















## OUR VIEW



## KYC jinx: Shareholders deserve better than this

*It's unfortunate that so many investor accounts have been put 'on hold' for identity data gaps. Yes, compliance matters. But companies and mutual funds could have put up a better show*

New Know-Your-Customer (KYC) regulations effective from 1 April have sent many investors into a tizzy, as they find their accounts locked for failing to meet yet another demand by authorities for verifiable data to establish their identities. Yes, we had a fresh round of KYC compliance. Under revised rules, holders of securities regulated by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) had to validate their email IDs in addition to phone and Aadhaar numbers, the latter duly linked with PAN cards issued for taxation. Past KYC okays obtained with utility bills or bank documents were left invalid by this exercise. As the number of people affected by the lock-out is substantial, this is large-scale disruption. According to a joint release by India's five KYC registration agencies (KRAs), as many as 12% of the over 108 million investor accounts under Sebi's oversight have been put "on hold." These can no longer be operated by investors, as their KYC data was found to have gaps. As a result, they can neither invest further at these windows, nor withdraw funds for any exigency. Even if it is temporary, it's harsh. By and large, we can assume these are their own reserves—assets acquired with hard-earned and tax-paid money—that they have been barred from. That too, with less than fair notice, as the high lock-out proportion indicates. So many accounts cannot all be fraudulent, surely.

With scarce information on what exactly went wrong, locked-out investors have fumbled around to figure out how to rectify the situation. To be sure, KYC rules are necessary. Equity and mutual fund (MF) holdings must not end up in the wrong hands. Fake accounts need to be nabbed and asset fraud stamped out. Our digital

identity system, which hosts biometric details, is designed to aid this endeavour. To the extent tax authorities need to check tax evasion, the PAN link could be justified too. But coercive action of this sort is best avoided. Rather than a shuttering, even if done only after repeated deadline extensions, a gentle policy nudge may have achieved the purpose. Accounts that lack a KYC update could have been slapped with an extra fee, for example, the payment call of which would have shaken asset holders into action. This would especially have been of help to elderly investors, many of whom are neither tech-savvy nor attuned to regulatory shifts and find it difficult to keep up with frequent resets of the maze that online validation is.

Given the puzzle that KYC can be for so many of us, a better approach would be for the onus to be shared more widely. Not just KRAs, which have helplines, even companies should make a greater effort to ensure law-abiding investors do not get barred from their holdings just for KYC neglect. In the case of MF investors, for instance, fund houses should take it upon themselves to see that people's folios are compliant. Similarly, publicly listed companies should display the grace to keep all their shareholders in the loop of changes that have a bearing on their ownership status, guide them on what exactly is needed, and work with them to get the requisite updates done. These guidance efforts need to go well beyond the mass despatch of confusing and perfunctory messages that are dense with jargon. Regardless of how tiny the stakes of investors in these companies are, they happen to be part-owners, after all, and deserve the courtesy of a proper heads-up—via personal engagement over the phone, if it comes to that. Asset ownership must not be taken lightly.

## GUEST VIEW

## Public policy education in India deserves much greater attention

*A wider and better understanding of India's challenges could improve our policymaking processes*



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India's rapid economic growth and increasingly complex social and public challenges underscore the need for robust public-policy education. However, public policy programmes fall short of adequately preparing the next generation of policymakers, civil servants and engaged citizens.

Traditionally, public policy education in India has been confined to post-graduate degree programmes, often offered in isolation from the real-world complexities that policymakers face. These programmes focus on theoretical frameworks and case studies from the West, without addressing the unique social, cultural and political dynamics that shape policy challenges in India.

To truly empower the country's citizens and public sector, public-policy education must evolve to become more accessible, practical and contextually relevant. This means expanding the avenues through which people can engage with public policy beyond the traditional degree programme format.

To begin with, public-policy education should be integrated into the curriculum of undergraduate and post-graduate programmes across all disciplines. Even students pursuing degrees in engineering, business or arts should be exposed to the basics of public policy, systems thinking and the role of citizens in shaping their communities. This cross-pollination of ideas will help

bring forth a generation of problem-solvers who understand the interconnected nature of societal challenges and are able to contribute meaningfully to policymaking processes.

Education does not end with graduation. Executive programmes on public policy matters should be made available to working professionals across diverse sectors. Many of the most pressing policy issues—from urban planning and environmental protection to healthcare and education—have become ubiquitous concerns in the workplace. By offering executive-level programmes, workshops and short courses, we can equip professionals with the knowledge to navigate these complex challenges, ultimately improving the quality of decision-making and service delivery.

It is not obvious but important to recognize that public-policy education can also play a key role in empowering the country's entrepreneurs. Too often, budding business aspirants become so sharply focused on developing products or services that they fail to adequately consider the domestic and international regulations that can significantly impact their operations. Many owners of startups only realize the importance of public policy when they encounter unexpected legal or bureaucratic hurdles that threaten the viability of their ventures. By integrating public policy curricula into entrepreneurship programmes and offering specialized courses for business founders, we can equip the next generation of business leaders with a deeper understanding of the policymaking landscape.

This will not only help entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of regulation and compliance, but also enable them to become active advocates of policy reforms that support innovation and the growth of small businesses. As India positions itself as a global hub for entrepreneurship, public-policy education could become instrumental in fostering a thriving, informed and resilient startup ecosystem.

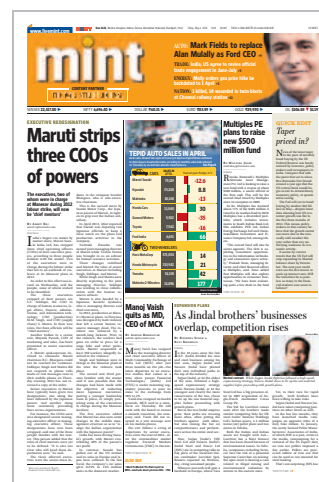
Public policy is a fascinating subject. The pedagogy should leverage innovative delivery formats, such as immersive travel programmes, hybrid models for working professionals and intensive summer schools. These alternative models can provide learners with hands-on experience, exposure to diverse perspectives and opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, all of which are crucial for developing a nuanced understanding of public policy. Through immersive learning, learners can engage with a wide range of experts from policymakers and civil society leaders to academics and social entrepreneurs. This multidisciplinary approach will not only deepen their knowledge, but also foster a network of like-minded individuals who can share ideas and work together long after the academic programme has ended.

The ultimate goal of re-imagined public policy education should be to create a more informed, engaged and empowered citizenry. When people from all walks of life have a deeper understanding of the policymaking process and the ways in which they can influence it, they become more invested in the well-being of their communities and the country as a whole.

Moreover, by exposing a diverse pool of talented individuals to the challenges and complexities of public service, such programmes can help create a robust pipeline of future leaders for the public sector. Local governments, state agencies and national ministries could tap this talent pool, attracting the brightest minds to tackle the country's most pressing issues.

In a time of rapid change and rising uncertainty, India needs a public-policy ecosystem that is responsive and capable of addressing the unique needs of its people. By rethinking the way we approach public-policy education, we can encourage a new generation of engaged citizens and policy entrepreneurs to help us collectively shape a brighter future for the nation.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

My mantra about everything that has to do with public policy is: identify and reject the false choice.

KAMALA HARRIS

## MY VIEW | WORLD APART

## We are in a frantic race for post-industrial dominance

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The scale of investment by the world's two superpowers as they conduct a proxy war through aggressive industrial policies is epic. Given the opaque nature of China's Communist Party government, the most cited estimate is that even five years ago, China was spending 1.7% of GDP on industrial-policy projects. That ratio has surely gone up since. This January, the government expanded its goals to include an emphasis on "photonic computing, brain-computer interfaces, nuclear fusion," according to *The Economist*, and in a classic Beijing micro-management mandate, decreed that research institutes "spend more than half of their basic funding on scientists under 35 years of age."

The US spends less than China as a proportion of GDP, but a JPMorgan report last year estimated that the three bills passed in 2021-22 with industrial policy aims would lead to investment of \$2.4 trillion.

Some find it fashionable to credit China's leaders with omniscience, but despite China's lead in, say, manufacturing large bat-

tery cells, electric cars, wind turbines or solar panels, US efforts seem better aimed. Improving its creaky infrastructure and making semiconductor chips are worthy goals, especially given the real danger of Beijing invading Taiwan, which dominates global chip production. The risk for the US is that these initiatives might over-stimulate its economy and keep interest rates high. For Beijing, it is larger still—public debt could rise to unsupportable levels.

Beijing's industrial policy dividends have been impressive thus far. The Rhodium group estimated that in 2020, China's spending on science and technology was 2.8%. *The Economist* in April quoted the Australian Policy Institute's list of 64 "critical" technologies and said that China leads the world "in all but 11." The list suggests China leads in 5G and 6G telecom, drones, radar and robotics. At many levels, China is a serial overachiever. The same article pointed to an index published by the World Intellectual Property Organisation that uses yardsticks such as infrastructure, patent awards and citations. "A middle-income country with China's GDP would expect to rank in the 60s. China ranks 12th."

So far, so impressive—if occasionally so gullible. There have been questions raised about the Chinese race to publish intellec-

tual property papers, for example, and the country is yet to build gigantic chip manufacturers such as Taiwan's TSMC.

The real challenge, though, is that President Xi Jinping's China has kept investment as a proportion of GDP at above 40%, a distorted-reality view of economics, while effectively suppressing domestic household consumption. Gross capital formation in China is 43.3% of GDP. By comparison, the OECD average is just 23.7%.

It is becoming harder to argue for Chinese exceptionalism in fiscal management. Xi seems keen to emulate the Soviet Union's late Nikita Khrushchev in his threats aimed at the US in the context of a post-industrial race for the future. But the backdrop of a housing bubble deflating and impoverished local governments—an integral part of China's alternately impressive and wasteful infrastructure roll-out of the past couple of decades—hurting towards *de facto* bankruptcy would make these grand plans difficult to achieve.

Bloomberg estimated that at the end of 2022, property developers owed \$2.5 trillion while local government financing vehicles owed \$13 trillion. This is a debt problem on the scale of Japan's after its bubble burst in the early 1990s, but with less capable macro-economic management. The *FT* reported recently that directives from the State Council to 10 highly indebted provinces and two large cities barred them from building more highways and government buildings. Banks have been directed to lend to high-profile manufacturing projects instead that President Xi has clunkily called "new quality productive forces."

**Industrial policy is playing a role that's subject to the risk of resources being misallocated by policymakers**

Even economic experts are voicing concern, which takes special courage in Xi's China. The truth is that we have seen this movie before. Earlier versions starred China taking advantage of its 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization (and the world's naivete) to dump products in markets abroad because large-scale subsidies had been part of its game-plan well before industrial policy became

the global epidemic it has in recent years.

In a chilling chart, the JPMorgan report shows that in the decade from 2010, opioid use in the US rocketed, inversely tracking the loss of manufacturing jobs there. "A total of 5.7 million factory jobs (in the US) were lost from 2000 to 2010—nearly 10 times more than during the previous 30 years, from 1970 to 2000." The political climate in the developed world will no longer allow China to export its way out of the economic doldrums, heightening the risk of massive overcapacity in future-focused industries.

By comparison, India's industrial policy seems a familiar tale of too little, too...er, too little of it thought-through, actually. It is hard to categorize a subsidy scheme for textiles or white goods as 'strategic' when the sensible thing would have been to sign free trade agreements with the EU years ago to allow our garment exporters to compete on a level field. *Mint* reported recently that imports from China grew from \$70.3 billion in 2018-19 to \$101.75 billion in 2023-24. Are we really weaning ourselves off Chinese exports? As an IMF report notes, well designed policies to improve the business environment would have been better than targeted government interventions that carry the risk of resources being misallocated.



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# What will the rising mercury this year mean for inflation in India?

India's balance of food-supply likelihoods has raised the question of whether fiscal 2024-25 will see monetary easing at all



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apart from public health. The *zaid* season—i.e., the period between *rabi* and *kharif*—covers short-duration crops, including some vegetables, fruits and fodder. While the impact on *rabi* crops is likely to be limited, as harvesting is already underway, daily data shows that select vegetable prices have risen, impacted by inadequate cold-chain infrastructure and the fallout on standing crops.

Food has already punched above its weight in the past 7-8 months, with vegetable inflation unlikely to materially recede from the prevailing 28% year-on-year pace. Notably, costs did not correct to the extent expected during winter, with high temperatures now likely to keep year-on-year growth in double digits over the next few months. The retail prices of potatoes were up 22%, onions 40% and tomatoes 36% in March 2024 from a year before, with other seasonal varieties also likely to be vulnerable. If the month-on-month increase in sequential food inflation quickens from our baseline of 1.1% quarter-on-quarter in April-June 2024 to 1.8-2.0%, headline inflation can potentially jump by 50-70 basis points in the quarter, taking full-year inflation 40-50 basis points above our baseline at 4.5% year-on-year in 2024-25.

Short-term solutions—such as improved supply networks, better inter-state movement and rotation of short cropping cycles—can be deployed, but are unlikely to provide immediate relief. The strengthening of India's cold-chain infrastructure and handling of produce will gain importance. Reliance on the upcoming monsoon is high. Today's reservoir level is at about 31.4% of full

capacity, lower than 39% in the comparable period last year. Rains are dearly needed. Dissipating El Niño and the start of La Niña in the third quarter would bode well for crop output and resultant farm income levels, but the spatial and temporal variation of monsoon rains will be equally pertinent.

**Policy impact:** RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has maintained a cautious and hawkish stance. The impact of weather conditions on food inflation—and consequently on inflationary expectations—will be closely monitored. Given the global conditions, including delays in the US rate-cutting cycle, higher oil prices and fluctuations in the value of the rupee, we expect the MPC to extend its wait-and-watch mode and track the monsoon's progress. The debate over RBI's policy path ahead has shifted from what 'the scale of cuts' will be to whether there will be 'cuts at all' in 2024-25. Upside risks to the central bank's inflation forecast of 4.5% for 2024-25 are also likely to delay any change in its policy stance to 'neutral.'

Domestic 10-year bond yields have corrected from their mid-April highs, but a dip below 7% is unlikely amid still-high oil prices, a strong dollar and hardening US Treasury yields. The next catalyst for debt markets will be the upcoming index inclusion of Indian bonds, with the first of the global benchmark indices due to start this process in June 2024 and another in January 2025. Mindful of the volatility that could accompany these inflows, India's monetary authority has steadfastly kept the currency on an even keel, whilst absorbing incremental inflows into its foreign exchange buffer.

Temperatures continue to hit new highs every subsequent year. In its March 2024 update, the World Meteorological Organisation's (WMO) annual *State of the Global Climate* report confirmed that 2023 was the warmest year on record, with the global average near-surface temperature at 1.45° Celsius above the pre-industrial baseline. Add to this, it was the warmest 10-year period on record. The agency added that the 2023-24 El Niño had peaked, but was still one of the five strongest on record. While the weather pattern was gradually weakening, it will continue to impact global climate, with above-normal temperatures predicted over almost all land areas between March and May this year.

The India Meteorological Department recently predicted that above-normal temperatures are likely to prevail over most parts of the country during the 2024 hot weather season (April to June), except some parts of east, northeast and northwest India. In official parlance, a heatwave is recorded if the maximum temperature of a station reaches at least 40° Celsius for plains and 30° Celsius or more for hilly regions. A departure from normal in the range of 4.5-6.4° Celsius is viewed as a heatwave, while anything more than 6.4° Celsius above the norm is termed a 'severe' state.

**Bolster defences:** Indian authorities have taken proactive measures to mitigate the impact of heat. For instance, power ministry officials have held reviews on ensuring uninterrupted power availability in cooperation with counterparts like India's coal and railway departments. Coal stocks have also been built up to meet peak demand, which is likely to be higher this year than experienced in past summer months. The ministry has projected 260GW peak power demand in the second quarter of 2024, higher than the record set by the third quarter of 2023. Despite greater installed capacity for renewable energy, the country's base load is still fossil-fuel heavy.

Concurrently, a two-decade long emergency provision has also been invoked that will require idle gas-fired power stations (left unused due to commercial concerns) to operate through May and June to meet an increase in electricity demand and prevent shortages akin to 2022. Earlier, an emergency rule for coal imports was invoked; it was supposed to be in force till June, but will now run through the end of the third quarter. Lastly, regular maintenance of power plants will be deferred to the monsoon period and new capacity additions will be fast-tracked. The general elections underway will span May, with results due on 4 June.

**Economic impact:** The economic impact of heat is likely to be the most telling on perishable crops—especially vegetables beyond the T(omato) O(nion) P(otato) three—and food-led inflation, aggravating the seasonal increase in prices during summer,

# Indian banks are slipping on a banana peel of tech adoption

Rapid progress in digital banking has exposed the system to risks



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Kotak Mahindra Bank has had some digital operations clamped by RBI

After being saddled for years with the biggest bundle of bad loans anywhere in the world, India's financial system had only recently found its footing. But with profitability at a decade high and capitalization in excess of the regulatory minimum, the country's banks have begun slipping again. This time, they're falling on the banana peel of technology.

The latest casualty is Kotak Mahindra Bank. Last week, the regulator ordered what was until recently India's fourth-largest lender by market value to stop taking new customers via its online and mobile banking channels and refrain from issuing fresh credit cards. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said it had found "serious deficiencies" in how the bank manages user access, vendor risk and data security. This is stiff punishment. More than 98% of the transaction volume in Kotak's savings accounts were from digital or non-branch methods in the December quarter; 99% of new credit cards and 95% of personal loans it sold were also online. While Kotak says it has already taken some steps and will "swiftly resolve balance issues at the earliest," the brazenness of last year's scam at UCO Bank is likely to make RBI cautious in lifting the ban. UCO is a small, state-owned lender based in Kolkata. Last November, it found some customers had got nearly \$100 million via interbank electronic fund transfers, but accounts at the sending institutions hadn't been debited.

This month, investigators said that this was no error, but a scam. A couple of outside engineers had allegedly fiddled with UCO's servers, creating money out of thin air, and crediting it to different accounts. Several account holders made "wrongful gains by withdrawing the proceeds," according to the bank's police complaint.

This is the crux of the issue. RBI's press release highlighted "frequent and significant outages in the last two years" in Kotak's services that inconvenienced customers. While these are annoying, the big risk is a UCO Bank-type scenario where the same money can be spent twice because it shows up in two accounts. If something like that happens at scale, it could pose serious risks to financial stability. All benefits from digitization pale in front of such a threat.

Digitization has undoubtedly brought benefits, particularly to non-state-owned lenders. Take Kotak, which now has 8.5% of the deposits of State Bank of India (SBI), compared with less than 6% seven years ago. This gain didn't take a commensurate expansion in physical presence. SBI has added nearly 5,000 branches since 2016—

10 times as many as Kotak. Even as they have gained from it, banks paid insufficient attention to tech. In December 2020, RBI barred HDFC Bank, India's largest private lender, from issuing new credit cards and launching fresh digital initiatives. The card ban was lifted after eight months; the digital blockade lasted over a year.

This isn't just an Indian problem. Singapore's DBS Group, which has aspired to rank alongside some of the world's most admired tech brands, has also stumbled on small things like an overheated data centre.

In India, fintech sped up money transactions, but it has also meant complexity. An otherwise staid banking system, running software on servers on bank premises, faces a tsunami of tiny transactions coming via intermediaries that mostly do cloud computing. A widely used smartphone-based protocol, UPI, logged more than 100 billion transactions last year. There are some 50 million merchants accepting online money via QR codes, but the regulator isn't sure if all are legit. Fast and furious may have opened the floodgates to fraud.

A rattled RBI is in a mood to punish. Earlier, it instructed Paytm, the homegrown payments pioneer, to freeze its banking business because of persistent non-compliance. Separately, it asked Visa Inc to stop the use of its business cards for commercial payments with a fintech firm in between.

Drastic supervisory steps may be necessary at times, but they will not be enough. The Indian regulator needs to update its own understanding of technology—the last edition of RBI's 164-page financial stability report devoted a mere four paragraphs to digital safety, even though the central bank's survey showed cybersecurity as a "high-risk" category.

Three levels are rising. A 2022 study by DeepStrat, a New Delhi-based consulting firm, had raised concerns about what it called a "fraud stack"—a large number of bank accounts "controlled by crime cartels without their owners being aware of their identities being misused," as explained by Anand Venkatanarayanan, one of the report's authors.

In one instance, the customer's address in a bank's records was the same as that of the bank branch. When such mule accounts hide in plain sight, attacks become highly probable.

MY VIEW | BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN

# A status quo bias tends to keep innovative ideas hidden

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Imagine you discovered an idea that could dramatically solve one of the most significant problems of an industry. What will you do with that idea? Would you shout about it from your rooftop or will you keep quiet about it? Here is the story of how an idea that could change the fortunes of the digital-advertising industry was treated. This story is a telling example of how most of us treat paradigm-shifting ideas.

Digital advertising is today a \$600 billion industry. In 1994, when digital advertisers started using banner advertising, the click-through rates (CTRs) were about 40%. But in 2022, CTRs stood at a mere 0.35%, a drop of more than 100 times from the 1996 level. One could try to cover up this humongous drop in CTRs by blaming an exponential increase in digital stimuli and the ever-shrinking attention spans of digital consumers. But the fact remains that this drastic drop in CTRs has happened in spite of new strategies like sophisticated data-mining techniques, deep personalization based on

data from sophisticated online cookie trackers and the use of search-engine optimization.

Tim Hwang, a former global policy lead on artificial intelligence at Google and author of the book *Subprime Attention Crisis: Advertising and the Time Bomb at the Heart of the Internet*, has warned of consequences for the global economy from the declining effectiveness of digital advertising. Once the actual inefficacy of digital advertising is more widely known, the value of online advertising will probably drop drastically. In this view, much like the subprime-loan crisis of the US mortgage industry pulled the plug on the world economy during the West's Great Recession about a decade-and-a-half ago, an implosion in what digital advertisements are seen by the market to be worth could hit the value of several technology majors that depend on digital advertising money for their revenues.

Given this precarious situation of the digital advertising world, a new idea put forward by Amazon is hugely relevant. As a leading player in the digital marketing world, trust Amazon to know a lot more than others about what works and what does not work in the digital world. Amazon claims to have found a way to improve CTRs. The Amazon

Ads website says: "An advertiser may have stand-alone images of their product against a white background, like a coffee mug. When that same coffee mug is placed in a lifestyle context—in a kitchen counter, next to a croissant—in a sponsored brands mobile ad, we have seen that click-through rates are more than 40% higher compared to ads with standard product images."

Wow! Given the precipitous fall of CTRs over the years, an idea that promises 40% improvement should be big news, even headline-worthy. But that was not what happened. Even on the Amazon Ads website, this new idea was not even a subhead. It was tucked away in a Q&A section one had to chance upon. Why was this idea underplayed and treated so badly?

First of all, to all those who have worked in the traditional advertising world, that idea is not new. In the traditional ad industry, art directors and photographers have long been aware of how an attractive product shot for a point-of-sale poster can impact business.

They would often spend days, if not weeks, thinking through a particular product shot and its background, along with special props and models if required. But the enormous time taken to photograph a product in an appropriate context was probably not the reason that Amazon played down its idea.

**The human mind resists change but innovation can be nurtured only by being open to ideas**

Today, Generative AI, backed with creative prompting strategies, can churn out good-quality images in a very short time. Everyone knows that. So why was an idea promising a more effective digital connect, one that could potentially alter the design of product tiles and product display pages across e-commerce sites, not given due importance?

Many of us hold onto outdated and ineffective ideas because of an inherent behavioural trait called the *status quo* bias. The human brain does not like to change. It likes to continue doing what it has been doing all along. Ever since e-commerce began, it has been a sort of dictum that a product tile or display page should only feature a stand-alone prod-

uct shot against a white background. It soon became the norm of all e-commerce websites. Based on work that my team had done, this column was one of the few to question that *status quo* ([bit.ly/49ZcYVP](http://bit.ly/49ZcYVP)). But otherwise, it was business as usual in the e-commerce business; even Amazon's website had only drab product shots against the usual white background.

The idea that Amazon Ads has recently proposed to make product displays more appealing questions the *status quo* of the e-commerce business. Will e-commerce players break free of their bias? It seems unlikely. As the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn once said, faced with a paradigm-shifting idea, the more intelligent a person is, the more intelligent the reasons this person will come up with for why the *status quo* is better.

What is the best bet for an innovative idea of yours to overcome the *status quo* bias that seems to prevail all around? Go to a family-run concern with your idea. From my experience, the heads of family-run businesses are far more open to accepting innovative ideas than professional managers in multinational companies. It takes a very different mindset to nurture innovative ideas that challenge the *status quo*.





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Scare visits schools

A bomb threat directed at nearly 100 schools in Delhi-NCR serves as a wake-up call for all of us

Amid an unanticipated cloud of fear, nearly 100 schools in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) sent students home early Wednesday upon receiving a bomb threat via email. The police conducted thorough searches, but found nothing suspicious. The scare has sent shockwaves through the community, leaving parents, educators and students grappling with a harrowing reality: The threat of terror is no longer a distant concern but a chilling presence in our midst. The sanctity of schools, once regarded as a safe haven for learning and growth, has been compromised. As we confront this sobering reality, it is imperative that we do not succumb to despair but unite in resilience and resolve. Foremost, we must commend the swift response of school authorities and law enforcement agencies in addressing these threats. Their coordinated efforts have undoubtedly helped reassure people. More importantly, our intelligence agencies need to put their act together; they are the ones who should have seen it coming. We do not have enough specific information to process at the moment and no clue about the intention or the identity of the perpetrator(s); we don't know if it was a real threat or just a mischievous element playing mind games, but such threats cannot be taken lightly, especially when human lives are at risk. The threat emails, reportedly emanating from a Russian IP address, were well-planned and coordinated. Shooting in the US schools is rather rampant; Indian schools are much safer and should stay that way. All we have to do is be vigilant.



Also, this small win should not lull us into complacency. We must remain vigilant and proactive in fortifying

the security infrastructure of our educational institutions. Beyond bolstering physical security, we must also invest in fostering a culture of vigilance and preparedness within our school communities. Educators play a pivotal role in equipping students with the knowledge and skills to recognise and respond to potential threats. Empowering students with safety protocols and encouraging open dialogue can go a long way in mitigating the impact of terror-induced anxiety. It is equally important that we address the root causes of such terror acts. Socio-economic disparities, marginalisation and ideological extremism often serve as fertile breeding grounds for radicalisation. By addressing these underlying issues through comprehensive social policies and inclusive education, we can strive towards building a more resilient and harmonious society. It is equally important to remain calm and not panic. In times of crisis, it is easy to succumb to fear and division. However, we must remember that our strength lies in our unity and resilience. Now more than ever, we must stand in solidarity with one another, refusing to be cowed by the forces of terror. Together, we can create a future where every child can pursue their education without fear and where schools are not battlegrounds but beacons of hope and enlightenment.

### PICTALK



Participants during a State-level bullock cart race at Thegur, in Chikkamagaluru

PTI

## Post-poll path for infra financing!

Modi 3.0 plans to bolster infrastructure creation post-election by expanding the infrastructure financing ecosystem

In the interim budget for FY25, infrastructure outlay was increased by 11.1 per cent to 11.11 lakh crore, including Rs 2.78 lakh crore for the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) and Rs 2.55 lakh crore for the Railway Ministry. Post-poll, the plan for a full-fledged budget for FY25 will look to raise Rs 25000 crore of finance through green bonds - higher than Rs 20000 crore raised through green bonds in FY24.



That going ahead private investment will be a big driver of infrastructure development, is evident from the National Investment & Infrastructure Fund (NIIFF) plan to raise USD 1 billion for its second Private Markets Fund (PMF). The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is likely to invest nearly USD 125 million. NIIFF manages over USD4.9 billion of equity capital commitments across its four funds-Master Fund, PMF, Strategic Opportunities Fund and India-Japan Fund. The MoRTH is looking to raise a whopping Rs 60,000 crore in FY 25 through monetisation of Toll Operate Transfer (TOT) highways and NHAI InvIT. In FY 24, Rs 38334 crore was raised from ToT, InvIT and project-based financing. It is significant to mention that under the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP), an ambitious target of raising Rs 1.08 lakh crore has been fixed for FY25. The share of privately funded highways in the overall award of projects in FY25 is expected to meet the Government's target of 10 per cent. NHAI has drawn up a plan to develop 53 listed highways worth Rs 1.2 trillion through BOT. The

MoRTH had a healthy award project pipeline of over Rs 45,000 crore as of March 2024. Following the Government's push for private participation in highways, IRB Infra Development has committed to invest 10000-12000 crore in FY25, to add road capacity through Build Operate Transfer (BOT) mode. The recent modification in concession agreements, according to IRB, has bolstered investors' confidence by enhancing the bankability of projects. Further, the central Government is putting into place its plan to pare a large portion of NHAI's Rs 3.4 trillion debt within 5

years. This will free up NHAI's resources for development in the highways sector. The energy sector is getting a big green private investment boost. REC Limited, a leader in the power sector in India has availed a SACE-covered green loan for JPY 60.536 billion to finance eligible green projects. In the power sector, besides the airport, Adani Enterprises is firming up its plans to plough USD 1 billion into these businesses. It is in advanced talks with several investors in the US and Europe to raise USD 1 billion for its Solar Panel business and Mumbai Airport. The company, which is enhancing its focus on green energy, raised USD 750 million through bonds in 2022. The investors and Indian corporates engaged in infrastructure development are banking on political and policy continuity for the fruition of the ambitious plan for infra financing push.

(The author is a veteran journalist; views are personal)



VINOD BAHL

Domestic Tragedy: Madam — Apropos the news article, "Man gets life imprisonment for murdering teenage Indian wife in London," published on April 30, this is my response. The news of Sahil Sharma's sentencing for the murder of his wife, Mehak Sharma, is a heartbreaking reminder of the devastating consequences of domestic violence. The brutal act not only robbed Mehak's family of a beloved daughter but also shattered their sense of security and left them grappling with irreparable grief. The fact that the tragedy unfolded within the confines of their own home, supposedly a place of safety, adds another layer of horror to the ordeal. Mehak's mother's poignant statement encapsulates the profound anguish and emptiness left in the wake of such a senseless loss. While the legal proceedings may offer some semblance of justice, they can never fully assuage the pain inflicted upon the victim's loved ones. It serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for greater awareness, support and intervention in cases of domestic violence to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

Global Impact of Bharat: Madam — Apropos the news article, "Covid handling changed world's perception of India: EAM," published on April 30, this is my response. India's growth trajectory under the spotlight! External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar reflects on India's changing perception abroad, citing COVID management and Chandrayaan-3 as game-changers. He highlights how decisions made domestically resonate globally, showcasing India's significance on the world stage. From bringing citizens home during crises to enhancing the value of the Indian passport, India's actions garner international attention. Jaishankar underlines India's technological prowess and socio-economic

# Democracy, economics and governance

The confluence of elections, electioneering and the economy demands meticulous examination and rethinking to make the system work flawlessly



BK JHA

As India goes ahead with its 18th General Elections, the nation finds itself at a crossroads of democracy, economics and governance. The elections, spanning 44 days from April 19 to June 1, are poised to be the lengthiest in Indian history, reflecting both the enormity of the task at hand and the significance of the decisions to be made. Against the backdrop of a burgeoning economy, evolving political landscapes and pressing social challenges, the intersection of elections, electioneering and the economy warrants scrutiny. The magnitude of election expenditures provides a glimpse into the economic dynamics surrounding the electoral process. According to the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), the anticipated expenditure for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections is staggering, surpassing Rs 1.35 lakh crore. This figure, more than double the amount spent in 2019, indicates to the monumental scale of electoral spending in the world's largest democracy.

With a projected voter base of 96.6 crore, the per-voter spending is estimated at around Rs 1,400, signifying both the financial investment and the democratic imperative of ensuring widespread participation. However, it's worth noting that the Election Commission's expenditure is expected to constitute only a fraction of the total outlay, pointing towards the diverse economic activities spurred by the electoral process. The Election Commission tirelessly strives to facilitate universal suffrage across the nation. Recognising the pivotal role of public figures in shaping civic consciousness, the Commission enlisted the famed actor Rajkumar Rao as its 'national icon' to galvanise youth engagement and voter turnout as the country approaches the general elections. Rao's portrayal of a dedicated poll officer in the acclaimed film 'Newton,' a poignant exploration of electoral challenges in a Naxal-affected region, resonated deeply with young voters. However, despite the cinematic depiction of electoral fervour, the anticipated



'Newton effect' has yet to materialise in voting patterns in two phases so far. Nonetheless, the indomitable spirit of election officers persists, as they traverse treacherous terrain and surmount logistical obstacles to ensure the integrity of the electoral process. Electioneering acts as a catalyst for various sectors of the economy, fostering growth and employment opportunities across the spectrum. From hospitality and transportation to textiles and advertising, the ripple effects of political campaigns are palpable. As political parties vie for voter attention, rallies, events and promotional activities proliferate, injecting vitality into local economies and stimulating demand for goods and services. Moreover, the advent of digital campaigning has revolutionised the electoral landscape, with professional agencies employed to enhance brand visibility and engagement. The economic dividends of such strategies are evident, as digital platforms emerge as potent tools for political communication and mobilisation. Amidst the fervour of electoral competition, political manifestos serve as blueprints for



ELECTIONEERING ACTS AS A CATALYST FOR VARIOUS SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY, FOSTERING GROWTH AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

governance, delineating policy priorities and economic agendas. The contrasting visions articulated by major political parties underscore the divergent approaches to addressing pressing socio-economic challenges. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), buoyed by its track record and incumbent status, advocates for policy continuity and fiscal consolidation. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emphasis on infrastructure development and economic reforms, a BJP-majority Government is poised to prioritise private investment and fiscal prudence, thereby fostering economic stability and growth. Conversely, the Indian National Congress or INDI Block champions a progressive agenda focused on job creation, social welfare and agrarian reforms. Proposals such as Government-led employment initiatives, minimum support price guarantees and education loan waivers underpin the Alliance's commitment to inclusive growth and equitable development. While political rhetoric often dominates electoral discourse, the economic imperatives transcending partisan lines merit attention. Issues such as

water scarcity, climate change and unemployment pose formidable challenges to India's socio-economic fabric, necessitating concerted action beyond the electoral cycle. The water crisis in cities like Bengaluru serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for sustainable resource management and climate resilience. Yet, the conspicuous absence of these issues from political manifestos is very disheartening. There is an urgent need for non-partisan dialogue and policy discourse on environmental sustainability and socio-economic resilience. As India embarks on its electoral journey, the confluence of elections, electioneering and the economy offers both opportunities and challenges. While the democratic process catalyses economic activity and political discourse, the imperatives of inclusive and sustainable development transcend electoral cycles. By transcending electoral exigencies and embracing a shared vision of progress, India can realise its aspirations for a vibrant democracy and a prosperous future for all.

(The author is Delhi-based senior journalist. Views expressed are personal)

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Technological deception



Apropos the news article, "Telangana CM summoned in Shah fake video case," published on April 30, this is my response. In today's complex political landscape, technology's role in shaping narratives is undeniable. The recent controversy surrounding doctored videos

of key political figures underscores the urgency of addressing misinformation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's acknowledgement of this issue highlights the importance of responsible information sharing in the digital age. However, the entanglement of political parties in this web of deceit further exacerbates the situation. The involvement of law enforcement, as seen with the Delhi Police's actions, signals a crucial step towards accountability. Yet, the broader implications of such manipulation on societal harmony cannot be overstated. Platforms like 'X' and social media giants must cooperate fully in identifying and curbing the spread of fake content. Ultimately, restoring trust in our democratic processes necessitates collective vigilance and decisive action against those seeking to sow discord through technological deception.

Arya Sundaram | Chennai

advancements, attracting global interest in investment and exploration. The narrative shifts from India being a concern to being a source of support, showcasing its resilience and diplomatic agility. With a focus on domestic performance, Jaishankar emphasises infrastructure development and socio-political systems, which captivate foreign fascination. India's journey from a developing nation to a global player exemplifies its potential and allure on the international stage, echoing the sentiment that Bharat indeed matters.

Kabir Oberoi | Mumbai

#### DIVINE SYMBOLISM UNVEILED

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Astroturf | Mother calls for full alert against evil forces," published on April 28, this is my response. The intricate symbolism of the goddess's accessories reveals profound insights into the cosmic order and human existence. The conch shell, echoing the primal sound of creation, signifies the source energy that initiates and sustains all life.

Meanwhile, the lotus flower, emerging from murky waters unstained, embodies purity and detachment amid creation's diversity. The goddess's eight weapons, contrasted with her two creative symbols, underscore the perpetual struggle against malevolent forces. This juxtaposition reflects the omnipresence and potency of negativity, urging constant vigilance and defensive action. Demons, depicted in surreal forms, serve as metaphors for internal and external threats, reminding us of the deceptive allure and insidious nature of evil. In essence, the divine imagery prompts contemplation on the balance between constructive creativity and vigilant defence in navigating life's complexities. It emphasises the importance of spiritual awareness and moral integrity in combating adversities while upholding the cosmic order.

Devansh Khatri | Jaipur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com





## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Covid vaccine row

Thorough probe a must to fix accountability

**A**STRAZENECA (AZ), a leading pharmaceutical firm headquartered in the UK, has admitted that its Covid-19 vaccine can cause a side effect in 'very rare cases'. The disclosure came during the hearing of a case in the High Court of Justice in London. Fifty-one claimants have alleged that they — or their loved ones — suffered from TTS (thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome) after receiving the AZ vaccine. This rare syndrome is characterised by blood clotting or abnormally low levels of platelets; its potentially life-threatening consequences include brain damage, heart attack, pulmonary embolism and amputation. The petitioners, who are seeking damages under the UK's Consumer Protection Act, reportedly possess documents substantiating their charge that the vaccine caused deaths or injuries.

The British case is of immense significance for India, where the AZ vaccine was manufactured and marketed as Covishield in partnership with the Pune-based Serum Institute of India. It was administered to almost 90 per cent of the eligible people in the country during the Covid years. Even though AZ has stated that patient safety is its highest priority, a thorough probe is required to allay the doubts and apprehensions of the Indian citizens who received Covishield shots. The matter has reached the Supreme Court, where a petitioner has sought directions to form a panel of medical experts to examine the vaccine's side effects.

During the pandemic, vaccine clinical trials were fast-tracked due to the urgent need to curb the virus' spread and save lives. This was driven by the overwhelming evidence that the benefits of vaccination exceeded the risks posed by the virus. However, the side effects, even if rare, have put a question mark over the safety of the AZ vaccine. The role of the regulatory authorities has also come under scrutiny. It is hoped that an in-depth inquiry will be carried out to pinpoint the lapses that imperilled the health of vaccine recipients. Fixing accountability and stressing the need for greater transparency should be the way forward.

## Pro-Palestine protests

US must not silence dissent by students

**T**HE crackdown on pro-Palestine protests at Columbia University and other campuses across the US is an assault on the fundamental principles of free speech and academic freedom. As hundreds of students face arrests, threats of expulsion and disciplinary action for voicing their solidarity with beleaguered Gazans, it is crucial to recognise that silencing dissent only deepens the wounds of injustice and undermines the values that the US claims to uphold. At the heart of these protests lies a demand for justice. Students are calling for their universities to divest from companies complicit in Israel's oppression of Palestinians — a moral stance in response to the ongoing violence and human rights violations in Gaza.

Instead of addressing the students' grievances, the authorities have resorted to heavy-handed tactics, invoking charges of anti-Semitism to justify their actions. Condemning Israel's excesses is not tantamount to anti-Semitism. It is a legitimate form of protest against injustice, rooted in the principles of human rights and international law. By conflating criticism of the Israeli government with hatred towards Jewish people, detractors are seeking to delegitimise dissent and shield Israel from accountability.

The response from universities and law agencies is worrisome. The use of force to suppress demonstrations runs counter to the democratic values that institutions of learning should safeguard. Instead of fostering an environment where diverse perspectives can be freely expressed, these actions create a chilling effect, stifling debate and dissent. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has rightly expressed concern over the disproportionate response to these protests, emphasising the importance of protecting freedom of expression. As the self-proclaimed leader of the free world, the US must not silence divergent voices; it must be a beacon of hope and ensure freedom as well as justice for all.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, MAY 2, 1924

'Peace' in the province

IN his speech delivered in reply to the farewell address presented by the District Board of Amritsar, to which we had occasion to refer in a previous issue, Sir Edward Maclagan gave expression to a feeling of satisfaction on "seeing the province now at peace" "except so far as Akali troubles are concerned." Although the exception itself covers a wide field, we wholeheartedly wish we could join in congratulating His Excellency on the "peace" of which he speaks. Unfortunately, the present state of affairs in the province does not warrant that good cheer and it has to be said that the "peace" spoken of is merely the "peace" of subdued feelings and the calm arising from despair. The Government, during the regime of Sir Maclagan, has never shown timely desire to bow to the popular will. The miseries experienced by the people in a large number of villages on account of the harsh methods of collection of the punitive police tax imposed upon them, the widespread resentment caused by various measures of repression which have been adopted in the name of law and order during the last three years, and the destructive effect of the communal policy inaugurated and obstinately adhered to during the regime of Sir Maclagan have all contributed to undermining civic harmony among people which is the foundation of real peace. This injurious policy has taken away the peace, mental as well as physical, not only of the community which complains of being the principle sufferer, but also of other communities. The bitter feelings engendered in Punjab by the communal policy of Sir Maclagan's Government have to some extent left the whole of India perturbed by its evil effects.

## Poor regulation plagues food safety

The rate of conviction has remained low despite an increasing number of failed samples

DINESH C SHARMA  
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

**T**HE food regulator of Hong Kong recently suspended the sale of three spice blends manufactured by an Indian company. This was followed by a similar action against another Indian spice brand in Singapore. The regulatory action came after the detection of high levels of ethylene oxide, a carcinogen, in the spices exported from India. The Maldives, too, has taken such action, while the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Australian food authority are examining the reports of contamination.

This is nothing new. Several hundred shipments of spices from India are refused entry for not meeting the quality norms in the US every year. Ayurvedic formulations are often red-flagged by the FDA and other regulators for containing excessive amounts of lead and other harmful heavy metals. Sometimes, the reverse also happens, as in the recent case of food company Nestle, which was found marketing baby foods with high sugar content in India, but not in markets in developed countries.

All these episodes follow a familiar pattern. The companies involved, be they Indian or multinational, deny any wrongdoing. They claim they are following the prescribed safety standards either in the country of origin or where they are exporting to, based on what suits them. The standard response of Indian regulatory authorities is that they are 'studying the situation', besides blaming foreign regulators for not sharing test reports with them.

The export promotion agencies



UNDER SCRUTINY: Top Indian spice brands are in the crosshairs of food regulators over alleged contamination. REUTERS

and industry bodies play the victim card — they argue that Indian exports are being singled out by Western countries which want to tarnish India's image. Such statements are supported by ministries and ministers concerned, in the name of the 'Make in India' dictum. Multinationals blamed for marketing potentially harmful products in India justify themselves by saying they are only following the standards laid down in India. In all this, the consumer remains a hapless spectator. For all the rest, it is business as usual once the din dies down.

No effort is made to address the issues at the crux of such episodes — loopholes in the food regulatory system like the opaque process of developing standards and rule-making, the near-absence of Good Manufacturing Practices, lax enforcement of standards and regulations and an inadequate analytical and testing system. The other important issues are governmental protection of the industry in the name of boosting export and discouragement of the representation of public health, consumer and civil society experts in food regulation.

Food companies involved in controversies wriggle out by say-

The FSSAI should make public the 'conflict of interest' data of members of all rule-making panels because consumers should know who is setting the standards.

ing they are following standards fixed by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), as has happened in the recent case of Nestle. Therefore, the method of fixing standards is critical. The FSSAI has a set of 26 scientific committees to provide inputs for setting standards for food products ranging from beverages to marine products. When the authority was formed in 2008, it packed these scientific panels with representatives of Indian and global food companies. Following an outcry in the media, courts and Parliament,

the panels were reconstituted. Subsequently, too, food companies continued to dominate through industry chambers and associations, which were given a seat on the scientific panels.

A few years later, this changed, and now the panels have working and retired scientists. Still, one can't say confidently that the rule-making process is free of the industry's influence. A cursory examination of the present composition of scientific panels shows that they still have members with past and present industry links. For example, the panel on beverages has a former global head of quality assurance at Coca-Cola as well as an official of the tea association among its members. Another committee has a scientist who is a member of the All-India Food Producers Association — a body of food companies.

The FSSAI should make public the 'conflict of interest' data of members of all rule-making committees because consumers should know who is setting the standards. The FSSAI's so-called partnership with the Confederation of Indian Industry and Hindustan Lever is also problematic at several levels. Instead of hobnobbing with those it is supposed

to regulate, the FSSAI should be striving to gain public recognition as an impartial and independent regulator.

For years, consumer groups and public health experts have been demanding a distinct health label for food products high in salt, sugar and fats, but the food safety authority and the industry have constantly opposed this. On the other hand, the regulator is quick to meet industry demands and even endorse their products, which is not its mandate. The label for fortified food products, as demanded by the food industry, is an example. The 'F plus' logo is awarded to products with added vitamins, nutrients, etc. It has been given to wheat flour, salt, milk, edible oil and rice products, and the FSSAI has created a separate website displaying all these branded products with photos (instead of just a list of names). This amounts to the advertising of a certain category of products by the regulator at the taxpayer's cost.

The implementation of the regulation is lax and compliance by the industry is poor, as found by audits of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Parliament. The CAG found in 2017 that even 10 years after its formation, the FSSAI had no time-bound plan for the formulation of standards; it issued licences based on incomplete information; and 56 out of 72 food testing laboratories surveyed did not have necessary accreditation certificates. There was also an acute shortage of staff. The PAC recommended bringing about greater transparency in the formulation or revision of standards. The FSSAI is still far from reaching the level of transparency recommended. The panel also noted that the rate of conviction was very low despite an increasing number of failed samples — a clear demonstration of poor regulation.

It is time we realised that business as usual in food safety is not good for people's health.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We may find in the long run that tinned food is a deadlier weapon than the machine-gun. — George Orwell

## The three Rs we practised unawares

RAMA KASHYAP

**R**EDUCE, reuse and recycle are buzzwords today. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, we were unaware of the three Rs of environment conservation, but would still practise them earnestly. Unlike the present-day 'use and throw' approach, we would tend to use everything to the fullest. Almost nothing was discarded in our middle-class households, to the extent that when a thing lost its functional utility, it was retained in the hope that someday, somehow it would be put to some use.

In those days of scarcity and meagre resources, we were practising 'minimalism' without being aware of it. We had a humble wardrobe comprising a pair of school uniform, just a few dresses for casual wear and one or two for formal wear. We were content with having one pair each of black Bata shoes and white canvas shoes for school and rubber slippers for home wear. We would be entitled to a new pair only after we outgrew one or it was torn beyond repair. Everything, from footwear, garments and watches to sundry gadgets, was repaired, sometimes through *jugaad*, till it was deemed absolutely irreparable.

Most amusing was the in-house recycling of things. A party dress would, in due course, be used as casual wear, later as a night dress and end up as a duster before being thrown away. There would always be an alternative way to utilise a discarded item. My mother used to stitch cloth bags from my old school skirts. That is how most cloth bags were made at home, recycled from used material. In the absence of polythene, people carried reusable bags for shopping. Today, despite the ban on single-use plastic, poly-bags continue to be in vogue, causing huge damage to the environment. Also, the consumption of tissue paper is increasing rapidly at an enormous cost to the ecology. Trees are being cut and a huge quantity of water is being consumed in the making of tissues, which are invariably thrown away after being used once.

If we were eco-friendly earlier, it was not because we were more conscious of our environment — it was the way of life back then. However, now that we are aware of the need to 'reduce, reuse and recycle', let us not mindlessly embrace consumerism. Not only should we try to reduce unnecessary consumption, we should also help in recycling through waste segregation and management. Let's not blindly adopt the 'disposable' culture; rather, we should promote our traditional 'reuse economy' based on our capability for repair and restoration. We must enjoy the fruits of development and prosperity, but at the same time contribute to environment conservation. Let the wheels of progress roll on without ravaging or plundering Mother Earth.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Rein in separatist elements

Apropos of the editorial 'Canadian laxity'; the raising of separatist slogans at the Toronto event attended by PM Justin Trudeau is not just a diplomatic debacle; it is a threat to the India-Canada ties. New Delhi's concerns and its strong protest against the pro-Khalistan event are warranted, especially because the strained bilateral ties have been exacerbated by Trudeau's reckless remarks regarding alleged Indian involvement in the killing of a Canadian citizen. Trudeau's rhetoric about defending freedom rings hollow as he allows divisive sentiments to flourish on his watch. It is time for Canada to prioritise diplomacy over pandering to separatist elements.

SAHIB PREET SINGH, MOHALI

## Diplomatic chill in India-Canada ties

Refer to 'Canadian laxity'; it was shocking to learn that pro-Khalistan slogans were raised at a public event attended by prominent Canadian leaders, including PM Justin Trudeau, in Toronto on Sunday. This comes amid a diplomatic chill between New Delhi and Ottawa. The India-Canada ties have been worsening since Trudeau brought up allegations about the involvement of Indian government agents in the murder of a Sikh separatist leader on Canadian soil. Even though New Delhi has asked Ottawa to share evidence supporting the claim, the latter has yet to produce anything. The Canadian government must not align itself with pro-Khalistan groups if it wishes to restore cordial relations with India.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM

## FSSAI's credibility hit

Apropos of 'Food safety concerns'; adulteration is not unheard of in India. Companies like Dabur, Zandu, Baidyanath, Nestle and Patanjali have all come under the scanner due to allegations of adulteration or for reportedly failing the quality test. The recent ban imposed by Singapore and Hong Kong on spice companies suspected of supplying contaminated condiments and *masalas* is yet another cause for embarrassment. All these also hit the credibility of the FSSAI and call into question its functioning.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

## Address vaccine injuries

Refer to the news report 'Covishield can have rare side effect: Firm'; the belated admission by British firm AstraZeneca that its vaccine for Covid-19 can cause TTS (thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome) in some cases has come as a bolt from the blue for those who had received the vaccine after placing their trust in the system. They got the jab without knowing about possible adverse events and suffered vaccine-related complications. The revelation calls for greater medical scrutiny. Medical journals and institutes should publish more studies on the matter, and experts should share their views on it. Besides, the Ministry of Health and the ICMR should publicly address these concerns.

SUNIL CHOPRA, LUDHIANA

## Need for informed consent

The admission by AstraZeneca regarding a serious side effect of its Covid-19 vaccine is deeply concerning. It underscores the importance of transparency in a vaccine rollout. While doctors reassure us about the rarity of the risk, the revelation demands further scrutiny. As we navigate through the complexities of vaccination drives, transparency must remain paramount. Every individual deserves the chance to give an informed consent while making decisions about his or her health. Vigilance, coupled with swift action, is imperative to ensuring public trust in vaccination efforts. Let this serve as a reminder of the need for rigorous monitoring and accountability in every vaccination drive.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

## Ban Covishield vaccine

Pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca has admitted in court that its Covid-19 vaccine, known as Covishield in India, can cause blood clotting and low platelet count. The company faces a class action lawsuit in the UK over claims that the vaccine has caused deaths and severe injuries to recipients. More than 175 crore doses of the vaccine have been administered in India. In view of the admission by the firm and the safety concerns that arose during the immunisation drive in India, the use of Covishield and other Covid vaccines should be stopped.

VJAYKUMAR HK, RAICHUR (KARNATAKA)

# India leveraging AI technology to make gains



**SUBIR ROY**  
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

**A**RTIFICIAL intelligence (AI) is proving to be hugely beneficial to the Indian information technology (IT) services sector. The sector is developing tools and systems that it is passing on to clients across the world to enable them to reap the benefits of the rapidly emerging and maturing technology. This is becoming a new and critical line of product offerings that will enable the sector to remain at the forefront of emerging technology, grow fast and continue to be highly profitable.

AI simulates the cognitive processes of the human brain, and generative AI (GenAI), on being fed enormous amounts of data, produces on-demand speech, text, images, audios and videos. These are critical for the country, as its technology sector earned substantial revenue of \$254 billion in 2023-24, up 3.8 per cent from the previous year. Out of this, exports accounted for \$200 billion (nearly 80 per cent); technology exports accounted for 28

per cent of the total exports. Even as the Indian technology sector is helping its global clients use the newly emerging AI and GenAI to take it forward, it is developing tools and products for its own use, enabling it to cut costs and raise its efficiencies manifold. AI, in fact, has become critical as it is enabling the software sector to remain relevant and go forward technologically.

Infosys is a leader in reimagining work, workplace and workforce by leveraging AI so that it is able to get more value out of its staff. Not just Infosys but other IT leaders, such as HCLTech and LTIMindtree, have taken on board Copilot, Microsoft's AI-based conversational chat interface.

Infosys has also incorporated the GenAI learning process into its platform, Lex, and it is being actively adopted by its employees. Additionally, an AI knowledge assistant of a higher order has been rolled out to all the company's leaders so that they can bring about improvements in the firm's sales process. As a result, processes that could take weeks can now be completed in days.

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), IBM and Wipro are following the same route. They are adopting AI processes in areas like human resource management, automating IT infrastructure and driving sales. IBM finds that, as a result of adopting AI in its



**PROGRESS:** There is little doubt that the Indian IT sector has graduated to a higher skill level with its adoption of AI and GenAI. iStock

own processes, it is able to raise value creation per unit of time by as much as 70 per cent. What is more, by becoming the first user of the GenAI processes developed by it, the vendor is able to debug the process and pass on a much better offering to its clients.

TCS found that the first step — getting its employees to understand GenAI — was in itself a big task. This is partly because as many as three lakh of its employees have by now been trained in basic AI skills.

In the IT space, India has already acquired the attributes of a developed country.

Wipro is going through a process of using an AI-powered enterprise chatbot to handle business queries, automate tasks and provide information to employees to enable them to do their work better. It is being used by companies in 53 countries to improve their knowledge management and boost productivity. The chatbot typically responds to employees in five seconds and is 95 per cent accurate.

GenAI is also helping another major part of soft-

ware services, business process management (BPM), which responds to customer queries to deliver better and at a lower cost. With the use of GenAI, till now the main vehicle of BPM delivery, the call centre will be required only minimally. If things keep going this way, in the not-too-distant future, only a few centres will be needed to handle incoming calls. Technology should be able to predict incoming calls and proactively address customer concerns. With the use of GenAI, many Indian BPM companies have been able to shift away from low-end voice-based services. As a result, some of this work has shifted to the Philippines. Firms in India are now using AI-driven chatbots to handle a lot of their work, which earlier used to be handled by their staff.

As Indian IT firms train their staff to handle GenAI for their work and deliver it to customers, the level of skills in the country is rising rapidly. This has caused a sharp rise in the operations of captives, or, as they are now called, global capability centres (GCCs) of international players. Many of these are now focused on areas like engineering research and development. Over time, more and more of the new models of cars of global players like Benz, which are now mostly made up of electronics, are being developed

at their Indian GCCs. There are now around 1,600 GCCs in India, with around 50 added last year.

There is little doubt that the Indian IT scene has graduated to a higher skill level with its adoption of AI and GenAI. This has enabled it to keep pace with the global development of technology and improve its value addition. This is likely to enable Indian IT services to continue to hold the pre-eminent position in the global marketplace that it does today. What began as an entity that was able to get low-paid engineers to write computer code cheaply is today keeping pace with the development of the latest phenomenon in information technology, GenAI.

The impact of this on the Indian economy will be twofold. The IT services sector will continue to be a top foreign exchange earner, thus bolstering the economy as a whole and allowing it to import the machinery needed to start high-end manufacturing being encouraged by the production-linked incentive scheme. Simultaneously, the country's IT companies are themselves becoming more and more valuable and focal points for inward foreign direct investment. The powers that be have set a target of making India a developed country by 2047, but in the IT space, it has already acquired 'developed' status.

# Paradigm shift needed to improve water use efficiency



**SP VASUDEVA**  
EX-DIRECTOR, UNION MINISTRY OF WATER RESOURCES

**L**AATEST data released by the Central Water Commission paints a grim picture of the live storage in India's reservoirs, particularly in the southern states. The reservoir levels in South India have plummeted to just 17 per cent of their capacity amid a widespread heatwave. This does not augur well for the water security of the region and the country as a whole.

India, which accounts for 4 per cent of the world's water resources, uses them for irrigation, and domestic and industrial purposes. Surface and groundwater, as per ease of availability, are put to various uses. There is, however, a shortage of water across states, leading to crop failure, deaths, closing down of healthcare facilities and industries. India has become 'water-stressed', with the per capita per year water availability being 1,545 cubic metres, less than the stipulated 1,700 cubic metres. At this rate, India is projected to become 'water-scarce' by

2050, when the availability will be less than 1,000 cubic metres.

Various states have made significant infrastructural investments in irrigation, but a lack of regular maintenance and quality service are causing bottlenecks. Water left untreated after domestic, industrial and other uses is causing surface and groundwater pollution. Groundwater is also getting polluted through an excessive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The Centre had informed the Supreme Court in 2016 that about 33 crore people in 256 districts of 10 states were affected by drought. Appropriate practices, innovative technologies and positive participation of all stakeholders are required for moving towards sustainable and efficient water use management.

India started on a positive note after Independence by utilising surface water of rivers through multipurpose projects, hydroelectric and water harvesting dams. However, over the past four decades, about 84 per cent of the total addition to irrigation areas, 80 per cent of the drinking water needs and most of the industrial use is met from groundwater. India, consequently, is the world's largest user of groundwater, accounting for 25 per cent of the global withdrawals. As a result, the water table has been dipping at an average of



**NEEDS:** India, which accounts for 4 per cent of the world's water resources, uses them for irrigation and domestic and industrial purposes. iStock

0.4 metre every year.

With water being a state subject, states/UTs need to do policy correction. The adoption of measures such as water conservation, groundwater recharge, conjunctive use of surface and groundwater, economic use of water through appropriate pricing and application of technologies and increasing water use efficiency through recycling can improve the situation. The implementation of measures like crop rotation and diversification, increase in drip and sprinkler irrigation and creating awareness can further bring water use efficiency.

The National Water Mission was launched in 2011 in order to conserve water, reduce wastage and ensure equitable distribution across and within states, besides introducing

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a framework for optimising water use efficiency by 20 per cent. Many interventions and schemes have been introduced under this mission. The 'Per Drop More Crop' scheme, introduced in 2015, promotes water use efficiency through micro irrigation, especially drip and sprinkler irrigation. However, only about 10 per cent of the net sown area has been covered under micro irrigation. The Sahi Raisal campaign — an awareness generation programme for educating farmers to adopt crops that are economically remunerative, environmental friendly and improve water use efficiency — has been launched. It is moving at a slow pace, but would bring dividends if implemented in right earnest. The Jal Shakti

Abhiyan is being implemented since 2019, with multi-stakeholder participation, especially of women, to optimise harvesting of rainwater and integrating it with afforestation. Desilting of water bodies and revitalising of abandoned borewells have also been initiated. Progress under this initiative is dismal, with watershed development works progressing at a sluggish pace and intensive afforestation yet to begin.

Atal Bhujal Yojana was started in 2020 to deal with overexploited and water-stressed areas of seven states. The Union Ministry of Jal Shakti has circulated a Model Bill among all states/UTs to curb overexploitation and depletion of groundwater. Several states have enacted legislation, but implementation has been effected only in a few. Industries extracting groundwater in excess of 100 cubic metres/day are now required to get an annual water audit done and reduce water use by 20 per cent over the next three years. This is a step in the right direction.

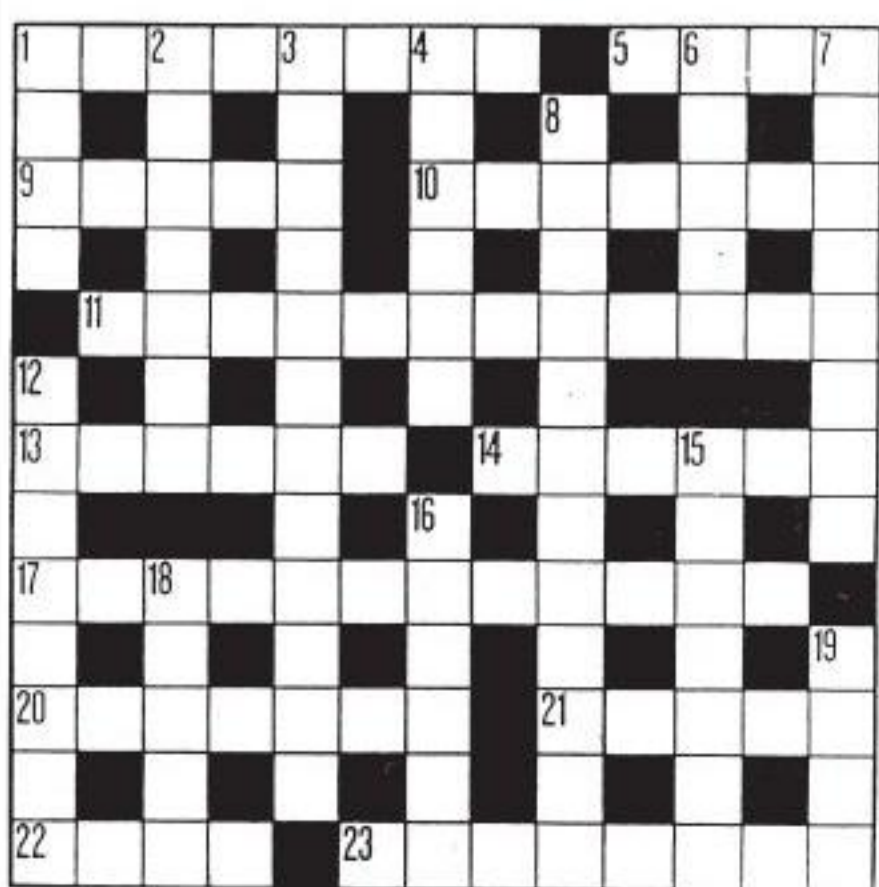
The Jal Jeevan Mission is on course to provide piped drinking water with a functional tap connection to each household in the country by the year-end. About 76 per cent of the rural households have been covered and those remaining and in urban areas are being targeted. Participatory irrigation management has brought efficiency and reduced the gap

between the created and utilised irrigation potential. These actions are helping in moving towards demand-driven supply of drinking and irrigation water that would make consumers responsible for making timely payments that can be utilised for proper operation and maintenance of infrastructure.

The NITI Aayog has developed the Composite Water Management Index (CWMI), covering drinking water, irrigation, sanitation, source augmentation and restoration of water bodies and groundwater, watershed development, sustainable on-farm water use practices to access and further improve water management performance. These performance indicators, integrated with improved policy and governance, are providing useful information to states/UTs and Union ministries/departments to formulate and implement sustainable strategies and practices for efficient and sustainable water management.

There is a need for a paradigm shift in taking forward strategies and regulations and integrating these through the CWMI. However, the absence of holistic implementation and regular and participatory monitoring at the block, district, state and national levels is hindering the pursuit of sustainable supply and improved water use efficiency.

## QUICK CROSSWORD



### ACROSS

- Persuade to believe (8)
- In excess of (4)
- Justification (5)
- Superficial (7)
- On a very short-term basis (4,3,2,3)
- Overjoyed (6)
- To the other side (6)
- In irresponsible manner (4,3,5)
- Single eyeglass (7)
- A break in speaking (5)
- Contest between two (4)
- Reserved (8)

### DOWN

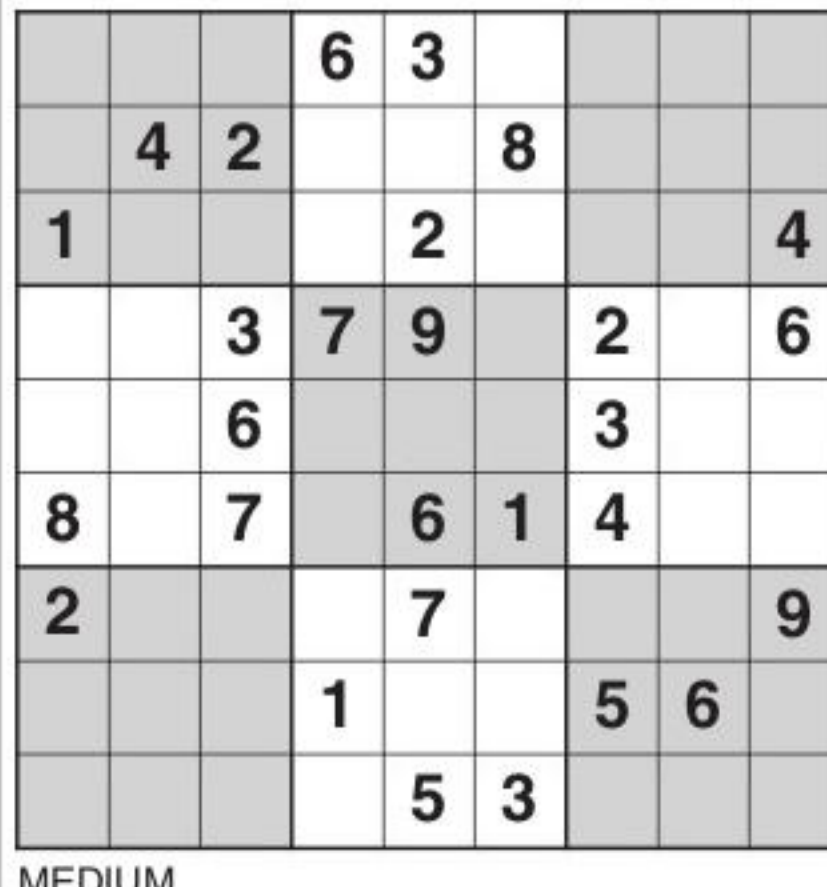
- Feel concern (4)
- West African republic (7)
- Lack of due restraint (12)
- Unconcerned (6)
- Logically correct (5)
- Noisy disorderly conduct (8)
- Deed done and irreversible (4,8)
- Fragrant (8)
- Not easily understood (7)
- Hold fast (6)
- Burn superficially (5)
- For fear that (4)

### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

**Across:** 1 Hold water, 8 About, 9 Outcast, 10 Pardon, 11 Senior, 12 Ancestor, 15 Verbatim, 18 Manage, 20 Tongue, 21 Inhabit, 22 Delve, 23 Tall order.

**Down:** 2 Of use, 3 Deceit, 4 Abstract, 5 Ravage, 6 Cordite, 7 At any rate, 11 Servitude, 13 Communal, 14 Trundle, 16 Amulet, 17 Unfair, 19 Guile.

## SU DO KU



MEDIUM

### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

### CALENDAR

#### MAY 2ND 2024, THURSDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Vaishakh Shaka 12
- Vaishakh Parvinte 20
- Hijari 1445
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 9, up to 1.54 am
- Shukla Yoga up to 5.19 pm
- Dhanishtha Nakshatra up to 1.49 am
- Moon enters Aquarius sign 2.33 pm
- Panchak start 2.33 pm

## FORECAST

CITY	THURSDAY FRIDAY	
	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	33	20
New Delhi	37	20
Amritsar	34	17
Bathinda	36	17
Jalandhar	34	17
Ludhiana	34	20
Bhiwani	37	22
Hisar	37	20
Sirsa	36	20
Dharamsala	25	11
Manali	25	07
Shimla	23	11
Srinagar	21	07
Jammu	33	18
Kargil	16	04
Leh	12	03
Dehradun	37	16
Mussoorie	25	11

TEMPERATURE IN °C