankwadiyon ko ghar mein ghus ke mare jata hai* (terrorists are being killed in their homes)”. Is the Indian government justified in targeting terrorists outside the border? Rakesh Sood and Tara Kartha discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Suhasini Haidar**. Edited excerpts:



Tara Kartha
is the director for research at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies. She spent 17 years at the National Security Council Secretariat, which sits at the apex of India's national security architecture

The U.S. went to Pakistan and killed Osama bin Laden in 2011; Israel's Mossad carries out such killings. But when India or Russia do it, questions are raised, or sanctions are imposed. Do you think there are double standards when it comes to transnational killings? And is there an international rule surrounding transnational killings?

Rakesh Sood: There is no clear, legal definition in international law of targeted killings. But conventionally, there are three factors considered before carrying out targeted killings. First, whether the individual is internationally designated as a terrorist under the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) designation list. Second, whether it is difficult to get hold of this person, get them extradited, or bring them to face judicial proceedings. Third, whether it is felt that the person continues to remain engaged in terrorist activity. Then, the state may feel that it is preferable to use lethal force in a pre-emptive fashion in a precise manner so that it does not cause collateral damage. The U.S.'s killing of bin Laden would probably fall into that category of targeted killings because he ticked all these boxes. There are plenty of instances where when these three conditions were met, there was less of an international hue and cry, and when they were not met, there was more of it.

Tara Kartha: There are massive double standards. Targeted killings came post-9/11. They [the U.S.] used drone strikes and every kind of attack and not just in Afghanistan. U.S. President George Bush's call to the world was that we [the U.S.] will attack you [terrorists] wherever you are because it's self-defence. The underlying criterion for any such attack is self-defence. The UN allows this. Article 51 of the UN Charter speaks of the right of individual self-defence.

The problem with *The Guardian* story is that it includes assassinations, targeted killings, and extrajudicial killings all in the same basket in the same article, which is crazy. Each one has a



A poster shows Sikh separatist leader Gurbatwint Singh Pannun. An Indian national has been charged by the U.S. with plotting to assassinate him on U.S. soil. AFP

different legal connotation to it. If we are to look at this issue, we have to look at the differences between these three in terms of international law and international humanitarian law.

Has something changed in India? In the past perhaps these operations took place quietly. But in recent times, the government has said India will chase terrorists and kill them if they go into, say, Pakistan. Is that legitimate?

TK: It is allowed under international law and under international humanitarian law. One criterion is that it should be proportionate force. A second is when the state is either responsible for the armed attack or is unwilling or unable to stop armed attacks. At all times, the principle of self-defence remains paramount. Generally, such attacks do not occur in times of peace. That is one difference between the Pakistan and Canada cases. You could argue that India is in a state of continuous conflict with Pakistan: attacks keep taking place, you [India] have raised the issue at the UN, these people are part of your list of terrorists. So, you have gone through the judicial process within your own country, and it is also sanctioned by the UN.

RS: Let's look at the three criteria. They may be in India's list, but they are not accepted internationally as terrorists. Second, there is no prospect of getting them extradited to come and face judicial proceedings. Now, you [India] could say that you are in a state of conflict with Pakistan. I don't know if that is legally correct, but politically you could maintain that. But you're not in a state of conflict, legal or political, with Canada and the U.S. Self-defence and pre-emption implies that there is a continuing and immediate threat. So, did Gurbatwint Singh Pannun constitute an immediate threat? That is an intelligence assessment. How you tick these three boxes would depend on the justification or credibility for a targeted killing.

Many would point out that the U.S. has



There are double standards when it comes to transnational killings, but by and large, you don't carry out attacks in the territories of what you call 'friendlies'.

TARA KARTHA

carried out drone strikes and killed thousands of people, including civilians, in what it saw as targeted killings and has never been held accountable. Mossad has killed people in the UAE and other countries. So, why has the U.S. made such an issue of this?

RS: Well, that is bilateral politics. But you're right. The U.S. is guilty of having conducted targeted killings with less than adequate justification, without having felt the need to tick the three boxes. Israel, too, has done this many times. But Israel has the backing of the U.S., and the U.S. is a permanent member of the UNSC.

TK: I think in the case of Canada, it was also a question of domestic politics. And since (Prime Minister) Justin Trudeau brought it up, I think the U.S., which may have preferred to have dealt with it quietly, was forced to come out. But if you notice, even after that the U.S. has not used it in a threatening manner. They've said they are unhappy. And yes, there are double standards, but by and large, you don't carry out attacks in the territories of what you call 'friendlies'.

India's response in each of the three cases has been different. Are ties the only factor?

TK: In the case of Pakistan, I think what the Defence Minister said is, if you do this, we will reserve the right to walk in. He added that we would prefer to have good relations with our neighbours. Canada has not given any evidence to us. And at least one of those killings was of a local organised crime leader who was already in a lot of trouble in Canada. In the case of the U.S., when India says it is carrying out an investigation in national interest, if indeed someone from RA&W (Research and Analysis Wing) did do this, I can guarantee that the National Security Adviser (NSA) was not involved because this was such a ham-handed operation.

RS: It is purely a reflection of politics and ties with each other. The Defence Minister is speaking to a country that is in the throes of elections. Politicians at the best of times are not necessarily precise with their use of words, and at election times, even less so. India's responses reflect the status of importance that is attributed to ties with each of these countries and the current state of play in each of the countries.

Do you think these allegations could have a

long-term impact on India-U.S. ties?

RS: It depends on how we deal with it and if we are able to carry conviction to the U.S. system. Canada has not shared any information or intelligence with us or at least nothing to the extent that would lead us to undertake an investigation of the kind that we are doing via-a-vis the U.S.'s information that has been shared with us. With Pakistan, it is open season.

TK: There has been some impact so far because all this was said publicly. But overall, no, our ties won't get severely affected because of our ties in other areas, especially innovation and defence technology. In the case of Canada, he [Trudeau] made the error of saying this in public. If he had probably said it in private, our reaction may have been quite different.

In the last few months, we have seen certain comments being made. For example, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee has talked about transnational killings and categorised India with Russia and Iran. What should the government do?

TK: There was a hearing on Pakistan in the U.S. Congress. And one of the Congressmen, who was from Texas, intervened to raise this issue of alleged killings. There are constituencies in the U.S., like Texas, which have a large Pakistani population. That will reflect in their domestic policy. While it is worrisome, we have to take it in our stride going forward.

We need to pull up our international image and strategic messaging. For some reason we seem to think it's not necessary and that our economy speaks for itself, and our words speak for themselves. We need to do a major PR exercise not because XYZ has said something but because it makes sense.

RS: India-U.S. ties are at a government-to-government level. The U.S. NSA is going to visit India. Democracies speak with multiple voices because there are multiple constituencies. A statement by one section of society doesn't necessarily reflect the totality of the relationship between the two nations. One way to respond to criticisms is to ignore them. But that is difficult in a relationship between two democracies. So, we need to be able to take action that would address this. Whether this is in terms of more effective communication is something that the government has to evolve. In a democracy, we have multiple channels of communication. We need to be able to make better use of these.



To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

The quiet heroes behind the electoral bonds stories

Reporters who file daily stories, which are sometimes deemed uninteresting, are the ones who make the big stories possible

Vignesh Radhakrishnan

On March 14, the Election Commission of India made public the names of the companies that had purchased electoral bonds. Almost immediately, *The Hindu* data team published the full list of the donors online. Our first electoral bonds story for the print edition was straightforward: it carried information on the companies that had donated the largest funds. But given time constraints, we could do little analysis on the nature of these companies.

The next day, we studied the list and found that many of the companies were unfamiliar. Some of them had sister concerns and all of them had donated to various political parties. We had to find out who owned these companies in order to contextualise the transactions. And there was no dearth of speculation on the data. Hours after the news broke, some said on social media that many of the companies were under the scrutiny of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and Income Tax (IT) Department. Some said many pharma companies that had been reprimanded by regulators were on the list. Some identified companies that had been given a clean chit by various committees. But where could we get credible information to fact-check these claims?

That is when the grunt work began. We found out when and for what reasons the ED and IT Department were investigating some of these companies and when these companies had purchased bonds. The dateline of old stories in the media helped us find out when companies had come under the scanner of agencies and the new data showed us how they purchased bonds worth crores of rupees just days later. Old stories about some of the companies securing government contracts helped us question whether there was quid pro quo.

While other media outlets were doing

similar stories, we found that some of them had included wrongly the name of one pharma company to the list of companies that were under the ED/IT Department scanner and had bought bonds just days later. Our digital archives showed that the investigators were not searching the company but only an employee.

Our search showed that a reporter of *The Hindu* Group covering the pharma beat had filed a copy saying the house of an employee of a pharma company was being searched by the ED. A photojournalist had clicked photos of officers entering the premises of the employee. An editor had probably asked the right questions - for instance, was it the company or the employee's house that was being searched? - and edited the story accordingly. Given that the story was filed years ago, when content management systems were still primitive and smaller stories did not always make their way online, it was noteworthy that the story was published on the website. This allowed us to find it easily. We were thankful to the editors who had ensured that such stories went online and to the tech teams which had made sure that such stories did not get lost when *The Hindu* migrated to new content management systems or during website redesigns. In short, we realised that a lot of editorial calls, both big and small, taken over the years had made it possible for us to write the electoral bonds story accurately.

In this digital era, reporters are under great pressure. They are tasked with recording podcasts and videos and writing explainers and long-form stories. But they don't do all this at the cost of filing the so-called run-of-the-mill stories. Reporters, through their everyday stories, the first drafts of history, which are sometimes deemed uninteresting, are the ones who lay the foundation for the big stories.

vignesh.r@thehindu.co.in

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Torrential rains in a desert city



Cars on a flooded road in Dubai. The desert city saw up to 259.5mm of rain on Tuesday, the most in 75 years since data collection began. At Dubai's airport, which is one of the busiest for international travel, nearly every flight was repeatedly delayed. The city is now grappling with the aftermath of the devastating floods. REUTERS

FROM THE ARCHIVES



FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 19, 1974

Oil development fund planned

New Delhi, April 18: The Petroleum and Chemicals Minister, Mr. D.K. Barooah, to-day announced that an Oil Industry Development Fund for Rs. 45 crores would be created and placed at the disposal of the Oil and Natural Gas Commission.
Replying to the demands for grants of the

Petroleum and Chemicals Ministry in the Lok Sabha, Mr. Barooah said that though the ONGC "is notionally an autonomous body, it entirely depended on the Government for funds."

Mr. Barooah indicated that Rs. 45 crores would be given annually. This fund would be adequate for the ONGC's purpose. The ONGC was not only going to have off-shore drilling but was also trying to get locations in other countries for oil exploration.

The Haldia refinery, which had been completed, would go into production in a couple of months.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 19, 1924

Indian debate in Commons

A special cable to the "Bombay Chronicle" dated London, April 17, says: Last night's Indian debate was a complete fiasco. There was an air of pretence and futility all over the speeches. The front benches were deserted. The Prime Minister was absent which was adversely commented upon by Mr. Pope Simpson. The Liberal amendment asking for a commission of inquiry was not moved, as a result of active canvassing by the father-in-law of the Viceroy's son, Sir Alfred Mond and Malcolm Hailey.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of employees fired by Google after office sit-in protest

28 Google fired employees involved in protests over the company's cloud computing contract with the Israeli government. The workers held sit-ins at the company's offices in California and New York. AP

The shares subscribed in Vodafone-Idea's FPO on the first day

26 In percentage. Debt-saddled telecom operator Vodafone Idea Ltd's ₹18,000 crore follow-on offering (FPO) opened to a modest response. Of the 1,260 crore shares on offer, 331.24 crore was subscribed. PTI

Loss of GST revenues due to offshore illegal betting firms

2.5 in \$ billion. The gaming industry body AIGF estimates that offshore illegal betting and gambling entities are causing the national exchequer a loss of \$2.5 billion per annum. PTI

The extent of the loss of GDP due to global warming

10 In percentage. Warming of the planet by 3 degrees Celsius may cost up to 10% of GDP, according to the *Nature Climate Change* journal. It also found that poorer, tropical countries could see the worst effects. PTI

Nestle India shares fall over reports of more sugar in milk products

3 in percentage. Shares of Nestle India declined amid reports that the global FMCG major sold infant products with more sugar content in South Asian countries including India. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Follow us [facebook.com/thehindu](https://www.facebook.com/thehindu) twitter.com/the_hindu [instagram.com/the_hindu](https://www.instagram.com/the_hindu)

Why have private investments dropped?

What is private Gross Fixed Capital Formation? When did private investments pick up in India? Will strong consumption spending increase private sector confidence? How do government policies affect private capital formation?

EXPLAINER

Prashanth Perumal

The story so far:

The failure of private investment, as measured by private Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) at current prices, to pick up pace has been one of the major issues plaguing the Indian economy. Private investment witnessed a steady decline since 2011-12 and the government has been hoping that large Indian corporations would step in and ramp up investment. In fact, in 2019, the Centre slashed corporate taxes from 30% to 22% hoping that the move would encourage private investment.

What is GFCF and why does it matter?

GFCF refers to the growth in the size of fixed capital in an economy. Fixed capital refers to things such as buildings and machinery, for instance, which require investment to be created. So private GFCF can serve as a rough indicator of how much the private sector in an economy is willing to invest. Overall GFCF also includes capital formation as a result of investment by the government.

GFCF matters because fixed capital, by helping workers produce a greater amount of goods and services each year, helps to boost economic growth and improve living standards. In other words, fixed capital is what largely determines the overall output of an economy and hence what consumers can actually purchase in the market. Developed economies such as the U.S. possess more fixed capital per capita than developing economies such as India.

What is the trend seen in private investment in India?

In India, private investment began to pick up significantly mostly after the economic reforms of the late-1980s and the early-1990s that improved private sector



GETTY IMAGES

confidence. From independence to economic liberalisation, private investment largely remained either slightly below or above 10% of the GDP. Public investment as a percentage of GDP, on the other hand, steadily rose over the decades from less than 3% of GDP in 1950-51 to overtake private investment as a percentage of GDP in the early 1980s. It, however, began to drop post-liberalisation with private investment taking on the leading role in fixed capital formation.

The growth in private investment lasted until the global financial crisis of 2007-08. It rose from around 10% of GDP in the 1980s to around 27% in 2007-08. From 2011-12 onwards, however, private investment began to drop and hit a low of 19.6% of the GDP in 2020-21.

Why has private investment fallen?

Many economists in India have blamed

low private consumption expenditure as the primary reason behind the failure of private investment to pick up over the last decade, and particularly since the onset of the pandemic. Their reasoning is that strong consumption spending is required to give businesses the confidence that there will be sufficient demand for their output once they decide to invest in building fixed capital. Hence these economists have advised that the government should put more money into the hands of the people to boost consumption expenditure, and thus help kick start private investment.

Historically, however, an increase in private consumption has not led to a rise in private investment in India. In fact, a drop in consumption spending has boosted private investment rather than dampening it. Private final consumption expenditure dropped steadily from nearly

90% of GDP in 1950-51 to hit a low of 54.7% of GDP in 2010-11, which was a year prior to when private investment hit a peak and began its long decline. And since 2011-12, private consumption has risen while private investment has witnessed a worrying fall as a percentage of GDP. The inverse relationship between consumption and investment is likely because the money that is allocated towards savings and investment, either by the government or by private businesses, comes at the cost of lower consumption expenditure. Other economists believe that structural problems may likely be the core reason behind the significant fall in private investment as a percentage of GDP over the last decade or so. They have cited unfavourable government policy and policy uncertainty as major issues affecting private investment. The rise in private investment in the 1990s and the 2000s correlated with the economic reforms programme started in 1991. The drop in private investment, on the other hand, correlated with the slowdown in the pace of reforms in the last two decades under both the UPA (second term) and NDA governments. Further, policy uncertainty can discourage private investment as investors expect stability to carry out risky long-term projects.

What about low private investment?

The biggest cost of low private investment would be slower economic growth as a larger fixed capital base is crucial to boost economic output. The push by the government to increase government investment is also seen as a negative by some who believe that it crowds out private investment.

Others, however, think that government investment compensates for the lack of private investment. It should be noted, however, that private investors are considered to be better allocators of capital than public officials, helping avoid wasteful spending. Further, taxes imposed to raise money for public spending can be a significant drag on the economy.

THE GIST

Gross Fixed Capital Formation refers to the growth in the size of fixed capital in an economy. Fixed capital refers to things such as buildings and machinery, for instance, which require investment to be created.

The biggest cost of low private investment would be slower economic growth as a larger fixed capital base is crucial to boost economic output.

Many economists in India have blamed low private consumption expenditure as the primary reason behind the failure of private investment to pick up over the last decade, and particularly since the onset of the pandemic.

What is the Bhojshala-Kamal Maula complex dispute?

What did the Madhya Pradesh High Court rule? Why is the status of the complex contested? What has the Supreme Court said about the issue?

Ziya Us Salam

The story so far:

On March 22, the 13th century Bhojshala-Kamal Maula complex in Madhya Pradesh's Dhar district became the latest site for a "scientific survey" by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The action followed the Madhya Pradesh High Court ruling which had, on March 11, ordered the ASI to conduct a survey of the premises within six weeks. The complex is contested by Hindus and Muslims as the Vagdevi temple and Kamal Maula Masjid, respectively.

What has the Supreme Court said?

Even as a 15-member ASI team along with the district administration and local police began the survey of the entire complex, the Supreme Court issued a word of caution on April 1. A Bench presided over by Justice Hrishikesh Roy said no physical excavation that would

alter the character of the premises should be carried out. The court's cautionary note followed the mosque's appeal against the High Court order. The top court also ordered that no further action should be taken on the outcome of the excavation without its permission.

What has been the status quo?

The Bhojshala-Kamal Maula temple-mosque compound has had a truce for the past 20 years. Following an arrangement in 2003, Hindus perform puja here on Tuesday while Muslims perform namaaz on Friday. Despite the occasional hiccup, the system worked fine until recently when a little-known outfit by the name of 'Hindu Front for Justice' petitioned the High Court, claiming the complex was a temple built in 1034 and the mosque here was constructed during the reign of Sultanate king, Alauddin Khalji in the 13th century by "destroying and dismantling ancient structures of previously constructed Hindu temples".

Dhar itself has been a city of prominence during the time of the Paramaras, the Marathas and the Delhi Sultanate.

The Muslims, however, claim no existing place of worship was demolished by Maula Kamaluddin Chishti, a sufi, after whom the mosque was named. He was a disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya and is said to have migrated to Dhar in 1291. He preached here for around 40 years. His tomb, built next to the mosque inside the complex here, is frequented by people of both faiths. They claim too that the ASI mentioned the Kamal Maula mosque in its records in 1902, and allege that the controversy began the same year when Kanshi Ram Lele, an education officer, found Sanskrit shlokas written on the floor of the mosque, and concluded it was the mythical Bhojshala.

Have there been surveys before?

A survey was carried out during the British regime by John Malcolm in 1822 who mentioned many legends about Raja

Bhoja, including the dams he built, but did not mention any Bhojshala. Malcolm did refer to the current building as a mosque albeit in ruins. He mentioned too a pulpit approached by a flight of stairs. On its floor, Malcolm is said to have found a Hindu inscription, indicating the mosque was built with pre-used material. Whether the pre-used material was of a local place of worship or otherwise, he did not investigate.

In 1935, the Front claims permission was granted by the local king for namaaz for a day. After Independence, the Jan Sangh entered the fray and started a protest for the restoration of the alleged temple. Then, around the time the Babri Masjid-Ramjanambhoomi stir was at its peak, attempts were made to whip up Hindu sentiments and recite Hanuman Chalisa here. The attempts were foiled by the administration. In 1998 a petition was filed in the High Court in 1998 by Vimal Kumar Godha on behalf of the Bajrang Dal and other Hindu bodies. The Kamal Maula mosque continued to be contested by the Hindu outfits in the legal domain. In 2002, around the time of Gujarat pogrom, there was violence around the ownership of the place of worship here as well. The local administration stated the place was "Kamal Maula mosque" and the existence of Bhojshala was a "mystery". Next year, a truce was arrived at with specific days for worship for both communities. The same words were quoted by the High Court recently while ordering a survey of the place.

THE GIST

On March 22, the 13th century Bhojshala-Kamal Maula complex in Madhya Pradesh's Dhar district became the latest site for a "scientific survey" by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

The 'Hindu Front for Justice' petitioned the High Court, claiming the complex was a temple built in 1034 and the mosque here was constructed during the reign of Alauddin Khalji in the 13th century by "destroying and dismantling ancient structures of previously constructed Hindu temples".

The Muslims claim no existing place of worship was demolished by Maula Kamaluddin Chisht after whom the mosque was named.

IN THE LIMELIGHT

The tryst between Dravidian politics and Tamil cinema

As Tamil Nadu heads for elections today, a closer look at the evolution of cinema as a medium for political propaganda and on those who have wielded this tool over time

Gopinath Rajendran

Cinema, in the form of documentaries, short films, feature films, and even animated cartoons, has long been used as a medium to shed light on major events or social conditions to inform and agitate the masses. Our Western counterparts have been utilising films since the days of World War I. In India, films on anti-British propaganda started the movement against British rule and to date, the medium has proved to be a formidable tool for spreading ideologies in the country, especially in Tamil Nadu where the lines between the two fields often crossover. The State has had five Chief Ministers from the world of cinema (excluding the current CM M.K. Stalin who tried his luck in acting with *Ore Rathnam* in 1987).

The architects of this assemblage
Fascinatingly, the current ruling party of Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was the one that understood the power of stage plays and films, such as *Thyaga Bhoomi* (1939) and *Mathru Bhoomi* (1939), to penetrate the minds of the masses before Independence. They began using films extensively, so much so that Indian National Congress leader K. Kamaraj asked if actors can manage presiding over a State. After Independence, four Congress leaders – including C. Rajagopalachari and Kamaraj – ruled the State until 1967 when administrative power went to the hands of Dravidian parties. C.N. Annadurai was the first leader from a Dravidian party to become Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu (then Madras State).

An excellent orator and writer, Annadurai pushed his ideologies through his writing that were made into films like *Velaikari* (1949), which was inspired by Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Nallathambi* (1949) which was adapted from the Hollywood film *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, and *Or Iravu* (1951). The films focussed on the disparity between castes and classes and promoted social justice and education. Speaking of *Velaikari* and *Or Iravu*, their lead actor K.R. Ramasamy, who previously staged both stories as plays, is said to be the first Tamil actor to dabble in politics. Not only was he a close follower and confidante of Anna, but his plays – which he continued after turning into a film star – doubled as fundraisers for the DMK.

Parallely, M. Karunanidhi, who as a high school student created the Tamil Nadu Tamil Manavar Mandram, the Dravidian Movement's first student wing, turned into a screenwriter with the M.G. Ramachandran (MGR)-starrer *Rajakumari* (1947). For MGR, an emerging actor at the time who predominantly starred in romance and action films, it was Karunanidhi's writing in films such as *Maruthanad Elavarasee* (1950) and *Manthiri Kumari* (1950) that gave him his big break.

While we are at it, around the same time a young boy joined a drama troupe and worked his way up to play the lead in the stage play *Shivaji Kanda Hindu Rajyam* written by C.N. Annadurai in the 1940s that was presided over by Periyar E. V. Ramasami, who was then leading the



Rich history: Udhayanidhi Stalin campaigning at Chintadripet on April 13. VEDHAN, M

Dravidar Kazhagam and the self-respect movement. It was he who christened this man, V.C. Ganesan, to Sivaji Ganesan.

When Sivaji Ganesan made his film debut with *Parasakthi* (1952) – alongside another actor-politician S.S. Rajendran – penned by Karunanidhi, the film was so politically charged that the then-ruling State government demanded that the film should be banned. However, the film, which commented on the caste system, went on to acquire a cult status. By then many prolific actors such as N.S. Krishnan and M.R. Radha made sure their characters were an extension of their personal ideologies which aligned with the Dravidian movement.

The grand split
MGR, in 1972, founded the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) as a breakaway faction from the DMK after an altercation with Karunanidhi. MGR's persona from films which portrayed him as a friend and saviour of the downtrodden mirrored his real-life actions where he carried out philanthropic services. This led to a landslide victory for the AIADMK in the 1977 State elections and MGR was Chief Minister until his death in 1987. Soon after his death, the party was split into two factions between his widow V. N. Janaki and Jayalalitha, a leading actor from 1965 whom MGR had collaborated with multiple times. When Janaki retired, Jayalalitha joined the two factions and served six terms as the Chief Minister.

A love-hate relationship
The direct equation the two fields of Tamil cinema and politics shared took a back seat after the death of MGR. The 90s, an important decade for Tamil cinema, saw very little on the political front by those from the film industry. In the mid-90s, it was speculated that Rajinikanth might take the plunge into

politics but the actor decided against it. Though he would go on to announce his entry into politics in 2017, he eventually dissolved his organisation in 2021 and affirmed that he won't be entering politics. His peer and close friend Kamal Haasan formed the centrist party Makkal Needhi Maiam in 2018. His party failed to win a seat in the 2021 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly election, and despite securing 2.62% of the votes, Kamal himself lost in the Coimbatore South constituency by a slender margin. He opted out of this year's Lok Sabha elections and instead campaigned for the DMK-led alliance.

Over the last few decades, many actors gave politics a shot albeit with comparatively less success. Multihyphenate T. Rajendar, a long-time supporter of the DMK, launched his own party the All India Latchiya Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. R. Sarathkumar established the All India Samathuva Makkal Katchi and had previously served as a member of the Rajya Sabha and the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly. He recently merged his party with the BJP. Actor Napoleon joined DMK and served as the Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment from 2009 to 2013. Director Seeman started the Naam Tamilar Iyakkam during the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War which has now become the Naam Tamilar Katchi and is fielding 39 candidates in the 2024 elections.

Cinema as politics
While many actors took the political plunge during and after their heyday within the film industry, there were a slew of actors/technicians who used the medium to reflect on the political situations of that particular era. Interestingly, most of them took the satirical route. Cho Ramaswamy was one of the earliest political satirists who infused jabs at that period's political

moves in the films in which he starred as a comedian. It was also the underlying theme for his directorial *Muhammad bin Tughluq* (1971).

K. Balachander brought in a new wave of films which were centred on social themes and interpersonal relationships mostly with a woman protagonist. His film *Achamillai Achamillai* (1984) satirises the Indian political system and the toll it takes on small-time politicians while *Thanneer Thanneer* (1981) dealt with everyday problems caused by corruption. Probably the most famous film in the genre which has become synonymous with political satires has to be Manivannan's *Amaidhi Padai* (1994). With a strong political acumen, Manivannan's directorial ventures – like *Palaivana Rojakkal* (1986) written by M. Karunanidhi – as well as the supporting roles he played in *Thai Maaman* (1994), *Villadhi Villain* (1995), *Ellame En Pondattithaan* (1998) and *Mudhalvan* (1999) were replete with political references delivered comically.

The late 90s and early 2000s saw a plethora of political films such as biopics on yesteryear political leaders as well as fictional takes such as *Makkal Aatchi* (1995) and a slew of Shankar films on social issues like *Gentleman* (1993), *Indian* (1996), *Mudhalvan*, *Anniyan* (2005) and *Sivaji: The Boss* (2007). Mani Ratnam, apart from making films such as *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995) that have politics as a canvas on which his plots are mounted, also made *Iruvar* (1997), inspired by the lives of Karunanidhi, MGR and Jayalalitha, which has become a textbook example of political dramas in Tamil cinema. In the contemporary Tamil film scene, there have been a fair share of political satires such as *Saguni* (2012), *Joker* (2016) and *Tughlaq Durbar* (2021) as well as entertainers with a political backdrop like *Ko* (2011), *Kodi* (2016), *Sarkar* (2018), and *Kodiyil Oruvan* (2021).

A new wave on the horizon
In the last decade, filmmakers like Pa Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj (with films such as *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Karnan* and *Maamannan*) and Vetrimaaran (*Visaranai*, *Asuran* and *Viduthala*) have introduced Tamil film audiences to a new wave of socio-political films that put anti-caste themes in the front and centre of Tamil cinema. Ranjith – whose directorials include politically charged films like *Madras*, *Kaala* and *Natchathiram Nagargiradhu* – apart from also producing such films, extends his social work in various forms like the Neelam Cultural Center and Vaanam Art Festival. Apart from them, works of filmmakers like Ram, Manikandan, Raju Murugan, Gopi Nainar and Lenin Bharathi have held a mirror to the sociopolitical issues and how they plague the lives of commoners.

Tamil cinema's tryst with its purveyors doubling it as a launch pad into politics shows no signs of stopping. The son of the State's current Chief Minister, Udhayanidhi, who entered the film industry as a producer and distributor-turned-actor, contested and won in the 2021 elections before being sworn in as Minister in Youth Welfare and Sports Development.

Probably the biggest announcement from the world of Tamil film in recent times came earlier this year when Vijay announced the launch of his political party, Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam. The actor, who announced his foray into politics at the peak of his career, declared that his party would enter the electoral fray in the 2026 Tamil Nadu Assembly elections.

2024 marks the 80th year of Periyar starting Dravidar Kazhagam which gave rise to the parties that have ruled the State since 1967. Cinema and politics, in various degrees of intensity, have remained intertwined since then.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

"Cloak and dagger operation (K. V. Ramakrishna Rao, Khammam)"
"Cloak and dagger operation" is 'an operation dealing with or suggesting adventure and exciting mystery.'
This is a cloak-and-dagger story.
A cloak is a loose sleeveless garment which 'is fastened under the throat and covers most of the body.' It can cover several things, including a dagger. When 'cloak' is used figuratively, it means 'a thing that hides'.
The whole thing was done under a cloak of secrecy.

"Cloak" is also used as a verb.
His mission is cloaked in mystery.
A 'cloakroom' is a room where outdoor clothes like coats and hats are left for a short time in a theatre, restaurant and the like. It is also a room in a railway station where one's luggage may be left for a short time. In American English, 'checkroom' is used. In British English, 'cloakroom' is also used euphemistically to refer to the toilet in a public building."
"Lingua Franca (K. Sriram, Delhi)"
"Lingua franca" is 'a language adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different'. English serves as a lingua franca in some parts of the world."
"Tweedledum and Tweedledee (C. V. Subbavadhanulu, Nuzvid)"
"It means 'a pair of persons or things nominally different but practically the same.' These were two names coined by John Byrom (1692-1763), who used them in a satirical poem to criticise quarrelling musicians. There was practically no difference in their performance. The names were popularised by Lewis Carroll who used them in his *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Now the term is used figuratively when one wants to refer to insignificant differences.

You have to choose between Tweedledum and Tweedledee.
"Please refer to your 'Know your English' column of August 20. You were discussing 'cop'. Allow me to point out that 'cop' is in fact an abbreviated form of 'constable on patrol.' This abbreviation was first used in England and now everywhere. (Upasana Sahoo, Hanamkonda)"

"I like your ingenious explanation. But I am sorry to disappoint you by saying that 'cop' is not from 'constable on patrol.' It is from the Latin root 'capere' – 'to take', 'to arrest'. 'Constable' has a different story, it is from the Latin 'comes stabuli' – 'count of the stable'. A constable was originally a master of horses. As horses were considered important a person who was in charge of them was also considered important.
"Constable" was the highest military title under the kings of France. In England, a 'constable' was a governor of a fortress. Even now the person who looks after the Tower of London is called constable. During the Tudor times, 'constable' referred to a parish priest. Later it came to mean 'a policeman.'
The Constable of France was the Commander-in-Chief of the Army for four centuries from the 14th. In England, the Constable of England or Lord High Constable is an officer appointed for coronation days."
Published in The Hindu on October 1, 1991.

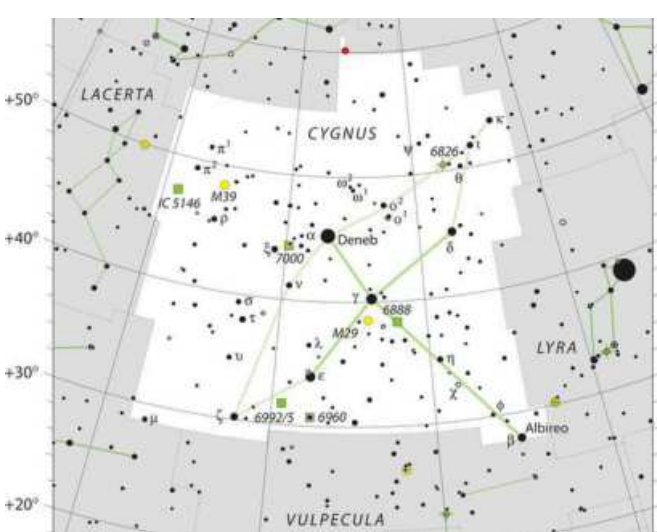
THE DAILY QUIZ

On April 19, 1975, India's first satellite 'Aryabhata' was launched into space

Vasudevan Mukunth

- QUESTION 1**
An important reason this mission was possible was the Soviet Union's offer to launch the satellite for free. While he had some apprehensions at first, the then chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation got on board with 'Aryabhata' before representatives from the two countries signed the launch agreement. Name him.
- QUESTION 2**
To memorialise the India-Soviet Union friendship, the USSR in 1984 issued a postage stamp featuring Aryabhata and two other Indian satellites launched onboard Soviet rockets. Name them.
- QUESTION 3**
Name the area on the outskirts of

- Bengaluru (then Bangalore) that U.R. Rao, the 'Aryabhata' project director from the India side, selected as the location for the Indian Scientific Satellite Project, where 'Aryabhata' would be built.
- QUESTION 4**
In 1972, the task of building 'Aryabhata' faced a political problem: there was strong opposition to moving equipment from the Satellite Systems Division in X to the new Bengaluru facility, despite a parliamentary assurance that it would be returned after the launch. Name the city X.
- QUESTION 5**
In March 1975, a month before the launch date, a panel recommended three names for the satellite. One of course was 'Aryabhata', which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi picked. Name the other two options.



Visual question:
Very close to the star Eta Cygni in the sky is a powerful and famous source of X-rays. Aryabhata's instruments were able to measure these X-rays despite the satellite's four-day lifespan. Name the source.

- Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:** 1. This freedom fighter is famous for his role in ushering the Green Revolution as Union Agriculture Minister. **Ans: C. Subrahmaniam**
2. This popular leader from Tamil Nadu, first made his entry into Parliament from Srivilliputtur in 1952. **Ans: K. Kamaraj**
3. This thespian was twice elected to the Lok Sabha on the Congress ticket in the 1980s. **Ans: Vjyayanthimala Bali**
4. This leader is the author of the novel *Kavalkottam* that was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for Tamil in 2011. **Ans: Su Venkatesan, CPI(M)**
5. This leader held portfolios as Union Minister in BJP led governments. **Ans: Rangarajan Kumaramangalam**
Visual: Identify this five-time member of Parliament. **Ans: Murasoli Maran from the DMK**
Early Birds: Rajmohan.V| Prashant Nain| Saheni George| Sadhan Kumar Panda| Binu Peter

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

Word of the day

Purloin:
make off with belongings of others
Synonyms: pinch, lift, sneak, pilfer
Usage: *She must have purloined a purse for the event.*
Pronunciation: bit.ly/purloinpro
International Phonetic Alphabet: /pɜːˈlɔɪn/

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

Battle for TN

BJP keen to emerge as a key force in the State

For many this time, Tamil Nadu is the most interesting battleground in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. With 6.23 crore registered voters, the State accounts for 6.38 per cent of the total number of voters in India. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections 72.44 per cent of the voters turned up to press a button on the EVM; the hope is that the number would increase this time. Realistically speaking, few expect the fight for the 39 constituencies to have a big influence over who would form the government in Delhi. Yet, the general elections in Tamil Nadu are significant for three reasons.



First, the elections will prove whether the BJP has emerged as the third force or not. For decades, Tamil Nadu politics has been two-cornered, with DMK and AIADMK occupying the vertices. Many others have attempted in vain to emerge as the third force. Actor Vijayakanth's Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam has fizzled out, Rajnikanth's proposed new party was never born, Kamal Hassan's Makkal Needhi Maiam has lost its identity by casting its lot with the DMK, Seeman's Naam Tamizhar Katchi looks like it has miles to go before it becomes a force, and actor Vijay's Tamizhaga Vetri Kazhagam, formed just two months back, is not in the picture, its focus being on the 2026 assembly polls. As such, even when the combined vote-share of DMK and AIADMK has slid to below 70 per cent — meaning that one in three Tamils want an alternative — the two Dravidian parties have remained dominant because the other 30 per cent is splintered. The BJP wants to consolidate the non-DMK, non-AIADMK votes and emerge as the third force. It is using the 2024 elections as a springboard to jump from the periphery of Tamil Nadu politics into the core.

Second, the general elections could create a churn over the existence of AIADMK in its present form. The party's leadership is frazzled by the attempts of two of its erstwhile leaders, former Chief Minister O Pannarselvam and TTV Dhinakaran, to claim the legacy of the party's matriarch, J Jayalalithaa, and founder, MGR. Their success at the hustings could possibly force a Shiv Sena-like fractious situation in Tamil Nadu.

And finally, unlike in the past when people chose either DMK or AIADMK, the 2024 elections are — for the first time — a clash of three distinct ideologies in the State. One is the Periyarist ideology, derived from 'Periyar' E V Ramasami Naicker, defined by leftist thought, extreme stress on social equality and atheism, followed by the DMK and AIADMK. Linguistic sub-nationalism and atheism, however, find more play in the DMK. The other is the right-of-centre, Hindutva-nationalist ideology of the BJP. The third is that of the fledgling Naam Tamizhar Katchi, an insular formation that abhors alliances and virtually isolates itself with its fierce Tamil sub-nationalism. The 2024 elections will tell us whose sails capture the most wind, which in turn could have a bearing on the future pathway of the State.

FROM THE VIEWROOM.

The BJP and the NRT

TCA Srinivasa Raghavan

Tamil Nadu will vote today in the 2024 general election. The talking point for the last few months has been the BJP's assault on the Dravidian citadel.

This is because of the Prime Minister's repeated forays there and the energetic endeavours of a young former police officer, K Annamalai. Their immediate aim is to increase the party's vote share.

Regardless of what happens in this election, the BJP's ambitions in TN have caused major schizophrenia amongst Tamils who have lived in North India for two or more generations. My family is amongst them.

But despite our long domicile in the North, North Indians regard us as South Indians, or more simply as 'Madrassis', because much of peninsular India was under the British Madras presidency. In Tamil Nadu, however, we are regarded as NRTs or Non-Resident Tamils or 'Dilli-kara'.

We are thus a minority in both

places. It has made us develop a split personality. Being a minority in both the North and in Tamil Nadu has also created a culturally hybrid Tamilian.

Truth to tell, a very large number of the third generation Tamils in the North can't read or write Tamil. Indeed, they barely manage to speak it.

But we build and go to Tamil temples and everyone speaks in Hindi or Punjabi there. "Oy, Sommi, Puli-yodharai kithe gaya si?" Sommi being the diminutive of Somanathan.

There is a general belief that NRTs are favourably inclined towards the BJP but that's a myth. The goodwill which the BJP enjoys amongst them is restricted mostly to the Brahmins and that too not all of them. Many NRTs call it an 'Indee' party.

A question that's often discussed amongst the older generation is how would the NRTs vote if they were to vote in Tamil Nadu. Would they vote for the BJP, as they do in the North or would they vote for one of the long-established political parties of the State including the Congress?



ANANT MERATHIA

It is a well-known fact that India's banking system was in deep trouble some years ago. The gross NPA ratio of public sector banks in 2016-17 was 11.7 per cent. Apart from the question of how these NPAs came into being, it was clear that it reflected the failure of legislation such as the SARFAESI Act, 2002, the RDBFI Act 1993, SICA 1985, and to some extent the winding up regime under the Companies Act, 1956. All of these performed initially but as time went by they gave way to delays, frivolous litigations, abuse of the process of law and more.

One aspect of Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016 (IBC) that makes it a unique law is how its regulator, namely the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI) has from time to time, provided data on various aspects of the law. This is right from the number of companies that have been initiated into the corporate insolvency resolution process (CIRP), liquidations, time taken for completion of each of these and other procedures under the IBC such as voluntary liquidation, percentages of recoveries and a lot more. It seems that easy access to data has become a major reason for loose criticism of the IBC and the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT). The NCLT is a specialised tribunal formed to adjudicate upon company law matters and cases under the IBC 2016.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

To begin with, let us first get the facts in place and then assess whether IBC as a law has been a success or failure. To what extent is it justified to easily blame the NCLT for supposedly being "slow" and not "swiftly deciding" the cases? As of December 31, 2023, 891 CIRPs that yielded resolution plans took an average of 671 days or 558 days (after excluding the time by the NCLT for specific reasons) from the date of commencement of the insolvency proceedings. It is interesting to observe that from October to December 2023 alone, about 79 resolution plans have been approved, which shows the pace at which the tribunal is picking up and trying to clear the backlog post-pandemic.

Similarly, in terms of liquidation, 2,376 companies were ordered to be liquidated, which took an average time of 486 days from the liquidation commencement date (LCD) for conclusion. Further, out of the 2,376 companies, for about 830 companies, the final reports have been filed, and these took about 575 days for closure from the LCD. Another process under



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

NCLT not to blame for IBC 'delays'

HURDLES. NCLT has the unenviable task of addressing the grievances of a range of adversarial stakeholders while taking cases to their conclusion

IBC, namely, voluntary liquidation took about 409 days from the LCD, and about 1,253 companies could successfully participate in this process and wrap up their operations.

In addition to the above, the inflow of applications in the context of personal guarantor insolvencies have significantly picked up after the Supreme Court's decision upholding the constitutional validity of several sections of IBC in *Dilip B Jiwrajka vs Union of India & Ors.* As many as 2,417 applications have been filed before the NCLT as on December 31.

IBC is a law where the underlying issues are all related to money and finances, barring matters where homebuyers are involved and emotions run very high. It has been held in

It is often seen that right from the very admission stage of a company into the corporate insolvency process, the proceedings turn adversarial.

Univalue projects (P) Ltd vs Union of India, that the NCLT and the Appellate Tribunal shall be bound by the principles of natural justice while regulating the proceedings before them, in addition to being governed by the provisions of the Companies Act, 2013 and IBC.

It is often seen that right from the very admission stage of a company into the corporate insolvency process, the proceedings turn adversarial. Issues such as non-cooperation between stakeholders and day-to-day challenges between the promoters and the insolvency professional (IP/RP) or Committee of Creditors (CoC), clashes among creditors, third party issues are commonly observed.

PRESSURE SITUATION

At the ground level, during the resolution process, there are litigations concerning partial admission or rejection of claims, which could range from a few lakhs for an operational creditor to possibly hundreds of crores for a financial creditor, related party issues, and more. It is a pressure situation even for the financial institution to fight for its entitlements right till the end, and the Tribunal

cannot ignore this. Then comes the grand finale in the resolution process in some cases where the competitive bidders and/or the promoters end up litigating for acquiring the company; proposals of one-time settlements, etc.

We claim to be a judicial system wherein any aggrieved person can approach a court of law and has the right to be heard. Is it then easy for the NCLT to brush aside these interim applications which form part and parcel of the CIRP or liquidation? Before rushing to the conclusion that there are delays in the resolution process by the NCLTs, one needs to accept that there are complicated issues that need to be looked into. These include the NCLT's efforts to give all relevant stakeholders a fair chance to be heard; the unsuccessful ones would take the appeal route.

Is it merely the judicial system that is responsible for the delays or is it the nature of issues and concerns of relevant stakeholders involved around this law that are equally or more responsible? This calls for sober reflection.

The writer specialises in corporate and IBC disputes in New Delhi and Chennai, and is the author of 'Defaulter's Paradise Lost'

Address basic problems in insurance industry

Reforms in regulation must grapple with the core issues of pricing, transparency, accountability and poor penetration

Srivatsan Ranganathan

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) notified the Insurance Product Regulations 2024 on March 20. The notification lays out a roadmap for issuing insurance products — be it life, non-life or health insurance. The notification supersedes a number of existing insurance product regulations.

The objectives of the notification include facilitating a faster customer response to emerging market trends, designing innovative products, promoting ease of doing business, improving insurance penetration without sidelining policyholder protection, and promoting good product governance with effective oversight and due diligence for insurance products.

It was probably felt that the existing guidelines, although they contained similar principles, did not help in bringing forth adequate products with customer orientation coupled with insurance penetration.

The regulations allow for reviewing and revising existing products, providing

adequate insurance with right risk transfer, simple and not complex to understand terms including transparency, and clarity in policy wordings, terms, coverage, exclusions and conditions.

The basic principles of insurance of insurable interest, indemnity, utmost good faith, proximate cause, contribution, subrogation and salvage should be well adhered to, while framing insurance products.

On pricing insurance products, it is important that it is adequate and appropriate to the risk, that the premium rates are fair and equitable, non-discriminatory and provide value for money, besides being viable, self-sustainable for the insurer as well. The products are expected to fit into the risk appetite, capital availability, claim experience, reinsurance costs, and guarantees of the insurer *vis-a-vis* market requirement. The products are meant to be amenable to market practices, and supportive of correct underwriting principles.

Three detailed schedules have been drawn with Schedule I and III for life insurance, Schedule II and III for



VITAL. Product regulation

general insurance and Schedule III for health insurance products.

FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS

While the wording and the principle behind the notification need to be commended, it should be remembered that the industry was not operating without detailed product guidelines in the first place. What clearly emerges is the fact that the existing products did not offer insurance penetration to the deeper roots of India.

Penetration is abysmally short or inadequate in relation to the risk.

Insurance after all has its edifice on the law of large numbers. Unless there is a larger market penetration, how far rationalising insurance cost and its risk return trade off will be practically feasible needs to be seen. To say that any policy wording needs to be read with a tooth-comb to understand the cover given, or that the exclusions in it need simplification of jargon, is stating the obvious. Much to the chagrin of most policyholders, most 'fine prints' emerge only before lodging a claim.

Product regulation is a must to standardise, streamline, regulate and to make them fit market needs. It needs to be factually seen how far the industry players and the regulator are going to walk the talk on this topic in the days to come. Cues may be taken from SEBI as well for its measures to improve stock market penetration in India. The fact is that insurance is always a need/risk-based product more than a profitable investment option. Unless there is genuine change in approach, this regulation will become like old wine in a new bottle.

The writer is a chartered accountant

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

Reining in tax havens

This refers to 'Are tax havens fading into the sunset?' (April 18). There has been a spate of news in the recent past on the revised tax rules on the DTAA between India and Mauritius. After four decades of the tax treaty signed between these two countries, India has been making sincere attempts in plugging the loopholes in the system besides strengthening the concept of Tax Residency Certificate (TRC) issued by the Mauritian government.

With the revised provisions coming into force, no entity can claim TRC status without having significant physical presence in the originating country. Though the change of law could initially impact the overall funds flow

between countries under the system, it would ensure no round-tripping is done to bring back the money in a legal form. It appears to be the best way of cleansing the system. It is believed that India would tread cautiously on this, without jeopardising economic and political relationships with the countries involved.

RV Baskaran
Chennai

Monsoon forecast

Apropos the editorial 'Monsoon cheer' (April 18), an above-normal monsoon predicted by IMD is a potential boost to the world's fifth largest economy. Plentiful rains not only bring respite from a scorching summer, but they are also the

lifeblood of the country. They drive agriculture output and growth, with farming still being the largest source of employment. Nearly half of the country's net-sown area doesn't have access to irrigation and, therefore, depends on rains to grow a number of crops vital for food security. The robust farm output helps to put a lid on food prices, which are above the comfort level now.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

Smart production

Enterprises are turning to smart digital infrastructures to gain production efficiencies and tap growing market opportunities. However, they must combine key

components — unifying voice, video, and data — to protect their employees and operations. Manufacturers seek to build secure 'smart' production facilities for their staff and assets and comply with local security regulations. In washing soap production, for instance, if the target is high, soda ash is added to boost production. Needless to say, need-based production is the order of the day and the production managers need to tune their schedule accordingly.

Jayanthy Subramanian
Mumbai

CSR efforts delivering

This refers to 'CSR is carving out an impact' (April 18). From investing for the sake of formality to making an

impact on the underprivileged sections of the society, CSR efforts have really come far in the last one decade.

Having different sectoral heads like JSW Foundation to CSR teams engaging with boards go to show that corporates really mean business and want to bring much-needed change.

A study by Give Grants tells us that we still have a long way to go as only 2 per cent of aspirational districts are receiving the funds. The government should conduct at least one session in a quarter where corporates can share their experiences. Innovative ideas can emerge during brainstorming in such sessions.

Bal Govind
Noida

Climate effect on crops

It's taking a huge toll on output and productivity

Arvind Kapur

The effects of climate change are particularly being felt by the agriculture sector. This year, for instance, farmers have had to grapple with untimely rains, hailstorms and delayed snowfall. Rabi crops are typically sown during October and November, and they generally mature by March and April. Since these crops are grown in the post-monsoon season, they require residual moisture or need less irrigation due to winter conditions in the North and less moisture evaporation.



RAINS. Changing pattern hurting

During late December and early January, rainfall typically occurs owing to western disturbances, which benefits rabi crops. But in the last two decades, rain has largely shifted to late February or early March. The late rainfall along with strong surface winds damage the matured crops and affect grain quality.

VARYING DAMAGE

These weather conditions are causing varying degrees of damage to mustard, wheat, gram, winter corn, and potato crops. This year, delayed snowfall in the hills and western disturbances led to rain and hailstorms in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, western Uttar Pradesh, and parts of Madhya Pradesh.

However, the damage to the crops has been in patches and not widespread.

In Uttar Pradesh, districts where crop loss has been pegged at around 30 per cent are Basti (35 villages), Chitrakoot (10 villages), Jalaun (33 villages), Jhansi (32 villages) and Saharanpur (62 villages).

According to the latest Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare estimates, wheat output is expected to reach around 112 million tonnes, an increase of more than two million tonnes over last year's level.

Similarly, mustard production is expected to increase by 0.4 million tonnes during the 2023-24 rabi season.

Another problem witnessed recently is the damage to wheat crop caused by sudden increases in temperature. The grain filling process is affected, leading to shrivelled grains and a reduction in both quality and yield.

The realities of climate change necessitate adjustments in cropping patterns to sustain productivity and production. The other solution is to use new breeding technologies like

genetic modification, gene editing and speed breeding to produce new cultivars which can withstand these variations. Every crop breeder needs diverse germplasm and land races to find genetic material which can make the crop withstand these environmental impacts.

The other challenge for the breeders is to reduce the time for development of varieties and hybrids which are tolerant to these stresses.

For this, speed breeding offers a solution, where a crop is cultivated under controlled light and temperature conditions. Depending on the crop, the growth period can be reduced by up to one-third.

Consequently, instead of two crop cycles per year, we can achieve six cycles annually. This approach allows for the expedited release of crop varieties, addressing the challenges posed by the accelerated pace of climate change. With gene editing and genetic modifications, new traits can be created in genotypes to withstand biotic and abiotic stresses caused by climate change.

Rice cultivation in Punjab and Haryana during the kharif season, a water-intensive crop, contributes to declining water tables and pollution from straw burning. The government must incentivise farmers to switch to alternative crops to address these pressing issues.

By 2050 or before Indian population will surpass China's and touch around 1.7 billion. At present we produce 330 million tonnes of foodgrains, but our need is projected to increase to more than 400 million tonnes. Land and water are dwindling resources, exacerbated by climate change, posing challenges to meeting food production targets. We must devise an agriculture roadmap accordingly.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, Sustainable Agriculture, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI)



RK RAGHAVAN

Two recent violent incidents in the bustling and pretty Australian city of Sydney throw up challenges to law enforcement of a country that prides itself for its benign but firm approach to maintaining public order in a multi-ethnic society. Recall the Novak Djokovic episode of a few years ago when he was refused entry and confined before being returned to his home country for refusing to be vaccinated before playing at the Australian Open tennis.

The city's leafy suburbs never cease to charm you. It is difficult to digest that such environs could provide a haven to two ostensibly deranged persons who, last week, wreaked havoc on a peace-loving population through senseless stabbing of innocent persons.

One attack was at the popular Westfield Mall close to the ever-crowded world famous Bondi beach. This killed six persons. The other was at the local Assyrian Church targeting Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel who was conducting the service when he was knifed by a teenager. Several were injured, including the Bishop.

There was no nexus between the two incidents. Still the audacity and recklessness of both the assailants stand out. While the police ruled out terrorism in the Mall attack, they looked upon the church assault as an act of terror committed out of religious bias.

What surprises this writer is that a knife and not a firearm was employed in the two crimes. In most of the developed world — except perhaps the UK — the gun is the preferred weapon to commit a crime. Was a knife used in Sydney because gun availability is strictly controlled in Australia? If that is so, kudos to Australian law enforcement.

Joel Cauchi (40), responsible for the Mall assault, had been known to the authorities as having a mental problem but not charged for any offence. The 16-year-old boy (name not yet revealed by the police) who attacked the Bishop was, however, known to the police and was on a good behaviour bond. He had been warned and let off a few years ago after he came to adverse notice for a mentally disturbed condition and for his latent propensity for violence. Here is a dilemma for the police. While they may suspect that a particular individual is a prospective criminal because of his visible mental condition, they have no option but to release the suspect when



Dealing with 'lone wolf' terror acts

ON THE PROWL. A lone wolf attacker is often mentally disturbed, as the incidents in Sydney, Oslo and Christchurch show. Police, society have to act in concert

there is no concrete evidence of actual participation in a crime.

Investigations are on in both the cases. Both happenings are viewed as the handiwork of a person acting on his own, commonly known as a 'lone wolf'. This phenomenon baffles law enforcement across nations.

A lone wolf is looked upon as a solitary individual indulging in public violence on targets he may never have met. The motive quite often goes undetected.

Some well known cruel incidents involving a lone offender include the July 2011 attack in Oslo and a nearby island where a youth summer camp was going on. Seventy-seven persons were killed in the fatal explosion engineered by a 32-year-old Norwegian with known right-wing extremist views.

Another well known gruesome incident was in March 2019 in which one Andres Breivik attacked two mosques in Christchurch (New Zealand) killing 51

Schools and homes will have to play a huge role in detecting deviance among the youth under their care. Indifference on the part of either is culpable.

persons. What was unique here was the live streaming of the dastardly action on Facebook by the offender Brenton Tarant (28), an Australian gym trainer who had migrated to New Zealand carrying his right extremist views.

SEVERAL THEORIES

There are several theories on the lone wolf phenomenon. The attacker very often has had a psychiatric disorder from childhood — especially at a broken home — that was developing without the knowledge of the parents. Even when the parents are aware of the disorder, many are guilty of ignoring it, either because of a fear of reputation loss, or perhaps in the hope that the child will outgrow the malady. The root cause of youth deviance is traceable often to a perceived sense of injustice. Animosity towards a political system is also not uncommon. This is a complex web where the despair of a person gets the better of hope.

There are two groups involved here; law enforcement and society at large. Police agencies are often clueless on handling a person reported to be mentally unstable and dangerous. Mere record keeping without treatment is often the starting point of a disaster such as Oslo, Christchurch or Sydney.

Law enforcement will not intervene unless the suspect had indulged in violence and caused harm to fellow beings. Application of law as a measure of abundant caution, without the report of a specific harm, will often lead to charges of human rights violation. Wait and watch is, therefore, the easy way out for the authorities. But police agencies do not always have the resources to monitor individual behaviour. This is where the shoe pinches.

Schools and homes will have to play a huge role in detecting deviance among the youth under their care. Indifference on the part of either is culpable. What about the bureaucracy? There is a social welfare set-up in every government. This is more on paper than on the ground. Government agencies are either preoccupied with other relatively more visible tasks or lack the skill needed to look for and detect aberrations in teenage mental health. This is why lone wolf attacks will continue to be a menace. The problem could grow in dimensions and intensity considering the burgeoning violence and inequality in our environs.

The writer is a former CBI Director and Professor of Criminal Justice and Policing at the Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

April 19, 2004

Disputed tax burden rising for India Inc

Taxes are the price of civilisation, said Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. Corporate India, however, does not appear to share his enthusiasm if the surge in disputed taxes are any indication. Indeed, the disputes arising out of demand notices totalling more than Rs 1,000 crore slapped on companies such as Wipro, Tata Sons, Slocum Investments (promoter of HCL Technologies) and Zuari Industries, in the last couple of weeks are not isolated events.

Campaigning for first phase of polls ends

Campaign guns fell silent on Sunday as over 800 aspirants fanned out door-to-door in a last-ditch effort to woo the electorate as meetings and rallies came to a close in 140 constituencies in 14 States that go to the polls on Tuesday in the first phase of elections to the 14th Lok Sabha.

Vajpayee, Premji, Ash among Time's most influential

The Prime Minister, Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee; the Wipro Chairman, Mr Azim Premji; and Bollywood actress Aishwarya Rai, figure in a list of the world's 100 most powerful and influential people compiled by the Time magazine.

How data protection law impacts the health sector

Gautam KM
Ridhi Kalra

In August 2017, the Supreme Court, in a landmark decision in the *Justice KS Puttaswamy (Retd.) & Anr. vs Union of India* case, recognised the right to privacy as a fundamental right under the Indian Constitution. Following this judgment, the government proposed a few versions of the Personal Data Protection Bill in Parliament before passing the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, making it the official legislation of India for personal data protection and privacy.

The US recognised the requirement of legislation for the protection of health data some decades back and enacted the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act in 1996, with the primary goal of safeguarding sensitive patient health information held by healthcare providers. At first, India introduced the Information Technology (Reasonable security practices and procedures and sensitive personal data or information) Rules, 2011 (SPDI Rules) aiming to regulate the processing of sensitive personal data in the digital space, where

it also recognised health data as a sensitive personal data. However, a need for robust overarching legislation was felt for addressing an individual's privacy concerns and for protection of personal data.

ONEROUS OBLIGATIONS

The enactment of the Act shall replace Section 43A of the Information Technology Act, 2000 and the sensitive personal data or information Rules, 2011 (SPDI Rules). The new legislation imposes onerous obligations on the persons determining the means of processing the digital personal data, i.e., the data fiduciary under the Act, irrespective of the sensitivity of personal data, scrapping the classification of health data as sensitive personal data as provided in the SPDI Rules.

As the name of the Act suggests, this law only protects the personal data which is collected in a digital form or if collected physically is later digitised. So this Act, with its present provisions, may not apply to the handling of data by traditional clinics, vaccination drives, healthcare facilities which still collect a patient's data in physical entry register



HEALTH DATA. No longer sensitive

and do not digitise it ever. Most organisations today collect personal data by placing cookies on an individual's system and the individual accepts those cookies to avoid the pop-up which keeps repeating unless an individual has not actioned on it, and consent to process personal data is deemed by these data fiduciaries upon acceptance of their privacy policy by the data principal by merely accessing the website of these data fiduciaries.

The Act imposes on healthcare providers an obligation to obtain an accurate, informed consent from patients backed by an affirmative action by such patients, which consent request need to be backed with a privacy notice detailing the manner in which the patient may exercise her rights in the

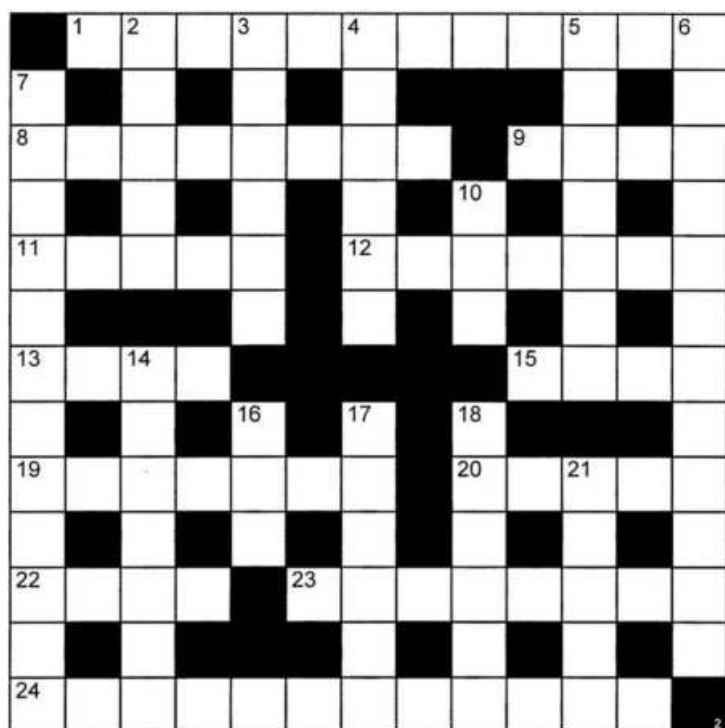
digital personal data collected by these healthcare providers and the re-courses available to such patient for grievance redress. In case of children and persons with disability being the patient, the healthcare providers will have to ensure that they obtain a verifiable consent from their parents or legal guardians.

Also, the legislatures have come up with a unique provision where privacy notice is required to be made available in 22 languages officially recognised under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution other than English, which may require the healthcare providers to implement appropriate technological measures to provide this privacy notice in the regional languages, if requested by the data principal.

These provisions not only add an obligation on the healthcare providers to obtain informed consent but will help educate the data principal about their personal data and build a nation of more informed data principals, who are more vigilant about their rights against any unauthorised processing of their digital personal data.

Gautam is Partner, and Ridhi is Senior Associate, Krishnamurthy & Co (K Law), Member of NATHEALTH

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2421



EASY

ACROSS

- Accommodation designs for approval (7,5)
- Being cooked too long (8)
- Look narrow-eyed (4)
- Concerning punishment (5)
- Orchestral kettledrums (7)
- Irritate (4)
- Engagement of gears (4)
- Aerial (7)
- Arterial trunk from heart (5)
- Do laundrywork (4)
- Curve: a conic section (8)
- Coin-collectors (12)

DOWN

- Vast water mass (5)
- Riding seat (6)
- Number (6)
- Mean (7)
- Immediately (8,4)
- Entanglement; something adding to difficulty (12)
- Little devil (3)
- Plant-destroying caterpillar (7)
- Unit number (3)
- Straw hat (6)
- Continental sausage (6)
- Perch for sleep (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Designs made by those with home ownership in mind (7,5)
- Bowler's stint finished, too long on range perhaps (8)
- Member of Upper House will look short-sighted (4)
- It's about punishing the Pole in the Ring-o'-Bells (5)
- Ain't wrong to hold the little devil, but they take some beating (7)
- It makes one irritatingly aware of bit of illicit chicanery (4)
- Measured by denier, he gets upset with the manuscript (4)
- Worker gets girl back and sticks up for air waves (7)
- Painting nothing inside, has a way for the blood to go (5)
- One right to get negative back for club (4)
- Rob a pal, a turn-out that's not straight (8)
- Sam must sit in discomfort while they make coins their study (12)

DOWN

- 'Will all great Neptune's _____ wash this blood Clean from my hand?' (Macbeth) (5)
- Lumber one with a seat for the jockey (6)
- It is reached by nonagenarian in entering Tyne disaster (6)
- Claim one's years to be the mean (7)
- Immediately it isn't crooked, it isn't on home ground (8,4)
- Almost arrive with split lip: Tom has one on that makes it worse (12)
- Bundle of mischief taken from 12 (3)
- Destructive caterpillar socially to ignore lowest of creatures (7)
- A person indefinite, singular as he may be (3)
- Hat affording craft passage (6)
- Is up about alarm: right out, there's the sausage! (6)
- Go to bed in flighty way, so get upset in rubbish (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2420

ACROSS 1.Revert 8. Ingle 9. Firedog 11. Knitters 12. Stamp 15. Four ,16. Ebb 17. Yawn 19. Party 21. Pictures 24. Strolls 25. Mimic 26. Trendy

DOWN 2. Exist 3. Evermore 4. Took 5. Filth 6. Age 7. Seas 10. Gnat-bites 12. Safe 13. Sycamore 14. Only 18. Hunch 20. Tiled 21. Pump 22. Came 23. Stet

Trust in elections

Faith in EVMs should be restored and maintained

India's Lok Sabha elections, which kick off today, are a uniquely vast undertaking. They take weeks to conduct, in several phases across the country. The first phase will see voting in only 102 of the 543 Lok Sabha constituencies. As compared to the voting, the counting of votes is remarkably speedy. For the past two decades, votes have been counted swiftly and securely through the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs). Results are known within hours most of the time — a clear difference from other large democracies. Slow counts, as in the 2020 presidential election in the United States, encourage losers to challenge the authenticity of the results. EVMs have thus significantly improved the credibility of Indian electoral results. The Supreme Court is currently, however, hearing a plea from some well-regarded non-government organisations that seek to, if not restore paper ballots, ensure that each electronic vote has a paper counterpart that is counted separately. The court has reserved its judgment for now, after two days of hearing. Without prejudice to the court's decision, it must be understood that the broader thrust of the plaintiffs' argument might endanger Indian democratic processes.

The judges have correctly noted that the ballot-paper era prior to EVMs was rife with electoral misconduct and malpractice. The Election Commission has argued that counting all the paper receipts of votes — voter verifiable paper audit trails, or VVPATs — would take days or weeks. Currently, about 5 per cent of VVPATs are counted as a random audit of the results of a particular constituency. The plaintiffs in this case have argued that some countries, like Germany, have returned to ballot paper after experiments in electronic voting. But the German constitutional court that delivered the decision did so on the principle that the process should allow for the possibility of public audits by non-experts — which the VVPAT does indeed do. The principle of transparency can be satisfied by more details of the process and more random audits; it does not seem to require the wholesale abandonment of electronic voting altogether.

Politicians who lose elections, regardless of party, like to blame EVMs. But, viewed objectively, these doubts should be dismissed. All major parties both win and lose elections in the EVM era. Many state governments are controlled by parties that are in Opposition at the Centre; and it is state government employees that oversee elections all over the country. This is, in many ways, a disaggregated exercise. The plaintiffs in this case might have sensible arguments to make about the weaknesses introduced into the system by the way the new VVPAT machines are constructed and connected to the ballot machines. These can be addressed by the court and the Election Commission. But broader doubts about electronic voting cannot be allowed to persist in the absence of any data suggesting fraud or misalignment. The hundreds of millions of Indians who will be voting starting today have faith in the electoral process. For some of them it is their only voice in their future, and they value it correspondingly. Causing them to disbelieve in the system without the slightest hard evidence would be inappropriate at the very least. EVMs cannot be made an eternal scapegoat for political outcomes.

Problem of plenty

Derivatives volumes can increase risks

The Financial Stability and Development Council is reportedly considering setting up a panel to study the potential risks arising from a surge in derivatives (futures and options, or F&O) trading. The rapid growth in F&O volumes, coupled with an increase in retail participation, may have led to increased systemic risks and a possibility of contagion if there are high levels of volatility. Although details are sparse, the panel would possibly focus on retail derivatives traders and their possible sources of margin funding. It would examine the possibility that individuals are using personal loans to fund margins for this highly leveraged form of trading. India is an outlier when it comes to derivatives trading. Not only does it generate the highest volumes of F&O trades, it has alarmingly high ratios of derivatives volumes to cash equity volumes. The notional turnover of the Indian market is over 400 times that of the cash equity market. This is in contrast to other large financial markets which generally have ratios of 10 to 15 times.

The volumes are driven by a large and growing population of retail traders. This leads to the possible connection with unsecured loans underpinning trades. If true, that creates a larger amount of risk and the possibility of contagion in the broader financial sector. The F&O turnover doubled in 2023-24 compared to the previous year. According to a 2023 study by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), nine out of 10 retail traders lost money, at an average of ₹1.1 lakh per trader in FY22. Given that retail participation has increased and trading volumes have more than doubled since FY22, the per capita losses are likely to be even higher now. The regulator suspects that many retail traders take unsecured personal loans in order to put down the required margin on F&O trades, which are generally executed at high leverages. This practice may be especially prevalent among non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) that also have a brokerage arm and in many cases the NBFCs would be borrowing funds from the banking system. If this is the case, substantial risks could arise across the financial system if there is high volatility in the F&O segment.

While futures trading is a zero-sum game, options are not zero-sum. Losses for an option seller could be unlimited and it is likely that the average retail trader is not very skilled in hedging to minimise losses, given the statistics. If traders who borrow to fund margins at high interest rates (personal loans are obtained at high interest rates) do suffer high losses, there could certainly be a negative impact on the lenders. However, one of the suggestions that Sebi tried to implement to assess the level of risk was considered unworkable as well as a violation of privacy. The regulator considered trying to assess the net worth of retail derivatives traders to gauge the level of systemic risk and then set cutoff thresholds for individual traders based on those net-worth assessments. While this specific idea may be unworkable, the proposed panel could find more pragmatic ways to mitigate risks. It could also look for the root causes of the extraordinary trading volumes F&O generates. More data about the segment and a holistic analysis would certainly help. The regulator would also do well to conduct awareness programmes.

Snatching decline from the jaws of growth

If enforced, the law of Standing Orders will bureaucratise India's most dynamic sector



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

India's information technology (IT) capital has been in the newspapers for the wrong reasons. Shortages of drinking water dominated the headlines, and there are signs of labour unrest in the IT/IT-enabled services (ITeS) sector. A new workers' union called Karnataka State IT/ITeS Employees Union (KITU) has demanded that the state government do away with the longstanding exemption, given to IT/ITeS establishments, from the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946. Karnataka has nearly 2 million workers engaged in the IT/ITeS sector, and it seems that about 10,000 are members of KITU.

The union said that the exemption allowed employers to flout labour regulations with impunity: Employers enforce long working hours, fail to provide mechanisms to safely report grievances (including sexual harassment), and engage in unfair practices to terminate workers. The law under debate does not itself offer any distinct labour protections and is only intended to improve transparency and workers' understanding of rights guaranteed to them in other laws. In Karnataka, establishments with 50 or more workers must codify and disclose the conditions of services to workers in 'Standing Orders' certified by the government. That sounds like a desirable thing.

But this law also enables workers' representatives to seek that employers go above and beyond legal requirements and effectively cast these conditions of service into stone. Establishments are forced to consult with worker representatives before adoption of Standing Orders. In cases of disagreements, the employer must engage in a tripartite discussion with

the workers' representatives and the government. What is an employer-employee relationship is then snarled up with two more actors, the union and the government.

The contents of certified Standing Orders cannot be changed for six months without the consent of worker representatives. Employers face significant pressure from worker representatives to adopt conditions of employment that are not mandated under any law. To illustrate, KITU has recently adopted a resolution to advocate the 'right to disconnect': The right to ignore all communications from colleagues and superiors "after hours".

While we can appreciate the objectives of worker representatives seeking greater power, this has consequences for economic dynamism. It is not an accident that Indian export dynamism has failed in most areas. Expressed in inflation-adjusted dollars, goods exports from India grew at a compound rate of 1.2 per cent per year for the 2012-2022 period (i.e. doubling every 56 years). In this same period, services exports grew at a compound rate of 5.7 per cent (i.e. doubling every 12 years). Has traditional Indian labour law hamstrung goods exports while services exports were given the opportunity to grow? What glory would Indian garment makers achieve if they were given the privileges of Indian software makers?

As an example, consider the right to disconnect. India's IT/ITeS sector serves clients in all time zones. It is difficult for Indian IT/ITeS establishments to maintain their global competitiveness if workers refuse to take calls from teammates abroad or customers abroad.



AARTHIKAM CHINTANAM

K P KRISHNAM

Strategy in Israel-Iran escalatory ladder

The latest escalation between Israel and Iran marks a significant change in the adversarial relationship between the two antagonists. Not since the first Persian Gulf War of 1990-91, when the Iraqi military under Saddam Hussein struck Israel with SCUD missiles, have the Israelis been subjected to a missile attack on the scale the Iranians executed. Tehran's most recent salvo involved a combination of drones and missiles. The missile barrage consisted of a mixture of cruise and ballistic missiles. Israel's missile defences intercepted an estimated 331 missiles launched by the Iranians. To be sure, the Israelis benefitted from American and British assistance in intercepting the volley of Iranian missiles and drones. What compelled the Iranians to launch such a large attack? The immediate and proximate cause was the Israeli air strike against the Iranian consulate in Damascus that killed two top Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) generals. This event triggered the latest round of escalation between Tel Aviv and Tehran, with the latter launching the Kheibar Shekan and Emad ballistic missiles and Paveh cruise missiles. The drones used by Iran included the Shahed 131 and 136. The Shahed 136 UAVs have been employed in Ukraine by the Russians.

From Iran's perspective, Israel breached a critical threshold by attacking its diplomatic mission, which Tehran deemed its sovereign territory. Iran's retaliatory action against the Israeli attack was not perfectly symmetrical in that the means employed by Israelis was likely manned airpower, whereas the Iranians used Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and missiles to strike Israel. Both the non-availability of manned airpower and easy availability of UAVs, ballistic and cruise missiles induced the Iranians to launch them.

The volume of projectiles and drones launched by Iran was also disproportionate to Israel's initial attack, but from Tehran's point of view this was par for the course for striking the sovereign territory of Iran.

Regardless of the lack of success accruing from Iran's missile-cum-drone shower, with at most five missiles penetrating Israeli defences, this is likely sufficient from an Iranian standpoint, because in all probability Tehran's purpose was strategic, conveying to the Israelis they ought not to repeat attacks against high-value Iranian targets. Indeed, five ballistic missiles were successful in penetrating Israeli defences by striking Nevatim Airbase in the Negev desert, causing minor damage. Influencing the risk calculus of the Israelis and inducing greater Israeli restraint was the real aim. Yet, what do we make of the 'failure' of Iran's combined missile-drone attack? It might be the case that a key reason why the Iranian missile-plus-drone attack was generally unsuccessful is because it was a deliberately performative act. The Iranians relayed in advance that they would retaliate by publicly revealing how they would do it or dropped sufficient hints that Israeli and American intelligence picked up.

A direct consequence of this was that it allowed both the Israelis and their allies — the Americans and the British — ample preparatory time to defend against Iran's missile and drone assault. By telegraphing the scale of the attack in advance, Iran was giving its primary adversary time to ready its defences to effectively neutralise the attack in a bid to insulate itself from a punitive reprisal by Israel and its allies. Yet, the scale of the attack does not square with the notion that it was a performative act and to conclude that it was based more on hind-

In the present fluid and flexible approach, managers and workers find middle roads that make sense, where certain individuals take on a greater burden of interruptions in the Indian night. Such pragmatic problem solving would be hindered by "the tripartite mechanism", i.e. with the union and the government being in the picture alongside the firm and the worker.

Are unions and State required to protect the help-less worker? There is now, in many sectors, a class of well-educated workers in India, who are competent to take care of their own interests. When an employer behaves in certain ways, such workers can and do choose to leave. Well-educated workers now have choices in a deep and liquid labour market. Wages go up and down reflecting supply and demand. A worker who wants the right to disconnect outside of office hours will find an employer who offers that at a commensurately lower price. These private bargains do not require the insertion of state coercion intermediated by a union.

When Standing Orders were dispensed with for IT companies, the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (PoSH) law and the Industrial Disputes Act provisions were reiterated as conditions for special treatment. IT/ITeS establishments were required to institute committees to deal with sexual harassment cases and other grievances and required to report on cases of dismissals to the labour department. The new union, KITU, alleges that many IT/ITeS establishments fail to comply with these conditions. There is merit in improved state government monitoring of the state of compliance with these requirements, possibly with greater public disclosure which could help workers make better decisions when choosing to work for a given firm.

What is at stake in these questions is the IT/ITeS sector in Karnataka, the heart of the state's economy. But even more, the policy conditions for services exports from India are of great importance for India's future. Services exports were a full \$325 billion in 2022-23 and can reasonably double every decade. That is, an additional export revenue of \$325 billion can come into Indian hands over the coming decade, if the State makes the right calls. These are very large numbers compared with the size of the Indian economy. If this sector is not nurtured, the economic future of India could be at risk.

And finally, we should think beyond IT/ITeS. What is so special about IT/ITeS that the difficulties of labour law were resolved for this sector in a way that was not done for other sectors? Could there be more sectors in India, other than just IT/ITeS and other business services, where these remarkable achievements of the IT/ITeS sector might be replicated? In fact, the exemptions given to the sector should act as a clarion call for similar flexibility to manufacturing and other services as unimaginative labour regulations have long been cited as a binding constraint to the growth of firms and to employment opportunities.

When determining the structure of labour law, governments like Karnataka need to shift gears from the name of the industry to worker agency. Perhaps the structure of labour law could involve the identical exemption for any firm where over 85 per cent of the employees are college graduates.

The writer is an honorary senior fellow at the Isaac Centre for Public Policy and a former civil servant



HARSH V PANT & KARTIK BOMMAKANTI

sight than foresight. After all, what if some of the Iranian missiles actually ended up inflicting significant casualties and destruction compelling the Israelis to escalate precipitously in retaliation. The extent of the attack does reveal that Iran has shown a greater proclivity to take risks and the confidence to do so had hitherto not displayed. But Tehran has also indicated that it wants to de-escalate, stating that it has achieved its objectives.

Even so, Israeli missile and air defences performed commendably with Israel intercepting and destroying 99 per cent of missiles and drones launched from Iranian soil. The multilayered Israeli air-defence system consists of the Arrow Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system developed jointly with the Americans geared for exo-atmospheric interception against long-range ballistic missiles. David's Sling is another capability to intercept medium-range missiles, which is supplemented with the American-built Patriot battery system. In addition, the Israelis deploy the Iron Dome that is specialised to intercept short-range rockets. Finally, the Iron Beam system is a directed energy or laser capability which may have been involved in the interception of Iran's missile volley and considered cheaper than the other interception capabilities Israel possess, but there is conflicting evidence about it actually being operational.

Iran's massive missile assault foreshadows ominous trends for strategic stability in West Asia, representing a clear transformation in the conflict dynamics between Tehran and Tel Aviv. Proxies and other domains such as cyberspace are likely to be the means through which Iran and Israel are likely to battle each other and their intensely adversarial relationship is likely to affect several countries in the region. Nuclear weapons too are just waiting in the shadows.

The writers are, respectively, vice-president for studies and foreign policy, and senior fellow, national security and defence, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi

Researcher in the hot seat



BOOK REVIEW

CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

Did you know that when Soumya Swaminathan, director-general of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), was invited to join the leadership team at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva in 2017, she was so reluctant to leave her job that she told J.P. Nadda — Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare at the time — "Mujhe mat bhejiye (please do not send me)"? He asked her to take up the invitation as it was an honour for India.

She wanted to stay back in order to look after her mother, who had dementia, and support her children through their graduate and postgraduate education, but her father

M S Swaminathan, known as the father of India's Green Revolution, convinced her to go.

This is one of the numerous captivating anecdotes sprinkled throughout journalist Anuradha Mascarenhas's book *At the Wheel of Research*, a well-researched and engaging biography of Dr Swaminathan who became the inaugural chief scientist at the WHO and served the global health agency during the Covid-19 pandemic. At first, she was taken aback that Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, a former Ethiopian health and foreign affairs minister whom she had met at a World Tuberculosis Day event in Delhi, and the first director-general of WHO from Africa, wanted her to join in the capacity of a deputy director-general for programmes.

Dr Swaminathan's "Why is he calling me?" response seems understandable when we learn from her foreword to the book that she is given to belittling her own achievements. When she was

approached to open up about her life for this book, she was initially reluctant. "I did not believe that there was anything extraordinary or particularly exciting about my life. What would interest a reader? What aspects of my life journey would resonate, enlighten, entertain or inspire?" she notes. Thankfully, she was able to get past those inhibitions to enable this wonderfully detailed account of her professional life.

After an MBBS degree at the Armed Forces Medical College in Pune, and an MD in paediatrics from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi, she pursued a postdoctoral medical fellowship in neonatology and paediatric pulmonology at the Children's Hospital, Los Angeles, attached to the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California. She became the director of the National Institute for Research in Tuberculosis in Chennai and the secretary of the Department of Health Research (Ministry of Health &

Family Welfare). While the book focuses on her stint with the WHO, it also fills us in on her contribution to tuberculosis prevention, tribal health, and de-stigmatisation of HIV and AIDS.

Dr Swaminathan's role as the chief scientist at WHO was created nine months before the Covid-19 outbreak.

It evolved to encompass "leadership coordination (internal and external), strategy, building consensus, firefighting, and being one of the main WHO communicators doing press conferences, interviews with... Indian and international media outlets, being active on social media... and taking on tasks that needed multidisciplinary expertise."

With this book, we get a glimpse

of how challenging it was "to be in the hot seat" but she was able to rise to the occasion because of her expertise in the field of public health, having dealt with "the biomedical and social aspects of HIV, tuberculosis and infections like Zika, polio and cholera". The author points out that India usually nominates officers from the Indian Administrative Service for posts in international organisations, and several candidates were being considered, but the WHO

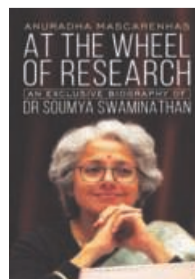
AT THE WHEEL OF RESEARCH

Author: Anuradha Mascarenhas

Publisher: Bloomsbury

Pages: 176

Price: ₹599



and she had to tread cautiously while addressing various stakeholders who were stubborn about the language to be used in important documents.

Like former United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's

memoir *Resolved: Uniting Nations in a Divided World* (2022), this biography shows us how power dynamics operate in international organisations. It recalls, for instance, the time when Dr Swaminathan was part of discussions on a treaty around "implementation of a framework for researchers to access genetic resources for biotechnology studies, vaccine development and other activities."

There were competing interests. Developing countries were looking for assured access to benefits as part of the sharing agreements. Wealthier countries wanted to safeguard private industry and intellectual property rights and also get free access to data and genetic resources.

India desperately needs more such books about women in senior leadership roles not only to inspire girls who want to realise seemingly impossible dreams but also to prepare boys to respect the knowledge, skills and vision that their female colleagues bring to the workplace.

The reviewer is an independent journalist and educator based in Mumbai. He is @chintanwriting on Instagram and X



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Political carnival, fest of democracy

The excitement around elections makes Indian democracy an engaging and energetic exercise

The world's largest festival of electoral democracy begins today. Close to a billion people will exercise their franchise in seven phases over the next month and a half. Today, 1,625 candidates are seeking a mandate from 102 constituencies across 21 states: Among the big states, Tamil Nadu will elect all its 39 MPs in this phase. In 2019, a majority of these seats were won by the Opposition, thanks to its near-sweep of Tamil Nadu. At stake is a third consecutive term for the BJP and the legacy of its mascot, Narendra Modi, who is seeking not just another inning as Prime Minister but also an enhanced mandate comparable to those the Congress won under Jawaharlal Nehru (1952, '57, and '62), Indira Gandhi (1971 and '80), and Rajiv Gandhi (1984). Modi has already changed the character of the polity, which for three decades after 1984 had given fractured verdicts: Under his leadership, the BJP broke this pattern by winning a simple majority in 2014, and improved its tally further in 2019. It is this trajectory that Modi is seeking to further: In his words, it began with the BJP offering hope, trust, and, now, a guarantee (of governance). Pivotal to this trajectory of success is the charisma of Modi, which has influenced the BJP to privilege his image over the organisation — the 2024 manifesto is issued in his name. "Modi ki guarantee". With the big promises of Ram mandir and Article 370 fulfilled, the BJP is "guaranteeing" the implementation of the Uniform Civil Code, Citizenship Amendment Act, and one-nation-one-election in the manifesto besides a continuation of existing welfare schemes. It is this cocktail of welfare, Hindutva, and national pride that has provided the launch pad for the BJP this season.

The Opposition INDIA bloc, after initial hiccups, managed to finalise seat tie-ups in all big states barring West Bengal, and has built a counter-narrative of "democracy-under-threat" and "Constitution-under-challenge", alleged intimidation of Opposition voices, curtailing of civil liberties, and sought to offer a broad agenda of social justice, populist welfarism, and improved centre-State relations, to pitch itself as a federal front that speaks against what it claims to be the unitarian and centralising tendencies of the BJP.

The high-voltage campaigns have seen these two visions clashing. The BJP, with better resources, superior poll machinery and a popular leader, seems to have an edge over the INDIA bloc, which is yet to get its act together and campaign as a single, seamless unit. However, these are early days and no election outcome can be predicted until the last vote is cast. Exciting days are ahead as the nation will debate with great intensity, the various ideas, ideologies, and programmes on offer. It is this noise that makes Indian democracy a deeply engaging and energetic enterprise.

No more Himalayan blunders, please

The government's insistence on ill-suited projects in the Himalayas is inexplicable, given the raft of reports — some by its own experts — that have warned of disastrous outcomes of such pursuits. After the 2013 flash floods in Uttarakhand almost completely washed away the Phata Byung project in the upper reaches of the mountains, the Centre wants to revive it and has initiated the process of environment clearance. The Himalayas are a sensitive ecosystem for a number of reasons and interfering with its precarious landscape has seen the region suffer a series of disasters, from floods to landslides to tunnel collapses. The mountains are relatively young, and therefore exceedingly geodynamically active at the surface and the subsurface levels. Deforestation and badly planned construction have exacerbated the problem by leaving the loose surface exposed to the elements, hastening erosion of the rocks. Against this backdrop, the climate crisis has proven to be the last straw, with extreme weather events becoming more frequent as the air in the mountains heats up faster than that in the low-lying areas and retains a lot more moisture.

The Phata Byung project is a symbol of what could go wrong during extreme events. An environment ministry expert committee reported that the project compounded the damage from the 2013 flash floods by constricting the flow of the Mandakini, one of the major streams that make the Ganga. There are serious question marks anyway about building dams in this belt owing to potential silting, earthquakes, and landslides. The concerns of energy and employment in the Himalayas need to be addressed with a different development lens than what serves other, less sensitive geographies.

{ BEYOND THE BYTE }

Rajdeep Sardesai



A referendum on Modi's leadership

The 2024 general elections is fought in the name of the Prime Minister, for or against

An electorate of a whopping 960 million plus, spread over 543 constituencies, and over a million booths in 28 states and eight Union territories are voting in an election in the world's largest democracy being fought on just one name: Narendra Damodardas Modi. The 2024 election is the ultimate presidential-style battle being contested under the guise of parliamentary democracy by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Leave aside Kerala, a state that marches to its own beat, and Andhra Pradesh, which has an old-style match-up between regional satraps, in every other state, there is only one candidate who has made this election a referendum on his leadership.

Even the BJP manifesto is almost entirely about deifying an individual above all else. "Modi ki guarantee" is the catchline that runs through every promise with pictures of the Prime Minister (PM) splashed across almost every page of the manifesto. The party has been subsumed within the towering personality cult built around the "one nation, one leader" drumbeat.

Not since the high noon of the Congress in the mid-1970s when then Congress president Dev Kant Barooah infamously spoke of "India is Indira and Indira is India" has a national election been so completely identified with one person. The 2014 election was a vote for change made with the assurance of "acche din"; 2019 was about leadership but within the context of a broader nationalist appeal built around the Pulwama terror attack and the Balakot response.

This time, there isn't even a façade for making this an issue-based election around jobs, inflation or income inequalities. Or, vigorously debating the hits and misses of the last 10 years. Even Hindutva doesn't matter beyond the core BJP voters. The much-hyped "Viksit Bharat" narrative is built around the core belief that only one leader can take India into the future. Even the promise of bringing the Olympic Games to the country in 2036 is designed to create an aura of near permanence around PM Modi's tenure. From spinning a dream of a "new India" by 2022, the calendar has been artfully shifted to 2047 and beyond, embodied in the Prime Minister's vision of an "Amrit Kaal".

The concept of a "guarantee", a word coined first by AAP and Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi in 2020, and later used by the Congress to highlight its poll promises in Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka, is now the PM's USP.

It is based on the realisation that voters are generally sceptical of their local leadership but more inclined to trust a larger-than-life national leader like Modi even if the "guarantee" is based more on hope than concrete delivery. Not surprisingly, the PM, rather grandiosely, refers to his guarantee in the third person, almost as if he too is subordinate to his own cult.

Karnataka offers a good illustration of how this obsessive personality-driven politics is working on the ground. With an abundance of cash-rich *netas*, defectors and dynasts, the "new" BJP candidate list in Karnataka reflects how a "party with a difference" is now simply a "win-at-all-costs" Modi-centric election machine. Half the sitting MPs have been dropped — many of them senior and loyal *karyakartas* — while the party has stitched an alliance with HD Deve Gowda's Janata Dal (S). Only a year ago, the BJP fiercely campaigned against the JD(S) in state elections, accusing the party of being a father-son private limited company that was steeped in corruption. The *anti-parivaarवाद*, *bhrashtachar hatoo* trope at the Centre sounds hollow in the lush green countryside of southern Karnataka as the BJP and JD(S) leaders campaign together in the name of Brand Modi.

In a sense, the BJP's Modi fixation is understandable. When you have a trump card in his undeniable popu-



The BJP is now a Modi-centric election machine

REUTERS

larity and mass connect, why will you not flaunt it? If the Congress in the Indira years built its election strategy around the latter's post-1971 "Maa Durga" imagery, why should the BJP hesitate to showcase its tallest and most trusted leader by some distance? But what makes sense electorally might not always be healthy for a diverse multi-party democracy. In the most fundamental sense, a concerted attempt is being made to render all other leaders and parties irrelevant to voter choices.

Ironically, it is the Sangh Parivar that has often emphasised the importance of *sangathan* (organisation) over *vyakti* (individual). Recall how the RSS frowned upon the BJP's 1999 and 2004 campaigns where massive cut-outs of Vajpayee dotted the political landscape. Now, the RSS appears to have silently acquiesced to the "aayega to Modi hi" propaganda blitz, secure in the knowledge that Modi 3.0 will faithfully implement the saffron brotherhood's core ideological agenda. A coalition-era PM like Vajpayee had to work within the constraints of a common minimum programme while a majority Modi government can push ahead with removing Article 370, building a Ram

Temple and now promising a Uniform Civil Code.

With MP candidates reduced to faceless nobodies, with Union ministers serving as faithful implementers of executive firmans, with bureaucrats living up to their reputation as dutiful "yes men", with the Opposition browbeaten and bruised and the media as cheerleaders, the stage is set for an election where a resounding mandate is sought in Modi's name alone. In the short term, it's a strategy that should pay rich dividends for the BJP when pitted against a divided and demoralised Opposition. In the long run, the inevitable question will pop up: "After Modi, who?"

Post-script: On a bus ride in rural Karnataka, I asked a group of women whether they had heard of "Modi ki guarantee" and the Congress's promise of "Nyay". Almost all of them identified with the former coinage, none of them could fathom what "Nyay" meant. Ironically, they were all beneficiaries of a free bus journey, one of the five "guarantees" implemented by the Siddaramaiah-led Congress government in the state.

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

In TN, a BJP challenge to Dravidian inheritance

Tamil Nadu, which will elect all its 39 Lok Sabha MPs today, is where the INDIA bloc is the strongest. The DMK-led alliance has a pan-state presence and represents a rainbow of castes and classes. This time, though, the BJP, has been a revelation. It is in contention in only a handful of seats, but mounted a high-voltage campaign by deploying its formidable resources. It hopes to emerge as the main Opposition in the state by displacing the AIADMK, which has been one of the two poles of Tamil Nadu politics since its formation in 1972. If that were to happen, it could completely change the political dynamic of the state, which has been under the hegemonic influence of the Dravidian Movement since CN Annadurai formed the first DMK government in 1967. A decent vote share could foreground the BJP as contender for office when assembly polls are held in the state in 2026.

The BJP's audacious campaign marks the first formidable ideological challenge to the Dravidian Movement and its multi-stranded politics that encompasses the legacies of the anti-caste social justice movements traceable to the early 20th century, pride in Tamil linguistic inheritance and identity that began in the 19th century, welfare governance focussed on the redistribution of public resources, and an argument for a federal nation that is at peace with sub-nationalisms.

The BJP, which is uncompromising in upholding a unitarian idea of India and subscribing to what it deems as the Hindu idea of society-nation, has been trying to craft a new language of politics to win over a people conditioned for a long time to perceive it as a party of north India, and a champion of Hindi and Hindutva at variance with the Dravidian cultural inheritance of Tamil Nadu.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has led this outreach by trying to plug into the Tamil cultural world. The invocation of Tamil as a language of antiquity in multiple fora, the exhibition and installation of a *sengol* (sceptre) presented by the Thiruvavuduthurai *adheenam*, a Shaivite *matham*, to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at the time of independence, in the new Parliament building, the Kashi Tamil Sangamam, started in 2022, which has seen thousands of people travelling from Tamil Nadu to participate in annual festivities at Varanasi, the Prime Minister dressing up occasionally in *veshti* (dhoti) and *angavastram* (shawl), or most recently, the promise in the BJP manifesto to build Thiruvalluvar Centres are, surely, aimed at bridging the political and cultural distance between the BJP and the Tamil political and cultural ecosystem.

The outreach has a past. The BJP appeared to be getting a foothold in Tamil Nadu's electoral politics in the late 1990s. It succeeded in getting the AIADMK to join the National Democratic Alliance ahead of the 1998 polls. When AIADMK quit the alliance a year later, the BJP persuaded DMK patriarch M Karunanidhi to become an ally. In 1998, the BJP won three Lok Sabha seats as part of the NDA. A year later, its tally increased to four. The DMK held important portfolios in the Vajpayee government until it left the coalition in 2004. In this period, the BJP state leadership tried hard to dispel the notion that its politics was inimical to Tamil interests by

open advocacy of Tamil language, literature, and culture, particularly its Shaivite inheritance. In a prescient essay ("Tamil-style Hindutva", 2000), the late historian MSS Pandian wrote, "where once the Hindu nationalists dreaded Tamil as the vehicle of anti-Indian desire, these new votaries of Hindu-Hindi-Hindustan no longer fear it; in fact, if the recent past is any indication, the BJP's new slogan for Tamils could well be 'Tamil-Hindu-Hindustan'." However, the party's best record in Tamil Nadu was a 5.7% vote share in the 2022 local body elections.

Despite Periyar EV Ramaswamy's atheist leanings, Tamil Nadu has remained an intensely religious society — except that a subaltern Hinduism that subscribes to mother goddesses and Murugan has far more resonance than the *Sanatana Dharma* variants — which, the BJP seems to believe offers an entry point to project its vision of a pan-Indian Hindu constituency. For its part, the language politics championed by the Dravidian

Movement has a Shaivite inheritance. For instance, it appealed to the Pure Tamil Movement of Maraimalai Adigal for its anti-Sanskrit, anti-Hindi stance, and promotion of Tamil. It was subsumed as a cultural influence for its religious content. The DMK also privileged the text of ethics, *Thirukkural*, over the massive corpus of Bhakti literature to build a non-denominational, secular Tamil public culture.

The pockets of influence that the BJP has in the state were the result of isolated communal polarisation. The Nagercoil (now Kanyakumari) parliamentary constituency became a major centre of Hindutva politics following the Meenakshipuram mass conversions and the communal riots that followed in Mandaikadu, a coastal village famous for its mother goddess shrine, in the early 1980s. The BJP's rise in the Coimbatore region followed the 1997 Hindu-Muslim riots and the 1998 bombings.

The demise of J Jayalalithaa in 2016 and the subsequent decline of the AIADMK has opened up the political space in Tamil Nadu. There has always been a 10-15% vote that was uncomfortable with the OBC-dominated, and Tamil-centric, Dravidian parties, and preferred a pan-Indian centrist force like the Congress. There is also a new class of voters — young, middle class, aspirational — who may be willing to look beyond the state's political inheritance tied to the Dravidian Movement.

Politics abhors a vacuum. The further rise of the BJP is incumbent on two factors: One, the implosion of the AIADMK, which continues to have a robust cadre network and the memory of MGR and Jayalalithaa to appeal to its rural, women voters; two, a significant inflow of castes and communities, who are not represented by the DMK or the AIADMK, into the BJP. The fact is the BJP, despite acquiring a non-Brahmin leadership, often slips into a language more identified with the old disempowered Tamil Brahmin elite, which, immediately, restricts its growth in a polity dominated by the idiom of an OBC-centric politics identified by its allegiance to caste-based reservations and a non-Brahmin cultural mores. That will require politics which is more grounded than spectacular.

The views expressed are personal

{ PINARAYI VIJAYAN } KERALA CHIEF MINISTER

A year's worth of rain fell in a day in UAE, highlighting the urgent need for assistance. We request the external affairs ministry to urgently ensure a mechanism to support Indians



How ECI intends to push voter turnout

The Election Commission of India's proactive attention to 266 low-turnout parliamentary constituencies points to its intention to take the issue head-on. Voter turnout is among the major checkpoints on which the quality of elections and, by extension, the health of Indian democracy is evaluated. The benchmark for 2024 has become stiff after the dramatic jump in turnout to 66% and 67% in the last two general elections, following a range of interventions. The next percent increase will always call for a higher level of effort.

Among the 266, while 215 are rural constituencies, while 51 are in urban areas. Seen against the demographic spread of over 6.5 lakh villages and 4,800 towns and cities, the tilt towards urban voter shortfall becomes obvious. Out of the 50 constituencies that had the lowest turnout in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, 17 were in cities. Several of the rest were medium-sized towns and district centres, in UP and Bihar. Twenty-nine constituencies from cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, and even Kolkata remained far behind the national average, with Hyderabad trailing at a pathetic 45%. Together, these constituencies had an average of 58% — 9% less than national turnout.

In Surat, during the last Gujarat assembly election, there was a 25% gap in voting between one urban segment and a particular rural seat. Bengaluru South turnout stood at 47.5% in last year's assembly election, while Karnataka had an impressive average of 73.84%. The list of urban non-performance is endless. Not surprisingly, just two weeks before voting, the chief election commissioner and two election commissioners spent hours addressing the predicament. Besides a dozen top metro commissioners, select district election officers of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh were also called into the huddle. The agenda was to prevent another dismal show by India's great urban centres. City administrators were advised to engage their resources and innovative skills to cover about 10% or more of the gap with national turnout. There is realisation that one fit hardly applies to the heterogeneous urban population comprising educated elite, professionals, slum population, industrial workers, and university students, to name a few. Each set needs to be specifically engaged and nudged and their reasons for not voting resolved.

Urban apathy is not the only headache. Eleven states, mostly in northern and western parts, had turnouts lower than the national average of 67.4% in 2019. Among 50 rural constituencies that recorded the lowest turnout, 40 belonged to UP and Bihar. These two states, which had a

depressed turnout of 59% and 57%, respectively, will again hold the key in 2024 as well.

Election managers are trying to cover all fronts, starting with getting the prospective voter to know what, when, where and how of voting, and stretching their resources to make voting as pleasant an experience as possible in the harsh summer of this large country. A Turnout Implementation Plan (TIP) is at work for differentiated and scientific interventions in districts, constituencies, and polling stations, with purposeful collaborations for higher electoral literacy and outreach. Celebrities and influencers are pulling their weight with young voters. The ECI's multimedia campaigns like "Turning 18" and "You are the One" are seeking to weave in motivation, especially harnessing the width of social media. Intense messaging has permeated spaces that touch the urban citizen — public transport, parks, markets, malls, digital platforms, and even utility bills. Polling infrastructure has been made more friendly and accessible. The facility of home voting for those above 85 years of age and those with disabilities is a unique empathetic action. Comfortable and shortened wait times at the polling station, booths for high-rise buildings in arrangement with Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) and augmented parking facilities are part of the plan.

In recent years, behavioural change through community engagement has been the strategy in major national initiatives. While rural communities are more cohesive, city administrations have quite successfully connected with the community at times of need. Enforcing Covid-appropriate behaviour among millions of city dwellers not long ago is a standout case. More recently, municipal bodies are mobilising families for source segregation of waste and garbage-free cities. They could similarly mobilise to break out of the stigma of low turnout. A well-cleansed electoral roll has meant that there are no bloated denominators. Until voting by millions of internal migrants gets sorted by a politically agreed-to mechanism, India has to live with a certain quantum of voting deficit, but certainly not with a whole 300 million. Apathy or unwillingness to act does not get borne by any excuse. It is no great citizenship to forfeit a right that also offers a choice of None of the Above (NOTA). Voting by 970 million Indians could easily be the most emphatic statement of democracy.



Akshay Rout

Akshay Rout is former director general, Election Commission of India. The views expressed are personal

OUR VIEW

THEIR VIEW



Election symbols: Silent messaging has a big role

As elections begin, the silent messages of political parties gain salience across India. A party symbol can speak a thousand words. It's also what a voter usually spots first on the ballot

Indian elections get underway this Friday with polling booths thrown open for us to pick members of the 18th Lok Sabha. As voters scan the list of candidates on electronic voting machines, looking for which button to press, we can safely assume that party symbols will catch their attention before they can read the names of people in the fray. In many cases, that will be the only cue needed for a vote to be cast. The use of easy-to-identify symbols goes back to India's early years of low literacy. While over three-fourths of all adults are now classified as literate, the value of these symbols has not diminished. It may even have gone up in recent elections marked by the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), given that many electors see a vote for the ruling party as a vote for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. For such voters, spotting the BJP's lotus symbol on ballots is what matters. The same advantage may also work for opposition parties. The Congress's hand symbol, for example, could also attract votes by means of a visual cue, without names needing to be read. Symbol salience is the equivalent of brand recognition, clearly, which explains the prominence given to these icons in party publicity material. As with all symbols, though, the symbolism of party insignia is also open to interpretation. The BJP's lotus offers vast scope for a semiotic study. As a flower, it can cue thoughts of a bloom in fortunes, for example, which squares rather well with its campaign theme of development and aim of a 'Viksit Bharat' (developed India) by 2047. As a particular type of flower, known for sprouting rapidly across a pond of water once it takes root, it also evokes a sense of expansion. Comments on the party's lotus-like proliferation since the early 1990s have been

common, especially in Hindi. The ruling party's archrival, the Indian National Congress, has also enjoyed high levels of recognition across India by virtue of its election symbol. It comes in handy to position the Congress in popular perception as a party offering a helping hand. By coincidence or not, this seems in sync with the grand old party's welfare orientation. It also lends itself to advertising propositions. "Haath badlega haalat," is its ad-line for these polls: The hand will change circumstances. While a hand that symbolizes agency (as a doer) may remind economists of a debate on state intervention, given that the free market is supposed to work at the behest of an 'invisible hand,' a palm held up can more generally be interpreted as a human gesture that signals assurance. This reading of the Congress symbol also conforms with the party's promise of 'nyay' or justice, an abstract value that can be sought to be assured at many levels in multiple contexts. Think of social justice, for example, alternate approaches to which have animated identity politics since the early 1990s. Party symbols are powerful. Which is why retaining the original is so crucial to the warring factions of parties that split. These symbols hold the key to party recognition. Decades ago, Marxists were lucky to get the Communist icon of a sickle, hammer and star. In 2022, only one part of a divided Shiv Sena could claim its bow-and-arrow, resulting in a wrangle over it. Party symbols are also useful. Which is why they often get deployed literally. Samajwadi Party leaders don't miss a chance to cycle around. Aam Aadmi Party supporters use its broom as a clean-up call. Silent messaging works. It's why lotuses are flourishing on walls and hands of solidarity are in the air.

It's time for company boards to create technology committees

The potential impact of tech trends on business requires such panels to exercise focused oversight



M. MUNEER & RALPH WARD are, respectively, co-founder of the non-profit Medici Institute, and a board advisor, coach and publisher.

In the wake of cyber attacks on such reputed enterprises as Equifax, Marriott, Best Buy, Yum! and others, we had written a column offering tips on constituting a dedicated board-level cyber-security committee. While this was useful for corporate governance, the criticality of technology to business would make a technology committee of the board an even wiser approach. A permanent tech committee is still not the norm, though global instances are on the rise. These panels often have blended duties, however, with strategy, innovation or risk to be overseen alongside. Also, their use is sector specific. Healthcare enterprises use them the most and utility companies the least. The board talent needed for a tech committee is a work in progress. Open-ended definitions of 'technology' (not to mention 'expertise') have meant that a director who attends a weekend business-school session on AI can claim to be an expert. A study of 40,000 US directors defined 'digital savvy' as possessing an "understanding, developed through experience and education, of the impact that emerging technologies will have on [business]." Companies with three or more such 'savvy' directors showed 17% higher profit margins. Here are some tips. Set up a dedicated tech committee to watch for what is coming to the market, and make that a regular part of board conversation. This

assures the company a regular touch-point on tech issues and aids the entire board's understanding of technology trends, opportunities and risks. A tech committee can have 3-4 members. It should meet quarterly and its charter could spell out a broad range of issues for monitoring, such as cyber risk, digital efforts, AI and the Internet of Things. It can start with a few items and then update the charter. Chair duties can involve working closely with the management to review matters that come up, before assuring a full readout of the minutes to the entire board. A manufacturer of electronic tools has a board-level technology panel that boasts of a strong bench of tech talent. This helps the committee ask good questions and do deep-dives into emerging trends. But even less tech-focused companies should have boards that include at least one or two members who bring experience in a number of related domains. Their mandate should be to determine how technology is impacting their business and come up with insights that can help. Procedures drive board behaviour, which is why written charters work for board committees. Laying out a well-discussed, regularly reviewed statement of duties, powers and areas of focus is fundamental to the heavy lifting

that these board committees must do. There are a few essentials to bear in mind while drafting a charter. First, note that the titles and ambits of these committees can be diverse. Traditional board committees, such as for the audit process, have a well-established mandate and role, and also largely uniform functions. The audit panels of a finance firm, healthcare company and retail chain all handle the same tasks. But, as the technologies used, compliance calls and strategic issues facing each sector differ, tech committees could have varying concerns and skill needs. There are several examples of enterprises getting tech committees to work for their boards. Procter & Gamble's Innovation and Technology Committee goes beyond just technology oversight to include innovation needs for new products, markets, acquisitions and company structure. Canadian Solar's tech panel helps the company stay at the cutting-edge of energy technology. The information technology and data security committee of the board of Adani Power has a charter that focuses more on cyber security needs and offers a good blueprint for the energy sector in India. At Hong Leong Bank in Malaysia, there's an information and technology committee that boasts of a very detailed charter for tech oversight, with a special emphasis on cyber resilience. Tech committees should budget for external advisors. Given the complexity and lightning pace of change, they can't hope to know everything from within their membership, or even management. They must be assured resources to tap external consultants for advice on technology, apart from legal, compliance, privacy and ethical issues. Given the speed with which technology impacts business, it's advisable to ensure your committee's charter spells out a specific mandate to act as the eyes and ears of the board on issues like AI, cyber risk and data regulation. More than any other committee, a tech panel must watch out for what's coming.

QUICK READ

While there are a few instances of tech committees being set up by boards, the idea needs to be adopted by companies across industries, given the enhanced role that technology is playing. Such panels need a clearly framed charter of intent to be effective. What exactly they monitor could differ but a common mandate would be to keep watch of emerging trends.



JUST A THOUGHT Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and focused effort. PAUL J. MEYER

GUEST VIEW

Why Europe is losing the productivity race to America

BARRY EICHENGREEN



is professor of economics at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author, most recently, of 'In Defense of Public Debt'

The gap between productivity growth in the US and Europe paints a stark and, for Europeans, depressing picture. In the two decades since 2004, US productivity growth, as measured by the value of output per hour worked, has been more than double that of the eurozone. Whereas eurozone productivity has flatlined and even fallen slightly since the outbreak of the covid pandemic, US non-farm output per hour has risen by more than 6% over the same period—a more than adequate performance by America's own historical standards. Something seems to be going seriously right in the US and seriously wrong in Europe. Some accounts point to the strong fiscal stimulus applied in the US since the outbreak of the pandemic. For Europeans, this explanation is reassuring, because it suggests that the differential is transitory. After all, America surely can't run massive budget deficits and live beyond its means indefinitely. But while strong spending stimulus can trigger rapid output and employment growth, it is not clear why it should produce faster productivity growth. On the contrary, given strong employment growth and tight labour markets, one might expect US companies to be forced to take on less productive workers, with negative implications for output per hour. More likely, tight labour markets in the US may mean that firms, unable to find an adequate supply of workers at any price, are impelled to substitute capital for labour—to invest in labour-saving technology. Americans visiting a bank branch will encounter plenty of ATMs, but sometimes not a single human teller. They are compelled to order meals, even at white-tablecloth restaurants, using a QR code. Patrons of Parisian bistros horrified by this thought may argue that a Franco-American cultural difference is at work. But it is hard to deny that tight labour markets also play a role. Recall, however, that US productivity growth had accelerated relative to Europe's already in the decade leading up to the pandemic, when labour markets were not so tight. Both the US and Europe turned to fiscal consolidation following the 2008 global financial crisis. Europe might have been

slightly more hell-bent on austerity, but there was not enough difference in demand conditions to explain their different productivity outcomes. Moreover, while American firms have been quicker to capitalize on digital technologies, the timing is wrong here too: US outperformance in computer producing and using sectors was most pronounced in the decade preceding the global financial crisis, not in the period since. As for the latest round of new digital technologies, firms are only just now beginning to explore how large language models and generative artificial intelligence can be used to boost productivity. In other words, artificial intelligence (AI) and related developments can't explain America's unusually strong productivity performance in the last four years. In fact, history suggests that capitalizing on radical new technologies requires firms to reorganize how they do business, a trial-and-error process that takes time. The inevitability of errors means that productivity is likely to fall before rising, a phenomenon economists call the 'productivity J-curve.' And it is not as if European managers are unaware of the labour-saving and productivity-enhancing potential of digital technologies. It could be that Europe's strong trade unions, fearing job destruction, resist their adoption, although Germany, with a tradition of strong unions, has some of the most robot-intensive factories in the world. Alternatively, restrictive EU rules may be impeding adoption in Europe. The EU's data-privacy regulations, and now its proposed artificial intelligence rulebook, if adhered to strictly, may slow down the development of AI applications. Finally, it could simply be that Europe has had bad luck, specifically in the form of Russian Pres-

ident Vladimir Putin and his energy-price shock. The US, being self-sufficient in energy, has not been vulnerable to energy-supply disruptions to the same degree. European firms, in contrast, have been forced to suspend their most energy-intensive operations or else to engage in costly restructuring, which is not good for productivity. Mario Draghi, Europe's senior economic statesman, will present the EU with a set of proposals later this year for boosting productivity. No doubt, he will recommend completing Europe's capital-markets union so that firms can more easily finance investments in new technologies. Draghi will probably recommend the removal of barriers to competition, which would intensify the pressure on firms to innovate in order to survive. He will likely advocate greater energy efficiency and self-sufficiency to free Europe from more Putin-like disruptions. Observers like me can confidently predict what Draghi will recommend because such proposals have been knocking around the continent for years. Europe should move now to implement these old ideas. And it desperately needs to come up with new ones. ©2024/PROJECT SYNDICATE

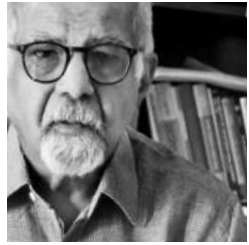


MY VIEW | RASHOMON DIARIES

MINT CURATOR

Good quality or bad, data always has plenty to say: Let data speak

Sooner or later, numbers will speak and the 'truth' will be out. Spin and dodgy arguments win only in the absence of data



SURJIT S. BHALLA is former executive director at the International Monetary Fund, former part-time member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council and author of the forthcoming book, 'How We Vote.'

Beginning today, General Election 2024 is a reality, and on 4 June, we will know the results. And we also know what will happen afterwards. The losers will probably demand a data recount; failing which, they will claim that electronic machines manipulate voting data and demand we go back to good old-fashioned time-tested methods of paper-ballot stuffing. And then we will go on to the next election.

But this is what one expects from politicians. Strangely, though, one has witnessed a parallel development among esteemed economists and policy analysts. I will just summarize the data arguments to show that some of the conclusions drawn by my tribe are even more bizarre than those drawn by politicians.

GDP and consumption growth are important factors that determine voting choices. Ten of the last 14 Lok Sabha elections can be explained by observing whether per capita GDP growth during the incumbent's term was above or below 3.25% (close to 5% GDP growth). This result has not been lost on the economic critics of the Narendra Modi government, including several renowned foreign experts and foreign publications. The narrative is the same: Don't believe the data, because data that is favourable to the government's view of the economy is likely to be exaggerated and probably even false.

S. Subramanian (*The India Forum*, 'The Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2022-23') accurately reflects this scepticism when he bluntly states that worries about the HCES 2022-23 results are justified because of the government's track record: "A part of that experience is reflected in the delay in the release of the 2017-18 Periodic Labour Force Survey report which carried information on a record level of unemployment in India... in the suppression of the NSSO's 2017-18 survey on consumption expenditure."

But this narrative has no time for logical objections. Note its emphasis on the delay in the release of PLFS 2017-18. That survey showed record high unemployment rates. Also, leaked results of the "suppressed" 2017-18 HCES showed a record steep decline in real consumption of 5.5% between 2011-12 and 2017-18. A 5.5% decline in a consecutive year would be bizarre, but somewhat plausible (it did happen in covid year 2020-21). But a decline of this magnitude after five years of positive economic growth (2011-12 to 2016-17; two years of United Progressive Alliance rule and three years of National Democratic Alliance rule) would imply an approximate decline of 25-30% in one single year, 2017-18. A decline of such dimensions in such a short period would have led to widespread starvation or even famine across the countryside. And, given its all-India nature, the worst catastro-



phe to befall India ever—worse than World War II and also the Bengal famine.

Over the last five years, what scholarly questions have been raised over the results of the 2017-18 HCES survey? And isn't it peculiar that many of the scholars who staunchly believed the authenticity of the 2017-18 HCES survey now equally strongly believe that the HCES 2022-23 survey is not comparable with the 2011-12 survey? Because identical questions were spread over three visits rather than one? If you believe that to be the real reason, then, as they say in New York, I have a bridge in Brooklyn to sell.

It now turns out that the International Labour Organization (ILO), which conducts labour-force surveys that get the same respect and authority as the World Bank's surveys and studies on poverty around the world, has now deemed the 2017-18 and 2018-19 PLFS results to be, well, worthless.

Here goes the ILO's explanation: "In the model of labour force participation, the PLFS observations for 2018 and 2019 have been excluded as they appear to present limited comparability with both the previous NSS results and the newer PLFS results. Given the country's size, this has a sizeable impact [on] the global aggregates." (shorturl.at/elt5)

We have this rather unusual reality of what happened with the first national surveys conducted in India after the 2014 general election. The 2017-18 HCES survey was not released by the Indian government on grounds of bad-quality data. The twin PLFS editions of 2017-18 and 2018-19 ('twin' because these surveys are conducted over eight quarters) are now deemed to be of uniquely bad quality by not the Indian government, but the United Nations' authority on labour markets, the ILO. The probability of these two statistical events happening by chance is close to the probability of my being able to find a buyer for the Brooklyn bridge.

QUICK READ

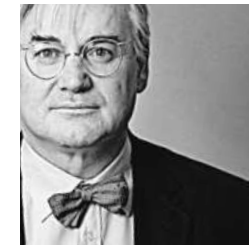
It is odd that doubts are being raised over the comparability of HCES 2022-23 readings with findings of previous rounds because the questions were asked over a longer duration.

We must let the data speak and keep our biases aside. It's extraordinary that the ILO found some Indian survey data-sets unusable for a labour report it released recently.

2018-19, was the ILO able to determine that for these years (and only these years), the survey data was not usable. In my long experience with international and national data, this is a most unusual condemnation and should lead to introspection among all. Second, we shouldn't let our prejudices determine our conclusions. Sooner or later, the data will speak, and the 'truth' will be out. So let no one have an opportunity to sell a Brooklyn bridge.

The West must not spark off a trade war with China over EVs

Its carmakers would not be served well by protectionist measures



DAVID FICKLING is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering climate change and energy.

A nasty thing about waging war is that your enemies have a habit of fighting back. That's a lesson German Chancellor Olaf Scholz would do well to keep in mind as he engages China amid a brewing trade fight over clean-tech. Recently, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned that "artificially cheap" Chinese-made electric vehicles (EVs), lithium-ion batteries and solar panels were causing "negative spillovers" in the US and around the world. Far from calling a ceasefire in President Donald Trump's trade wars, the Biden administration appears now to be re-arming in an attempt to neutralize the issue ahead of elections in November.

That puts Germany in an uncomfortable spot. Russia's invasion of Ukraine forced Berlin to rethink its post-war commitment to pacifism. US-China trade tensions are forcing a reckoning with its multilateral approach. The EU last year announced a probe of subsidies for Chinese EVs and has since added solar and wind probes. Berlin's stance may decide whether this simmering fight intensifies or dissipates.

Cars are a contention. Automobiles are Germany's biggest export, and one where the EU still has a slight surplus with China. Volkswagen, BMW and Mercedes-Benz sell about a third of their cars in China, and the trade relationship is crucial—the Asian country is a lucrative end-market for high-end European-made autos, and a low-cost supplier of batteries and vehicles. If Brussels raises tariffs on Chinese imports, the blowback could be devastating.

European carmakers are already facing a tough market in China, thanks both to weak local household spending and a competitive threat from cheaper locally-made EVs. Retailary tariffs and hostile consumer sentiment could deal a knockout blow. Hyundai, which trailed only VW in 2014 as China's top-selling car brand, has declined since a 2015 falling-out between Beijing and Seoul over South Korea's deployment of an anti-missile system, and barely scraped the top 20 last year.

European firms, politicians and lobby groups have so far taken a dramatically different tone in relation to China than their more hawkish US counterparts. "Free trade needs to be our North Star, our guiding principle," Oliver Zipse, BMW's chairman, said last month. The European auto industry "is not massively damaged by the import of Chinese automobiles, nor is it in the interest of the EU to further impose customs on these products," he added.

Tariffs on Chinese EVs should be reduced, not increased, his Mercedes-Benz



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz could aim to de-escalate trade tensions **REUTERS**

counterpart Ola Källenius told the *Financial Times* last month. Imports need "to be met with better product, better technology, more agility," he was quoted as saying. "That is the market economy. Let competition play out."

It's not just German companies taking this stance. Stellantis, owner of the Fiat, Maserati, Citroen and Peugeot brands as well as Chrysler and Jeep, is attempting to leapfrog its slow start in EVs through a €1.5 billion tie-up with China's Zhejiang Leapmotor Technology. VW is investing €2.5 billion under a joint-venture plant with Xpeng, the Chinese EV-maker in which it bought a 5% stake last year. Even Renault, which barely has a presence in China any more, is teaming up with Zhejiang Geely Holding Group on an engines venture.

President Xi Jinping, for his part, needs to extend an olive branch. If China wants to disprove the febrile US talk about Beijing hollowing out the world's industrial sector, it has the perfect opportunity to show how the trading relationship can be mutually beneficial.

To date, much of China's investment into Europe's automotive and EV battery sector has been focused on Hungary. Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, that's probably the last location you'd choose if you wanted to convince Brussels that your industrial policy wasn't a Trojan horse for authoritarianism.

Chery Automobile and SAIC Motor Corp, which are reported to be scouting out European assembly plants, would do well to pick locations in the heart of the continent's liberal democracies—and politicians in those countries should do all they can to attract them. China can also pour oil on troubled waters by accommodating Europe's desire to own a larger slice of its battery-materials supply chain.

Compared to the naked protectionism being promoted by the US, Scholz could offer a more fruitful approach. Capitalists shouldn't retreat into their shells at the first sign of competition. Instead, they should treat every danger as an opportunity to up their game. It's ironic that the US, which pretty much invented the spirit of ebullient boosterism, is now the nation retreating from it most rapidly. Europe in general, and Germany in particular, could show the West a better path. **©BLOOMBERG**

GUEST VIEW

Use a standardized framework to track air pollution

RONAK SUTARIA



is founder and chief executive officer of RespiR Living Sciences.

A global air pollution report, *World Air Quality Report 2023: Region and City PM2.5 Ranking*, featured 83 Indian cities in the top 100 most polluted cities of the world. While the reality of air pollution in India is undeniable, the ranking of cities requires an unbiased measurement framework. The data used in this report is a combination of readings from regulatory air-quality monitors and low-cost sensors. While this approach has merit, the weak link of the study is the 'spatial and temporal' extent of the monitoring. For example, the yearly average of Delhi, reported at 102 microgram per cubic metre (ug/m3), is based on readings from 40 locations across the city with a cumulative uptime of 93%, whereas that of Siwan in Bihar, ranked No. 7 with 90ug/m3, is based on a single location, and Gurugram's 17th rank reading of 84ug/m3 is drawn from four locations. The number of monitoring locations and their uptime that go into calculating the city's average (and ranking) need standardization.

For city-level air pollution rankings, there are three critical parameters: one, the spatial coverage of the measurements; two, the temporal coverage ('uptime' of monitors or the number of hourly data points reported every month); and three, what pollutants are measured (PM2.5, PM10, NO2, CO, SO2, etc). Ranking cities by PM2.5 is sufficient, but a more nuanced ranking would factor in levels of NO2, O3 and CO as well.

Scrutiny of the report's 83 cities reveals that 15 of these had no public or government-backed air-quality data, so it is likely that data from privately run sensors was used to track their annual levels. The government uses Continuous Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Stations (CAAQMSs), whose readings are reported on the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) portal. Alternate technology is available and community-set-up sensors have scientifically-valid readings too. The report's data for 52 other cities is sourced from only one government-owned CAAQMS. Relying on a single monitor to check an entire city's air quality has many challenges, the biggest being that the reading may not be sufficiently representative and could give us a biased impression. About 10 locations included in the list (such as Morar and Banpoh) do not qualify

as cities on the list of monitored cities on the CPCB portal. Since only 16 cities on this list have more than one monitor, should the others be part of such global rankings?

A standardized framework for reporting city-level pollution levels is essential not just for ranking reliability, but also from a policy perspective, as the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) uses such data for decisions on where to disburse funds.

Launched on 10 January 2019, the NCAP identified 102 'non-attainment' cities at the onset. By 2024, it had identified 131. Its entire ₹9,934.4 crore budget is allocated by data from manual air quality monitors. These offer a "minimum 104 measurements in a year, at a particular site, taken twice a week 24-hourly at uniform intervals." Alongside these, NCAP cities run CAAQMSs, which cost around \$20,000 to monitor each pollutant, thus cumulatively costing as much as \$200,000 for all notified air pollutants.

While the lack of a standardized framework doesn't necessarily mean single-monitor cities should not be included in rankings, it's important to move towards a peer-reviewed approach that does not have spatial and temporal coverage gaps.

Any ranking needs to meet globally-accepted 'FAIR' data principles. In other words, it should have the attributes of: Findability, so that people at large can find the underlying data used to compute these rankings; Affordability, which means the technology used to generate the data should be easily affordable by cities that want to track their monthly air quality levels and join these rankings; Interoperability, so that the data is in a format that allows for use with other data systems and not provided in sealed documents (as is the case of manual monitoring data in India); and Reproducibility, which means that the findings should be entirely reproducible by another independent agency that

QUICK READ

A recent global ranking report featured 83 Indian cities among the world's 100 most polluted but a large number of them can't be said to have statistically sound air quality monitoring systems.

A robust system that offers us reliable data is crucial not just to be sure of how cities are faring against pollutants, but also to guide allocations under the National Clean Air Programme.

undertakes the same exercise with equivalent technology. For national-level rankings to hold credibility, the data used should adhere to these FAIR data principles. Only then would the rankings form a valuable record in the context of understanding the current situation and checking which cities are becoming worse and which are getting better over time. Using FAIR data principles will also allow us to compare city-level air quality data independent of the size or population density of a city, and eventually help us scale these rankings to cover the country's 7,000-plus census cities and towns.

To effectively compute city-level air quality rankings, the authorities in India need to release guidelines on what constitutes adequate spatial and temporal coverage of a city from an air-quality representation perspective. The three prevalent mechanisms in use—manual air samplers, CAAQMS and sensor-based monitors—all have their respective strengths and limitations. A prudent city administration would look at adopting a judicious mix of all three systems. This would allow it to create a comprehensive approach based on an affordable, accessible and irrefutable methodology to track air-quality data. It's time we attained such clarity on the air around us.



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

OPENING UP

New FDI regime fits with India's growing stature as space-faring nation. Market freedom requires regulatory oversight

THE GOVERNMENT MAY have timed the notification of its liberalised foreign direct investment (FDI) rules with the visit of US tech mogul Elon Musk next week. But the policy, approved by the Union Cabinet in February, is also a piece with its drive to position India as a space power. It allows 74 per cent FDI under the automatic route for satellite manufacturing and data products, 49 per cent for launch vehicles and spaceports, and up to 100 per cent for manufacturing components required by the sector. The liberalised regime fits in with the changing profile of the country's space programme. Largely known in the past for excellent communication and weather-related satellites, India's stock as a space-faring nation has gone up globally since the launch of Chandrayaan last year and the setting up of the solar laboratory in January. ISRO also has plans to send astronauts into space next year. These missions signal the expanding capacities of the premier space agency. But in recent years, private companies have also made their presence felt in the arena. In 2022, for instance, Skyroot Aerospace, a Hyderabad-based exploration start-up, launched India's first privately built and designed rocket from ISRO's Satish Dhawan Space Centre. Space missions have so far been, by and large, driven by the thrust of successive governments on self-reliance. The new policy sends the welcome signal that the Centre today recognises the significance of collaborations in a field that is capital and technology-intensive.

India's share of the global space economy is between 2 and 3 per cent. The government has plans to increase it to more than 10 per cent by 2030. According to the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe), an autonomous agency of the Department of Science, this scale-up will require an investment of \$22 billion in the next 10 years. The Space Policy introduced in April last year recognised this need. It redefined ISRO's role and tasked the agency with research and development. The policy also recognised the private sector as an important stakeholder. Relaxing entry barriers for FDI is a continuation of the thrust on capturing a large share of the global space economy. It also provides regulatory clarity. Take, for instance, the provision relating to spaceports. Currently, ISRO operates the spaceports in the country. By allowing 49 per cent FDI in the segment, the government seems to be signalling its intent to make the ecosystem more enabling for private companies.

Space technology remains crucial to the welfare objectives of the government, including those related to agriculture and global warming mitigation. It cannot also be delinked from national security objectives. It's clear that the ISRO-dominated ecosystem is now a thing of the past. India's space economy now needs the right balance of regulatory oversight and market freedom. A liberal FDI regime is the first step.

RIGHTS AND WRONGS

Centre's committee to examine issues of queer community is welcome. It must hold wide-ranging panels, focus on equity

GIVEN THE TENOR of conservatism that has generally guided its views on LGBTQIA+ rights, including its opposition to the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the country, the Centre's notification of a committee "to examine the various issues relating to the queer community", honouring its undertaking to the Supreme Court (SC) in October last year, is welcome. Chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, the mandate of the six-member committee is to ensure that the systemic discrimination and violence faced by the community in accessing social welfare schemes and services is mitigated. The work that lies ahead is arduous. The panel will need to consult widely with LGBTQIA+ rights groups and other experts to draw up a roadmap for a more equitable society.

In its landmark 3:2 judgment last year that stopped short of granting constitutional validity to same sex marriage, SC had shifted the onus on to the legislature to ensure that protective safeguards are woven into the framework of rights and that "a bouquet of entitlements which flow from an abiding relationship of this kind" is recognised. The entitlements iterated by the apex court included the right to be treated as a family for banking and medical purposes, jail visitations and last rites, among others. The Court also mentioned "legal consequences such as succession rights, maintenance, financial benefits such as under the Income Tax Act 1961, rights flowing from employment such as gratuity and family pension and insurance".

The reading down of the provisions of Article 377 by the SC stands out as a seminal moment but the progress on queer rights in the country has been chequered at the best of times. Legislative intentions have often appeared to be out of sync with ground realities — a survey conducted by Pew Research between June 2022 and September 2023, for instance, showed that 53 per cent adults were in favour of legalising same-sex marriages. It is also telling that the community's rights barely feature as election issues. This year, only the Congress manifesto speaks of a "law to recognise civil unions between couples belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community" and the CPI(M)'s of "legal recognition and protection to same-sex couples similar to marriage-'civil union'/same-sex partnerships". The BJP has promised insurance coverage to transgender individuals under the Ayushman Bharat scheme and wider access to Garima Grehs. These are progressive aspirations, but they remain in the tentativeness of the future. The immediate work ahead of the Centre's panel is to seize the momentum set in motion by the apex court and to assure the community that their concerns will be heard — and addressed.

A CYCLE FOR TARUN

A nine-year-old lost a bike and gained a talisman. Thank you, Delhi Police

PERHAPS, FOR MANY better-off kids today, the good life is all about video games, digital learning and a yearning for social media. Aspiration might mean becoming an influencer, and freedom, unrestricted access to the internet. For nine-year-old Tarun, though — like so many others before him — his cycle was a talisman. It meant more time: Instead of changing two buses and wasting over half an hour to get to his school from Aryapura in North Delhi, he could confidently zip through lanes and roads in 15 minutes. It was also a desire fulfilled: A hand-me-down, gifted to him by a friend when he saw Tarun's fascination with the bike. Then, last week, it was stolen. His parents, both factory workers, couldn't afford a replacement.

A child's first cycle is a curious thing, a bit like the first car for gearheads. It is something to own, yes. But it is also a means to a wider world, the first taste of freedom and empowerment. It's also something to take care of, and be responsible for. Perhaps that's why, at a loss a week after the theft, Tarun walked up to a policeman and told him of his suffering.

Police in India can be intimidating, their lathi something to fear. And for all the talk of "community policing", the khaki vardi can be something to fear for the poor. The police, for their part, work in a system that gives them little autonomy, training and resources to address the major crimes and many injustices they witness on a daily basis. Ram Manohar Mishra, SHO of the Subzi Mandi police station, though, saw something he could fix and immediately bought Tarun a new cycle. Tarun, now, will not be late for school. For him, the uniform will mean benevolence and decency. And for Sub-Inspector Mishra and his colleagues, the sight of a boy on his bicycle can be the talisman that represents a job well done.

Clash of aspirations

India's demographic dividend could hurt if its youth cannot be employed in jobs that meet their ambitions



AMARTYA LAHIRI

INDIA IS TODAY at an inflexion point. During the current century, the country has experienced a couple of decades of economic growth rates that have been significantly greater than the growth rates in the first four decades post-independence. This acceleration of growth, combined with rapidly changing geopolitical realities, has suddenly positioned India in the eyes of itself and parts of the Western world as an economic and political counterweight to China. This view hopes that India will become a key driver of the world economy in the coming three decades. Will it?

There are headwinds to India's ambitions. The first and biggest issue facing the country is its employment situation. The typical Indian is very young, with the median age being around 28 years. Moreover, India has a very low dependency ratio, with 100 workers for every 40 dependents (those who are too young or too old to be working). India's low dependency ratio, the young age of its workers, and the anticipated addition of around 10 million new workers annually for the next couple of decades is often described as India's demographic dividend or boon.

India's demographic dividend is, however, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it presents the country with a short window during which it will have a huge supply of young workers and human capital. On the other hand, it presents the country with a severe challenge in matching these workers to productive jobs. The labour market matching process is a challenging exercise in any country, leave alone one adding massive numbers of workers to an enormous labour pool.

An additional complication to this labour market matching challenge is the ongoing transformation of India's economy from primarily agrarian to more non-agrarian. This presents two challenges: First, people's skills need to change in order to successfully transit from the agricultural sector to either manufacturing or services. Second, these transitions often require workers to also change location, since non-agricultural employment opportunities tend to be in urban centers far

from rural India. Since migration is costly, both monetarily and socially, imperfections in the process can act like a massive hand-brake for the economy.

The signs suggest that the labour market is currently failing in its task. The indications of this failure can be found in many places. The overall unemployment rate of 8 per cent (according to the 30-day moving average figure from the CMIE) is just one of them. A recent ILO report is even more disconcerting. It reports searingly high unemployment rates of graduates (29 per cent), and of those with secondary or higher education (18 per cent). Indeed, CMIE estimates the overall unemployment rate of 20-24 years to be 44 per cent. These are terrible statistics at an absolute level, even without getting into questions regarding the quality of the jobs that are on offer for those lucky enough to find them. What is holding up the Indian labour market?

India's demographic dividend is, however, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it presents the country with a short window during which it will have a huge supply of young workers and human capital. On the other hand, it presents the country with a severe challenge in matching these workers to productive jobs. The labour market matching process is a challenging exercise in any country, leave alone one adding massive numbers of workers to an enormous labour pool.

One problem is the smallness of firms in India, both in terms of employment and revenue. Indian firms tend to be smaller, grow more slowly, and are less productive than firms not just in the industrial West but also other emerging economies like China and Mexico. The lack of size and the associated low productivity of firms in India limit their demand for workers. A second problem is the skill deficit in India. Firms, especially in the white-collar service sector, often complain about not finding workers with the requisite skills. This is a problem of the education system in India. The annual ASER reports have been indicating a general problem with student learning for a while. These issues are now beginning to have effects on the labour market. If firms can't find workers with the required skills, they just do not hire. In the white-collar segment of the labour market this shows up as extremely high unemployment rates of workers with graduate and/or high-school degrees.

The unfolding labour market situation in India is perhaps best described as a clash of aspirations. On one side we have a plethora of entrepreneurs and firms with very limited aspirations to grow. There are some

firms, like Shahi exports which employ around 1,20,000 people, that become large and start competing in export markets. But those are exceptions. The rest choose to remain small even though it restricts their ability to compete with larger and more nimble competitors from Vietnam, China and Bangladesh. Some of this is possibly due to the tax or regulatory policy environment. However, a possibly equally important contributor is a lack of ambition with small entrepreneurs seemingly satisfied with their current limited scale.

On the other side of the market is a big pool of workers whose numbers are swelling by 10 million a year. These young workers are typically more educated than their parents, have high school or college degrees, and have lofty aspirations from the labour market. Moreover, their aspirations are being fed by the relentless messaging of the macroeconomic success of India in terms of markers like its aggregate GDP. These unleashed aspirations are unlikely to be satisfied by gig-worker jobs with all their attendant insecurities. Any solution to the unfolding labour market crisis will require private manufacturing firms to scale up their ambitions. A self-sustaining way to achieve that would be to incentivise exports. Available evidence suggests that firms that export tend to be larger and more productive. On the other hand, firms that produce only for the domestic market tend to be smaller and unproductive. Clearly, domestic market protection only incentivises these small and unproductive firms with all the attendant negative effects on the labour market. An export reorientation is likely to change the entrepreneurial mindset.

The unfolding clash of aspirations of workers and entrepreneurs in India has the potential to convert India's demographic dividend into a demographic curse if the country cannot find ways of employing its young workers in jobs that meet their aspirations. Dealing with the issue should be at the top of the agenda of the next government.

The writer is Royal Bank Research Professor of Economics, University of British Columbia



KRISHNA KUMAR

WITH THE PASSING away of Kusum Jain recently, Delhi has lost a fighter for children. She chose her own fight path and stayed true to its direction. Troubled by the many injustices that school children suffer in our system, she founded an organisation called the Parents Forum for Meaningful Education (PFME). In the initial years, she assumed that the forum's voice would reach the power structures that shape children's fate during their school years. She soon realised that pleas for reform in the architecture of power need power to translate ideas into reality. What power could Kusum Jain wield?

To seek justice for school children, she approached the courts. Her fight was never easy. In case after case, it was clear that layers of fear and secrecy prevented any open challenge to the use of physical force for disciplining children. The first layer is the child's fear, the second is that of the parents. What happened in the classroom or the principal's office is something no child wants to reveal at home. When you are small, you are afraid that adults at home will blame you for provoking the teacher. And then, finding witnesses who will testify to acts of violence or humiliation meted out at school is difficult.

I remember Kusum asking parents to stand by their children. But even in cases where the child's body carried the marks of physical punishment, parents were reluctant to pursue a complaint simply because they didn't want to antagonise the school. Even more difficult were cases where the punish-

SPEAKING FOR THE CHILDREN

Kusum Jain fought legal battles to make education system accountable

ment consisted of humiliation leaving the child psychologically injured.

In a major case, PFME succeeded in challenging the existing rule that permitted corporal punishment. The Delhi High Court struck down the rule, opening the legal path for the implementation of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and the constitutional provisions that defend the child's need for dignified treatment. Kusum was, of course, aware that legal victories have to be supplemented by reforms in teacher training and school administration.

Every news item of harassment of children troubled Kusum as a personal matter. She has died, but her angry voice will always resonate in my ears, representing the civic conscience hurt by the violent treatment of school children.

Exams constitute another domain of dark secrecy. Boards resemble Kafka's castle. Bye-laws permit the regime of confidentiality at every step in the conduct of exams. Between the setting of question papers to the evaluation of answer sheets and the declaration of results, the examination system is steeped in a legalised culture of secrecy. Children are scared of facing the Boards, not just because teachers and parents use the fear of failure or poor marks as means to motivate hard work. The fear has deeper roots — in the feeling that if an answer sheet is unjustly marked, no one will ever see it.

Kusum Jain took on this hardened system and challenged the bye-laws that justify the

lack of transparency and rectification in cases of unfair marking. In this difficult terrain too, she strode with firm resolve, spending hundreds of hours preparing grounds for legal battles against a frozen system and its defendants. Her aim was to secure the student's right to inspect the answer sheet after evaluation. She had partial success, opening the way for a ray or two of light to shine through the dark castle.

A few years ago, she was injured when a car parked inside a court's premises drove off without looking. Even while she was recovering, Kusum was working on plans to make her Forum reach out to a wider orbit of awareness and struggle. At times, I wondered what motivated her to stay so steadfast to a cause that most people give up after their children have finished school education.

In the annual calendar of our education system, there are two seasons when parents get worked up — at the time of admission and then, at the end of the session during the final exam. When a child has successfully negotiated the Boards, the average parent bids farewell to the dream of systemic reform. Kusum Jain lived that dream day and night, in health and sickness. Her feisty spirit and modest demeanour will remain a treasured, inspiring memory.

The writer is former director, National Council of Educational Research and Training

APRIL 19, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

DEPUTY CM RESIGNS

THE MAHARASHTRA DEPUTY Chief Minister Ramrao Adik resigned from the cabinet after submitting his papers to Chief Minister Vasantdada Patil. He also conveyed this to the Congress (I) high command. He had taken the decision only to avoid embarrassment to "my leader", Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, he said and averred that he would always remain loyal to her and to the Congress (I).

CHANDIGARH CURFEW

THE UNION TERRITORY of Chandigarh was

put under night curfew as a precautionary measure. The curfew, imposed at 6pm, would be lifted at 7am the next day. It follows scattered incidents of violence and arson during the funeral procession of Hindu Suraksha Samiti leader, Inder Pal Gupta, who was killed by extremists. Two Chandigarh Roadways buses were set on fire and a number of vehicles were damaged.

PAK-PUNJAB LINKS

HOME MINISTER P C Sethi told the Lok Sabha that the government had been receiving reports for some time that Punjab extremists had links with Pakistan. There was also evi-

dence of smuggling of arms from Pakistan across the border. He said that while the government was prepared to resume talks with the Akalis, it would take firm steps to deal with the terrorists.

FIRING AT RIOTERS

THE POLICE FIRED at hundreds of riotous workers at the Naraina Joha mandi near Patel Nagar. No one was injured in the firing but 11 policemen and four workers were reportedly injured in the three hours of violence. The police arrested 287 workers on charges like attempt to murder, rioting, assault on public servant duty and under the Delhi Police Act.



THE IDEAS PAGE

A battle of ideas

In BJP and Congress poll promises, two different visions for the Indian state



HILAL AHMED

THERE ARE TWO ways to read the manifestos of the BJP and Congress. One could simply adopt a checklist method to catalogue the issues, promises and resolves. This interpretation is useful to find out what is pronounced as a considerable agenda and what is deliberately overlooked to maintain ambiguity and confusion.

For instance, economic growth and welfare packages for the concerned segments of society are highlighted by both parties to assert a positive, future-oriented agenda. Yet, controversial issues such as CAA and NRC are conveniently sidelined. Even the BJP, which has presented the CAA as an important political achievement, remains very careful in placing this issue as a future promise. The party manifesto says, "We have taken the historic step of enacting the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and will implement it to confer citizenship to all eligible persons." The Congress manifesto, similarly, does not touch upon the question of citizenship, and for that matter, CAA.

Using another possible mode to read these manifestos, one can evaluate these party documents as a valuable political source to understand the proposed outline for the future Indian state, instead of debating the listed items and omitted promises. For this purpose, we should revisit the three fundamental constitutional concerns — social justice, economic equality, and religious-cultural pluralism — to make sense of frequently used terms like Viksit Bharat 2047, Atmanirbhar Bharat, Nyay, and defending the Constitution.

The BJP's Sankalp Patra (which is officially released as Modi ki Guarantee — 2024) revolves around the figure of the Prime Minister. Every poll promise is presented as Modi ki Guarantee simply to make it more personal and appealing. The Sankalp Patra has two main components — a report card on the performance of the government and a set of guarantees.

A close reading of this document makes it clear that the Modi government is committed to what I call the charitable state — a state that envisages welfarism as official generosity, while facilitating the open market economy as the driving force for infrastructure development. This charitable state model is invoked to justify popular schemes such as PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, PM Jan Dhan Account, Ayushman Bharat, PM Awas Yojana, and the Jal Jeevan Mission. These schemes are introduced to us not merely as achievements, but also as possible policy tools to address the substantial economic questions related to income inequalities and class-based disparity. That is why the Sankalp Patra lists programmes and policies separately for *garib* (poor) and middle-class families. This economic classification goes well with the basic premise of the charitable state. The welfare schemes are linked to economic distress, especially at the bottom level of society, while infrastructural development is proposed to satisfy the middle-classes.

The charitable state model is also used to accommodate conventional social justice categories — OBC, SC and ST. It is stridently argued that BJP is committed to social justice-based representation at every level. The manifesto highlights the fact that



CR Sasikumar

60 per cent of ministers in the present government belong to OBC, SC and ST communities. It is proposed that the party will constitute "district level committees to ensure that welfare schemes reach the lowest level". Adequate representation in this committee for SC, ST and OBC communities is also promised.

The Sankalp Patra, it seems, is very careful about the notion of religious-cultural pluralism. It talks about temple-centric schemes and plans, tribal heritage and even the concerns of linguistically inferior groups. Yet, there is nothing on religious minorities and India's multi-religious culture and heritage. The famous slogan "Sab ka Saath, Sab ka Vikas" is invoked to make a case for inclusivity in future Viksit Bharat. This inclusivity, however, is defined in a highly restricted manner.

The Congress party's manifesto (Nyay Patra) seems to pose a serious challenge to the charitable state model. It underlines the three goals of Congress's Nav Sankalp Economic Policy — work, wealth, and welfare. These three themes are invoked not merely to refute the programmes and policies introduced by the Narendra Modi regime but to offer a constructive resolve for the future.

Economic inequality is the central theme of the Nyay Patra. It says, "The people of India are divided in economic terms. There is a small class of the very rich, a substantial middle class, a large segment of people above the poverty line but not yet the middle class, and nearly 22 crore people who are poor." This class division of Indian society is seen as one of the reasons behind economic inequalities and social injustice.

Reiterating the party's commitment to an open economy, the manifesto makes a rather radical proposal. It says that economic growth should be driven by the private sector, which must be complemented by a

Using another possible mode to read these manifestos, one can evaluate these party documents as a valuable political source to understand the proposed outline for the future Indian state, instead of debating the listed items and omitted promises. For this purpose, we should revisit the three fundamental constitutional concerns — social justice, economic equality, and religious-cultural pluralism — to make sense of frequently used terms like Viksit Bharat 2047, Atmanirbhar Bharat, Nyay, and defending the Constitution.

"strong and viable public sector". The private sector, in this schema, is not envisaged as a self-regulating economic entity. The Nyay Patra claims that Congress is opposed to monopolies and crony capitalism. The party will ensure that no company or individual is given undue economic advantage.

The inequality question is further expanded to propose a new framework for social justice. The Nyay Patra highlights the need for a nation-wide Socio-Economic and Caste Census to enumerate the castes and sub-castes and their socio-economic conditions for a meaningful policy of affirmative action. It further proposes that the party will raise the 50 per cent cap on reservations for SC, ST and OBC; and at the same time, the "EWS reservation will be implemented for all castes and communities".

The Nyay Patra is particularly concerned about growing intolerance. It invokes pluralistic values and constitutional principles as its foundational commitments. It emphasises the need to accommodate all sections of Indian society, including religious and linguistic minorities, to reclaim unity in diversity in the real sense of the term. The relative backwardness and marginalisation of minorities are given adequate attention to establish a link between cultural pluralism and social justice. In other words, a new conception of the state is proposed, which does not want to deviate from the dominant economic consensus in favour of market-driven economic reforms. Yet, it is equally devoted to ensuring economic democracy and social justice.

It will be too early to predict the political outcomes of these manifestos. Nevertheless, an interesting battle of political ideas has already begun, which will shape the future trajectories of our democracy.

The writer is associate professor, CSDS, New Delhi

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Teachers... cannot be chastised for exercising their rights to profess their ideological interests. Ministry must first come up with clear guidelines on what constitutes partisan politics. A failure to do so might end up turning the sanitisation campaign into a tool for a powerful few to punish [them]..." — THE KATHMANDU POST

India's 4P model

Political leadership, public financing, partnerships and people's participation have helped India achieve success in national programmes



PARAMESWARAN IYER

AT THE WORLD Bank-IMF spring meetings this week in Washington DC, a particular event came to my attention: a ministerial-level consultation to follow up on the 2023 Paris Pact for People and the Planet (4P), which seeks, among other objectives, to ensure that no country should have to choose between fighting poverty and fighting for the planet. I was reminded of an earlier 4P formulation that came out of the Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Conference (MGISC) held in Delhi in October 2018. At this event, co-hosted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and attended by Ministers of Health and Sanitation from 55 countries around the world, a different but related set of 4Ps were declared as India's formula for achieving developmental results on the ground. These were — political leadership, public financing, partnerships and people's participation.

The 4Ps from the Delhi declaration were key lessons emerging from Prime Minister Modi's transformational programme, the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), which aimed at eliminating open defecation and improving the quality of life for over 550 million Indians, particularly women and girls, through a mass movement or *jan andolan* of behaviour change, and through the provision of over 100 million toilets. International recognition of India's substantial contribution to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 6 (water and sanitation) led to Prime Minister Modi being awarded the Global Goalkeeper award at New York in September 2019 for the progress India had made in improving sanitation.

For the World Bank, now with the new vision of "a world free of poverty on a livable planet", it is important to learn from India's 4Ps since they are directly relevant to the successful implementation of large-scale transformational programmes, whether they are aimed at poverty-alleviation or address global public goods like climate change and pandemics. Let us examine why.

The first P (political leadership) is perhaps the fulcrum of driving change and impact on the ground. It took a leader like PM Modi to boldly announce to the world at his inaugural Independence Day speech on August 15, 2014, that the time had come to squarely tackle the hitherto impossible challenge of open defecation in India — and restore dignity, health and security to communities, especially women and girls. The declaration of the goal to achieve a clean India was followed by the creation of institutional and financing mechanisms to implement this massive programme in a federal context. The PM also closely monitored

the progress of the SBM on the ground, including by the use of technology.

The second P (public financing) is a direct follow-up to the first, through a high-level policy decision to finance the implementation of sanitation — a public good — across the country. In a context where scarce public resources had to be deployed for national developmental priorities, it took a discerning leadership to appreciate that investment in sanitation influenced both poverty reduction and led to an improvement in the quality of life for India's population. As a result, the Indian government, Centre and state, invested as much as \$20 billion on sanitation. Many of the Health and Sanitation Ministers at the MGISC had personally told me that they were keen to go back to their countries and initiate SBM-type sanitation programmes (Nigeria, in fact, soon launched the Clean Nigeria programme) but had one request of us. Could PM Modi talk to their presidents and prime ministers and influence them to invest in sanitation like India had?

The third P (partnerships) was also critical. The SBM was never implemented as a sarkari programme but in partnership with international bodies such as the World Bank, Unicef, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, state and district administrations, local bodies, panchayats, school children across the country, and with the strong support of media and sports stars. Partnerships were key and led to the creation of a national team Swachh Bharat. The one bonus was that we had a communicator-in-chief, the PM himself.

The fourth P (people's participation) became the hallmark of the SBM, which had captured the imagination of the nation. Each of the six lakh villages in India decided to take it upon itself to become open defecation free. Rural communities took matters into their own hands and engaged in mass movements to encourage all households to build toilets and use them. Women and girls went from being beneficiaries of the programme to leaders in their own right, and many led *jan andolans* to declare their villages open defecation free. The fourth P was also critical for ensuring the sustainability of the programme — unless communities took matters into their own hands and owned and implemented it, the outcomes would not stick.

The 4Ps have successfully been applied to other national programmes in India, including LIFE (Lifestyle for the Environment), the Jal Jeevan Mission and many more. Today, as the world is renewing its focus on the achievement of the SDGs, and the World Bank is working with countries to help them address global challenges, including climate change, pandemics, fragility, water and energy access and food security, the relevance of India's 4Ps, especially the first one — political leadership — as demonstrated by Prime Minister Modi — has never been greater.

The writer is India's Executive Director to the World Bank and former Secretary, Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation and CEO NITI Aayog. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

VOTERS' DILEMMA

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The Mahayuti's dilemma' (IE, April 18). The inability of the top leadership of Shiv Sena and NCP to manage internal dissension led the BJP to play "smart politics" and form a government with the support of dissenters. It seems opportunism has dictated the moves of all other parties in Maharashtra. Uddhav Thackeray ditched the BJP to ride to power with the help of Congress. Congress is now with the communal SS, NCP(SP), SS (UT) and Congress ruled the state after fighting each other in the assembly poll. The real dilemma is now of the voters: Whether, and whom to vote for.

YG Chouksey, Pune

A FAIR VERDICT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Correcting wrong, laying a path' (IE, April 18). The SC observed that its previous verdict had caused a "grave miscarriage of justice" to a public utility, which was saddled with an exorbitant liability. The verdict vindicates the existence of the Court's curative jurisdiction and flags a possible conflict between finality in litigation and the need for substantive justice. While the DMRC invoked the arbitration clause, DAMEPL halted operations in June 2013 and handed over the line to the DMRC. The outcome only underscores the importance of arbitrators sitting on appeal getting both fact and law right.

SS Paul, Nadia

SWISS DIPLOMACY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A trusted mediator' (IE, April 18). Due to its diplomatic mediation and facilitation efforts, Switzerland has played a part in resolving many international conflicts. In recent years, it has regularly offered its "Good Offices" to parties in conflict and has been involved in as many as 30 negotiations in over 20 countries. As far as peace in Ukraine is concerned, the Swiss Peace Conference may not produce the "Geneva Accords". However, the participation of several G7 and third-world countries could mount diplomatic pressure on the Russian administration and eventually lead the parties out of the war.

Arjun Singh, Jaipur

TWO-FOLD SOLUTION

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Moving past bonds' (IE, 17 April). This article has been able to bring home deficiencies in the current policy on Electoral Bonds, which was further validated by the Supreme Court of India. One of the proposals, on the creation of the National Election Fund (NEF), is the need of the hour. It requires a reliable methodology for distribution to various political parties and can go a long way in curbing corruption and the use of black money during election. Through this, any government in power can come out clean and companies can contribute by availing tax benefits and receive a clean chit in the process.

CGH Khan, Gwalior



AMEETA MULLA WATTAL

Helping the young vote

Today's youth care about issues, yet are reluctant to vote — a gap that must be bridged

THE LARGEST DEMOCRACY in the world is voting in the 18th Lok Sabha elections ON Friday. According to the Election Commission of India, less than 40 per cent of voters between the age of 18 and 19 have registered for the 2024 elections across the country. This is concerning.

Why are the youngest eligible voters hesitant to exercise their franchise? The lowest rates of enrollment are in Delhi, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Why are we not able to engage this demographic, considering that the states mentioned have large youth populations?

Many among our young feel that politicians and political parties do not advocate agendas that appeal to them. They do not have faith in a top-down approach, particularly in a political process. There is no guidebook that can easily sort out dilemmas in a world of ambiguous interpretations and incomplete awareness of what a real political system should be.

In school, even in the senior-most classes, reflection and analysis get little encouragement, leaving young people unable to understand the impact of their decisions, particularly when they vote for the first time. No one teaches them the realities that give meaning to their choices, nor are they

taught to connect with the multiple processes and relationships outside themselves, which will help to clarify their vision.

In India, every fifth person is between 10 and 19 years of age. A young vote matters, his or her voice matters. When the ballot is cast, the little mark on the index finger shows that the country matters.

When our young vote, they take part in something that is much bigger than any one person. We must orient the youth to believe that there are very few actions more influential than voting, and their decision will impact their lives in a myriad ways.

Before they go out to vote, they must be sensitised towards issues that affect them locally and nationally and make informed choices.

Participation in elections is a key freedom. Those who don't vote should realise that there will be trouble as democracy will not realise its potential. Good governments come into place only when the whole country votes together.

When politicians chase votes, the young coming out of schools are often ignored. If issues that affect young adults, like subsidies in tuition fees in higher education, better quality livelihoods and health care, are not spotlighted during campaigns, the in-

terest in voting declines.

Gen Z has been stereotyped as uncaring, apathetic and lazy. As an educator, my interactions with students has led me to believe that they do care — they are passionate about social action, they volunteer in greater numbers than any generation before them. Never before have there been so many youth protests, revivals and pressure groups that have effected change.

This is a generation which has witnessed societal unrest, and whose lives have been complicated and shaped by the pandemic and climate change.

Young people are constantly consuming information and can access anything through social media. Political memes are defining their choices. They tend to campaign online. Considering they are a digital generation, it is ludicrous that voting is not online. It's unrealistic to expect young people to queue up to tick the ballot boxes. Over 90 per cent of them use the internet at least five times in a week. If voting is allowed online, a greater number are likely to vote. If bank transactions can be made secure, so can online voting.

The problem is that the young don't know how to gauge the difference between political parties, one reason being that

youth-centred agendas are limited. The education system doesn't orient them to understand the who and why of voting. The young today are unable to draw lessons in political behaviour from society.

Today's youth are full of new ideas, they are more connected than previous generations. Boundaries in their personal lives have become blurred due to technology. Activism has become aligned with all that they think and do. They participate more than any other age group in innumerable causes. During discussions in progressive schools, what has emerged is that students believe that they need to stand up for themselves, the environment, the marginalised, LGBTQIA+ rights, justice for minorities, and access to education. Each of them has a voice that can turn society on its head; it's about feeling responsible, passionate, and empowered to use it.

To the young voters of today: Please cast your ballots, because there are tools that give you a voice that is louder than that of any other generation in history.

The writer is Chairperson and Executive Director Education, Innovations and Training, DLF Schools and Scholarship Programmes



@ieExplained

#ExpressExplained

If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

EVERYDAY HEALTH

Report flags sweetened Nestlé products: how added sugar harms babies

RISHIKA SINGH & ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 18

NESTLÉ'S PRODUCTS for babies sold in India and other Asian, Latin American, and African countries have significant added sugar, while those same products sold in Europe or UK do not, a report by the Swiss investigative organisation Public Eye and the nonprofit International Baby Food Action Network has said.

Nestlé is the world's biggest packaged food company and, according to Public Eye, controls 20% of the baby food market, valued at nearly \$70 billion. The report said that in India, all 15 products of Nestlé's Cerelac brand, meant for babies of ages 6 months and older, contained on average 2.7 grams of

added sugar per serving. The sugar content was declared on the packaging in India.

A spokesperson for Nestlé India said "reduction of added sugars is a priority", and "over the past five years, we have already reduced added sugars by up to 30%". The spokesperson said compliance with food safety guidelines "is an essential characteristic of Nestlé India and we will never compromise on that".

The food safety regulator, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), did not comment on the report. However, government officials said the lab reports of the samples from India will be sought, which will then be examined by the FSSAI's subject expert committee.

What are added sugars?

Sugar occurs naturally in some foods. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), sugar is "found in milk (lactose) and fruit (fructose) [and] any product that contains milk (such as yogurt, milk or cream) or fruit (fresh, dried) contains some natural sugars".

Added or free sugars are sweetening agents that are added to processed foods and beverages. Added sugars can "include natural sugars such as white sugar, brown sugar, and honey, as well as other caloric sweeteners that are chemically manufactured (such as high fructose corn syrup)," the AHA says.

Added sugars are considered to be more harmful than naturally occurring sugars found in fruits and milk.

Why are added sugars especially

harmful for babies?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) advises against the introduction of added sugars before the age of 2. The introduction of added sugar in baby foods can contribute to the development of addictive eating habits and a preference for sweet tastes from an early age.

"Exposure to excessive sugar can lead to weight gain, obesity and an increased risk of developing chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers later in life. Additionally, high sugar consumption in infancy has been associated with an increased risk of dental caries (tooth decay) and poor nutrient intake, as sugary foods often displace more nutritious options in a child's diet," Dr Richa Chaturvedi, an endocrinologist at Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, New Delhi, said.

Dr Arun Gupta of the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI), which was the India partner for the report, said, "When you add sugars to baby formula food, babies are much more likely to drink it up because of the pleasing taste. With happy parents purchasing the products, it boosts the bottomline of companies. And they can get by because the regulations are weak."

How much sugar is too much?

In 2015, the WHO called on countries to reduce free sugar intake in children and adults to 10% of their total energy intake. It also made a conditional recommendation of cutting it to 5% or 25 grams per day. The recommendation did not apply to natural sugars.

A UNICEF-supported study from

December 2023 found that 44% of the 1,600 infant cereals, snacks, and ready-to-eat meals marketed at young children in Southeast Asia included added sugars and sweeteners.

What do Indian guidelines say?

The Indian regulation that prescribes standards for infant nutrition does not prescribe any upper limit for added sugars. It gives the requirements for various macronutrients such as proteins, fats, and carbohydrates, and micronutrients such as vitamins C, and D, iron, and zinc.

The regulations allow for the use of corn syrup and malt in cereal-based infant food. It also allows the use of sucrose and fructose as a carbohydrate source, provided it makes up less than 20% of the carbohydrates in the food.

EVERYDAY AI

HOW TO SPOT AI-POWERED POLITICAL DISINFORMATION IN POLL SEASON

ANKITA KISHOR DESHKAR
NAGPUR, APRIL 18

THE first phase of voting for the Lok Sabha elections is on Friday. Over the past few weeks, there has been a deluge of disinformation and manipulated media online.

Two videos of actor Aamir Khan went viral this week. Both were manipulated versions of a promo for Khan's popular TV show, *Satyamev Jayate*. In one, Khan appears to be explicitly supporting the Congress party, while in the other, he is seen speaking about *nyaya* (justice) — a key Congress talking point in recent years, and the title of its manifesto (*Nyaya Patra* or 'Document [for] Justice').

Recently, actor Ranveer Singh too was a victim of deepfake technology, when a manipulated video of him criticising Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the issues of unemployment and inflation was widely shared. In the original clip, however, Ranveer was actually praising the prime minister.

Here is how these deepfake videos are made — and how you can spot them.

Voice swap technology

itsaar.ai, an AI detection tool developed in collaboration with IIT Jodhpur, shows that these videos were generated using 'voice swap' technology.

As the name suggests, this refers to the process of using an AI algorithm to either alter or mimic an individual's voice. The technology also allows the creators to change the characteristics of a voice, such as accent, tone, pitch, and speech patterns to make the videos more realistic.

Currently, there are several easy-to-use AI voice swap tools available for free. The creator has to simply upload or record the audio sample that she wants to replace, and then customise the settings to make the uploaded sample sound as realistic as possible.

Spotting deepfakes

While it is not easy to spot well-produced deepfakes, here are some tips to keep in mind while scrolling through so-



A manipulated version of this original *Satyamev Jayate* video has appeared online. YouTube screenshot

cial media, especially during election time.

VERIFY SOURCES: Be cautious of audio or video content from unfamiliar sources, especially if it seems controversial or sensational. Verify the authenticity of any suspicious post by cross-referencing with reliable sources, and trustworthy media organisations.

LISTEN FOR ANOMALIES: Deepfake audio may exhibit subtle anomalies, such as the voice's unnatural tenor, slightly robotic speech, and irregular pauses. Listen closely for these telltale signs of manipulated or synthetic speech.

SCRUTINISE VISUAL CONTENT: Deepfake audio is often accompanied by manipulated visual content, such as altered video footage. Check both audio and visuals elements for any discrepancies or inconsistencies. For instance, if lips do not move in sync with the speech, the video you are seeing may be manipulated.

STAY INFORMED: Staying updated about day-to-day news and events is key to recognising the risks associated with deepfakes. It is harder to fool people who have general awareness of what is happening around them.

USE AI VOICE DETECTORS: A few AI detectors, such as Optic's AI or Not are available to be used for free. You can upload any suspicious audio or video onto such detectors, which will tell you the authenticity of any content.

JAYPRAKASH S NAIDU
RAIPUR, APRIL 18

AT LEAST 29 alleged Maoists were killed in a gunfight with security forces in the forests of southern Chhattisgarh's Kanker district on Tuesday, exactly 10 days before the district goes to polls in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections on April 26.

The operation is the largest (in terms of bodies recovered) since the creation of Chhattisgarh in 2000, and among the biggest successes for security forces in their decades-long fight against left-wing extremism (LWE). (See table alongside)

Pushing into 'unknown hills'

The operation saw security forces push deep into the Maoist stronghold of Abujmahad (literally, "the unknown hills") — a 4,000 sq km swathe of forest land in southern Chhattisgarh's Bastar region, mainly covering the districts of Narayanpur, Bijapur, and Dantewada, just south of Kanker. Only a small part of the forest falls in Kanker.

The difficult terrain, absence of roads, and presence of LWE has meant that 90% of Abujmahad, bigger in terms of area than Goa, remains unsurveyed by the government. These jungles are, thus, used both as safe havens and transit corridors for Maoists to travel between Maharashtra (to the west), Andhra Pradesh (to the south), Telangana (to the southwest), and Odisha (to the east) via Chhattisgarh's Sukma district.

Those who were killed

Sources in the Chhattisgarh police told *The Indian Express* that the CPI Maoists' Partapur Area Committee (PAC) may have been wiped out in the operation. Over the years, the PAC has been accused of carrying out several deadly attacks, including the killing of a BSF jawan in an improvised explosive device (IED) blast during the Chhattisgarh Assembly elections last year.

But those killed may also have been a part of the Jan Militia (People's Militia) — local tribals who provide logistical and other support to Maoist fighters — sources said, citing the area in which the encounter took place, and the cache of crude country-made weapons recovered.

"The People's Liberation Guerilla Army (PLGA), the well-armed core of CPI Maoist's military strength, does not operate much in Kanker, and is concentrated on South Bastar instead. But training camps are held for the Jan Militia between February and June, when security forces conduct their Tactical Counter-Offensive Campaign (TCOC)," a senior official said.

EXPLAINED INTERNAL SECURITY

Anti-Maoist ops status check

The April 16 operation marks the successful entry of security forces into the Maoist-controlled forests of Abujmahad. Chhattisgarh is the only state where Maoists retain the capability to mount major attacks

MOST MAOISTS KILLED IN CHHATTISGARH ENCOUNTERS

| Date of encounter | Location, District | Bodies of Maoists recovered |
|-------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| April 16, 2024 | Abujmahad hills, Kanker | 29 |
| April 2, 2024 | Lendra forests, Bijapur | 13 |
| February 18, 2008 | Tadkel forests, Bijapur | 10 |
| March 2, 2018 | Pujari Kanker hill, Bijapur | 10 |
| February 6, 2019 | Bodga forests, Bijapur | 10 |
| November 23, 2010 | Near Kunder, Ashrampara villages, Sukma | 9 |
| April 16, 2013 | Near Khammam, Jagargunda, Sukma | 9 |
| March 1, 2016 | Near Pesalpad forests, Sukma | 8 |
| April 27, 2018 | Aipenta, Marimalla hills, Bijapur | 8 |
| July 18, 2018 | Timenar forests, Dantewada | 8 |

Source: Chhattisgarh government



Security personnel during the encounter on Tuesday PTI

LWE in Chhattisgarh

Chhattisgarh is the only state in which Maoists continue to have a significant presence, and retain the capability to mount big attacks. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) website, there are 70 LWE-affected districts in the country. Of these, 15 are in Chhattisgarh alone. Of the 25 "Most LWE affected Districts", seven are in Chhattisgarh, while eight are in Jharkhand.

According to data presented by the government in Parliament, between 2018 and 2022, there were 1,132 "violent incidents perpetrated by Left Wing Extremists" in which 168 security force personnel and 335 civilians lost their lives. This accounts for 70-90% of deaths, and over a third of all violence due to LWE.

In the same period security forces have also killed 328 Maoist cadres, in over 400 planned operations.

The government's 'final push'

Chhattisgarh, and to a lesser extent Jharkhand, is a part of the government's "final push" against LWE. This has seen central forces such as CRPF setting up bases deeper inside Maoist strongholds such as the jungles of Abujmahad. In the past few years, more than two dozen bases have been set up in

Abujmahad, with Kanker's Rowghat jungles too seeing new camps.

After the BJP came to power in Chhattisgarh last year, a few new police camps have been set up on the two main entry points to Abujmahad — from Kanker in the north, and Narayanpur in the east. The police have also crossed the Kotri river, a tributary of the Indravati-Godavari, and established a new base camp in Abujmahad.

An official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told *The Indian Express* that it is this that made the operation possible.

Two of Bastar's biggest encounters against Maoists since 2006 have taken place this month. Before the one in Kanker, 13 alleged Maoists were killed in Bijapur district on April 1. A total 79 alleged Maoists have been killed so far this year. For perspective, 65 alleged Maoists were killed in all of 2019.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, during an election rally in Chhattisgarh last Sunday, promised to "end Naxalism in three years" if the BJP is voted to power for a third term.

That being said, Maoists still control significant territory, and retain the capability to launch big attacks. Sundarraj P, Inspector General of Police, Bastar Range, said that improvised explosive devices (or IEDs) remain a

major threat to security forces. To avoid major casualties, Maoists have adopted a strategy of working only in small action teams of the kind that harked to death a Chhattisgarh Armed Force (CAF) commander in Bijapur in February.

Concerns over rights violations

The government's push has also seen human rights activists and families of slain alleged Maoists mount accusations of fake encounters against security forces. In February, wives of three men killed in an encounter, along with other locals, marched to a police station in Kanker claiming that the deceased were innocent villagers.

After the killing of 13 alleged Maoists on April 1, lawyer and activist Bela Bhatia had alleged that the encounter was fake.

Kawasi Lakma, a former Congress minister and six-time MLA from Konta in Sukma district, had told *The Indian Express* in an interview: "When we (Congress) were in power, except the Silger incident (May 2022), where three tribals were killed, no other incident occurred. There have been 10 incidents of police firing since the BJP took over four months ago. Today, even ordinary tribals who may be going to the market or a fair are seen as Naxals by the government."

YOUR GO-TO INSTITUTE FOR GENERAL STUDIES PREPARATION

VAJIRAM & RAVI
Institute for IAS Examination

| | | |
|--|--|---------------------------------|
| Prelims cum Mains | Prelims cum Mains | Optionals |
| General Studies Comprehensive Programme | General Studies Fledgling Comprehensive Programme | Optional Subjects Course |
| 11 Months + 8 Months MSP | 2 Years + 8 Months MSP | 5 Months |
| APRIL 2024 | MAY 2024 | JUNE 2024 |

Available in Classroom and LIVE-Online Mode | 080-6220-6330 | www.vajiramandravi.com

Cost and benefit: Israel's expensive defence against aerial threats

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 18

ISRAEL HAS claimed that 99% of the more than 300 missiles and drones launched by Iran on April 13 were intercepted — a "significant strategic success", as Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesperson Rear Adm Daniel Hagari said. However, this success came at a significant economic cost, which will recur in the event of more or bigger Iranian attacks.

Iran's barrage, Israel's defence

According to the IDF, Iran launched 120 ballistic missiles, 30 cruise missiles, and around 170 UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles), out of which only a few ballistic missiles got through Israel's defences, which comprise multiple systems such as the Iron Dome, Arrow interceptors, Patriot missiles, and advanced fighter jets.

These systems, operated by the IDF and Israel's allies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, are designed

for specific threats and are integrated to work in tandem.

For instance, the US-developed Arrow is a family of anti-ballistic missile interceptors which can hit intermediate range ballistic missiles either within (Arrow 2) or beyond (Arrow 3) the Earth's atmosphere. The Iron Dome, on the other hand, shoots down short-range rockets, UAVs, and other small aircraft.

The asymmetry in costs

Israel's remarkably capable air defence system is also very expensive, especially when compared to the targets it seeks to shoot down.

Thus, while each of the Russian-made Katyusha rockets that Hamas and Hezbollah routinely fire into Israel are estimated to cost about \$300, each of the Tami missiles that the Iron Dome uses to intercept them costs between \$20,000-\$100,000, according to a report by the *Air & Space Forces Magazine*.

Add to this the fact that multiple Tamirs may be fired at each incoming projectile to

ensure success, and the cost of interception balloons.

Yehoshua Kalisky, a researcher at the Tel Aviv-based think tank Institute for National Security Studies, told *The Wall Street Journal* that Israel spent more than 2.1 billion Israeli shekels (more than \$550 million) to repel the Iranian barrage over just a few hours. The Israel-based news website *Ynet News* estimated the cost at double that — more than \$1 billion.

"If we're talking about ballistic missiles that need to be brought down with an Arrow system, cruise missiles that need to be brought down with other missiles, and UAVs, which we actually bring down mainly with airplanes — then add up the costs — \$3.5 million for an Arrow missile, \$1 million for a David's Sling, such and such costs for airplanes... [we get] an order of magnitude of 4-5 billion shekels (more than \$1.3 billion)," Brig Gen Reem Aminoach, a former financial adviser to the IDF chief of staff, told *Ynet News*.

By contrast, an Iranian ballistic missile is estimated to cost around \$100,000, and its Shahed drones \$20,000-\$50,000 each, according to reports by *The Guardian*. Experts have calculated the cost of the attack for Iran at \$100-\$200 million — perhaps five to 10 times less than what Israel spent to repel it.

Needed: cheap interceptors

The Washington Post reported that the US estimates Iran's stockpile to contain at least 3,000 ballistic missiles and hundreds of launchers — which means that if not deterred, Tehran already has the capacity to carry out an attack like the one on Saturday at least 10 times over.

Repelling these potential attacks will entail a huge drain on Israel's finances, and could stretch the missile production capabilities of the country and its allies. Experts have noted that industrial specialisation and the stress on quality of defence equipment has meant that it could take two years

or more to deliver orders for some Western air-defence interceptors.

This problem has been in evidence in Ukraine. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, over the past two years, Russia has fired more than 2,000 missiles and 5,500 Iranian Shahed drones at Ukraine, cashing in on falling Ukrainian interception rates as the country runs out of Western supplied missiles.

Tom Karako, director of the Missile Defense Project at the Washington DC-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) told *The Washington Post* that "the number of munitions it took to repel the [recent Iranian] attack was enormous, costly and could be difficult to replicate".

Chris Brose, chief strategy officer at the American defence technology company Anduril Industries, told reporters: "You can't kill cheap drones if you don't have cheap interceptors."

A potential future solution

To address the asymmetry in costs, coun-

tries are now testing a different form of air defence, based on microwave and laser beams, which could, in theory, fire indefinitely as long as their power source is intact. Once in mass production, they will also be much cheaper than currently available systems.

In January, the UK military tested a new laser weapon dubbed 'DragonFire'. This experimental system was developed for about \$40 million, and consumes energy worth only \$13 to down a drone, the UK government has said.

"This type of cutting-edge weaponry has the potential to revolutionise the battlespace by reducing the reliance on expensive ammunition, while also lowering the risk of collateral damage," UK defence secretary Grant Shapps said in January.

Several other countries, including India, are said to be developing their own such weapons. However, this technology is not battle-tested, and questions have been raised regarding their effective range. They also require a steady source of energy on the battlefield.

Opinion
FRIDAY, APRIL 19, 2024



● CONDUCTIVE FOR GROWTH
Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman

“We welcome all companies and entrepreneurs from across the world to come and Make in India, as the environment is conducive, the youth is skilled and manufacturing here is a cost-effective proposition”

Shift course, push demand

BJP’s election manifesto is prudent, but the right policy is to encourage resource spread, without stretching fiscal limits

THE PRUDENCE IN the Bharatiya Janata Party’s 2024 election manifesto is striking as it shows the evolving maturity of the party after being in power for a decade. In the run-up to the 2014 elections, the party had not only promised substantive shifts in the country’s policy paradigm, internal political dynamics and the world-view, but was also specific about the targets: A “strong” rupee, reducing import dependence on oil to 65%, bringing back “every penny” of black money stashed abroad, 20 million jobs every year, doubling of farmers’ income, and so forth. A decade later, these have proven to be difficult, being in many ways driven by externalities. The rupee’s relative value against the US dollar, or its real effective exchange rate, for example, is significantly a function of variables like (global) inflation and interest rates.

The realisation of this may have led to the current restraint, as much as the rich experience gathered in administration. To be fair, notwithstanding the rhetoric at the hustings, the Modi government has never been fiscally extravagant. It managed to limit the consumption booster even during the strenuous period of the pandemic to an affordable level, by boldly defying the global trend of much larger fiscal handouts. While the Centre’s budgetary capital spending has increased above trend in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, a corresponding reduction in capex by central public sector enterprises and state governments ensured that even this wasn’t at the cost of the fiscal consolidation. Whatever monetary or in-kind concessions the government gives out, notably free ration to a mammoth pool of 810 million people, have been targeted and efficacious.

Of course, the BJP manifesto bears the imprint of the ruling dispensation’s political convictions. The pledges to work towards ‘One Nation, One Election,’ and implement the Uniform Civil Code are reflective of the regime’s resolve to complete its unfinished agenda. The economic implications of these contentious moves need to be gauged. That said, continuity and fiscal responsibility are the hallmarks of the BJP manifesto, in sharp contrast to largesse offered to the electorate in the Congress’ *Nyaya Patra*. Bounties such as income transfer of ₹1 lakh/annum to each woman in the (still-to-be-defined) “vulnerable/poor families” would cement the entitlement culture. These could draw the country’s public finance and the larger economy into a vicious vortex, which would not be easy to escape. Such concessions would require substantial additional resource mobilisation (like hefty new taxes) that could further undermine the aggregate demand, when the economy is struggling to win its spurs.

However, the (unspecified) “next-generation reforms” that the BJP says will undertake, if voted back to power, must also include certain course correction. It must be recognised that more even distribution of financial and other resources is needed for the growth of both the economy’s productive capacity, and the government’s fiscal capacity. Reasonably speaking, the global economy can’t be expected to provide a higher level of support for India’s growth over the next few years given its prolonged crisis-handling mode. Domestic demand creation has greater relevance now, which requires solid support to the informal economy, without endangering the fisc. Also needed are policies aimed at rapid job creation and addressing income stagnation, and a greater role of the private investors in infrastructure sectors. The plan to strengthen fiscal autonomy of Panchayati Raj institutions is welcome, but states need to be encouraged to put skin in the game.

Too many passive investors?
There’s no such thing

US MARKETS ARE doing much better than markets everywhere else, but no one seems to know why. Yes, there are theories: Perhaps it’s the promise of AI, or maybe valuations are high, and the market will come down. Or...could it be that markets are doing better because no one is really thinking about them all that much?

I know I’m not — because I own passive index funds. And I am not alone. In January, the share of money in passive funds was more than 50%. In 2010, that figure was between 30% and 40%, depending on how you measure it. It could be that markets keep rising because we passive investors just keep buying stocks no matter what the information says.

There has always been a contradiction at the centre of the efficient-market hypothesis: If prices reflect available information almost instantaneously, then there is no point in trying to beat the markets. This process is critical to how markets work.

Markets are supposed to allocate capital to its most productive use. If the money just goes to the biggest companies, that entrenches their market power and could undermine innovation and long-term growth. If money goes to the wrong places, stocks become overvalued and vulnerable to bubbles. And even if neither of these hypotheticals is true, some active investors complain that the rise of passive money is making it harder to incorporate important information into prices and make money.

Which leads to a second paradox: For markets to be efficient, there needs to be a critical mass of investors who don’t believe in market efficiency — or believe that they are smarter than everyone else. But how many is enough?

A recent research note from Owen Lamont, a longtime finance professor now at Acadia Capital, defends us passive investors. We are not distorting markets or making them less efficient. Like Switzerland, he argues, we’re neutral. Of course, if we lived in a world where almost everyone is neutral, countries run by destructive and imperial autocrats would face no resistance.

Lamont says it does not take that many people to keep markets efficient. Conditions might change, making it harder to make money if you don’t change your strategy, but that’s always been the case. You just need the right people in markets — the smarter ones — to keep them efficient.

Not much data is available on who owns passive funds vs. active ones; there is some ambiguity about what counts as passive. But industry sources spoke to estimate that growth in passive investment has been equally split between retail and institutional investors. Some converted to the passive religion after reading research showing that active fees weren’t worth it. But a lot of the flow into passive funds is new money. To be sure, there is probably a limit to how much passive money can dominate markets. About half the money in public markets is institutional money. And while institutions are also investing more in passive funds, as a share of their portfolios institutional investors are still mostly in active funds.

Institutional money managers and many financial advisers have an incentive to stay that way. Some of it is self-interest — if you are paid lots of money to manage an endowment or someone else’s money, it is hard to justify your fee if you put it all in the S&P 500. Institutional investors may also have needs that require more obscure assets or correlations, and need active management to get that exposure.

A bigger threat to efficiency is private markets. They promise higher returns, but offer no transparency or liquidity (which is arguably their appeal), so there is no way for investors to price in information. If they attract more of the talent and money, that could leave public markets less efficient for passive investors like me. For now, however, they are still mostly efficient — which does not mean, of course, that they make any sense.

Regd. No: DL-21048/03-05. R.N.I. No.26750/74. Printed and Published by R.C. Malhotra on behalf of The Indian Express (P) Ltd and printed at The Indian Express (P) Ltd Press, A-8, Sector-7, Noida - 201301 and published at The Indian Express (P) Ltd, Mezzanine Floor, Express Building, 9 & 10, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: 0120-6651500. (Cover price: Patna: Mon-Fri ₹12, Sat & Sun ₹12; Raipur: Mon-Fri ₹12, Sat & Sun ₹12) Chairman of the Board: Vivek Goenka, Editor: Shyamal Majumdar, Editor (Delhi) Shobhana Subramanian* (*Responsible for selection of News under the PRB Act) © Copyright: The Indian Express (P) Ltd All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner, electronic or otherwise, in whole or in part, without prior written permission is prohibited. The Financial Express®

● THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

MORE INDIANS NOW ASSESSED TO TAX, THEY HAVE HIGHER INCOMES; TAX NET IS CAST WIDE

More incomes in the tax net

AKHILESH TILOTIA
AKSHATA KALLOOR

The authors are with National Investment and Infrastructure Fund. Views are personal



₹1.46 lakh in FY21 is significantly lower than the minimum income chargeable to tax. It is, hence, heartening to see that more than a third of the incomes are now offered to tax, up from less than a quarter a decade ago.

The ratio of tax collected to RI has fallen from 18.7% in FY12 to 15.6% in FY21, by more than 310 basis points. Lower effective tax rates are mainly driven by a fall in corporate tax rates which, in 2019, were reduced for existing domestic companies and new domestic manufacturing units. The effective corporate tax rate, basis the tax computed to be paid to RI, ranged between 30% and 35% from FY12 to FY19 but fell to 24.3% in FY21. For individuals, average effective tax rates did not change by a lot, staying between 10.4% and 10.8% over FY12-21.

Deaveraging direct taxes

Overall direct tax-to-GDP ratio has gone up from 4.1% of GDP to 4.9% over FY12-21. This includes taxes from various

“persons”. In the graphic, we detail the direct tax collected as a percentage of GDP across individuals and businesses over time, juxtaposed with the average effective tax rate.

Tax refers to the tax payable as computed as per returns filed by assesses of these two categories. There are seven categories of “persons” including firms, association of persons, and Hindu Undivided Family.

Salary incomes (of individuals) constitute 55.1% of total GTI in FY21, up from 51.6% in FY12 while business income is down from 33.4% to 29.2% — a roughly 400 basis point interchange in the two largest income categories, which between them account for ~85% of overall incomes.

The numbers used in this analysis may not fully tie in with the direct tax-to-GDP ratio as detailed by the financy ministry in its annual budget documents due to many factors including changes in tax due after assessments, penalties, refunds, etc. The

government’s actual collections are higher than the numbers noted here, though the trend is broadly similar.

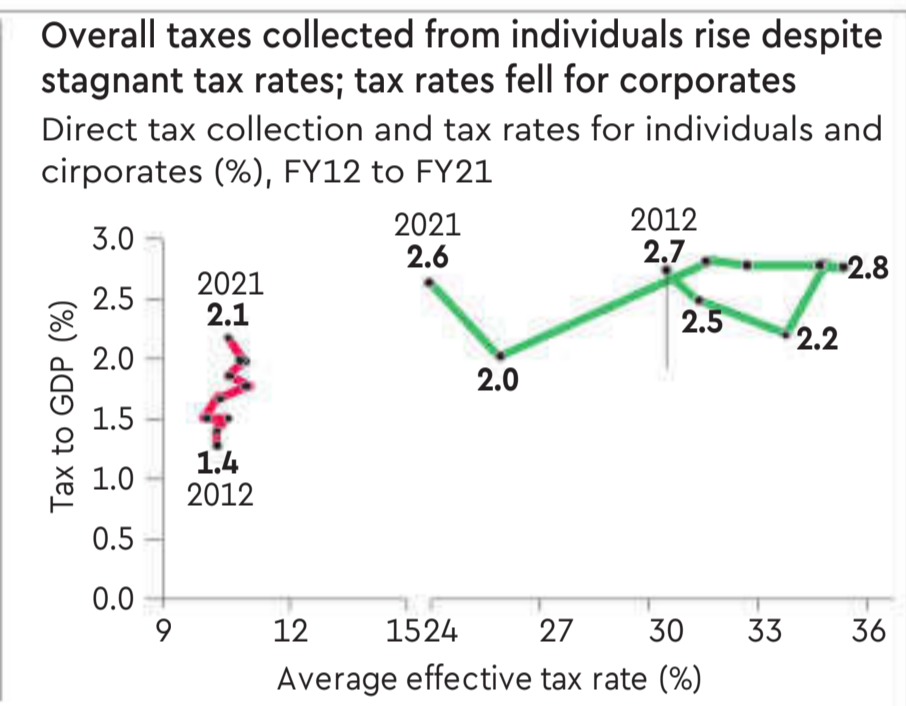
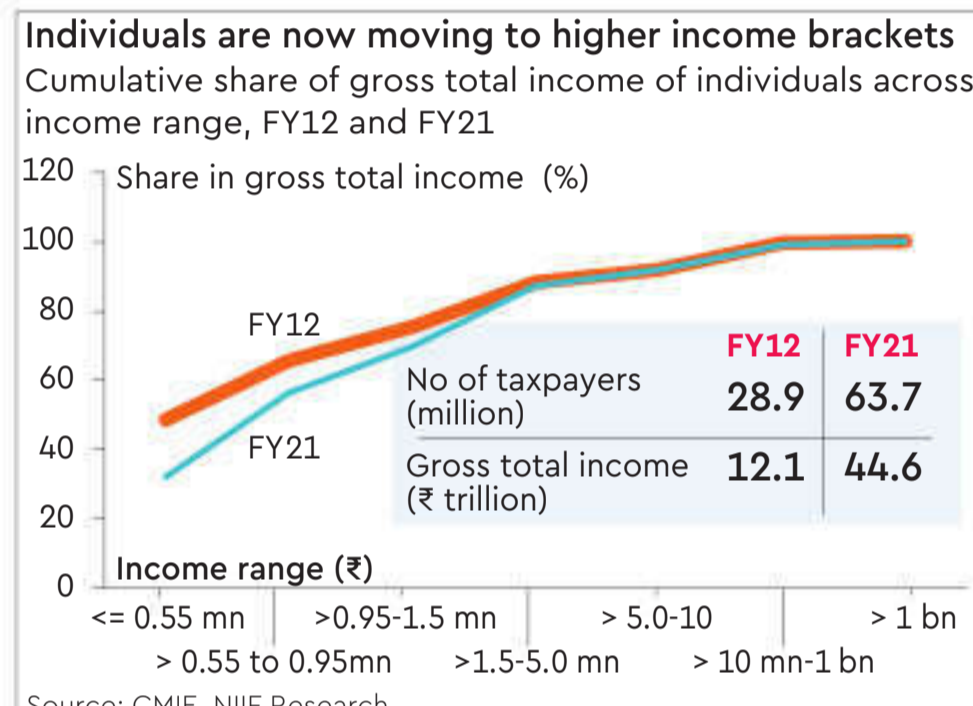
For individuals, tax computed as due, as a proportion of GDP, increased by ~80 basis points to 2.1% of GDP in FY21 from 1.3% of GDP in FY12. This is driven both by (a) the increase in number of tax returns as noted earlier; and (b) an increase in incomes: More than four-fifths of all individual tax filers earned gross incomes of less than ₹5.5 lakh in FY21, this proportion was three-fifths by FY21. We note the relative stability of the effective tax rate between 10.4% and 10.8%.

For businesses, tax computed as due changed marginally by 10 basis points to 2.6% of GDP in FY21 from 2.7% of GDP in FY12. The cut in tax rates in FY20 shows up clearly in the tax-to-GDP collected from business incomes since that year.

Other caveats

We know from Budget documents that over the last three years till FY24, direct tax-to-GDP ratio has continued to rise. As data is released, it will be instructive to see if this is due to lower taxes on business incomes leading to higher tax collections, or the individual income taxes continue to contribute more.

The nature of the fiscal contract in a \$10 trillion economy will be very different from the current one.



The Indian trade policy paradox



● PRADEEP S MEHTA
SHRUTI MAHESHWARI
The authors work for CUTS International

India critiques plurilateral agreements, challenging their place within the WTO structure. However, this perspective overlooks their legal and practical aspects

REGARDLESS OF WHETHER it is justified, there is a perception among many delegations that India adopts an obstructionist role and is seldom constructive within the World Trade Organization (WTO). As part of its international relations strategy, India has been quite successful in cultivating an image of an independent global leader, which is exemplary. Yet, its trade policy seems to lag behind its more assertive foreign policy aspirations.

In crucial areas such as trade within multilateral frameworks, India has continued to be seen as a frequent and assertive naysayer in spite of making promises to reform. It is time for our trade mandarins to follow the foreign policy mandarins.

India may justify its stance as protecting herand other developing nations’ interests against those of wealthier countries. Nevertheless, this position has sometimes led to India being sidelined, even by poorer nations, as was evident in the context of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA). The IFDA does not delve into contentious issues such as market access or investment protection. Instead, it aims to streamline administrative processes that hinder foreign direct investment, especially at the entry point (rb.gy/lv3c4ed).

However, at the 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) held in Abu Dhabi recently, India took a formal stand against integrating the IFDA into the WTO framework, criticising it for being outside of the

WTO’s mandate and for not being multilateral. Our conversations with anonymous representatives from several missions in Geneva after this incident indicated their firm support for the IFDA and its perceived advantages for their economies. They also criticised India for its objections that led to non-acceptance of the IFDA, which was agreed to by 126 of the 164 member countries.

India’s resistance to the IFDA is centred on a broader debate between plurilateral and multilateral approaches to trade negotiations. India critiques plurilateral agreements (PAs) like the IFDA as ‘non-mandated’ and ‘non-multilateral’, challenging their place within the WTO structure. However, this perspective overlooks the legal and practical aspects of these agreements, which have been part of the WTO’s framework.

Plurilateral treaties are legally recognised with the WTO structure, included in Annex 4 of the WTO Agreement.

And India’s claim that PAs are instruments for developed countries to dictate terms is unfounded. These negotiations can be, and often are, inclusive, as demonstrated by the IFDA initiative, which was predominantly driven by developing countries and least developed countries

(LDCs) (rb.gy/lv3c4ed). With significant backing from these economies, the argument that India (and South Africa) are defending the interests of developing and LDC members seems questionable.

There is also an observable frustration with the slow progress at the WTO. The IFDA extends beyond simplifying investment policies; it is pivotal for reforming WTO negotiation processes to address modern-day global trade challenges. This approach could successfully promote the development agendas of member countries through what can be termed ‘new multilateralism’. PAs support the concept of variable geometry within the WTO, fostering an issue-based understanding of the challenges and finding a path for reform.

At this juncture, where the traditional consensus-based model of the WTO is faltering, a plurilateral strategy could reinvigorate the organisation and help reclaim its relevance in global trade governance. India, as a significant player in the WTO, is at a crossroads and should consider adopting a more proactive and forward-looking role in trade talks. Its current strategy, particularly its opposition to the IFDA talks led by developing countries, is inconsistent with the leadership role it aspires to. Similarly,

India’s strong resistance to addressing new issues like electronic commerce, gender, and micro, small and medium enterprises within the WTO’s flexible framework underscores the need for an update in its traditional methods to align with the changing global trade environment. The WTO is struggling with the poor pace of negotiations and the changing geopolitical landscape. The gradual demise of the Doha Development Round stands as a stark reminder that the consensus-based method of the past is ill-suited for the geopolitical realities and expectations of the present and immediate future. For India, as contended earlier (rb.gy/oy4b5z), this means transitioning from a position-based negotiation strategy to one that is interest-based.

India must acknowledge its strategic geopolitical advantages and progress with a definitive objective of becoming a developed nation by 2047. Failure to adapt may not only diminish India’s influence in the WTO and impact our growth prospects, but also challenge our identity as a champion for the Global South.

Should India not change its course, it might face a situation akin to that of Italian footballer Mario Balotelli, who, plagued by negative publicity, famously wore an undershirt with the rhetorical question “Why always me?” during a goal celebration to express his exasperation with ongoing criticism.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Elections kick off

The mammoth parliamentary election starts with its first phase today (April 19) with 102 seats up for grabs. It is apt to describe the election involving 969 million eligible voters, 5.5 million electronic voting machines (EVMs) and 2,600 registered political parties in the world’s most populous country and the world’s largest democracy with the adjective ‘mammoth’. The logistics of conducting the mother of

all elections spanning over 44 days is testing, if anything, and requires political parties’ and people’s cooperation. The Bharatiya Janata Party fancies winning 400+ seats, but that is wishful thinking and bluster. It could suffer losses due to the simmering discontentment with mass unemployment and unchecked price rise. Media projections and crowds may not be the gauge of the ‘mood of the nation’. Now that 26 like-minded Opposition parties have formed

INDIA, there may be no split in the secular vote. This Lok Sabha election is crucial as it will reshape India’s future. —G David Milton, Maruthancode

Musk’s bargain

Elon Musk is a hard bargainer and would try to extract every possible advantage in his negotiations with the government of India. The entry of Tesla in India would shake up the electric vehicle industry. Musk’s Starlink project would probably be

resisted as it would make the thousands of crores spent by Indian telecom firms in setting optic fibre networks and towers redundant. The advantage of Starlink to access the most remote location would be very useful in India because of its terrain in certain parts. The government must balance the interests of all stakeholders before taking a decision. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



No one can be a true nationalist who is incapable of feeling ashamed if his state commits crimes, including those against his fellow citizens

Benedict Anderson

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

— Rammath Goenka

PARTIES SHOULD OFFER LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS, NOT JUST HANDOUTS

THE two largest national parties—the BJP and the Congress—have recognised unemployment and rising prices as important issues for the 2024 elections. Their promises focus largely on providing relief to the people on these two counts through welfare. But while doing so, they have failed to present structural solutions for the longer term. The BJP is silent on farm distress and labour issues, while the Congress does not present a plan to mitigate the impact of its giveaways on economic growth. Both parties have offered what has been termed by some experts as “charity” to help the weaker sections tide over inflation and joblessness.

The BJP’s 67-page manifesto does not mention the term ‘unemployment’, but offers a series of steps to temporarily help the poor and the jobless. It has promised to continue the free ration scheme—launched in 2020 to feed more than 80 crore people—for another five years. The Union government has also been providing direct financial assistance of ₹6,000 a year to small and marginal farmers; the BJP has promised to continue this scheme. The party is, however, silent on the farmers’ demand for the implementation of the Swaminathan Commission report and a legal guarantee for minimum support prices.

The Congress manifesto, on the other hand, plays up the issue of unemployment by highlighting how its government between 2004 and 2014 generated rural employment by bringing in the national job guarantee programme or MGN-REGA. It has promised an urban version of the law that would guarantee one-year apprenticeships to graduates and diploma holders, with an assured payment of ₹1 lakh for a year. It has also promised to fill the 30 lakh vacancies in central government departments. The party has assured a direct transfer of ₹1 lakh to a woman in every poor household. On the farm front, the Congress promises implementation of the Swaminathan Commission report and legal guarantee for minimum support price, one of the two demands that led to the 16-month-long agitation by farmers.

These promises by the two leading political parties underline some of the toughest problems faced by a vast majority of the people in the country. However, the solutions offered by them show a lack of fiscal prudence and reliance on the so-called *reudi* or handout culture. It’s time political parties started fighting elections on growth-oriented, financially-prudent policies that help the country achieve its long-term goals.

CHANCE TO BE KINDER TO ELEPHANTS AT POORAM

IT’S that time of the year in Kerala when animal welfare activists lock tusks with ‘elephant lovers’. It’s time for Thrissur Pooram, the largest temple festival in the state marked by colourful fireworks and the parading of caparisoned elephants. As many as 100 captive elephants take part and people from all over the state flock to Thrissur to witness this magnificent event that lasts 36 hours. Animal welfare activists have been up in arms against the parading of the elephants as the jumbos are subjected to severe torture while they stand for hours in chains in the heat and face deafening fireworks. But traditionalists, who vouch for their love for elephants, have been opposing any regulation in the name of customs.

However, there could be some change this time as the Kerala High Court has picked the issue as a *suo motu* case and decided to intervene. Taking note of the extreme heat conditions in the state, the court has directed that the *theevetti* (pole-mounted fire) be placed at least 6 metres away from the elephants and that only a few persons be authorised by the organisers to enter the 6-metre radius. The court has told the organisers—the Paramekkavu and Thiruvambady devaswoms—to share with the forest department the details of the volunteers engaged with the elephant squads; it has also banned use of ‘capture belts’ or any other equipment that causes hurt to the animals. The court has asked the organisers to ensure that the elephants are under no fatigue and are not exposed to the sun for long, and are properly fed and watered. The order also asks that the issuance of fitness certificates for the captive elephants be made mandatory before participating at the Pooram.

The high court directive, for a change, has been welcomed by the Elephant Owners’ Association, which had protested against a more stringent order issued by the state forest department banning percussion and fireworks within a 50-metre radius of the elephants. The state government and the organisers should see to it that the Pooram is celebrated without hurting the helpless pachyderms. No torture can be tolerated in the name of tradition. Those concerned must understand that traditions survive when they attune themselves with the changing times.

QUICK TAKE

MANGO SATYAGRAHA

A counsel for the Enforcement Directorate has told the special court hearing the Arvind Kejriwal case that the jailed Delhi chief minister has been intentionally having more mangoes to raise his sugar level. The counsel alleged this was to create a condition for seeking bail. Kejriwal’s counsel retorted the CM’s diet was fixed by his doctor and asked, “Is the ED above the doctor?” Let the Aam Aadmi leader have his *aam* or mango while the season lasts. Meanwhile, other authorities are focusing on the right sugar question: whether the world’s biggest packaged food company is adding too much sugar in its baby food brand in India.

MAHARASHTRA is seeing a straight and hard fight between the two national alliances, NDA and INDIA. The NDA is contesting through four parties in the state—the BJP, Shinde Shiv Sena, Ajit Pawar NCP (AP-NCP) and Rashtriya Samaj Paksha—and INDIA is represented by three parties—the Congress, Uddhav Thackeray Shiv Sena (UT-SS) and Sharad Pawar NCP. The alliances are appealing to different sections of Maharashtraian society.

The BJP has given Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar—NDA’s two Maratha faces—the responsibility of attracting the community towards the bloc. The Rashtriya Samaj Paksha, with pockets of support in Marathwada, north Maharashtra and west Maharashtra, is mobilising the Dhanger (herder) community. The BJP, for itself, has focused on the OBCs. On the ground, there is palpable discontent against the Narendra Modi government on economic issues; at the same time, people express satisfaction with Modi’s leadership.

The state’s political axes are aligned along community lines—upper castes versus Marathas, Marathas versus OBCs, and upper castes versus SCs. Each division has a different social base. This makes the sub-regional contexts fascinating.

Vidarbha

The Vidarbha division is socially distinct from the others because its base is made of OBCs. The main contest here is between the Congress and the BJP. East Vidarbha has six Lok Sabha seats; two of the six are reserved—Ramtek for SC candidates and Gadchiroli-Chimur for scheduled tribes. The other constituencies feature OBC candidates from one side or the other—Vilas Thackeray in Nagpur, Ramdas Tadas in Wardha, Amar Kale also in Wardha, Sudhir Mungantiwar in Chandrapur and Pratibha Dhanurkar in Chandrapur. Modi has aggressively campaigned on OBC issues in East Vidarbha and his party has fielded Tadas and Mungantiwar.

Among the four seats in western Vidarbha, Amravati is reserved for SCs. There is a triangular fight between the BJP, Congress and Prahar Janshakti Party (PJP). Voters upset with incumbent MP Navneet Kaur Rana are turning to the PJP instead of the Congress. The Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) is contesting in Akola, Buldhana and Yavatmal, where it is contesting with OBC candidates against Maratha or Kunbi ones. The division of anti-BJP votes in these seats is going to be between the VBA and INDIA parties. UT-SS has some social support in this division, too.

The state’s 48 Lok Sabha seats face a highly fragmented polity. Understanding how the cards stack up would require looking at social faultlines in the sub-regions

THE MANY ANGLES IN MAHARASHTRA’S POLL GEOMETRY

PRAKASH PAWAR

Professor, Shivaji University, Kolhapur, and coordinator, Centre for Gandhian Studies



SOURAV ROY

North Maharashtra

Of the eight constituencies here, three are reserved—Nandurbar, Dindori and Shirdi—where the contest is a straight one between NDA and INDIA. In Dhule, Jalgaon and Ahmednagar, it’s Marathas versus Marathas. Raver has an OBC vs Maratha contest. The Left parties have substantial influence in this division, too. The region’s farmers, who mostly grow onions, bananas and grapes, are dissatisfied with the BJP.

There is a conflict brewing between the NDA’s Maratha candidates in the region—Subhash Bhamre, Smita Wagh and Sujay Vikhe Patil—and its OBC leadership of Eknath Khadse and Chhagan Bhujbal.

Mumbai and Konkan

There are 11 Lok Sabha constituencies in

the Konkan division, including Mumbai and half of the Maval constituencies. Mumbai’s multicultural and urban polity is divided into three layers. Mumbai city’s two constituencies have large non-Marathi populations and pose one of the biggest challenges to UT-SS. Of the four constituencies in Thane district, Eknath Shinde’s backyard, is reserved for SCs; Shinde’s son Shrikant is contesting from Kalyan. Here, local castes such as Agri, Koli and Bhoi are taking the initiative in mobilisation. Suresh Mhatre (Agri) versus Kapil Patil (Agri) is a contest between Sharad Pawar NCP and BJP. All candidates here have not yet been announced for the four constituencies in Mumbai Suburban.

In Raigad, there is an OBC vs OBC competition between AP-NCP and UT-SS. In

Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg in South Konkan, where OBC voters are in substantial numbers, it’s mainly a Maratha vs Maratha contest between Narayan Rane of BJP and Vinayak Raut of UT-SS. Shiv Sena had influence here, but the cadre is now divided with the party split.

Western Maharashtra

The BJP is contesting five of the 10 constituencies here. Of this, Pune is urban and the others semi-urban and semi-rural in nature. BJP’s Pune candidate is a Maratha and the Congress’s belongs to an OBC group. The image being portrayed here is that the Congress has fielded a poor candidate, whereas the BJP candidate is from the upper classes, which happens to be the party’s base here.

The social structure in Solapur, Sangli and Hatkanangle is multi-caste and multi-religious, including Lingayats and Buddhists. The BJP’s base here is the business class, whereas INDIA’s base is the peasantry, with sugarcane prices a big issue. Activists have shifted to the BJP after splitting from Raju Shetty, a former MP from Hatkanangle and president of Swabhmani Paksha who didn’t join either bloc.

Kolhapur, Satara, Madha, Baramati, Maval and Shirur are mainly supported by Marathas and OBCs. Shirur has a Maratha vs Mali contest. Supriya Sule from Baramati has a claim to her father’s Maratha heritage and her father-in-law’s Chandraseniya Prabhu heritage. The other constituencies face Maratha vs Maratha contests. Sharad’s party has been built anew here and the Marathas who joined NDA—including Vijaysinh Mohite Patil and Niles Lanke—are turning to NCP again.

Marathwada

In the division’s eight constituencies, there is conflict within castes and groups. So the NDA vs INDIA fight is socially playing out as Maratha vs Maratha and Maratha vs OBC. It’s the former in Jalna, Nanded, Osmanabad and Hingoli, and the latter in Beed and Parbhani. Muslim voters—who tend to favour UT-SS, Congress and Sharad Pawar NCP—will have an impressive say in entire Marathwada. VBA has also fielded candidates from this community.

In sum, the NDA may well corner substantial support in all the divisions while bleeding Maratha votes and gaining OBC ones. The UT-SS’s social base is expanding in Marathwada and western Maharashtra. Sharad Pawar’s NCP is getting most of its support in western Maharashtra, and the Congress in Vidarbha and Marathwada. Let the voting begin.

(Views are personal)

OPENING THE WRONG GATES TO PhD ASPIRANTS

THE University Grants Commission’s (UGC) recent notice on using National Eligibility Test (NET) scores for PhD admissions has stirred a hornet’s nest. A section of academicians and students are up in arms, resisting the move as they feel it is regressive. They contend that centralised tests, while serving no useful purpose, are counterproductive and rob academia of academic and administrative freedom.

Traditionally, the NET, held biannually in June and December, has been primarily considered for awarding Junior Research Fellowships (JRF) and as an eligibility criterion for appointment as assistant professors for candidates holding post-graduate degrees. Under the new directive, successful NET candidates will be categorised into three groups. Category one includes individuals eligible for PhD admission with JRF and assistant professor appointments. Candidates in category two are eligible for assistant professor appointments and PhD admission without JRF. The third category is those eligible just for PhD admission.

The UGC’s rationale behind this policy shift is two-fold. Firstly, it aims to streamline the admission process, sparing students the burden of undertaking multiple examinations for PhD programmes. Secondly, the move aligns with the objectives stated in the National Education Policy 2020, which advocates implementing a single test for PhD admissions. Effective from academic year 2024-25, the UGC has mandated all higher educational institutions (HEIs) to adhere to these guidelines.

To assess the ramifications of such a decision, it is imperative to examine the test under consideration. The NET comprises two papers: the first assesses candidates’ teaching and research aptitude, while the second evaluates their subject knowledge. However, those familiar with the test would likely concur that its reliance on objective-type questions with no negative marking tends to prioritise memorisation over deep understanding and application of knowledge. Questions predominantly focus on factual recall, emphasising who, when and where, over why and how. For instance, in the literature paper, the significance of the line, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is trivialised by merely asking students to identify the speaker. Many questions require students to recall authors’ names, works and characters. This methodology

primarily assesses lower-order cognitive abilities like remembering while neglecting higher-order critical thinking skills, such as analysing, evaluating and creating.

Previously, the test included a descriptive paper that offered valuable insights into students’ writing and critical thinking capabilities. However, this component has been discontinued, diminishing the test’s capacity to measure research aptitude and skills. Consequently, the current structure of the NET, combined with the



these competencies, scholars are likely to face numerous obstacles along the way. They must possess patience, resilience, and perseverance to navigate this endeavour successfully. They must maintain an unwavering passion for their subject, self-motivation, independence, receptivity to new ideas, and a willingness to learn.

Retegrettably, the NET falls short in assessing or nurturing these skills. The contention that these skills could be assessed during the interview lacks substance, particularly considering the minimal weightage (30 percent) and limited time allotted. Consequently, universities may admit scholars skilled in rote learning but lacking essential competencies. PhD aspirants will be compelled to undergo a ritualistic examination that adds little to their development. Additionally, the one-year validity for scores among category two and three students may cause mental and financial strain, prompting repeated test-taking and benefiting only coaching centres.

With the implementation of the new rule, the UGC seeks to centralise control over the operations and procedures of HEIs under a unified framework. Introducing the Common University Entrance Exam earlier was one such initiative. Now, by adding a centralised examination for PhD aspirants, the UGC has advanced this approach further. One can’t help but ponder what lies ahead for India’s HEIs.

Clearly, the intention to promote uniformity in higher education is not progressive. While the UGC has traditionally served as a regulatory body, its increasing involvement in directing all aspects of functioning could prove detrimental to Indian HEIs that already face mediocrity accusations. Moreover, such a move poses a significant risk of compromising the autonomy of HEIs. I have often heard and read in public forums UGC officials extol the importance of independence for HEIs. However, initiatives like this could only be perceived as a blatant infringement upon the autonomy of institutions that are already grappling with restricted freedom.

(Views are personal) (johnjken@gmail.com)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Media legend

Rammath Goenka’s untiring and bold steps towards bringing out the truth is always worth telling the youth about. He was friends with not just politicians and high-ranking people, but the public of all levels just for his approach towards projecting the reality of problems faced by society. He is considered one of the hundred most influential people who shaped India.

Indra Getzy David, Tirunelveli

Electric future

Ref: *Tesla is coming, but buyers deserve a wider choice* (Apr 18). Tesla is an appropriate partner for India to execute its China + India. This might open a wider gateway for Indian exports of EVs. Both Tesla and India need each other to increase global footprints. It is crucial for India to nurture the partnership to reach greater heights.

Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru

Battery sufficiency

India’s new EV import policy is the reason for Tesla coming to the nation. Indian battery manufacturers should concentrate on improving their products so they can compete in the EV sector. This way, we can soon become autonomous in this field as well.

Ravi Nair, Palakkad

Vote security

As one reader mentioned in their letter, online voting can save a lot of money for the government and make life easier for citizens. However, it has many problems. The secrecy of voting becomes vulnerable. Despite the EC’s efforts to conduct free and fair elections with EVMs, contestants resort to influencing voters with temptations, intimidation and blackmail. Online voting could make it easier to steal votes through fraudulent methods.

N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

Kerala fronts

The UDF in Kerala, particularly the Congress, alleges that the CPM has a tacit understanding with the BJP, while CPM says the same about the UDF. It is an open secret that both UDF and LDF are helping each other by allying with INDIA. They are conveniently hiding this fact and fooling the common man.

Kannoth Gopalakrishnan, email

RIP Jayan

The sad demise of musician K G Jayan was indeed a colossal loss to connoisseurs of classical Carnatic music. To him, devotional melodies were nothing but a ‘pathway to god’. Aldous Huxley has said, “After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.” No doubt Jayan exemplified this truth in his musical journey.

Kelath Gopakumar Menon, Thrissur

Watch This Space for Lift-Off in That Space

SpaceX, Starlink can leverage India's capabilities

Governments are increasingly turning to the private sector for dominance in space. The strategic intent that drove the earlier space race has yielded to commercial considerations, as the prospects and economics of colonising the solar system improve. SpaceX, owned by Elon Musk, has made two breakthroughs in space travel. Its rockets have powered NASA's latest mission to the moon with an ultimate aim of mining it. And trials of reusable rockets have reached a stage where they can seriously lower the cost of placing satellites in Earth's orbit. This second development is of considerable interest to India, one of the few nations that have demonstrated capabilities in launching payloads in terrestrial orbit as well as in interplanetary missions. New Delhi wants to leverage this capacity to tap into the business possibilities that are opening up in the space sector.

India last year bifurcated its space programme in order to allow Isro to focus on research, and NewSpace India to commercialise technology. Another agency, IN-SPACE, is tasked with ensuring continuity as access to dual-use technology eases for consumer industries such as telecommunications. Earlier this year, GoI announced a liberalised foreign investment regime for manufacture and delivery of payloads. India, of course, is not alone in seeking to draw more private capital into the ecosystem in order to cut reliance on public funding of its space programme. The world over, commercial interest in space is driving satellite and rocket technology.

The immediate business case for the space sector is telecommunications, in which another Musk company, Starlink, has a significant presence. Starlink has sought permission from India to offer satellite-based internet services in the country. This benefits the Indian space sector directly by drumming up business for commercial satellite launches, and indirectly by possibly gaining access to cost-efficient rocket technology. A buy-in from Musk could provide India's commercial space industry a considerable leg-up.

What's Bad for Them Is Also Bad for Us

Nestlé seems to live by the adage, 'Different strokes for different folks'. The Swiss NGO Public Eye, and International Baby Food Action Network, found that Nestlé baby food products sold in developing countries like India had added sugar content, unlike their products sold in Europe and Britain. This, despite advice from WHO — and an advisory on its own website — against the introduction of added sugars to diets before the age of 2, not to mention a 2022 call for a ban on added sugars and sweeteners in baby food products. Nestlé is not alone following the same 'different sauces for gander and goose' practice to augment sales.

Nestlé is at fault. But so are those — pliant consumers included — allowing companies like it to get away with double standards. This 'third world' mentality of letting substandard goods be 'ok for us' even as it won't pass muster 'with them', needs to end, especially when our bodies and health are concerned. There is no place any longer for such health and hygiene subjectivism. Food regulators like Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) were aware of the WHO advisory, but looked the other way. In India, the added sugars content is information printed on labels. But FSSAI needs to step up and ensure that the food we consume is healthy, safe, and is indeed what it is sold as.

FSSAI must ensure that food and drink standards are constantly evaluated and updated based on scientific assessment and global health advice. Once incorporated, these standards must be enforced. The exponential growth of the F&B market requires a regulator that is fit for purpose, keeping an ever-watchful eye over the food baskets of an increasingly alert consumer class that cares what it — and its children — ingest.



JUST IN JEST

Why going to cast your votes is like going out to the movies

So, What'll Be Your Voting Show Time?

Ah, the theatricality of civic duty. Much like selecting the perfect time to go out to the movies, the act of voting offers its own menu of showtimes. Morning voters, early birds of democracy, sip their coffee with a hot plate full of electoral enthusiasm. They're all gung-ho to cast their ballots before the rest of the world lands up. As soon as their morning walk's done, off they go to change the country by the press of a button. Noon voters, like the midday matinee crowd, tactically sneak away from their daily grind for an intermission of political participation, sandwiched between work and home. The citizen going out to vote at noon also hopes fewer folks will brave the heat at this hour. Fingers crossed, they go hoping the mob hasn't also thought up of joining the 'ticket line' at this abominable hour.

Afternoon voters, akin to the blockbuster crowd, flock to polling stations after work, their civic engagement illuminated by democratic ardour. They don't mind the crowd — for they are the crowd. All they want is to be seen as being integral to the mandate of 'box office'. Then there are the night show-walas. In hustings terms, they make up the voters who are there till ballots go home. And there's, of course, the OTT viewers — who watch the mega movie playing outside from the comfort of their home and political sofa position.

Be prepared not just to cast your vote but also to stay safe during the heat of these elections

Don't Make Voting Too Hot



Dileep Mavalankar

With general elections beginning today, the summer of 2024 is an important one for India. However, the year is also predicted to be exceptional when it comes to weather. Earlier this month, IMD predicted above-normal temperatures this summer and longer heatwaves from April to June over most parts of the country, except some parts of east and northeast India and pockets of northwest.

This weather warning is not surprising. With climate change, average global temperature has been increasing, and heatwaves are becoming common worldwide. Other reasons for the extreme departure from normal maximum temperatures include local weather conditions, increasing concretisation, deforestation and changes in land-use patterns. Conversion of land into built-up areas, such as buildings and asphalt, contributes to higher surface temperatures.

Climate and public health scientists started noting the killer potential of heatwaves since the mass heatwave of 1995 in Chicago that killed about 700 people. In the last 20 years, several such



Given climate-change predictions, future elections should be held in winter



Hydrate at the hustings

heatwave-related increases in gross mortality have been reported in various parts of the world.

- ▶ In 2003, a two-week heatwave in Europe killed 70,000 people, which was also above the average mortality for that season.

- ▶ Ahmedabad reported 800 all-cause excess deaths in May 2010, a measure of how many more people are dying than expected, compared to the previous few years.

- ▶ India saw a 55% rise in deaths due to extreme heat during 2000-04 and 2017-21, according to the 2023 Lancet report. 'Countdown on health and climate change'.

- ▶ Exposure to heat also caused a loss of 167.2 bn potential labour hours among Indians in 2021, resulting in a loss of incomes equivalent to about 5.4% of the country's GDP.

While older adults, co-morbid people or infants succumb to heatwaves, their stories aren't reported in the media. Only deaths of young people directly exposed to the sun — just 10% of total heat-related mortality — are made public.

We are seeing many rallies and meetings this election season. Many citizens, political workers, election officers, and police and security forces

will be exposed to heat on a massive scale. Heat-related illnesses, such as heatstroke, heat syncope (unconsciousness) and heat exhaustion, depend on heat exposure (temperature, moisture, wind and duration), the individual's vulnerability, acclimatisation or resilience, and protective measures taken.

IMD's declared temperature of most places is taken from weather stations near the airport, not from the city's centre. City centres are 3-4°C higher than peripheral areas due to the impact of urban heat islands, created due to the lack of trees, more constructed spaces and lack of open areas in the city centre.

IMD measures temperature in a shaded wooden box about 6 ft above the ground. If one stands directly in the sunlight, then the exposure to heat due to solar radiation directly falling on the person is higher; and, hence, that person can heat up much faster.

Political parties must follow basic

precautions this scorching poll season:

- ▶ Follow and implement NDMA's guidelines on preventing heat-related illness during voting.

- ▶ National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) has also issued various technical guidelines. This is a welcome first step. But getting the guidelines disseminated and then implemented requires a lot more effort from governments at all levels — central, states and districts.

- ▶ Unleash big-scale public awareness campaigns to educate people, political parties, government and election officials about how heat kills and how to prevent heatstroke, the most severe form of heat illness. This will require substantial resources and planning.

- ▶ Some primary methods of preventing heatstroke: ▶ Avoid exposure to direct sunlight as much as possible. This means no public meetings or rallies between 11 am and 4 pm.

- ▶ If one has to go out in the sun, take an umbrella or cover the head with a cap or head cover. Walk or work in the shade, not directly in the sun.

- ▶ Avoid dehydration by drinking plenty of water at home, and carry water with you for the road.

- ▶ If someone feels hot and uncomfortable, move him or her to shade and sprinkle water on the person to cool the body by evaporation. If there is no improvement, immediately shift to the nearest health facility or hospital. ▶ IMD predicts heatwaves in many cities five days in advance. Pay heed and take precautions. Political parties should also follow this 'heat code of conduct' to ensure that their workers and the public do not suffer due to heat this election. We don't want this election to be remembered for any heat-related deaths. Given climate-change predictions, future elections should be held in winter.

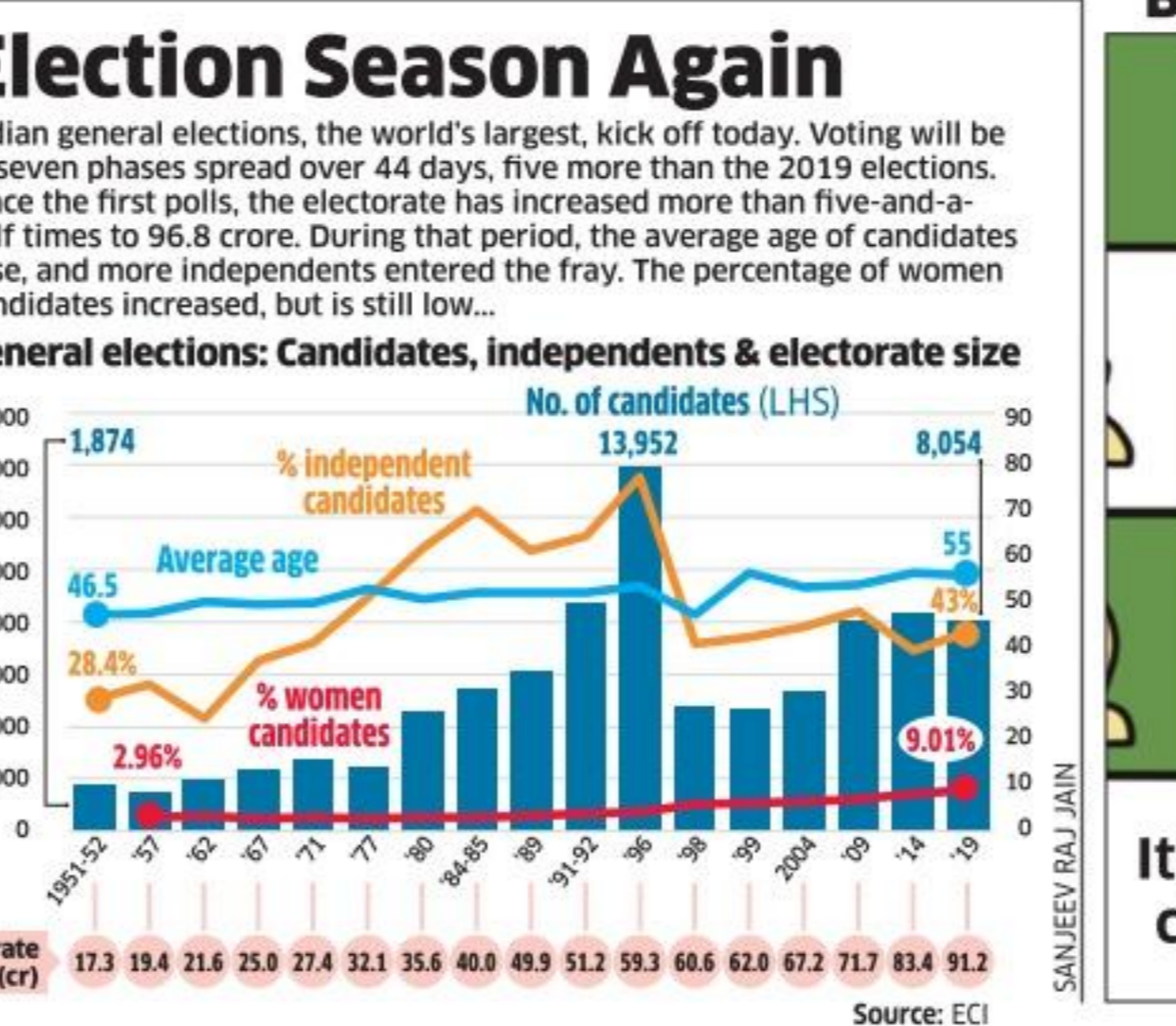


Climate and public health scientists started noting the killer potential of heatwaves since the mass heatwave of 1995 in Chicago that killed about 700 people

The writer is distinguished professor, Indian Institute of Public Health, Gandhinagar (IIPHG)

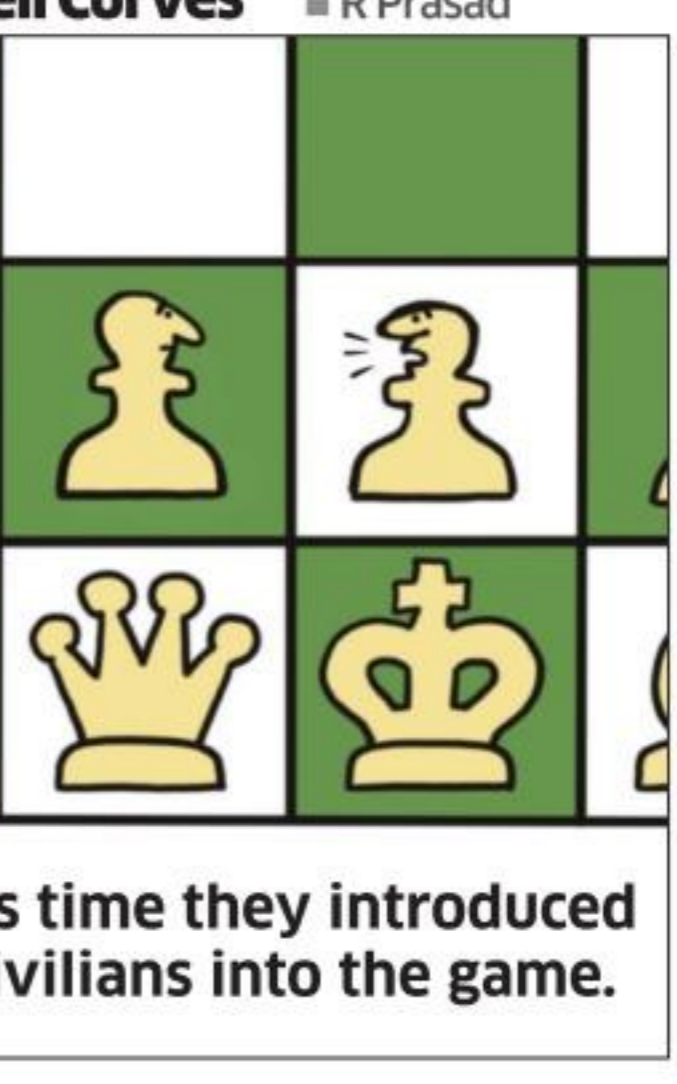
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

And so starts an election so grand,
Where seat predictions will pass plenty hands.
But no crystal ball's clear,
Even if you think the outcome's clear,
Welcome to everyone's Guessworkland!



Bell Curves

It's time they introduced civilians into the game.



Here We Go Again, India



Akshay Rout

Today, 102 of 543 Lok Sabha constituencies spread over 21 states and UTs will vote in the first of seven phases of the largest election humanity has ever seen. Polling will also be completed in 10 states/UTs today. While the second phase will be conducted by the end of this month, the remaining five phases will close counters on June 1, with the last three phases totalling only 163 seats. Counting takes place on June 4.

On the wish-list front, one sincerely hopes that the recent impressive march to polling stations by India's women continues unabated. One also wishes that India's 210 m youth (18-29-yr-olds) make this election their own by speaking through the ballot, be it 'desh ke liye' or 'apne liye'. One also hopes our urban citizens follow their rural counterparts and not lag 10% behind in turnout figures.

On the ground level, voters will be up against the unseasonal heat flaying many parts of the country. Meteorological predictions over the next six weeks are not comforting. Several areas are likely to confront especially discomforting weather conditions. Yes, India's general election has always been a summer routine. Election managers will certainly engage all their wherewithal to make it easier for voters, as well as for lakhs of their own staff and auxiliary support.

Earlier this month, EC directed election observers to augment amenities at polling stations to combat heat. In the future, dramatic restructuring of polling cycles — perhaps even the 'One Nation, One Poll' option — could throw up a solution on this front. But, for now, one will have to depend on the grit of the Indian voter to beat the pounding spring-summer heat to exercise their franchise.

One must spare a thought for the grueling itinerary of politicians and party workers putting up 'campaign shows' one after the other. EC has tried to reduce the strain through a transparent system of online permissions for voter outreach called *Suvidha* — for rallies, opening offices, door-to-door canvassing, video vans, helicopters, vehicle permits, distributing pamphlets, etc.

The fight against what CEC Rajiv Kumar described as the '4Ms' — unaccounted money, muscle, misinformation and MCC (model code of conduct) violations — will continue. EC has largely been successful. Poll violence has been — barring incidents in states like West Bengal — more or less managed so far. Seizures worth over ₹4,500 cr in the last six weeks have 'beaten' the ₹3,475-cr haul made in the entire duration of 2019 election, a testimony to robust vigilance and operation against black money. Significantly, almost half the volume is from illicit drug seizures.

Tech-driven misinformation, including AI-manufactured deepfakes, have become a bane this election. But the menace hasn't shaken it. Preventive steps have fortified key instruments of election management. Crackdowns on surrogate, misleading and anonymous political advertisements in both offline and digital spaces have been visible. EC's 'Myth Vs Reality Register' platform and the 'Verify Before You Amplify' campaign have helped. Constant dialogue between regulators and digital platforms, and evolving SOPs, can



Vroom vroom

prevent hijacking of the level playing field via AI-engineered mischief in the coming weeks.

When thousands of candidates and hundreds of political parties are jostling for space in the next couple of months, one expects some violations. And violations there have been, as have complaints, notices, orders — and actions taken.

In the face of politicians getting embroiled on the wrong side of the 'poll perimeter' but outside its ambit, EC's observation has been succinct: 'While the Commission remained unwaveringly committed to protection of level playing field and campaign entitlement of political parties and candidates, it has not found it correct to take any step that could overlap or overrun the legal judicial process.' Besides constitutional wisdom, the statement suggests the tightrope EC has to walk.

This time, EC went a step ahead in making party leaders accountable for glaring violations by candidates. Following misogynistic comments by two politicians of two major national parties, in an order, EC said that it 'considers the whole process of conduct of election as a major enhancer of status of women in India and is committed not to allow any erosion of this status in any manner during the election period under its own aegis'. This order from the constitutional body uniquely reinforces a national consensus to give women their legitimate space in electoral democracy.

It will be unreal to wish away MCC violations, poll-related violence and misinformation campaigns in the coming weeks. But handling these is part of the poll process. What is important is that phase after phase, parties and candidates will be evaluated by 970 mn Indians across 10.5 lakh centres. These citizens — us — must avail of this opportunity. Because, in Mohandas Gandhi's words, adult suffrage enables all of us 'to satisfy all the reasonable aspirations'.

The writer is former director general, Election Commission of India



THE SPEAKING TREE

Work or Calling?

NAJIB SHAH

There is an incident, perhaps apocryphal, relating to Christopher Wren, an English architect responsible for building several monuments including St Paul's Cathedral. One day while supervising the work in the cathedral, he noticed three bricklayers. The first was working in a disinterested, sluggish manner, the second, a bit better. The third was working diligently, a smile on his face, obviously proud of what he was doing. Wren asked the bricklayers, 'What are you doing?' The first bricklayer replied, 'I am laying bricks.' The second said, 'I am building a cathedral.' And the third replied, 'I am building a house of God.'

Each of them had the same occupation and were perhaps getting the same wages too. Their perspectives, however, differed dramatically. In the language of psychologists, the first had a job, the second, a career, and the third, a calling. When you have a calling, it means you have passion — passion for doing the work well. Excellence is the natural consequence. One look at the magnificent St Paul's Cathedral and you would exclaim that this is the work not of some perfunctory workers but bricklayers who had a calling.

What a wonderful world it would be if everyone of us made whatever work we are doing, our calling. A world where excellence rules. If everyone was pursuing excellence, it would mean people working with commitment, integrity and in harmony. Such a society will necessarily be a good society.

Chat Room

Poll Mahakumbh Kicks Off Today

Aprons the news reports, 'PM Attacks Congress in his Election Rallies', and 'BJP will Win Only 150 Seats, claims Rahul' (Apr 18), the crucial democratic exercise in the country starts from today. The voter's choice will decide his fate for the coming five years, and beyond. The narration of the parties in their campaigns look more to be street fights for power than a serious attempt to provide clean administration and ensure inclusive development. While the ruling party talks more about dynasty politics than its achievements, the opposition parties are immersed in internal politics and are unable to expose the misdeeds and mistakes of the ruling dispensation. It is now left to the individual voter to analyse and cast her vote accordingly.

A GRAJMOHAN
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

It's Manifest in Black & White

This refers to the Edit, 'Let's Make Elections Manifesto-Mukt' (Apr 16). Politics is about taking a stand and communicating it in no uncertain terms. An informed voter would like to verify how the core values of a party remain at the core or how they drift, by comparing the manifestoes of a

party across terms. Since the politician's voice is not necessarily the party's, the only reliable trace about what a party stands for is reflected through the manifesto, notwithstanding its fragility in terms of a wide gap between intent and delivery. By getting rid of the manifesto, let's not give them a rope so long that they are absolved of any effort in putting a thought in their intent to be declared publicly.

PRASAD AMBADAS KULKARNI
Mumbai

Travancore Got Europeans First

'A New Yen for Assertion' by TK Arun (Apr 17) refers to Japan as 'the first Asian power to have a naval victory over a European power'. Actually, this credit goes to the Travancore kingdom that defeated the Dutch in the battle of Colachel in 1741. The Dutch imperialistic dream was shattered with this defeat and heralded the decline of the Dutch superpower, giving way to the rise of the British.

ASHISH ANILKUMAR
Byemail

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

CONTRAPUNTO



Don't buy a single vote more than necessary - I'll be damned if I am going to pay for a landslide

-JOSEPH KENNEDY

Here We Go

Many subplots in the first of 7-phase elections. TN is of special interest. First vote in J&K post-Art 370

The first phase to elect the 18th Lok Sabha will decide the outcome of more seats than the six phases to follow. One hundred and two seats in 21 states are at stake.

Each LS poll is unique with surprises guaranteed when votes are counted. A special feature of the first phase are the subplots within the largest electoral exercise in the world.

A beachhead? | TN, with 39 LS seats, is the biggest prize in today's polling. But there's more at stake here than 2024. The state's been a political outlier, pushing national parties to the margin. DMK has retained its successful 2019 alliance. Arguably, the most consequential outcome will be the vote shares of the erstwhile allies, AIADMK and BJP. It's this measure that will indicate if the five-decade phase of TN politics revolving around two Dravidian parties is coming to an end.



One election | Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim are two of the four states where LS and assembly polls are being held simultaneously. Arunachal continues with a tradition of sending some candidates to the state assembly unopposed. BJP has already secured 10 of 60 seats this way.

A new beginning | J&K will witness its first big election after the nullification of Art 370. BJP and Congress go head-to-head in a keen contest in Udhampur. Resumption of electoral democracy in J&K is a positive takeaway.

More of the same? | Both of Manipur's seats go to polls today. However, only a part of Outer Manipur constituency will vote. Polling for this constituency will be completed during the second phase. Given its unsettled state and ethnic violence, even a healthy turnout will be a good sign. Manipur's healing has to come through a political process.

Over the next six weeks, the world's largest democracy with over 968 million voters will exercise its franchise. Almost 2% of this electorate is in the age group of 18-19. Democracy has been the glue holding together our diverse country by giving everyone a sense of ownership. It's the most precious legacy of India's political independence.

That Sweet Drug

Sugar's part of Indian culture. Eating it is socially accepted substance abuse. But it must be controlled

Sugar is as addictive as any drug, releasing opioids and dopamine in our system. Sweetening baby formula and cereal is one of the most insidious ways in which global food companies prime consumers to crave sugar right from infancy. While there has been some outrage about this in the West, a recent study has found that food giant Nestle adds sugar to baby food like Cerelac in low, middle income countries, including India.

Sugar addiction in India, often called the world's diabetes capital, is in a class of its own. India is pretty much the home of crystalline sugar, where it was used as early as the 6th century BCE for ceremonial and royal purposes. So we have a longstanding cultural attachment to it. Eating sugar is socially acceptable substance abuse. We eat mithai, payasam and the like for every celebration, feed each other sweet stuff to mark an occasion. It's a collective drug rush, we bond over it. Prosperity means the capacity to eat more sugar; love means giving children sugary treats.

But our bodies are only human. We can consume sugar in tiny amounts. But bulk sweeteners snuck in by industrial food and beverages are destroying our health. In the last century, sugar consumption has soared everywhere in the world, with US and western Europe consuming 40-60 kg of sugar per person a year.

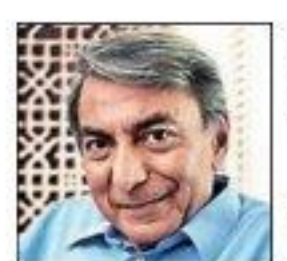
Many countries have taken the war on obesity and diabetes seriously, slapping taxes on food giants. Chile has banned advertising and put warning labels on junk foods. Consumption of such items dropped nearly 25% in 18 months. Others like Israel and Singapore have also done this. Coca-Cola, Pepsi and others have had to tweak their recipes to meet Singapore's cap on sugar limits. Sugar content in these brands varies by country; which is why a Fanta tastes different around the world.

India might have an enduring relationship with mishti, but we must curb our enthusiasm. As these global examples show, regulators can hold the food industry to account - if they are serious about public health.

Foodie for thought

Let's find a better word to describe those who help us celebrate the sense of taste

Jug Suraiya



Some years ago, Bunny joined an online international community dedicated to creating and enjoying good cuisine, who call themselves foodies.

When Bunny joined the group, its membership stood at a few hundred. Today it's some 90 thousand, spanning the globe from America to Australia, India to China, and points in between. Members post pictures of meals they have made and enjoyed, and are generous in sharing their recipes with others. As a result, Bunny and I can sample a smorgasbord of culinary creations from Burmese Khao Suey to Kashmiri Rogan Josh, from Italian Ragu and Spaghetti Aglio e Olio, to Russian-French Stroganoff and Pakistani Nihari.

Bunny has also picked up useful kitchen tips, such as blanching mushrooms before cooking, and the secret of searing scallops to enhance texture and taste. Members of the mega-group provide eating-out tips about places that are often out of the way. Thanks to this we've discovered great home-style eateries as well as fine dining establishments in Goa, Britain, and Europe, and indeed in Gurgaon where we live.

In all, foodies are goodly folk to know. The only thing I disapprove of is the term they use to describe themselves: Foodie.

The word conjures an image of a gluttonous juvenile, mouth and face smeared with some gooey comestible of unidentifiable origin, but suggestive of something sugary and icky-sticky.

Why would those who literally embody good taste employ a descriptive term for themselves which has such unappealing associations, more evocative of greedy gormands than fastidious gourmets?

An alternative appellation for foodies might be epicures, derived from the 3rd century BCE Greek philosopher, Epicurus, which now denotes alimentary aficionados. However, the word might be shortened to epics, creating confusion with the Ramayan, the Mahabharat, and the Iliad.

Perhaps aristologists would be apter, based on the word aristology, or the art of dining well. And in shortened form it could become aristos, aristocrats of appetit most bon.

jugularvein

It's Not Done & Dusted

Elections begin today. Don't go by polls predicting big BJP win. Even BJP isn't taking it for granted. For good reasons. Like major states voting in multiple phases & summer's impact on turnouts

R Jagannathan



Voting for 2024 general elections begins today. That old adage, 'Don't count your chickens before they hatch', should apply in spades to current expectations about who will emerge the winner.

Widespread consensus seems to be that not only will Modi be back in govt, but maybe with a bigger majority than in 2019. Not so fast. We can't assume an outcome till the last vote is cast and counting done, even if odds seem to favour a particular outcome right now.

Here's why.
● First, unlike the past, there are simply too many opinion polls appearing on TV channels every other day. Some of them may be scientifically designed, but others may not be. In fact, the broad similarities in their final seat projections make one wonder if there is not some kind of confirmation bias at work here. Even assuming potential voters are telling pollsters what they genuinely may do on voting day, the perils of converting voting preferences into seat wins even before a voter has pressed an EVM button cannot be overstated.

● Second, Met office has predicted a torrid summer this year, with heat waves in some parts of the country. This may impact voter turnouts. Big question is whether the committed or marginal BJP voter will decide to stay at home, or the opponents of BJP. We can't know this till the actual polling day. This is an imponderable that all parties have to reckon with. (As an aside, it is a pity that nearly a billion voters have to head for polling booths right in the midst of high summer. This must change.)

● Third, unlike the pollsters and some TV anchors, BJP isn't acting as if elections have been won. While they obviously exude confidence publicly, they have certainly not taken this election for granted. Or else Modi wouldn't be sweating it out day in and day out. The search for multiple allies in vulnerable states, and defectors, has been a continuing one. As a party that privately polls voters many times to spot shifts in the mood, this tells us something. 2024 isn't yet a done deal. The 400-paar rhetoric may be a clarion call to the parivar to get the committed vote out.

● Fourth, the spread-out nature of polling in large states (very few have single-day polling) means that voting in the earlier phases may impact trends in the later ones, both positively and negatively. Fence-sitters may opt to back the potential winner in an earlier phase, while those who are against the (presumed) early trends may vote with a vengeance in the later phases to prevent their nemesis from taking office.

Parties themselves have the option to shift gears and messaging in multi-phase voting. In 2009, Congress party's (late) YS Rajasekhara Reddy gave pro-Telangana speeches in the first phase, while aggressively championing a united Andhra in the next phase. He won both phases.

In states like West Bengal, where there are multiple constituencies seeking to hear different messages on the same issue (CAA, for example), the messaging could be different in different phases. This means not only different states, but different regions within the same state may vote differently this time. This suggests the possibility of unpredictable outcomes. (As an aside, again, one must ask whether even with multi-phase polling, voting must be excruciatingly spread out over six long weeks?)

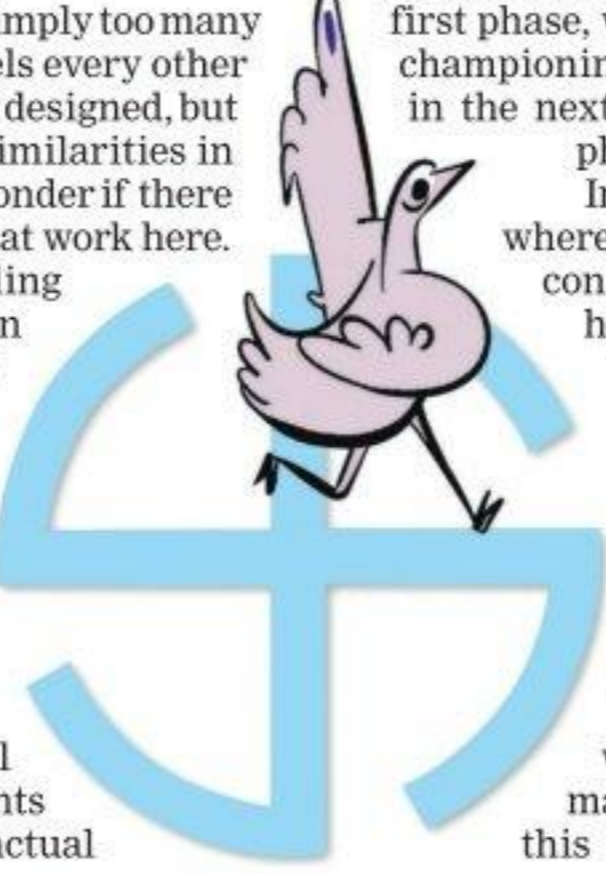
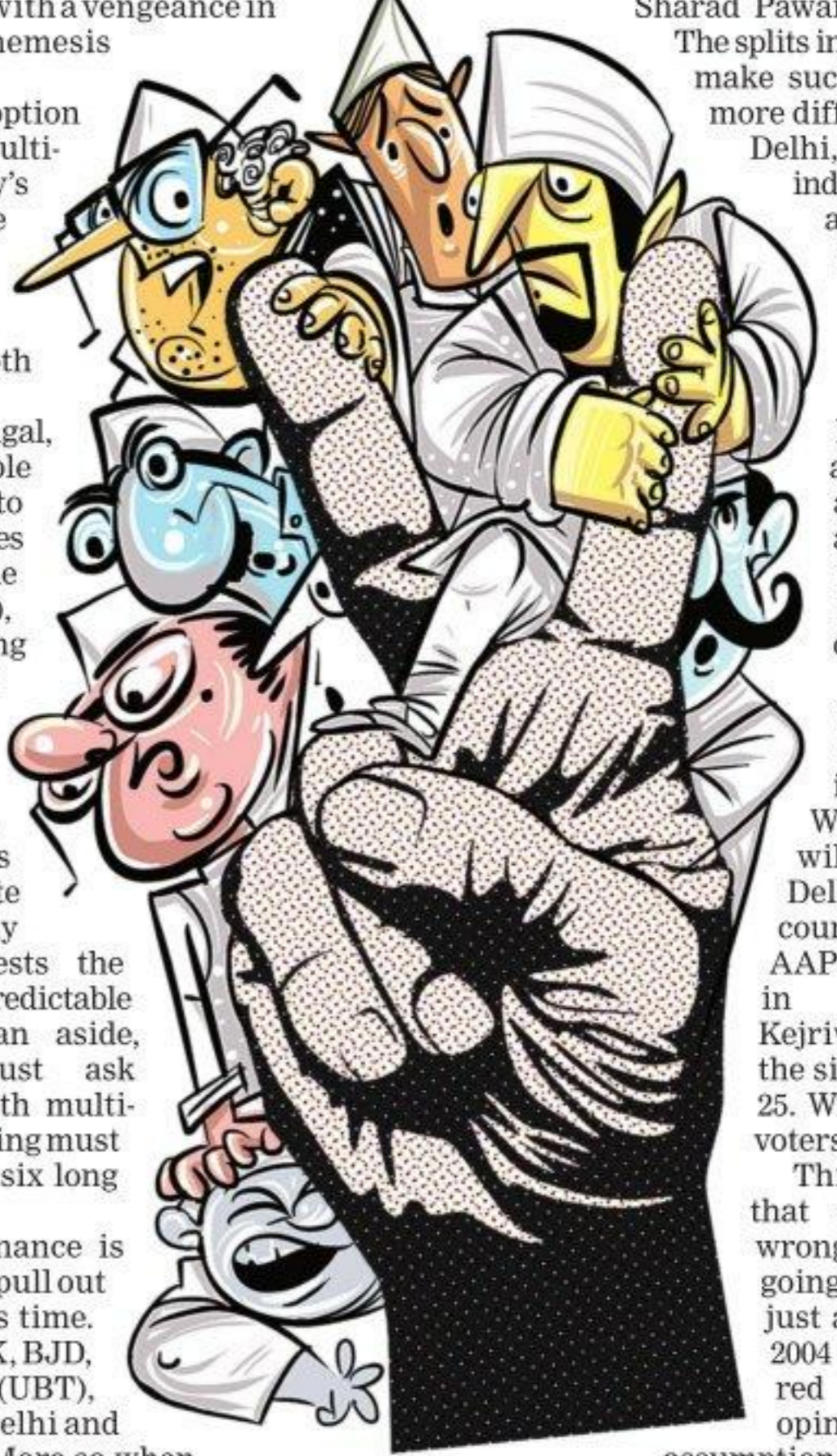
● Fifth, fear of Modi's dominance is likely to make the regional parties pull out all stops to prevent a BJP win this time. From Trinamool to AIADMK, DMK, BJD, Bharat Rashtra Samiti, Shiv Sena (UBT), NCP (Sharad Pawar) and AAP in Delhi and Punjab, fear of BJP will be high. More so when some of their seniors are in jail or under the enforcement directorate's lens. We don't know what parties will do when pushed to the wall.

● Sixth, vote transfers between allies are also difficult to predict. While the SP-Congress alliance in UP may not face contradictions like the ones faced by the SP-BSP alliance in 2019, Maharashtra MVA will get a reality check on whether Uddhav Thackeray's Hindutva voters will vote for Congress or Sharad Pawar. And vice versa.

The splits in Sena and NCP will make such voter dilemmas more difficult to resolve. In Delhi, fear of BJP may indeed make Congress and AAP voters more willing to work together, but it is not a certainty since every voter knows that Delhi's assembly elections are just 10 months away, and the two parties will fight from separate corners.

● Seventh, judicial action may make a difference in some states. What, for example, will be the impact on Delhi voters if the courts release all those AAP seniors currently in jail, including Kejriwal? Delhi votes in the sixth phase, on May 25. Will sympathy sway voters at that point?

This is not to suggest that all pollsters are wrong. Or that BJP is going to lose this one just as Vajpayee did in 2004 after being declared the favourite in opinion polls. But any assumption that 2024 is a slam dunk for BJP would be rash. Best to wait till June 1, when exit polls will be in. Or better yet, till June 4, when EC will give us the final tally of seats.



POLLITICS
Special Series on Elections

Where Will The Uttarakhandi Go?

Climate is curiously missing from poll talk in this Himalayan state with most fragile ecology, its people caught between sinking land, forest fires and flash floods

Atul.Sethi@timesgroup.com



Over the last few weeks, as election campaigns warmed up across the state, so did many of Uttarakhand's forests - fires raged, jungles were up in flames, and continue to be afire. So far, in April alone, almost 100 hectares of forests have been gutted. With over 70% of its area under green cover, forest fires are a recurring issue, with far-reaching ecological, and economical, impact, and dealing a significant blow to tourist footfall.

But 2024 has been particularly severe - over 250 hectares of forests stand burnt, up from the 214 hectares that were gutted last year till mid-April. With a couple of months for summer to end, and monsoons to arrive, the damage will likely be on a much greater scale this year.

Yet, the issue has barely found mention in the poll discourse.

Facing natural disasters | Himalayas make up the bulk of the state's geography. Uttarakhand is India's most vulnerable state in terms of natural disasters - from flash floods to landslides and earthquakes. It has witnessed a stream of natural calamities for years, including the devastating Kedarnath floods of 2013 that claimed over 6,000 lives. In 2021, flash floods at Raini village - from where the Chipko movement began in 1970s - led to 200 deaths with several missing. Last year, large-scale subsidence in Joshimath forced over 1,000 people to abandon homes. Similar land sinks have hit hill towns like Karnaprayag, Mussoorie and Nainital.

Skipping the issue | Yet, candidates of both BJP and Congress have largely refrained from this fundamental issue in their poll pitches.

Per state data, over 100 people on average lose their lives to natural disasters in Uttarakhand each year; landslides being the deadliest. Recently, NDMA identified 13 potentially dangerous glacial lakes in Uttarakhand Himalayas, which pose a risk of glacial lake outburst floods - what triggered the Kedarnath floods.

Again, no political party has bothered to share their



outlook on this problem, or on the wider effects of climate change, and how they plan to tackle it.

Living with the wild | Another key issue, especially in hill villages, is the threat from leopards. For most of us living in cities, it's difficult to imagine the extent of this problem, which persists almost a century after hunter-turned-conservationist Jim Corbett wrote about his encounters with 'the man-eaters of Kumaon'.

If anything, the issue is much more severe following the continual encroachment of wildlife corridors, and urbanisation of forest fringes. At least 50 people lose their lives in animal attacks every year in the state; over 300 left injured in encounters with leopards, tigers, elephants, bears and snakes.

Nota on the cards | Twelve people have been killed in such attacks this year. In the last decade, Uttarakhand's big cats killed 264 - leopards accounted for 203 deaths and tigers 61. With man-eaters on the prowl, life in affected villages comes to a standstill - schools get closed for weeks and people are afraid of venturing out after dark.

This poll season, many villagers, especially in areas like Pauri Garhwal and Nainital sat in protest, threatening to boycott elections or opt for Nota. Candidates have skinned over the serious issue. No one has any concrete roadmap to mitigate such conflicts.

Then there's the migration | So, what are the parties talking about? Congress concentrated on social welfare schemes and promised economic growth by increasing job opportunities. Migration from hill villages remains a pressing concern due to lack of basic facilities in the hills and joblessness.

Unemployment is at an all-time high - there are around 9L registered unemployed young people in the state at present, and Congress is hoping for some traction. For BJP - which won all five seats in 2014 and 2019 here and is eyeing a third successive win - the focus has been on infra development, projects mostly initiated by Centre like the Char Dham all-weather road, and Rishikesh-Karnaprayag rail link, which would take the railway line to towns in Garhwal Himalayas for the first time.

And the tourist trap | BJP also highlights its pilgrimage-tourism initiatives - redevelopment of Badrinath and Kedarnath, as well as setting up of the Manaskhand Mandir Mala Mission to exploit the tourism potential of 16 identified temples in the Kumaon region.

The party has spoken about 'sustained development' ostensibly to allay concerns raised over the Char Dham road project, but has been largely silent on the effects of mass tourism on the limited carrying capacity of hill towns.

Uttarakhand (5 LS seats) votes today

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

We look for existing examples in our lives of what we say we want...we put more attention on that, than what we believe is missing...The more we do that, the more evidence of positivity we will see...We are voting with our attention.

Leah Pearlman

Wanted: Evolutionary Leadership With A Heart

Daaji Kamlesh D Patel

The outdated leaders of the 21st century are not the ones who lack vision or empathy, but those who are not receptive to evolution, growth, and personal transformation. The transformative power of leadership that is open to change and evolution is tremendous.

Leaders who embrace evolution can navigate uncertainty with confidence, inspire others to innovate, and drive positive change.

Growth and transformation are ongoing processes. We need not be afraid to challenge our assumptions, seek new perspectives, and learn from our mistakes. By constantly evolving, we can stay ahead of the curve and lead the nation towards a brighter future.

Another important aspect of evolutionary leadership is the ability to inspire others to join in the journey of

growth and transformation. Leaders who lead by example, demonstrating a willingness to learn, adapt, and evolve, inspire others to do the same. By showing vulnerability and humility, they create a sense of trust and authenticity that motivates others to follow their lead.

Now comes the most significant aspect of how to be an evolutionary leader: How do we know that we have to change, grow, and transform? The first step is the self-awareness that there is a need to change. To let go of certain qualities, attitudes, and tendencies, we need to receive an appropriate signal and be receptive to embracing the change within ourselves. I have noticed that people who embrace contemplative practices are open-minded and aware of character transformation and personal evolution.



THE SPEAKING TREE

The qualities of the heart lie at the foundation of a great leader. Integrity lies at the core of his true nature. A leader of integrity is authentic, honest, and holds himself accountable. This integrity fosters trust, creating a harmonious environment where everyone feels valued and respected.

Compassion is also a key quality, deeply intertwined with the values of the heart. A compassionate leader radiates empathy, understanding the joys and sorrows of others. This empathy guides their decisions, ensuring that kindness and understanding

are at the forefront of their leadership. Courage, in the context of the heart, is not about bold actions, but about the quiet strength to stay true to one's values. A courageous leader embodies inner strength, facing challenges with grace and determination and inspiring

others to do the same. Humility is another cherished trait. A humble leader is open to learning from others, acknowledging his own imperfections, and embracing feedback with gratitude. This humility fosters a culture of collaboration and mutual respect.

Inclusivity is his natural quality. Such a leader welcomes diversity of thought and background, recognising the richness it brings to the collective wisdom. He strives to create a space where everyone feels heard and valued.

A candidate who wishes to be an inspiring leader and to be chosen by citizens needs to embody these qualities of the heart. Such a leader will lead with integrity, compassion, courage, humility, inclusivity, and adaptability, guided by a vision of unity and harmony. May we seek leaders who embody these qualities, paving the way for a brighter, more transformative future for all.



www.dailypioneer.com

facebook.com/dailypioneer | @TheDailyPioneer | instagram.com/dailypioneer/

PAPER WITH PASSION

Time bomb

Currently at 1.44 billion, India's population may double in 77 years unless we curb the trend

India stands at a pivotal juncture in its demographic journey; its population already surpassing China's to reach a staggering 1.44 billion. The prospect of this number potentially doubling within 77 years presents a formidable challenge. True, India's burgeoning population holds the promise of a significant demographic dividend: A youthful workforce, if equipped with the right skills and opportunities, can be the driver for economic growth, innovation and productivity. With appropriate investments in education, healthcare and employment opportunities, India has the potential to emerge as an economic powerhouse. But this is easier said than done. Alongside the opportunities, India also grapples with formidable challenges stemming from its rapid population growth. The strain on resources and infrastructure is palpable, with sectors like healthcare, education, housing and transportation already stretched thin. Overpopulation exacerbates the demand for food, water, energy and housing, leading to environmental degradation and perpetuating socio-economic disparities.



Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach. First of all, there must be a concerted effort to invest in human capital. Education and healthcare must be prioritised to empower individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to participate meaningfully in economy. Mercifully, our population growth rate is showing a downward trend. To arrest the spiralling growth, a comprehensive population strategy is urgently needed, but the nation does not have any such plan.

One reason could be that any attempt to control the population would be highly unpopular. Indira Gandhi, along with Sanjay Gandhi, tried it in the 1970s which eventually led to her downfall. All political parties also learnt their lesson. Of course, we are no China and no coercive measures should be taken but the Government can make concerted efforts to reward family planning and penalise large family sizes. Comprehensive programmes aimed at empowering individuals, especially women, about reproductive health and contraception can help stabilise population growth. Furthermore, investments in sectors such as healthcare, sanitation, transportation and housing are necessary to meet the needs of the growing population. Sustainable development practices must be embraced to mitigate environmental degradation. Job creation is also paramount for managing population growth effectively. Policies that promote entrepreneurship, attract investments and support the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises can help generate employment opportunities. Gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives that enhance access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities are essential. Empowered women are more likely to make informed choices about family planning, leading to smaller family sizes and improved maternal and child health outcomes. There is no dearth of solutions but the big question is, who will bell the cat?

PICTALK



Foreign tourists during celebrations of World Heritage Day at the Agra Fort, in Agra

The enduring ties between India and Iran



BHOPINDER SINGH

Amid geopolitical complexities, India finds itself navigating a delicate balance between Iran, Israel and its domestic constituencies

Persians have had a civilisational connection with Hindustan (Persian for India) since antiquity. There is a powerful India connect, even for the most epochal person defining the politics of the post-Iran Revolution (1979) i.e., Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. His paternal grandfather, Seyed Ahmad Musavi 'Hindi', was born in Kintoor, near Lucknow. Musavi was to leave Awadh and settle in Khomein but was popularly known as 'Hindi' in Persia! Later, 'Hindi' was to be the pen name for Ruhollah Khomeini's poetry.



In India itself, Shiite dynasties flourished as refugees escaping persecution from Arab-Sunni strains settled and thrived in Deccan, Rampur, Awadh, Bengal etc., with Lucknow emerging as the epicentre of Indian Shi'ism. Unlike the Middle East, the sectarian tensions were relatively less as the Gazetteer of Gilgit Agency noted, "Wherever Sunnis and Shias are found living together, they seem to practice a mutual tolerance rare in other Muhammadan communities. Except in Chilas and the Indus valley below or, there is, generally speaking, a complete absence of fanaticism". But, times changed and polemical writings of supremacist and sectarian assertions increased, causing bloody rift and polarisation. Soon, even in India the numerically lesser Shias were harassed by the substantially larger Sunni populace, leaving only pockets of Lucknow and Kargil area to have Shias in majority, as other enclaves were predominantly Sunni dominated. 'Shiaphobia' acquired even more sinister propulsion in neighbouring Pakistan and the air of the Sunni-Shia divide soon acquired political/sovereign overtones with Iran emerging as the transnational voice of Shiite sensibilities. The Ummah (Muslim world) got divided into two broad 'blobs' on sectarian lines and the shadows of Iran-versus-Arab Sheikhdoms undercurrents played out violently in areas with mixed populations e.g., Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Pakistan and even so in India, though the sectarian tensions were not so pronounced here. This unique phenomenon of the relative security, freedom

and thriving of Shias in India (where their percentage was in a similar minority to many other Islamic countries with the Sunni majority) did not go unnoticed in Tehran. India was a rare haven for Shias in modern times and Iran reciprocated the same by occasionally taking a pro-India stand on platforms like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). That the fate of minority Shias in Pakistan was particularly beleaguered, made Tehran adopt pro-Delhi postures as geopolitical quid pro quo. As the Arab Sheikhdoms were particularly close to the Pakistanis during the Cold War, Iran acted on the rebound by deepening relations with India. But the inevitable consequences of the Iranian Revolution and the need for it to take more puritanical stances and aspire to take over Ummah leadership from Saudi-led Sheikhdoms led to it occasionally striking contradictory postures on issues like Kashmir et al. But situational and sectarian angularity ensured that both Iran and India were on the same side in sensitive theatres like Afghanistan, opposing the Pakistan-led Taliban forces. However, at the same time, India was recalibrating its relations by cosyng up to both the United States of America and Israel, strategically. The cost of Delhi's engagement with Washington and Tel Aviv led



INTERESTINGLY, BOTH ISRAEL AND IRAN HAVE STRONG CONSTITUENCIES WITHIN THEIR NARRATIVES THAT CAN CONVINC THEIR POWERS-THAT-BE OF INDIA'S 'LARGER COMPULSIONS'

to sticky situations like India stopping oil purchases from Iran owing to US-imposed sanctions, as well as stuttering on strategic projects like Chabahar Port. Yet all along there was always an unsaid understanding between Delhi and Tehran of the other's compulsions leading it to be forced into certain decisions — the bilateral trust and intent were rarely questioned. While India's drift towards 'majoritarian' politics led to natural concerns within the Ummah (even though Sheikhdoms were officially bonding frenetically owing to India's emergence on the global highway), the local dynamism for Shias remained protected with the ruling political persuasion co-opting the Shias, actively. Both during the 2014 and 2019 General Elections, prominent Shia leaders in Lucknow actively supported the winning dispensation. Again, it didn't go unnoticed in Iran which remains hypersensitive to the fate of Shias across the world. India was an honourable exception in terms of its treatment of the minority Shias. This undeniable reality helped nuance the parallel (and unprecedented) outreach of Delhi with the capitals of Sheikhdoms and Tel Aviv. Today, when the Israel-Palestine war has metastasised into dragging Iran into the conflict, picking sides for Delhi becomes tricky. The

template of 'strategic independence' (used in the Russia-Ukraine conflict) could be afforded to this conflict which conjoins morality with practicality to take a deliberately mealy-mouthed position that offends none and yet genuinely beseeches peace. Delhi would know about the latent and conflated emotions of the Indian Muslims on the conflict, especially for the Shias when it comes to Iran. From the electoral lens, the dispensation recognises its investment in the Shias and Pasmenda (a backward caste) but the situation does get complex with Israel in the admixture, as that has a similar resonance in the 'majoritarian' calculus as a valorised counterweight to Pan-Islamism. Israel often gets lionised disproportionately and morality becomes increasingly irrelevant. Interestingly both Israel and Iran have strong constituencies within their narrative that can convince their powers-that-be of India's 'larger compulsions'. It is these powerful backdoor channels, civilisational bonhomie and calibrated diplomates that must be deployed as both countries are vital to India's future. India needs to prioritise peace over binary choices. (The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Chhattisgarh encounter aftermath



propos the news article, "Chhattisgarh encounter leaves 29 Naxals dead", published on April 17, this is my response. In the dense forests of Chhattisgarh, where at least 29 Naxals were neutralised, including the top leaders, Shankar Rao and Lalita, divisional committee members of the CPI (Maoist)'s North Bastar Division. This clash, occurring just days before the Lok Sabha polls in Bastar, signifies the ongoing battle against insurgency in the region. More than 60,000 security personnel have been deployed in the district to oversee the electoral

process. This is the highest casualty suffered by the Maoists in a single incident since 2018 when 37 of them were killed in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district. The Maoist rebels may have had reasons to hold a grudge against the government, but their romantic notion of revolution is misplaced because they'll never succeed in displacing the Government or creating their own Communist paradise in Bastar, or any other region of the country. So yes, they'll probably try to continue their usual attacks, but with the continued, concerted push by the security forces into their strongholds, those attacks will become fewer and far between. We have lacs of military and other security personnel but still, activity is not controlled. Adivasi have their livelihood in the jungle. Government cannot replace them in the name of development. However, I think Maoists' best bet would be to put down their arms and try to effect change through the ballot box. Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

quences in the region and the world. West Asia is often termed as the energy basket of the globe due to its potential to produce oils. Many important sea trade routes connecting Asia to other parts of the world also go through this region. Any direct war between Tehran and Tel Aviv can pause oil supply and disrupt the sea routes. The war can also pull other regional powers into it. Global organisations and leaders should mediate between the countries and convince them to avoid future intensifications of conflict. The leaders of both Iran and Israel should also stop provoking each other. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza also needs to be stopped immediately as it is the root cause behind the conflict in the region. Deba Prasad Nayak | Dhenkanal

TOO MUCH IS TOO BAD

Madam — Apropos the news article, "RCB Maxwell takes a mental and physical break from IPL 2024", published on April 17, this is my response. Many players from

the ongoing IPL have been playing all three game formats almost continuously throughout the year, so their endurance limit, patience and love for the game must be appreciated. The saying, "Eat cricket, talk cricket, sleep cricket" is highly suitable in their case. But too much of anything is too bad in many ways. It wrecks their physical and mental health, playing becomes mechanical & casual, keeps them away for longer periods from their family, spectators will be bored to see the same faces again and again etc. Further cricket became a profession and business, no more a gentleman's game played leisurely and IPL affected the way test cricket is played and reduced its popularity and the number of spectators in the stadiums watching it. No other game has reached such a situation as that of cricket. It is time to restrict the amount of cricket played for its good. O Prasad Rao | Hyderabad

How justified is abusive language on OTT?

The impact of abusive language on societal norms is profound; content creators must deliver realistic but responsible content



KAJLEEN KAUR

The Over-the-Top (OTT) platform has revolutionised India's entertainment landscape and has created a niche for itself among audiences. It is considered to be progressive, realistic, has variety and also caters to the needs of all age groups. However, there has been a lot of noise about the proliferation of abusive language in many of the web series that have raised a lot of general and even legal objections. Recently the Supreme Court (March 2024) has given its verdict that the use of abusive language on OTT cannot be regarded as a criminal offence, as it would lead to an infringement of free speech and violate artistic creativity. This leaves us with an open debate about whether under the guise of freedom of speech, we can use foul language that may be affecting the cultural values of people.



The use of abusive language in OTT content shapes how audiences perceive the characters, themes and overall tenor of the content. It may add authenticity to certain narratives or characters. If nothing else, it has become a fashion Statement and is more saleable. It can be categorised as a demerit good with a high order of negative externality. Undoubtedly, the onus of the use of such language in society does not lie on OTT, it reflects something already present, but it has certainly contributed to making it more prominent. Some viewers avoid using such foul language, as they consider it to be morally incorrect and undignified. After all, what is the use of good education, if it does not teach us to differentiate between decent and indecent? With the explosion of cuss words on OTT, even this section of society is affected. The young generation, at tender ages, is exposed to such language and easily gets influ-

enced by it. It can become pervasive in everyday usage, hindering effective articulation of thoughts and ideas and challenging the professional and academic standards. It can be detrimental to social interactions and emotional well-being, hampering overall personality development. Simply providing a statutory warning of the content not suitable for a certain age, does not complete the responsibility of the makers. With the availability of the internet and its easy access via gadgets in every home, it is practically not possible to refrain kids from watching such content every time. With the nuclear family setups and working parents' culture gaining strength, it becomes even more difficult. We in India have reformed the education system with the introduction of the National Education Policy and Indian Knowledge System. It thrives on providing a high-quality education system rooted in Indian ethos contributing to transforming India into a value-based superpower. So, while at one place when we are trying to imbibe and revive our rich heritage, at the

same time, we are defending, if not promoting, the use of indecent language. We have a zero-tolerance policy against abuse in educational institutes, but a child tends to learn from the overall environment of which OTT is presently an unavoidable part. Besides, another aspect of the foul language on OTT incorporates gender-specific derogatory terms, predominantly objectifying women. Indian society has always given a special place to women and their role is spread across the cultural, economic and spiritual fabric of our society. The worship of goddesses reflects the deep-rooted respect and reverence for women in our culture. Undeniably, women are behind building the strong-rooted edifice of values and ethics, the society does not feel any responsibility to uphold their dignity. A good and progressive social environment is one where individuals feel respected, secure and valued. (The author is an assistant professor at Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, University of Delhi; views are personal)

POLITICAL CHARADE

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Contribute fully in 400 seats goal: PM to Bengal", published on April 17, this is my response. If Sandeshkhali has indeed "sent shivers down the entire nation"; surely it must be asked whether the country had been "immersed in a coma" revolving around spine-chilling gangrapes /murder/forced cremation /naked parade of women folks in Uttar Pradesh Gujarat Kathua or Manipur! So the TMC Government of West Bengal is "allowing infiltration" to "boost" its "vote bank"! So who mans the Indo-Bangladesh international border? West Bengal police under the TMC-led West Bengal Government or Border security forces under the BJP-led Centre! Period. And "TMC Government opposes Ram Navami celebration in West Bengal" should feature as "joke of the century"! If announcing a State Government holiday for a purely North Indian festival, absolutely alien to Bengali culture, gets "credited" as "Opposition" to Ram Navami with the Who's Who of the TMC, zealously participating in such processions; then the word "Opposition" itself must be urgently amended in the dictionary! Lastly, it must be answered why despite winning as many as unprecedented 18 Lok Sabha seats from West Bengal in 2019, not a single Bengali was allowed to lead a ministry in the Union Cabinet in the last 5 years! Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

TENSION IN WEST ASIA

Madam — The tension in the West Asia region has escalated since Iran has directly launched missile attacks on Israel. The area is already facing challenges due to Israel's war operation in Gaza after the October 7 attack by Hamas. More than thirty thousand people have already died due to this out of which the majority are women and children. USA and other regional players like Hezbollah and Houthis have also been involved in the conflict in these six months. Further escalation of war can lead to serious conse-



FIRST COLUMN

A VISION FOR INDIA'S GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

The BJP manifesto focuses on strategy to make India a champion of Global South



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) unveiled its election manifesto earlier this week, opting for a departure from the conventional strategy of enticing voters with freebies and subsidies. Instead, the manifesto takes on the guise of a policy document, delineating the achievements of the PM Modi administration over the past decade and pledging to propel India into a developed economy within the next 25 years. Notably absent from the document is any significant mention of Pakistan, a focal point of India's foreign policy for years, in either the BJP manifesto or the Prime Minister's interviews.

The manifesto underscores the government's emphasis on foreign policy, echoing the strategic vision cultivated during India's G20 presidency. It celebrates India's emergence onto the global stage, exemplified by the unanimous consensus achieved for the New Delhi Declaration, a feat accomplished amidst doubts about US-Russia concordance. Prime Minister Modi elucidated his approach in an interview, emphasising the imperative of working towards global good without personal reservations, a principle that guided India's diplomatic endeavours.

In delineating the government's foreign policy outlook, Prime Minister Modi reiterated the cornerstone principles of "Neighbour First" and "Act East" since assuming office. The Act East policy has extended India's influence into the ASEAN region, fostering positive perceptions even among nations geographically distant. India's proactive assistance to neighbours during crises, such as earthquake relief in Nepal and aiding Sri Lanka during times of turmoil, exemplifies its commitment to regional solidarity.



The manifesto boasts of the safe repatriation of 1.5 crore distressed Indian citizens and positions India as a vocal advocate for the Global South, a central tenet of its foreign policy stance. Technological innovations like the Digital India stack, including UPI, have amplified India's presence on global platforms, albeit challenges persist in enhancing the acceptability of the Indian rupee in international trade. The document briefly touches upon India's burgeoning focus on the Indo-Pacific, a region of strategic interest for major global players and pledges to safeguard navigation rights and maritime security. Under Modi's leadership, the manifesto pledges to bolster India's standing as a champion of the Global South, leveraging the Prime Minister's 5S approach of respect, dialogue, cooperation, peace and prosperity. It articulates aspirations for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and vows to enhance collaboration within the Indo-Pacific region to foster mutual growth and security. Furthermore, the manifesto underscores the importance of securing critical minerals essential for the digital age, signalling intentions to forge partnerships with friendly nations to integrate India more deeply into global supply chains. In sum, the BJP's manifesto serves as a testament to continuity in India's foreign policy objectives, underlining a commitment to advancing the nation's interests on the global stage.

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

Sustainability through global collaboration



RAJDEEP PATHAK

President Dennis Francis, at the helm of the 78th UN General Assembly session, champions sustainability as pivotal to economic advancement

While the news of increasing temperatures in the Capital City of Delhi in the coming weeks and months hit the headlines, in a resounding affirmation of the symbiotic relationship between sustainability and economic progress, President Dennis Francis (heading the 78th session of the UN General Assembly), recently in an exclusive interview with PTI, unequivocally asserted that the pursuit of sustainability stands as the cornerstone of 21st-century development endeavours. He also emphasised the imperative of integrating sustainability into the fabric of global advancement. Dennis Francis is all set to inaugurate the "Sustainability Week" at the United Nations headquarters scheduled from April 15-19, 2024. Under the overarching theme of "Paving the Way for a Sustainable Future," this landmark event will spotlight pivotal sectors such as tourism, infrastructure connectivity, transportation, energy and debt, dedicating its discourse to the multifaceted dimensions of sustainability in each domain.

In this PTI exclusive, President Francis outlines a strategic focus on key economic sectors — tourism, transportation, infrastructure, energy and debt management — to drive transformative sustainability. He highlights challenges like climate change, energy security and debt entrapment, emphasising their nexus with poverty, education, housing and national security. Francis further underscores sustainability as both a moral imperative and a catalyst for equitable global progress, envisioning judicious decisions in these realms as key to profound shifts towards a sustainable future.

During the upcoming 'Sustainability Week', Dennis will host a series of high-level events including debates on 'debt sustainability' and 'socio-economic equality'; discussions on 'tourism and sustainable transport', an informal dialogue on 'global resilience through infrastructure connectivity' and a stocktaking session for the completion of the 'UN Decade of Sustainable Energy for All' - all aimed at advancing the implementation of SDG 7 for sustainable development.

Dennis (in the interview) fervently promotes the fusion of sustainability and economic advancement, underscoring their intrinsic interdependence for societal well-being. He advocates for a transformative approach toward sustainable lifestyles, condemning antiquated resource exploitation methods exacerbating climate instability. He envisions a future where profitability harmonises with environmental stewardship, fostering equity and resilience. 'Sustainability Week' precedes the 'Summit of the Future', to instil sustainability as a collective imperative for safeguarding resources for posterity. He further emphasised the pressing requirement to refocus endeavours on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which saw a setback in target achievement because of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing conflicts. 'Sustainability Week' aims to revive dedication to impactful measures, crucial for reorienting the SDGs towards their intended trajectory.

Through collective action, the aim should be to uplift communities, inspire hope and advance the global agenda for sustainability and equity. The need is to empower communities, foster optimism and promote sustainability and equity worldwide.



Governments, communities and organisations per se are uniting to tackle environmental challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss and renewable energy promotion. For example, in Scandinavia, countries like Denmark have been leaders in wind energy production, investing heavily in offshore wind farms and renewable energy infrastructure. Denmark's commitment to sustainability has led to a significant reduction in carbon emissions and reliance on fossil fuels. Moreover, in Southeast Asia, Singapore pioneers innovative strategies to address river and ocean waste, utilising advanced wastewater treatment and strict plastic regulations, effectively curbing marine pollution. Meanwhile, Africa's 'Great Green Wall' initiative fights desertification in the bio-geographical Sahel region by planting trees and promoting sustainable land management, revitalising degraded landscapes and fostering biodiversity. Across Latin America, Costa Rica exemplifies biodiversity conservation through national parks and eco-tourism, fostering sustainable development while preserving its rich natural heritage, resulting in both environmental protection and economic prosperity. Some of these diverse efforts demonstrate global commitment to environmental management, enhancing resilience and also safeguarding ecosystems for future generations.

India's proactive stance towards achieving the SDGs is evident through multifaceted commitments across sectors. Initiatives like the 'National Solar Mission' and 'Jal Jeevan Mission', 'National Health Mission', etc., highlight the resolve to tackle environmental challenges. India further aims to generate great renewable energy capacity, emphasising reduced reliance on fossil fuels. Water conservation programs such as rainwater harvesting and the

'Jal Jeevan Mission' underscore India's dedication to ensuring water security, aiming to provide piped water supply to all households by 2024. This commitment is reinforced by experts like waterman, Rajendra Singh and CEO of Centre for Science and Environment, Sunita Narain, who stress the importance of renewable energy and community-driven water conservation efforts. Additionally, India's sustainability efforts extend to biodiversity conservation, rural development, healthcare, education, waste management and gender equality, exemplified by schemes like MGNREGA and Ayushman Bharat. Dr. Vandana Shiva emphasises that sustainability encompasses socio-economic factors, with India's inclusive policies striving to create a more equitable and resilient society through integrated policymaking. It may be noted that India initiated its climate action journey in 2009 by pledging to decrease emissions intensity by 20-25 per cent by 2020, achieving a commendable 24 per cent reduction. Subsequently aligning with the Paris Agreement, India outlined its 'Nationally Determined Contributions' in 2015, aiming for a 33-35 per cent emissions intensity reduction by 2030. Additional goals include enhancing non-fossil fuel energy generation, expanding carbon sinks and targeting 'NET ZERO' emissions by 2070. National efforts are reinforced by initiatives such as the 'National Action Plan on Climate Change' and the 'National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change', focusing on renewable energy, sustainable habitat and adaptation strategies.

As per media reports, by April 2023, India had made substantial progress toward 14 of the 33 SDGs, with improvements in neonatal and under-five mortality; sanitation and electricity access. Challenges like adolescent pregnancy, clean cooking fuel and water facilities persist. Legislative amendments promoting renewable energy and carbon credit trading, along with initiatives such as the 'Green Hydrogen Mission', highlight India's commitment to sustainability. "Business Today" report of August 25, 2023, suggests that these efforts, coupled with the implementation of the 'Sustainable Development Goals National Indicator Framework', positioned India as a global leader in sustainability, as reflected in its ranking in the 'Climate Change Performance Index', indicating promising future progress. India has implemented various environmental conservation initiatives like the 'Swachh Bharat Mission' 'Namami Gange', etc., along with legislative measures such as the 'Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act' and so on. The introduction of the 'Sustainable Development Goals National Indicator Framework' by the National Statistics Office in 2023 signifies efforts to monitor progress. However, despite advancements in climate action, financing SDGs remains a challenge. Proactive measures, integrating sustainability into policymaking and engaging communities are essential for achieving the ambitious 2030 SDG targets globally, ensuring equity and resilience. The imperative for proactive engagement by dedicated and committed citizens, not only within India but globally, underscores the urgency of collective action. Such involvement is paramount in addressing contemporary challenges, necessitating concerted efforts on a global scale. The choice is ours — perish or preserve.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)



INDIA'S SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS EXTEND TO BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION, RURAL DEVELOPMENT, HEALTHCARE, EDUCATION, WASTE MANAGEMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY, EXEMPLIFIED BY SCHEMES LIKE MGNREGA AND AYUSHMAN BHARAT

Corruption and political defections: A telltale sign of democratic decay

The electoral arithmetic, rather than the principles of righteousness, often dictates the trajectory of political decisions

Last week, while flitting through the contents of a leading daily newspaper in India, an interesting article caught hold of my attention and it made a compulsive reading throughout. The article was captioned — 'Since 2014, 25 Opposition leaders facing corruption probe crossed over to BJP, 23 of them got reprieve'. The article was, undoubtedly, a telltale commentary on the holes in the prevalent political system in our country. It was an embarrassing account of the glaringly apparent fact that political parties of all hues and shades are compelled to flow with the tides produced by the fault lines in our political system and that too sometimes for sheer political survival.



ATUL SEHGAL

It may not be worthwhile to go deep into the finer nuances of the above account and be brazenly judgemental of hallowed political parties and personalities. It appears to be proper to dwell on the deficiencies of the current system in Bharat and regretfully State that the electoral arithmetic is the biggest bane of our political system. To build up the numbers for gathering the elusive major-

ity, political parties, under a legal system that is speckled with loopholes, have to resort to such shenanigans to assemble numbers to make stable governments and even make strong governments that can govern smoothly. Our democracy has definite deficiencies. Rather it is anything but perfect. A multi-party democracy is better described as a non-ideal, diluted form of democracy, especially so in a culturally variegated society like ours. The purest form of democracy is outlined in our ancient scripture Manusmriti. While making a mention of Manusmriti, it needs to be clarified that this observation is not to be taken lightly even if there is controversy associated with this ancient scrip-

ture. That controversy sprang from its distorted version, due to historical extrapolations by unscrupulous persons. The original, uncorrupted version of Manusmriti is a divine blueprint of an ideal governance system. The scripture talks of democracy indicating the following three characteristic features of democracy (prajatantra) 1. Partyless system of elections and governance 2. Right to recall the elected representatives by the voters 3. Congruous with the principles of righteousness or Dharma It would also be relevant to State here that the above primaeva, divine scripture also provides a structural frame for the democratic governance system. It talks of



three assemblies — Rajaryasabha (executive assembly), Vidyaryasabha (subject specialist assembly) and Dharmaryasabha (assembly of religious experts). The last-mentioned assembly or council is composed of persons of distinguished moral standing and impeccable character who

act collectively as some kind of moral authority on the functioning of the executive council. It is easy to see how far the existing polity and governance structure are away from the above-mentioned ideal polity and governance system in a democratic set-up. In a party less democratic polity, all problems of electoral arithmetic and the evils that they engender are bound to vanish. There are going to be no big election rallies, no stupendous spending on elections, no horse-trading, no party switching, no turn-coats, no go slow on prosecuting the corrupt and criminal politicians and no silly concepts of majoritarianism or minorityism. There is going to be no

minority-centred governance. It is also not difficult to understand how many secondary evils of the extant political system in our country will get eliminated if we were to incorporate the tenets of the sacred scripture Manusmriti in our polity and governance. It may be farfetched to expect that we can carve out from the present system something exactly conforming to the above utopian structure but even if we incorporate therein one or two important features like party less democratic system in our country, great benefit can accrue to our governance. In light of what is Stated above, we certainly need to reform our democratic system which does not deliver

too well. Accordingly, we look forward to the expectedly third term Modi Government bringing about wide constitutional, electoral and bureaucratic reforms to enable our nation to progress by kangaroo leaps, which it is capable of. Bharat is divinely destined to become the leading global nation-State of the world while maintaining its pristine stature as the moral and spiritual trailblazer of the world. This is so because Bharat is the land of saints, sages and seers who have been the beacons for humanity through the course of its long and chequered historical existence on this planet.

(The author is a management consultant; views are personal)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Iran-Israel conflict

Both nations must heed calls for restraint

STRIKING a defiant note, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that his country will decide whether and how to respond to Iran's April 13 airstrikes. Netanyahu has rejected calls for restraint from close allies, even as the US and 47 other countries have issued a statement unequivocally condemning the attacks on Israel by Iran and its militant partners. Meanwhile, an intransigent Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has warned Israel against retaliation, while suggesting that Iran is capable of carrying out much bigger strikes than those witnessed over the weekend.

This aggressive posturing by both sides is worrisome not only for West Asia, which is already in the throes of the six-month-old Israel-Hamas war, but also for the world at large. The United Nations has urged Israel and Iran to exercise 'maximum restraint', but the two nations seem to be in no mood to tone down their rhetoric. The US and its allies have a crucial role to play in reducing hostilities. The West has been ambiguous about the Israeli strike that killed two Iranian Generals in a consulate building in Damascus, Syria, on April 1. Such provocative attacks should be denounced categorically, irrespective of whether the perpetrator is a friend or a foe.

With Israel becoming increasingly isolated in the international arena due to its relentless bombardment of Gaza, it can ill afford to confront Iran militarily. The fact that there were no fatalities in the attacks carried out by the Iranians should make Israel see reason. UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron has rightly hoped that Israel will act against Iran 'in a way that is smart as well as tough and also does as little as possible to escalate this conflict'. There is a need for both sides to tread warily so as to avoid creating a new war zone.

Haryana hospitals

Mismanagement, staff shortage plague healthcare

THE dire state of facilities at hospitals in Haryana paints a grim picture of a system in desperate need of attention and reform.

It is evident from recent reports that the health infrastructure is failing to meet the needs of the public. This negligence not only perpetuates suffering but also erodes trust in the institutions meant to safeguard public health.

The case of the Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Medical College and Hospital in Faridabad stands out as a glaring example of inefficiency and mismanagement. Despite substantial investments and the passing of two years since its establishment, the hospital remains largely inactive, failing to offer essential in-patient and emergency services. While outpatient services may be operational, the lack of comprehensive care facilities severely undermines its purpose and renders it incapable of fulfilling its potential as a referral centre. In Rohtak, patients at the PGIMS endure hours-long wait and chaotic scenes due to a severe shortage of medical and paramedical staff. As a result, vulnerable patients are subjected to hardships and delays in receiving even basic medical care. Meanwhile, the scarcity of tuberculosis medicines in Karnal underscores the systemic challenges in drug procurement and distribution. TB patients, already burdened by the challenge of managing a chronic illness, are facing hurdles in their treatment due to the unavailability of essential medicines. Along with compromising individual health outcomes, this jeopardises public health efforts aimed at combatting the spread of infectious diseases.

It's time for concerted action to revitalise healthcare in Haryana and ensure that patients have access to quality treatment. Immediate steps must be taken to address staff shortage and ensure timely availability of essential medicines. Additionally, greater accountability and transparency are needed to prevent wastage of public funds and resources.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, APRIL 19, 1924

The great debate

OUR anticipation regarding the probable result of the debate on Viscount Curzon's motion in the House of Commons has been fulfilled to the letter. Neither the Liberal nor the Labour amendment appears to have been moved, far less pressed, and the original motion was talked out after a speech from the Under Secretary of State, which showed how much he and the mover of the resolution had in common between them. The debate, in fact, served exactly the purpose which the mover of the resolution had in view, namely, that of confirming the Government in its present attitude, and if it incidentally served another and a scarcely less notable purpose, it was because it could not be helped. It showed that the history of the latter half of the first decade of the century, when India had for the first time a Liberal statesman of the highest reputation for character and consistency as her Secretary of State, is repeating itself with a vengeance today with Labour put in the place of the Liberal party. In those days, the spectacle was presented week after week of the government of the day being heckled by its own supporters in regard to its Indian policy and measures and supported with the same consistency and warmth by its traditional opponents. The debate on Viscount Curzon's motion showed, not for the first time during the short period Labour had been in office, that the Government's Indian policy had the fullest support from the Conservatives and the orthodox Liberals, less full support from the more advanced Liberals and less advanced Labour members, and least support from those Labour members who had carried some of their old-time principles into the House.

Heady cocktail of religion & politics

All sorts of Machiavellian tactics are being used to ensure victory in the polls

TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

RADHARAO Gracias is a firebrand lawyer in Goa. He speaks his mind whenever the occasion merits this course. Last week, I received via email a sample of his activism. Radharao, a former MLA, had lambasted local BJP supporters on X (formerly Twitter) for offering people free tickets on a train from Goa to Vailankanni (Tamil Nadu), the passage paid for by 'vested interests'.

The pilgrimage to Vailankanni is much sought after by Catholics as some miracle was reported to have occurred in that coastal town in Tamil Nadu in the past. Since I do not believe in miracles, I had not taken the trouble to ascertain what exactly drives the believers to frenzy. But the bulk of our believers do believe in the supernatural. That is the reality.

Radharao's lament is that BJP supporters conceived of a Machiavellian plan to despatch a substantial number of Catholic voters to a destination where they would love to go. The train to Vailankanni from Goa departs every week on Mondays. All the tickets for May 6 were bought, probably by 'vested interests', soon after election dates were announced. Radharao alleged that they were being offered free of charge to Catholic voters to ensure their absence on May 7, the day of polling in the small state that sends only two MPs to the Lok Sabha.

This, then, is a new tactic to ensure poll victory. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Goa, Cardinal Filipe Neri Ferrao, alerted his flock not to travel on May 6 since it was their duty to vote the next day.

Whether diabolical or just plain



PLOY: Ex-MLA Radharao Gracias has accused the BJP of a bid to keep Goa's Catholic voters away from polling booths by offering them a free pilgrimage to Vailankanni in Tamil Nadu. SPOCK

funny, stories like the one circulated by Radharao are doing the rounds elsewhere in India too. A parrot picked the name of one Thangar Bachan, a PMK candidate, as the winner from the Cuddalore Lok Sabha seat in Tamil Nadu. The DMK government led by CM MK Stalin promptly arrested the owner of the parrot for spreading fake news.

Tribal women in Palghar (Maharashtra) returned to the BJP pracharaks in their area the saris and the shopping bags with Modi's picture that were obviously given to them as inducements, proclaiming that they wanted employment and not these items.

The Catholic Archbishop of Idukki in Kerala favoured a public screening of *The Kerala Story*, which depicts the story of girls from his state who were subjected to 'love jihad'. They were not only converted to Islam but also joined the ISIS in Syria, where their husbands were fighting the 'kafrins'.

In a multi-religious country like India, instances of romance between Muslim, Hindu and Christian boys and girls are inevitable. The Sangh Parivar has raised its hackles over such marriages, terming them cases of 'love jihad'. I

Any reference to religion is out of bounds during electioneering. Oblique references are deftly made by politicians like Modi.

know of many Muslim women married to Hindu or Christian men. No objections were raised, except perhaps by the parents of the girls. Protests are heard mainly when Hindu girls marry Muslim boys!

The induction of the Kerala girls and their Muslim bridegrooms into the outlawed ISIS is, of course, another matter. That is truly sinful. If that wicked angle is not present, love between man and woman should not be interfered with only on the ground that they belong to different religions.

Talking of Kerala, AK Antony,

a former Congress Chief Minister who later became the Defence Minister, has a son who joined the BJP and is fighting the Lok Sabha elections on the saffron party's ticket. Antony was known for his uprightness and integrity. He publicly announced that he wished for his son's defeat. In a country where politics has become a family profession and where tickets are sought by politicians for their sons or daughters, a father disowning his son is a rare occurrence. But Antony is made of a different timber.

Our Prime Minister makes statements against his opponents every day, sometimes more than once or even twice a day. Usually, he accuses them and their parties of corruption. They, in turn, accuse the BJP of the same evil. Here, the party in power is in the driver's seat. It can make it extremely difficult for Opposition parties to collect funds for fighting elections. The BJP is using its pole position quite liberally in its quest for a third term.

But the PM has now stepped beyond corruption to territory on which, by law, he is not allowed to enter. Any reference to religion is out of bounds during electioneering. Oblique refer-

ences are deftly made by politicians like Modi. He castigated the Congress for its absence from the inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya.

That was clever of him. He knew in his heart of hearts that by inaugurating the temple himself and not getting it done by the Shankaracharyas, he would effectively ensure that the Congress and some other opponents would stay away. And 'stay away' is what they did. That gave Modi the opportunity to castigate them on a matter that would resonate with the Hindu masses.

Last week, Modi thought of another stick to beat his opponents with. He pounced on a video foolishly put out by Lahu Yadav's son Tejashwi, showing him and his father cooking meat in the family kitchen in Patna. Watching the culinary skills of the father-son duo was none other than Modi's 'bete noire', Rahul Gandhi! That was enough to get the mind tick faster.

Modi lambasted the trio for eating 'non-vegetarian' food during the holy month of Sawan, when pious Hindus abjure meat, fish and eggs. He obviously calculated that the pious Hindu voter would veer to his camp, forgetting that that vote was already his for the picking. Modi's disgust with meat-eaters will reverberate with the people of Gujarat. There is a preponderance of vegetarians in Modi's home state, where the majority of the people do not eat meat or fish. In my ancestral state of Goa, the local Saraswat Brahmins are avid fish-eaters like the Brahmins of Bengal.

Modi should stick to the charge of corruption, which is his constant refrain against his opponents. The people believe that charge to be true. Similarly, when the Opposition hurls that same charge at the BJP, the common man believes that, too, to be true since there has been no respite in the last decade from the daily demands made by government and municipal employees for 'speed money'.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend. —Thomas Jefferson

The benefits of being a junior

ATUL JOSHI

I got exposed to the unpleasant practice of ragging during my days in a medical college. The saving grace was a deep bond of friendship that was eventually established with my seniors. It brought me to most of them, initially in a cautious or tentative way, and then wholeheartedly as I became convinced of their benevolence. Gradually, a sense of admiration for them was ingrained in me. Even more than three decades after having passed out of the hallowed portals of the institution, any senior, even a year older, is a 'sir' for me. They have become mentors and guides for a lifetime.

A noticeable feature of this relationship in the medical college was the likeable practice of the senior taking care of the junior's expenses. If I had gone to watch a movie and was fortunate to be spotted by them, it was a given that they would buy me the ticket and the mandatory Campa Cola during the interval. Many of them were not from a rich background but the responsibility of looking after the juniors fell squarely on their shoulders. It was all right for them to avoid splurging, but spending on juniors was never a burden and they cheerfully discharged this responsibility. We, as juniors, would revel under that umbrella of protection.

The examples of that largesse were many. If I was having an ice-cream at an eating joint and happened to greet a senior, he would pay for it without much ado. While travelling in a bus back to my hometown, the conductor would politely inform me that my ticket has been paid for by a man sitting in the back. When I would look back with surprise, I would be greeted by the reassuring smile of my senior. This goodwill gesture was not confined to just a few of us. If there were several of us and the senior alone, standing ahead in the queue for bus tickets, he would buy us the tickets, while we would reimburse him later.

Close to our hostel were a couple of tea shops which we frequented. I had got so used to being pampered by my seniors that there was never an occasion when I had to pay for the tea and samosas. I even stopped carrying my wallet there nor did I feel the need to open a *khaata* (account). Once, one of my seniors happened to be there; he carried the additional burden of having been my senior in school too. I felt doubly close to him. In his cursory way, he instructed the tea seller to add my expenses to his account. I gathered the courage to tell him that my dues from the day before were also pending. He laughed aloud, looked at me with affection and told the tea seller to credit those expenses too before walking away. I reverently followed him back to the hostel, appreciative of his 'big brother' attitude. Meanwhile, I waited for my turn to do the favours once I became a senior myself.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Extortion in name of cow protection

With reference to the editorial 'Mob violence': the rise in incidents of cow vigilantism is alarming. The killing of two Rajasthan residents, Nasir and Junaid, on the suspicion of cattle smuggling last year was symptomatic of the growing menace. As the cow is considered a sacred animal in Hinduism, Hindu nationalists often take it upon themselves to act as the protectors of the milk animal. But over the years, vigilantes in states like Haryana and Rajasthan have taken advantage of the cause and extorted money from cattle smugglers in exchange for letting them pass through their areas. States must work together to curb the menace. Also, members of the Muslim community must respect the sentiments of Hindus and desist from slaughtering cows.

KRISHAN BHATIA, HANSI

Naxalite shadow on polls

Apropos of the editorial 'Bastar encounter': the District Reserve Guard and Border Security Force personnel deserve kudos for the daring act of killing 29 Maoists, including history-sheeter Shankar Rao. The huge recovery of arms and ammunition from the area is concerning. There should be no compromise on security measures as the threat of Naxalite activities persists. They are able to carry out major attacks because of their strong intelligence-gathering capacity and the support they receive from local residents. As India goes to the polls, the government must take steps to ensure the safety of voters and the smooth conduct of the electoral process, especially in regions prone to Naxalite violence.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

Failure of healthcare system

Refer to the editorial 'Ailing healthcare': the harrowing incident at the Ludhiana Civil Hospital exposes a chilling reality of neglect and disregard for human dignity. The fact that a patient was forced to share a bed with a corpse is not just a failure of the healthcare system but a moral travesty. The

lack of basic medical attention for days, coupled with bureaucratic apathy, highlights systemic inadequacies that cannot be excused. As the victim's suffering persisted, administrative formalities took precedence over urgent medical care. The case serves as a distressing reminder of the dire state of our healthcare system, where individuals are reduced to mere numbers. Swift and decisive action must be taken to ensure that such egregious lapses never recur and that all patients receive the care and respect they deserve.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

Public healthcare long neglected

With reference to the article 'Reduce out-of-pocket expenditure to revitalise healthcare': the author has rightly stressed the need for reducing such expenses. Public healthcare has long been neglected by successive governments. India has failed to address health problems like anaemia, malnutrition and obesity and issues like a lack of safe drinking water. Besides, it seems like insurance schemes are being used by the government as a medium to hand over public funds to the private sector. India needs to change its priorities to boost essential public services, such as health, education and infrastructure, and develop a system under which corporates and public institutions work together to ensure equitable growth.

VITULK K GUPTA, BATHINDA

Residents' safety gone to the dogs

Apropos of the news report 'Man mauled by stray dogs, third death in two months in Patiala district': the menace of dog attacks is not confined to any particular region. Such cases are reported from time to time throughout the state. For how long will the authorities concerned let helpless residents be bitten or mauled by canines? The Punjab Government must come up with a solid action plan to eradicate the growing problem. Besides, there is a need to ensure the timely release of adequate compensation to the victims of dog attacks or their families.

JAGDISH CHANDER, JALANDHAR

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.

These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

Pakistan blundered into an unwinnable conflict



LT GEN DS HOODA (RETD)
FORMER NORTHERN
ARMY COMMANDER

extreme conditions was a true test of resilience, and success was achieved because officers and soldiers displayed superhuman tenacity and a willingness to die for the country.

After the initial discovery of intrusions on May 3, a bloody battle lasted nearly three months before India declared victory on July 26. The Pakistan army denied involvement in the fighting and refused to acknowledge its fallen men, an ultimate dishonour to their sacrifice.

Although limited in scale and geographical spread, the Kargil War prompted a deep strategic analysis in both countries. There was a great deal of debate in Pakistan on the miscalculations that led to the conflict and in India on the national security gaps, including an intelligence failure due to which intrusions went undetected. Looking back, we can now assess how effectively the lessons that were learned have been applied by both countries.

Three days after the war, the Indian government constituted the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) to review the events leading to the Pakistani aggression and recommend measures to safeguard national security against armed intrusions. The committee noted that the political, bureaucratic, military and intelligence establishments had developed a vested interest in the status quo. It emphasised the need for a comprehensive review of the



TRIUMPH: Indian officers and soldiers displayed superhuman tenacity in the 1999 war. TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO



After the war, there was a great deal of debate in Pakistan on miscalculations that led to the conflict and in India on the national security gaps.

national security system, considering the Kargil experience, the ongoing proxy war and the nuclearised security environment.

The Group of Ministers' (GoM) report, which followed the KRC, was arguably the most comprehensive examination of national security issues undertaken in independent India. Four task forces were established to evaluate the intelligence apparatus, internal security, border management and defence management, underscoring the seriousness of the post-war assessment.

The two reports led to many changes in the management of national security. The National Technical Research Organisation was formed in 2004 to handle centralised communication and electron-

ic intelligence. The Defence Intelligence Agency was formed to cater to the military's specific intelligence needs. A multi-agency centre was set up to foster better inter-agency information-sharing and coordination.

The defence establishment underwent some restructuring. This included the creation of an Integrated Defence Staff, the founding of the Strategic Forces and Andaman and Nicobar Commands, and the devolution of financial and administrative powers to the three services. The appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff, as recommended by the GoM, was made in 2020.

Some recommendations remain only partially implemented. The GoM had noted: "Multiplicity of forces on the same border has also led

to a lack of accountability on the part of the forces. To enforce accountability, the principle of 'one border, one force' may be adopted while considering the deployment of forces at the border." This principle has yet to be applied to the Line of Actual Control with China, where the Indian Army and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police are deployed under different command arrangements.

The GoM pointed out weaknesses such as the absence of a national security doctrine and the lack of commitment of funds to the military beyond the financial year. Other problems that needed to be addressed were greater integration of the service headquarters into the government and jointness in the armed forces. These shortfalls persist.

On the Pakistani side, there was much public debate on the Kargil debacle. The war exposed the skewed nature of civil-military relations, where military objectives were framed without political and diplomatic considerations. Nasim Zehra, in her book *From Kargil to the Coup*, writes that the army gave then PM Sharif the first detailed briefing on the operation on May 17. By this time, soldiers had already occupied positions across the LoC.

After the war, the role of the Generals who plotted it should have come under scrutiny. Instead, the Pakistan military sought to shift the blame to the political lead-

ership, and growing distrust finally led to the military coup that ousted Sharif from power in October 1999.

The Kargil fiasco brought out forcefully that Pakistan's use of the military option against India carried no gains. Not only would India react with superior force, but the international community would isolate Pakistan over such action. Rather than finding ways to reduce tensions with India, the Pakistani army fell back on the use of terrorists, and violence escalated in Jammu and Kashmir after the war.

Many experts opined that Pakistan should refrain from becoming obsessed with Kashmir and focus on building a strong economy. Shahid Amin, a former Pakistani diplomat, wrote that the country should become ruthlessly realistic about its limitations and priorities. Pakistan's survival must precede everything else.

Nevertheless, the core issues that drove Pakistan into an unwinnable conflict remain largely unaddressed. The military still controls the reins in the country, the rhetoric over Kashmir continues, the economy is in dire straits and state support to terrorist organisations persists.

Today, India is a far stronger nation, and a Kargil-type scenario appears unlikely. However, the 1999 conflict revealed a level of recklessness in the Pakistani establishment, and the current state of affairs in that country does little to dispel that impression.

Need to review functioning of food & drug regulatory agencies



DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

ness, etc. The law specifically deals with misleading advertisements that claim miracle cures for diseases or make false or exaggerated claims about the effectiveness of certain drugs. Under this law, the Central Government is empowered to take action against those who violate its provisions. The 1940 Act and the rules made thereunder are the primary legislation governing the manufacture, distribution and sale of drugs, cosmetics, medical devices and other related products in India.

Patanjali has been advertising several herbal products that claim to 'cure' a range of diseases and conditions, including diabetes, thyroid-related problems and even cancer. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it launched Coronil, which it claimed could cure the disease. The product was endorsed by Dr Harsh Vardhan, then India's Health Minister. When objections were raised, the marketing claim was changed from 'treatment' to 'management.' While claiming cures for several diseases, Patanjali advertisements also targeted the modern system of medicine, saying that it had no cure for them. This irked not only health activists but also the Indian Medical Association (IMA). The company was dragged to court for the violation of the two drug laws and reprimanded. Yet, it continued with mis-



IN THE DOCK: The SC has insisted on personal and repeated apologies by the Patanjali promoters, Ramdev and Balkrishna, for contempt of court. PTI

leading advertisements, in contempt of a court order.

Misleading advertising related to drugs, remedies and health is a major problem, going beyond Patanjali. Newspapers and television channels (during certain time slots) across India are filled with advertisements and sponsored content containing tall claims about cures and treatment for everything, from constipation to heart disease. Online platforms like YouTube, Instagram and Facebook are inundated with such claims from doctors and companies, in complete violation of the law. So-called 'social media influencers' have joined the bandwagon of promoting potentially harmful health products. Though large pharmaceutical companies

We are in this mess not because our laws are inadequate or toothless, but because their enforcement by the government is lax.

mostly refrain from direct advertising, they indulge in unethical marketing practices like paid news, sponsorship of medical conferences and gifts for the doctors who prescribe medicines. A few years ago, even the IMA was accused of endorsing certain products without sufficient evidence about their efficacy or addressing the ethical questions involved in doing so.

We are in this mess not because our laws are inadequate or toothless, but because their enforcement by the government is lax, and the regulatory bodies have decided to look the other way. The laws are old and have been amended from time to time, and several committees have looked into their relevance and the need to make the

rules more stringent. While the process of change will take its course, there is no reason why the existing provisions cannot be put to the best use. This columnist flagged the claims made by Ramdev about a cure for HIV/AIDS in 2008. Anbumani Ramadoss — a trained medical doctor who was then the health minister — got the ministry to serve a notice on Ramdev. But very soon, he did a U-turn and attended a yoga session of Ramdev in Gurugram, where the latter repeated his claim about the HIV/AIDS cure. Brinda Karat, a CPM MP at that time, too, raised the matter of misleading claims with the Uttarakhanda Government, but no action was taken.

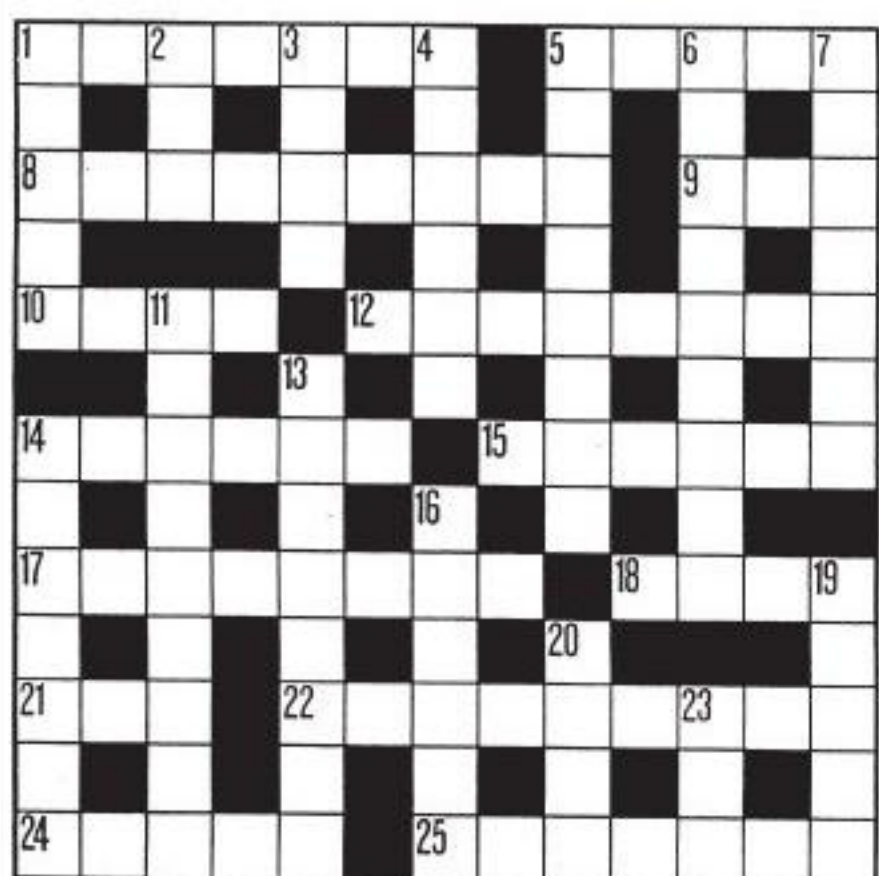
In the present case, the Central and state regulatory agencies delayed action and then acted in cohesion to give Patanjali free rein with its misleading claims. Dr Babu KV, a Kerala-based health and RTI activist who filed a series of complaints against Patanjali, first wrote to the state licensing authority in Uttarakhand, urging action for violation of the 1954 Act. The authority wrote to the company to withdraw the advertisements in question but took no action when Patanjali refused to act, though it had the power to do so. Not only this, the authority gave an escape route to Patanjali. The company was served the notices under the 1954 Act but under a specific rule of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act,

which was sub judice in the Bombay High Court. Patanjali cited the legal case and did not budge. The rule in question was added through an amendment in 2018, and it mandated the pre-approval of advertisements with health claims.

Celebrity endorsements and health claims over food products are also a major challenge. In this case, too, the food safety regulator has been sluggish. The advertising of nutraceuticals and food supplements is a problem area that needs urgent attention.

Given the changing contours of the media landscape and forms of direct and indirect advertising, we need a comprehensive review of all laws and rules relating to the marketing and advertising of medicines, food products and supplements, including those of the Indian systems of medicine. The law against misleading advertising, claims and celebrity endorsements of harmful products (including surrogate advertising) needs to be very stringent. We should review the functioning of Central and state food and drug regulatory agencies and provide them with adequate resources, authority and independence to effectively monitor and enforce compliance. The Patanjali case is a wake-up call for all the parties concerned. After all, it is directly related to the health and well-being of people.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Evolve (7)
- 5 Plain clothes (5)
- 8 Inappropriately (3,2,4)
- 9 Track worn by wheels (3)
- 10 Long eagerly (4)
- 12 Journalist (8)
- 14 To lower status of (6)
- 15 Conciliate (6)
- 17 Official means of regulation (8)
- 18 Ooze out (4)
- 21 Raised edge (3)
- 22 To reveal (9)
- 24 Vague (5)
- 25 Generally considered (7)

DOWN

- 1 To flag (5)
- 2 Examine critically (3)
- 3 Elevate (4)
- 4 Destitute person (6)
- 5 Capital of Liberia (8)
- 6 Of highest quality (5-4)
- 7 Temporary (7)
- 11 Accuse specific people (4,5)
- 13 Equitable treatment (4,4)
- 14 Propriety (7)
- 16 Supposed cure for all ills (6)
- 19 Offer as excuse (5)
- 20 A rigid support (4)
- 23 Proverbially industrious insect (3)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Distract, 5 Trek, 9 Laden, 10 Shorten, 11 Keystone Cops, 13 Inside, 14 Studio, 17 Coldshoulder, 20 Earmark, 21 Gesso, 22 Troy, 23 Oratorio.
Down: 1 Dull, 2 Sadness, 3 Ringside seat, 4 Custom, 6 Ratio, 7 Kingston, 8 Comes to light, 12 Discreet, 15 Dresser, 16 Docker, 18 Largo, 19 Solo.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

APRIL 19, 2024, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Chaitra Shaka 30
- Vaishakh Purnimite 7
- Hijri 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 11, up to 8.05 pm
- Vridha Yoga up to 1.45 am
- Magha Nakshatra up to 10.57 am
- Moon in Leo sign
- Gandmoola up to 10.57 am

FORECAST

| SUNSET: | FRIDAY | 18:52 HRS |
|------------|----------|-----------|
| SUNRISE: | SATURDAY | 05:50 HRS |
| CITY | MAX | MIN |
| Chandigarh | 34 | 23 |
| New Delhi | 35 | 22 |
| Amritsar | 30 | 21 |
| Bathinda | 36 | 22 |
| Jalandhar | 30 | 17 |
| Ludhiana | 34 | 22 |
| Bhivani | 33 | 25 |
| Hisar | 36 | 20 |
| Sirsa | 37 | 24 |
| Dharamsala | 27 | 12 |
| Manali | 16 | 04 |
| Shimla | 21 | 11 |
| Srinagar | 18 | 10 |
| Jammu | 27 | 18 |
| Kargil | 11 | 02 |
| Leh | 12 | -01 |
| Dehradun | 35 | 18 |
| Mussoorie | 20 | 13 |