

## Headcount Down, It's Not Final Countdown

Signals bigger emerging opportunities soon

Infosys and TCS reported declines in headcount in 2023-24 after around two decades. Till now, revenues of Indian infotech companies bore a linear relation to their hiring. Although business is slow, revenue growth during the year for both companies was positive, and the breakdown of the correlation with headcount addition points to structural shifts brought on by automation. It may be early days yet for the effects of generative AI to show up in the tech job market. But Indian IT workers, like their counterparts in the US, are losing their ability to negotiate salaries without additional skills.

Globally, companies are tightening tech budgets in an environment of high inflation, and the focus appears to be bloated wage bills where there is scope to cut costs. Earlier, this would have a positive fallout on outsourcing and jobs in India's IT industry. The causality is less certain now, and is headed for non-linearity as entry-level positions are extinguished by AI. Tech jobs like software and web developers, programmers, coders and data scientists are vulnerable — to a point. Large Indian IT companies will be early adopters of AI and will catalyse tech diffusion to broader segments of the economy. A few years later, IT job seekers with AI skills will have a larger pool of employers, both local and foreign, bidding for their skills as they automate business processes. The net impact should be positive, given our digitally-trained workforce's size and global pace of AI adoption.

AI promises a quantum jump in productivity on the lines of — but on a much greater scale than — the introduction of word processors and spreadsheets. India is uniquely placed to drive that transition and generate employment through ensuring productivity gains. IT jobs here are shifting up in value, and the displaced workforce is mobile enough to be absorbed in other industries with minor reskilling. Headcount declines at frontline IT companies signal bigger emerging opportunities within a reasonable timeframe. The dislocation is not going to hurt too much.



## Cloud-Seeding Isn't a Rain/Water Solution

The Dubai deluge prompted much speculation about whether the UAE's cloud-seeding programme was the culprit. It turns out that it's almost certain it wasn't. The extreme rain event was most probably spurred by climate change coupled with freak weather conditions. But curiosity about cloud-seeding lingers. What it is, is a weather-modification technique that began in the 1940s when two scientists from General Electric used silver iodide bullets to generate artificial rain. During the Vietnam War between 1967 and 1972, the US spent some \$3 mn each year on weather-modification campaigns designed to draw out the monsoon season and create muddy, challenging conditions for enemy fighters a continent away.

Today, China has the most extensive cloud-seeding programme in the world. In 2022, it was used to bring more rainfall to the Yangtze that had dried up. At least 52 countries have cloud-seeding programmes. Last year, the Delhi government had considered cloud-seeding to combat pollution. But after expert advice, it refrained from playing Indra.

Many climate scientists believe that cloud-seeding can only help at the margins. But its popularity only shows increasing desperation for a quick fix to the effects of climate change. These attempts are like other geoengineering methods, like reflecting sunlight before it hits Earth using sulfate aerosols. Moreover, manipulating weather patterns can lead to conflicts of interest, as different groups may have opposing preferences. It can also be weaponised. India has raised questions about China's weather-modification activities and its link with flash floods in Himalayan states. Such quick fixes have limited use. Reducing carbon emissions should be seen as the prime solution to weather 'mood swings'.



### JUST IN JEST

Biden channels his inner Prince Philip to explain a mysterious death in the family

## Story of Uncle Joe's Non-Veg Uncle Bosie

Everybody loves their uncles. They're the X sauce in the family mix, racontouring away and making comments so non-PC that you have to pinch yourself to see if you're woke. Earlier this week, Uncle Joe — Biden when he's playing Oval House — said his uncle, Ambrose J Finnegan Jr a.k.a. Uncle Bosie, 'got shot down in [Papua] New Guinea' during World War 2. Chacha Biden went on about how his body was never found because 'there used to be a lot of cannibals, for real, in that part of New Guinea'. Just for the record, the White House is not vegan.

Pentagon's records of Uncle Bosie have a bone to pick with Joe's version. Officially, he was one of three men lost when the plane they were in crashed off the PNG coast. Explaining that some communities did practise cannibalism in the past in specific contexts, PNG authorities said, "They wouldn't just eat any White men who fell from the sky." Whether Joe-ing around or not, this could be King Biden in his Prince Philip mode. In 1988, during a visit to the Oceanic country, Philip a.k.a. Mr Queen Elizabeth had asked a Brit student trekking in PNG, 'You managed not to get eaten, then?' Yes, it was a quip, but a classic Philip one suggesting there were still people-eating people in the region. So, was the nephew, with his history of occasionally lapsing into 'unreason', having his Hannibal Lecter moment?

As Iran-Israel escalates, India must keep calm and carry on choosing its friends strategically

## New Old Testament Time



Indrani Bagchi

Israel didn't wait for the Jewish holiday of Passover, nor did Benjamin Netanyahu heed Joe Biden's call to 'take the win'. The escalatory spiral is a given now in the only war that has the potential to blow out of control in possibly the most volatile region of the world. Has the last word been spoken? Given the history of the region, unsurprisingly unlikely.

While Iran and Israel have conducted both a clandestine and proxy war with each other for years, the latest crisis can be traced to Netanyahu's reckless decision to strike Iran's embassy complex in Damascus, Syria, on April 1. The strike was a violation of international law. It was also done without consultations with Israel's allies who may have counselled restraint.

The Israeli action set a dangerous precedent. Iran, smarting under repeated targeted assassinations of its military leaders and nuclear scientists by Israel, vowed revenge. Iran has also been at the receiving end of ISIS and Jaish al-Adl terror groups for some months now, and is particularly vulnerable in their internal security. It has faced domestic protests over hijab rules for over a year. A faltering economy has turned many younger Iranians to question Iran's commitment to a war in another land, rather than focusing on its own development.

Revenge is a bad policy — this applies to both Iran and Israel. Iran's retaliation last Saturday night was over the top. Even though it had telegraphed its intent for almost a fortnight, with Israel clearing out its embassies in many countries, the attack, with 300 drones, cruise and bal-

listic missiles, was suicidal, enough to spark a larger war. Iranian drones have been at work in the Russia-Ukraine war, and in 2021, were used by Tehran's proxy Houthis to target a Saudi oil refinery.

Israeli counter-retaliation was built into the Iranian action. Iranian leaders would have been in a la-la land if they believed Israel would let things be. Any statement that ends with the threat of 'stronger action' in case of an Israeli response is only inviting a response. As tension builds up, Iran has also promised to 'review' its nuclear stance. Now Israel has given them a reason. What will Iran do with this political justification?

The region is no stranger to what Thomas Friedman coined as 'Hama Rules' — promising destruction of the enemy. Witness the near-destruction of Gaza after the October 7 terror attacks. Or contemplate what could have happened if the massive Iranian strikes

The latest crisis can be traced to Netanyahu's reckless decision to strike Iran's embassy complex in Damascus, Syria, on April 1



into Israel had succeeded. Now that Israel has struck several Iranian cities, mutually assured destruction is unfolding in slow-mo.

Israeli action against Hezbollah in Lebanon has intensified, as has its bombardment of Gaza. The US has announced sanctions against Iran's drone and missile capabilities, to appease Israel. G7 will take similar steps against Iran. But that is not the point. No one says Western treatment of the crisis is even-handed, or pretends to be so.

The most remarkable fact about the April 13 rain of missiles was that Israel was largely unharmed. Almost 99% of them were destroyed by Israel, the US, Britain and Jordan, aided by real-time intel from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Traditional allies like the US and Britain stepped up to help, even if they had to hold their noses. But new allies stepped out of the closet — which is the story of this century. Iran's closest allies Russia and



Gloom and Dhoom

China will be tested for their support in the coming days.

The real winner of last weekend's Night of the Long Missiles was the Abraham Accords. These pacts, a Trump-Jared Kushner legacy, have stood a tough test. They are the basis of what will constitute the core alliance in West Asia.

Iran is a common enemy. The US hates Iran for a host of reasons, beginning with the storming of its embassy in 1979. Saudi Arabia and the UAE harbour a centuries-old hatred of the Persian Shia. And Israel sees Iran as an existential threat.

Iran has almost 20 proxies. But a lesson from Pakistan is these groups invariably bites the hand that feeds them. Israel has found new friends, and both sides have an equal interest in the other's success. That's important in a world where the US is often preoccupied with itself.

India took a more even-handed position on the Iran strikes, likely irritated by Israel's Syria miscalculation and having to protect 17 Indian

sailors in a ship seized by Iran. But, looking ahead, India's I2U2 and IMEC will be alive and well, given the new Arab-Israeli understanding.

India is not caught in this war. Oil will continue to flow through the Strait of Hormuz. If they close, Iran will shut out essential commodities. Unless Iraq, Syria or Hezbollah decide to wreak violence on Israel, Iran is largely on its own. China will continue to buy almost all of Iran's oil, even through third countries like Oman and Malaysia. Oil prices have climbed. But there is enough spare capacity in the world to offset this.

This is not the time for hyperventilation but cold strategic thinking. India has legitimate worries about the developing axis that includes Russia, China, Iran and North Korea (Pakistan? Qatar?).

India should not be carried away with its rhetoric. It must choose its friends, and not have everyone at its table. It's too crowded and there's not enough to eat.

The writer is CEO, Ananta Aspen Centre



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Just Listen!

OSHO

Listening is one of the basic secrets of entering the temple. Listening means passivity. Listening means forgetting yourself completely; only then can you listen. When you listen attentively to somebody, you forget yourself. If you cannot forget yourself, you simply pretend that you are listening — you don't listen. When you listen, you become just a passage, a passivity, a receptivity, a womb; you become feminine. When you become yin, receptivity, the door is open. And you wait.

Listening is the art of becoming passive. The ears are symbolic. Have you watched? Your ears are nothing but passages, just holes, nothing else. Your ears are more feminine than your eyes; your eyes are more male. Your ears are a yin part; your eyes are a yang part. When you look at somebody, you are aggressive. When you listen to somebody, you are receptive.

That's why looking at somebody for too long a time becomes vulgar, impolite, unmanly. But listening to a person has no limit because the ears cannot trespass. They simply remain wherever they are. The ears need no rest; they are open 24 hours. The eyes cannot remain open even for minutes. Aggression tires because aggression takes your energy out; so, the eyes have to blink continuously in order to rest. It is a continuous rest. The ears are rested always. That's why music has been used by many religions as an approach toward prayer because music will make your ears more vibrant, more sensitive.

From 'A Sudden Clash of Thunder', courtesy: Osho International Foundation; www.osho.com

## AI Needs to Be Kept Under an IA Eye



Sindhu Vethody

A recent report from Gartner on security and risk management (SRM) of companies forecasts:

- ▶ Worldwide end-user spending on SRM is projected to be around \$215 bn in 2024, an increase of 14.3% from 2023.
- ▶ Spending on security services — consulting, IT outsourcing, implementation and hardware support — is forecast to total \$90 bn in 2024, an increase of 11%.
- ▶ Security services are expected to represent the largest area of total SRM end-user spending in 2024 at 42%.
- ▶ Increasing adoption of IA by firms means the security of such systems from threats and vulnerabilities is paramount. This is where the internal audit (IA) function becomes essential. IA plays a crucial role in ensuring:
  - ▶ Controls for IA security are established and effective in mitigating risks.
  - ▶ Organisations maintain integrity

and reliability of their AI systems, thereby safeguarding sensitive data and maintaining trust in the digital ecosystem.

Some principal strategies and considerations of IA for AI security control requirements:

- ▶ **Understand AI-plus risks** Deepen and strengthen understanding of AI technologies, their applications and specific risks they pose. AI systems are complex and have their vulnerabilities, which traditional security controls often fail to address.
- ▶ **In data poisoning**, for instance, the decision-making process of AI becomes vulnerable to adversarial manipulation. Moreover, all these attacks look out for weak models. So, it's important to be aware of such risks for effective audits of AI security.
- ▶ **Update audit skills & knowledge** Auditors also need to upskill themselves with the abilities and knowledge that AI systems are to be judged with. That would include a proper understanding of AI algorithms, data processing and an environment regulated around its use. Auditors should continue learning and developing professionally, and maintain a competitive edge in constantly growing threats and technologies.



See things, stay real

▶ **Collaborate with experts** Complexity means that IA functions will have to start considering partnering with AI experts, such as data scientists and AI security specialists. This collaboration would help an auditor understand the AI systems that were in place at the time, why some model decisions were made, and what security controls had been implemented in the system. The latter could also enable a more focused and effective audit of AI systems.

▶ **A risk-based audit approach** Best way to audit AI systems would be to identify and prioritise AI applications based on their criticality to the organisation, and the risks they may represent. High-risk areas may include AI systems that process sensitive data, influence critical decisions and interfere with external systems. Areas of interest to audit shall

be those of applicability and effectiveness in these high-risk areas concerning security controls.

▶ **Assessing security controls** Whether the organisation's AI security controls cover best practices and regulatory requirements should be determined independently. Security controls should contain facilities within data protection mechanisms, processes to validate models and incident response plans on an AI-specific basis. So, due consideration for the organisation's ethical deployment of AI should also be given to auditors, keeping in mind biases and discriminations that these systems may be subjected to.

▶ **Continuous monitoring & assurance** IA can recommend implementing tools and techniques for AI security monitoring, such as anomaly detection and automated vulnerability assessment. It is critical to continuously assure that AI security controls are functioning as designed.

Following these strategies could reduce the risk of AI threats, and encourage the ethical and responsible use of AI technologies.

The writer is managing director, Pratiwiti India

## GIFTwrap for Golden Return Visa



Manjeet Kripalani

Golden visa is the new status symbol in India. Different countries use official titles like Global Talent Visa, Startup Visa, Citizenship by Investment, and Global Investor Programme. But, technically, it is a 'residence by investment programme'.

It offers residency benefits, including healthcare, tax, new markets, education and visa-free travel to any individual and their family who invests between \$50,000 and \$1mn in any of the over 100 countries that offer such a programme. A golden visa-holder is eligible for citizenship after 5-10 years. Typically, individuals can hold double or triple golden visas and passports.

According to Citizenship Invest, nearly 10% of all golden visas are given to wealthy Indians. Singapore and Dubai are favourites for golden visa holders from India. Many belong to the generation of businessmen who benefited from the 1991 reforms and leveraged the visa to keep their family wealth insulated in a different jurisdiction.

There's good reason: heirs of dynastic India Inc are being outcompeted by a new generation of hungry and talented Indian entrepreneurs who, like the country's star national

cricket teams, are emerging from India's second-tier cities and towns.

While schemes were initially offered to draw HNIs, talented entrepreneurs and investors to countries that desired or needed them, geopolitics and criminality are getting in the way. EU countries that offer golden visa schemes have attracted \$13 bn in annual revenues. However, according to Global Witness and Transparency International, these programmes have been abused.

Financial Action Task Force's November 2023 report pointed out that criminals have exploited vulnerabilities in these programmes to commit fraud, crime and corruption in the billions of dollars, and are able to hide their assets. Consequently, many countries — especially in the EU — have begun to suspend these schemes, some completely and some, like Spain, have restricted golden visas for real estate investors.

Other advanced countries like Australia suspended the scheme when they found that 85% of their golden visas were granted to people from China, many of them corrupt officials. However, small countries like Vanuatu in the Indo-Pacific attribute 12% of their GDP to citizenship by

investment. They cannot afford to turn away 50% of applicants who are Chinese nationals.

Golden visas are now losing their sheen. Developed countries like Britain and some in the EU, as well as cities in the US, are facing growing social and security issues. Educational institutions that attract fee-paying students, especially from India and China, have managed to ring-fence themselves

for the picking for the moment. However, student security is a problem.

Therefore, it may be time for wealthy Indians to turn homeward again. Though there are still legitimate deterrents — tax and regulatory hurdles and challenges in the ease of doing business being a few — India is making progress.

GIFT City (Gujarat International Finance Tec-City) in Ahmedabad district, which is priming to be India's International Financial Centre (IFC), could be India's first 'anti-golden visa' option. Plans for an IFC elsewhere were made in 2007. But multiple and repeated delays and setbacks are only being overcome now.

Physically, the greenfield city, 20 mins away from Ahmedabad, has appeal. Office towers have begun to sprout, as have international hotels, hospitals, schools, international colleges, and affordable and luxury housing.

Financially, it's trying to overcome roadblocks that businesses complain

about. IFSCA, as a unified regulator, has institutions from RBI and Sebi to IRDAI and PFRDA under its jurisdiction for a holistic resolution of issues and to avoid India's bureaucratic overlap. It has a hi-tech and high-security international stock exchange. There are tax benefits galore — exemptions on corporate tax, reduced minimum alternative tax, 10-year tax holiday. These should attract ship and aircraft leasing and startups, especially in fintech.

India has a long way to go as the competition in Asia is stiff compared to other financial centres like Seoul, Singapore and Dubai. Still, GIFT City has seen a substantial increase in interest this year, given global instability and the pushback against China. Foreign diplomats have been making a beeline to this new space, as have lawyers, accountants and family offices. So far, 176 investors, including two Australian universities, are licensed to operate in GIFT City. 238 more applicants are reportedly in line.

A possible way to attract Indian businessmen back is for GIFT City to add a branch office in Mumbai. It has homegrown business talent, plentiful bars and Bollywood glamour, something that Gujarat lacks. Here, the wealthy can continue to reside in expensive sea-facing homes with their funds invested in GIFT — in exchange for keeping anti-money-laundering authorities far from the city's bay.

The writer is co-founder-executive director, Gateway House



LOLLING ON SATURDAY

## Three Engineers' Body Question

Three engineering students were gathered together discussing the possible designers of the human body. One said, 'It was a mechanical engineer. Just look at all the joints.'

Another said, 'No, it was an electrical engineer. The nervous system has many thousands of electrical connections.'

The last one said, 'No, actually it had to have been a civil engineer. Who else would run a toxic waste pipeline through a recreational area?'

## Facing Yama

A dog, a bird and a cat have died. All three face Yama sitting on his resplendent throne, who asks each one what they believe in. The dog replies, 'Disci-



pline, training and loyalty to my master.' Yama considers her answer and replies, 'You may sit on my right.'

The bird replies, 'I believe in singing for my master to make him happy.' The lord of death considers his answer and replies, 'Then you may sit on my left.'

Then he looks at the cat. 'And what do you believe in?' The cat answers, 'I believe you are sitting in my seat.'

## Chat Room

### Avoid Sun Roast, Enjoy Ghee Roast

Apropos 'So, What'll Be Your Voting Show Time?' (Just In Jest, Apr 19), though inured to the Chennai sun, the headline temperature inflation did prompt my brother-in-law to repair very early morning to the polling booth. Decades of well-oiled election machinery ensured his prompt discharge of his electoral onus. His triumphant inked finger, thereafter eager to dip into the chutney that comes with the dosa at the nearby Akshaya, was dismayed at the huge crowd of similar devotees to the festival of franchise, wherein one would repay the debt of the year-round freebies. His breakfast was destined for the homely hearth. The adage, one cannot be hungry for change on a contented stomach, is an enduring one.

R NARAYANAN  
Navi Mumbai

# Opinion

SATURDAY, APRIL 20, 2024

## DIGITAL ACCESS FOR ALL

Union minister for information &amp; broadcasting Anurag Thakur

[Mobile connectivity] not only bridges the digital divide but also empowers rural communities, opening doors to a world of opportunities



## STATE OF ALLOCATION

THERE IS A NEED TO REVIEW THE MECHANISM OF TRANSFERS AND THE CRITERIA GOVERNING THEM

# Secular bias in resource transfer

**C**OOPERATIVE FISCAL FEDERALISM works effectively in the belief that different tiers of government function efficiently through collaboration among themselves. Their interactions occur under rules that are transparent, consistent, and unambiguously known to all participants. However, we see an asymmetry in allocation of resources and expenditure responsibilities among the different tiers of government. This requires an optimal resource transfer mechanism to facilitate delivery of services at different tiers so that the right incentives are provided to each tier for maximising welfare.

The states, however, believe that the asymmetry envisaged in the Constitution has accentuated beyond the levels contemplated and tilted in favour of the central government. The better-off states are concerned that the transfers are unduly biased against them and that would create a situation of adverse incentives. First, this is because of treating different sets of receipts as independent rather than fungible and a part of the whole, such as non-tax receipts being not a part of the divisible pool and increasing recourse to cess and surcharges. Second, the criteria being followed for interstate allocation of resources have often ignored their contribution to resource generation and genuine expenditure commitments. The first issue was recognised by the 14th Finance Commission, which rightly observed that in resource transfers it is necessary to consider resources and expenditures for both the Union and the states by creating an appropriate fiscal space at each tier.

There have been significant changes in the nature and quantum of transfers to the states. Prior to the recommendation of the 10th Finance Commission, only the proceeds of income tax and excise duties were sharable. The 10th Finance Commission recommended global sharing of tax receipts, which has since continued with an increase in the share of states from 26% to 42%. Overall share of states in

gross revenue receipts of the Union has increased post-14th Finance Commission to average 51% in the past decade. The share of taxes, as entitlement, reached an average of 29% of gross revenue. Another 22%, discretionary in nature, is by way of grants. Notwithstanding the overall increase, inter-se transfers among different categories of states is biased in favour of the less advantaged ones. Some broad characteristics of resource transfers are indicated in the table.

The table reveals that for NE and more disadvantaged states, transfers account for a bulk of their revenue receipts. While tax transfers are more biased in their favour, discretionary transfers in terms of grants and schemes are more equitably distributed. Further, during 2014-2022, the overall resources largely maintained a reasonable growth for all category of states thanks to greater buoyancy of transfers from the Union. The buoyancy of the

states' own resources was less than unity and it had significantly eroded for the states in the southern region.

The bias in favour of backward states was purposive and encouraged by successive Finance Commissions (FCs). Their criteria for distribution of the divisible pool between the states significantly allocated higher weights to backwardness defined as distance from the best state in terms of per capita income. The idea behind such purposive bias was to compensate these states for their low fiscal capacity and to maintain a uniform level of civic amenities. Higher allocation would facilitate more inflow of private and government investment helping them to catch up in terms of personal incomes. This bias has persisted for over 70 years now. The outcome, however, is not unambiguously in favour of this purposive bias. The per capita income of backward states compared to the average of all states declined from 67% in 2000-

01 to 61% in 2021-22. For NE states, it declined from 87% to 77%; for the better-off states, it increased from 132% to 143%. The southern region showed a better performance in this period. Their per capita GSDP increased from 1.24% of all states to 158%. On civic amenities, the overall Sustainable Development Index shows a much better performance for the better-off states.

In view of this, there is a need to review the mechanism of transfers and the criteria governing such transfers. Discretionary transfers are more equitable and better targeted; it may be worthwhile considering more such transfers. A body like the Office for Budget Responsibility in the UK can balance the bias in such transfers. Further, to incentivise raising own resources in backward states, the FC can allocate a percentage of divisible pool in proportion to own resources raised. This will indirectly provide the better-off states a better share in resources raised in their domain area. We need to reduce the apprehension that those who contribute to resource generation have a limited share in their use. Such allocation will facilitate greater capital formation and better resource management. It will force states to focus on raising their own resources rather than seeking fiscal packages.

**R GOPALAN  
MC SINGHI**

The authors are former civil servants.



### CHARACTERISTICS OF TRANSFER OF RESOURCES FROM UNION TO STATES

	Transfers as % of				Per capita transfer		Tax transfers, %	Other transfers, %	Buoyancy of transfer
	Revenue receipts		GSDP		Average 2000-14	Average 2014-22	Average 2014-22	Average 2014-22	Average 2014-22
	Average 2000-14	Average 2014-22	Average 2000-14	Average 2014-22					
North East	74.3	76.8	20.3	19.6	6,612	19,443	8	10.7	1.108
Backward states	53	55.7	9.2	10.5	2,486	8,376	54.4	42.9	1.307
Other states	27.1	35.2	3.1	3.9	1,824	7,168	37.6	46.4	1.539
Southern states	27.2	34.4	3.4	3.9	1,949	7,757	17.5	21.5	1.419
<b>All states</b>	<b>39.6</b>	<b>45.8</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>2,320</b>	<b>8,230</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1.387</b>

Note: Backward states include Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Jammu &amp; Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, &amp; Uttarakhand

## The job drought in finance and tech is ending

**THE SOLID ECONOMIC** growth of the past few years hasn't translated for professionals looking for white-collar jobs. A hiring boom in 2021 turned into a slump by the second half of 2022 as rising interest rates and a post-pandemic hangover in key industries led companies to focus on controlling costs. Labour market conditions now appear to be somewhere between stabilising and improving for these workers, pointing to better times ahead.

The best way to gauge this is by looking at the Bureau of Labor Statistics' monthly Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey, and focusing on the professional and business services category that encompasses roles such as corporate managers, accountants, lawyers, and technical workers. The hiring rate here, which looks at how many people found jobs in a given month compared with the number employed in that industry, stabilised in the back half of 2023 from a year earlier after significant declines in late 2022 and early 2023. It's now recovered to be slightly positive on a year-over-year basis. You see the same pattern in the finance and insurance group.

One reason hiring slumped was because workers, worried about headcount reductions, stopped quitting their jobs as rapidly as they had during the 2021 boom. More people stayed put as opportunities in the labour market dwindled. With turnover slowing, companies had less need to hire. We're not back to 2021's heady pace of worker churn, but fear of job loss appears to be dissipating, and workers are starting to become more confident about exploring their options.

The March employment situation report backs up this change. For professional and business services workers, growth in aggregate weekly payrolls—a metric that serves as a rough proxy for incomes by combining jobs, the length of the workweek and wages—increased in the first three months of 2024 at the fastest rate since the third quarter of 2022. Bank of America noted in a recent report that for workers who make over \$125,000 (a group that tends to be white collar), after-tax incomes are starting to grow again after a sluggish 2023. Further evidence comes from the ongoing first-quarter earnings season where one of the drags on bank results was higher non-interest expenses, in part due to the need to pay up to draw talent.

Labour market "vibes" are also improving. The Conference Board's monthly consumer confidence survey has shown an uptick in the percentage of respondents saying that jobs are plentiful for each of the past five months. This improvement has been a long time coming. An 18-month hiring downturn is pretty lengthy considering that real GDP growth averaged 2.9% between the second half of 2022 and the full year of 2023. That's about how long the hiring downturn lasted during the recession brought on by the 2008 financial crisis. And the specific timing here can be traced back to how the economy and financial markets have evolved over the past six months. The stock market has surged. Recession fears have abated. Household and business confidence have improved. The Federal Reserve has pivoted from talking about rate hikes to hoping that subdued inflation data will allow them to ease policy. You'd expect all of that to lead to a positive shift in the outlook for hiring.

Two of the industries most associated with white-collar workers have specific reasons for optimism. While artificial intelligence may one day displace a lot of jobs, in the near term there is a need for tech companies to buy hardware, build data centres, hire workers, and create tools to leverage AI, resulting in something of a war for talent that can do all that. And Wall Street is finally seeing deals rebound from the downturn that began in the spring of 2022, an encouraging sign for those tied to investment banking activity.

Workers feeling better about their future job prospects may be one reason why consumer spending was so strong in the first quarter of the year, and why investors and the Fed have dialed back expectations for rate cuts this year. The combination of strong economic growth and persistently tepid demand for white-collar professionals wasn't sustainable, and the convergence means good news for workers.



**CONOR SEN**

Bloomberg



**SACHCHIDANAND SHUKLA**

Group Chief Economist, L&T  
Views are personal

## Signs of change in rural economy

While rural consumption may see a cyclical recovery, broader consumption will still play a secondary role as the govt continues to lean on capex-led growth

**THE STATE OF** consumption, especially in the rural economy, has become akin to a riddle ever since the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Multiple shocks, and that too in quick succession, have only added to the chaos. Unseasonal rainfall in Q1FY24 damaged crops and hurt output. In Q2, an erratic monsoon impacted sowing. Then, higher inflation, especially food inflation, had an adverse impact on discretionary expenditure and weighed on rural revival. Reservoir levels have fallen well below last year's levels, with the southern region's reservoirs being the worst hit. India's agricultural exports have seen the lowest growth in five years for the April-January period.

The busy electoral calendar, with several state elections in a short span of time, created differential expenditure patterns, as pre-electoral cycles typically meant higher government spending by the respective states. Poor spatial and temporal rainfall spread also had a debilitating impact on rural demand. Both these factors created huge distortions in income and consumption patterns that accentuated the skew across states and categories.

Importantly, according to latest data, real agriculture activity shrank by 0.8% year-on-year in Q3FY24, the first negative reading in nearly five years. Foodgrain production of major crops is estimated at 309 million tonnes for agricultural year (AY) 2024, which is 6% lower as compared to AY23. The Central Statistics Office's

advance estimate for FY24 indicated negative growth in Q4FY24, too. If that does play out, it would mean two consecutive quarters of negative real agri gross value added growth, the first such instance since FY15.

Yet, there has also been a distinct pattern of K-shaped rural recovery manifesting via high-ticket consumption and premiumisation across sectors within the rural sector. Demand for higher HP tractors, i.e. above 40 HP, reportedly grew thrice that of lower HP (sub-30 HP) tractors over the last three years. Demand for four-wheel (4W) drive in tractors also witnessed a rise. Similar trends, data and anecdotes are rife for categories such as 4W, 2W, real estate, and white goods categories across rural and urban segments, despite continued price hikes by companies.

However, there are some early signs of change in the background. Private weather agency Skymet has predicted that India will have a normal southwest monsoon in 2024. Monsoon rainfall between June and September is expected to be 102% of the long-period average (LPA).

There have been early cues for monsoon being normal from January onwards this year. APCC, the South Korean meteo-

rological agency, and even Skymet hinted at a normal monsoon in January. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) recently said that the current El Niño, one of the five strongest on record, has peaked, is gradually weakening, and is transitioning to La Niña, which typically results in stronger monsoon circulation.

The RBI's latest survey on consumer confidence for the current period has been on a path of sustained recovery. Consumer confidence for the year ahead has also improved further. The latest RBI report also pointed out that rural demand, which was lagging urban demand earlier, has picked up since Q2FY24. Notwithstanding lower estimates of rabi production, it cited a robust 20% rise in agricultural credit growth, strong

upticks in two-wheeler and tractor sales, and a fall in demand for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme as evidence of improvement in non-farm employment in rural areas and recovery in the informal sector.

Farm input prices deflated during September 2023-February 2024 due to a decline in the prices of diesel, fodder, pesticides, and fertilisers. The wholesale price index of electricity—a key component in both industry and farm inputs—

remained deflated for the most part in H2FY24. Nominal rural wages increased by 5.9% in January 2024, driven by wage growth in the non-agri rural sector.

However, one key factor that could have a huge impact on the fortunes of the rural sector is the government spending pattern. The Centre's revenue expenditure slowed to a mere 1% in February, even though, in aggregate, it grew 7%, driven by capex spending that increased to 36.5% y-o-y. State governments' spending on revenue account slowed to 6% y-o-y even as capex spend growth doubled. The pace of spending is likely to remain lacklustre till the new government presents the final Budget, and should likely rise in the second half of the year, giving a fillip to rural activity.

A normal monsoon is an important prerequisite for broader economic growth. Also, stronger rural and aggregate consumption will spur capacity utilisation levels that have flatlined lately around 75%. Importantly, a normal monsoon will be a critical input for the RBI to move decisively towards interest rate cuts, given the role of food inflation in quelling the inflation pitch for long now. But make no mistake, while rural consumption may see a cyclical recovery, broader consumption will continue to play a secondary role as the government continues to lean on a capex-led growth strategy.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Banking sector progress

Indian banks are actively adjusting deposit rates in response to a surge in credit growth, which has outpaced the former, leading to a liquidity squeeze in the financial system. This aims to attract funds and maintain liquidity amid challenging market conditions. However, higher deposit rates could adversely affect banks' profitability, particularly in a stable repo rate environment. With the repo

rate remaining at 6.5% since February 2023, a significant increase in deposit rates could erode net interest margins, directly impacting banks' profitability and ability to lend. To mitigate these risks, the Reserve Bank of India should consider gradually reducing interest rates for stability and support banks' profitability. Aligning deposit and lending rates with prevailing repo rates is essential to sustain the economic progress. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

### New tax code

Before 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked voters to give him 60 months after giving the Congress 60 years to run the nation. After two terms, he is asking for a third term, saying the earlier terms were a trailer and real action would come now. It is reported that the new direct tax code is ready for implementation. It is likely that the whatever revisions there may be, there will be no relief for the

salaried employee. The government wants to align the new DTC with international norms without considering the difference between the facilities offered to the taxpayers abroad and those that are offered here. Corporates get the best of treatment from the tax authorities while the salaried taxpayer has nowhere to hide. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra



## OPINION

The  
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OUR TAKE

## Pursuit of peace in the shadow of war

Israel and Iran should cease hostilities. Global diplomacy must work for de-escalation and the long-term objective of a Palestinian State

For several days now, the situation in West Asia has teetered precariously close to spiralling out of control and the latest Israeli strikes with drones on at least two Iranian cities on Friday will only add to fears of a wider conflict engulfing the region. The drone strikes targeted Isfahan, home to some of Iran's most important nuclear facilities, and could have been perceived by Tehran as a dangerous escalation. Iranian officials have apparently decided to play down the strikes, describing them as the work of "infiltrators" without any direct reference to Israel, and thus indicating there may not be any further retaliation. These Israeli drone strikes were retaliation for Iran's first direct attack on Israel with hundreds of drones and missiles last week, which in turn was a response to Israel's brazen attack on an Iranian diplomatic compound in Syria. Sure, both attacks have been calibrated, but it's worrying that there has been no cessation of hostilities.

The Iran-Israel tensions and the Israel-Hamas conflict, now into its seventh month, highlight the need for concerted global diplomacy aimed at the more immediate goal of de-escalation and the long-term objective of a two-state solution to Palestine. The US and its close partners have done too little to rein in Israel as it unleashed the unprecedented bombardment of the Gaza Strip and killed nearly 34,000 people. It is also difficult to buy into the argument proffered by Israeli officials that they didn't expect Iran to react strongly to the strike on the diplomatic facility in Syria. With public opinion turning against Israel's actions in Gaza in the US and large parts of Europe, US President Joe Biden and his European partners need to do more to pull the region back from the brink.

Diplomacy in West Asia has never been for the faint-hearted, and even more so now, and the US and its partners need to get back to the drawing board to come up with a solution that will address both the security imperatives of Israel and the need for a state for the Palestinian people. The West will need to engage with Tehran to ensure the success of efforts to find a lasting solution. Iran, for its part, will have to take a relook at its dangerous policy of arming and supporting a range of proxy forces in Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, Syria and Yemen as part of Tehran's efforts to extend its influence in West Asia since this has only exacerbated tensions across the region.

For a country that describes West Asia as part of its extended neighbourhood and has tremendous stakes across the region, India has appeared more as an onlooker amid the latest round of tensions. External affairs minister S Jaishankar recently spoke to his Iranian and Israeli counterparts to convey New Delhi's concerns and to emphasise the need to dial down the tensions. But West Asia watchers have for long believed India can play a much larger role in addressing the long-standing problems of the region because of its close relations with Israel and Arab states. India needs to leverage these relations to help bring the key actors to the table instead of merely insisting that dialogue and diplomacy are the only way forward. The costs of a wider conflagration in West Asia will be very high for India, which has nine million expatriates spread across the region. Besides the remittances from these Indian nationals, West Asia remains a key trading region and the primary source of energy.

## No wave in sight, big surprises are unlikely in offing

State-level and local factors may acquire more salience in the 2024 elections in comparison to the two previous elections

Polling for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections began on Friday, involving 102 parliamentary constituencies or nearly one-fifth of the country. Pre-poll surveys by several agencies have indicated a comfortable victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), without any significant change in the strength of the Opposition parties.

What are the risk factors associated with these estimates? And, what do they indicate about the emerging nature of politics in India?

First, while the BJP's campaign narrative focuses on national resurgence under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, there are no big emotive issues that could rile up sentiments nationally.

However, the BJP has made every effort to link the redrawing of the ideological arc of India's political mosaic to rising global prestige and the dream of a developed nation status for India by 2047, linking it to the idea of civilisational assertion. The Congress and other Opposition parties have stressed on economic issues (price rise and unemployment), independence of institutions, political corruption (electoral bonds), targeting of the Opposition and civil society institutions, and have termed this election as a battle to save India's democratic soul.

The pre-poll surveys have recorded significant anxiety over economic issues, but there is also support for the BJP's ideological projects. It remains to be seen which electoral narrative would voters repose their faith in, but this fault-line is likely to get shriller, and the gap between the two camps will get wider.

Second, there is a general refrain that despite

these narratives, the campaign in this election is rather muted. Party workers are not running around with enthusiasm and voters are not showing signs of any great excitement. While the big rallies by the top leadership on both sides are happening, street-level mobilisation is missing. The lengthy campaign period owing to seven-phased elections and heat cannot explain this as the last three elections too happened under similar conditions.

Is the campaign quieter this time because there is no big emotive issue or no new leadership on the campaign trail nationally? Or is it because of the inevitability of the outcome, in which the BJP is largely expected to retain power? It seems that muted election campaigns are likely to be the new norm as campaigning has become personalised, with the massive penetration of smartphones and access to social media platforms.

Third, while Modi enjoys considerable popularity in public opinion polls, there is no big pro-incumbency mood outside the core base — the so-called "wave election". The proportion of respondents in the Lokniti pre-poll surveys who said that the government should get another chance was lower than the PM's popularity rating and the NDA's projected vote share.

Will this muted campaign and the high probability of the incumbent's return as projected by the surveys, impact the intensity of political mobilisation, and therefore, result in lower turnout? Did Modi anticipate this when he gave the call for 370 seats for the BJP to entice party mobilisers? Indeed, there is a symbolic messaging behind the "abki baar 400 paar" pitch — keeping the organisational machinery agile and not letting it fall into complacency.

However, a higher turnout may not come about this election cycle. In 2019, the turnout in these 102 constituencies stood at 70%, two percentage points higher than the national average. The provisional figures from phase I indicate that we might have a lower-than-average turnout this election.

Fourth, while the aggregate picture may still



Rahul Verma

He is a research associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi.

## In West Asia, the game of deterrence has changed

On April 19, US officials anonymously confirmed that Israel had executed a drone strike near Isfahan, Iran's response has been to downplay the strikes, which can be characterised as Israel's response to the Iranian drone/missile attack on Israeli territory on April 13. While Iran and Israel have now both struck each other, the deterrence balance has effectively shifted in Iran's favour.

Deterrence, according to economic Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling, can be characterised as preventing an adversary from any undesirable action by imposing a credible fear of consequences. The credibility of the threatened consequences is married to the actual ability to carry it out, should the adversary continue to act in an undesired way. When this ability is doubted, even if the adversary's action continues, deterrence fails. This failure is in turn associated with the red line that a state had set, for its threatened consequences to be triggered.

Hence, red lines also create commitment traps. In West Asia, the most famous red line in recent memory was the one set by Barack Obama in 2011: That if Syria's Bashar-al-Assad employed chemical weapons amidst the growing civil war, it would cross the United States' red line, drawing "enormous consequences".

The Syrian Arab Army eventually crossed this line with a devastating Sarin gas attack on a rebel-held Damascus suburb, killing 1,400. Looking to avoid a direct war with Syria, the United States failed to execute its threat; "The President blinked", as David Ignatius of the *Washington Post* later said.

Across the decade since, it has been hard to set red lines in West Asia. The conflict landscape features a diverse set of armed groups, including those funded and sustained by Iran's formidable paramilitary, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The large presence of the IRGC in Iran allied with Iraq and Syria, has made it a plump target for Israeli air action, allowing Tel Aviv to avoid direct engagement with Iran. Since Iran itself prefers to keep the IRGC's extraterritorial activity largely discreet, its own response is indirect. It targets other pressure points, such as proxy-led attacks on the forces of Israel's main backer — the United States. Israel itself has long conducted direct (on Iranian soil) but covert (with plausible deniability) attacks on Iran, including cyber attacks and assassinations of nuclear scientists. Hence, both Iran and Israel have historically preferred a cat-and-mouse approach with plausible deniability, without setting overt commitment traps.

While the Israeli strike on the IRGC on April



Bashir Ali Abbas

He is a research associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi, and a South Asia Visiting Fellow at the Stimson Center, Washington DC.



All indications suggest that 2024 has characteristics of a normal election, in which the social basis of power remains unchanged and the incumbent, by and large, is retained

hide the variation within groups, the final seat tallies of parties may also be reflective of whether they managed to get their prospective voters to the polling booth or not. For example, the 2019 elections indicated a rise in turnout among women, while the turnout among Muslims was lower than the average. Generally, a lower turnout is not a cause of worry for cadre-based parties like the BJP as it is expected that with their organisational machinery, they may still be able to get their own voters out. In 2019, the BJP had another advantage in the pre-poll surveys: Those who preferred the BJP were more likely to come out and vote for it, while the Opposition voters in the survey were less sure of turning out to vote for the party of their choice. The analysis of the 2014 and 2019 elections also indicates that the BJP had a higher probability of winning a seat where the turnout rise was higher. The pattern for the Congress party in these elections was the opposite, indicating the very different mobilisational capabilities of the two parties.

Fifth, all indications suggest that 2024 has the characteristics of a normal election. Political scientists distinguish a normal election from a critical one. In critical elections, the social basis of power is completely realigned, and the incumbent is much more likely to lose. In a normal election, the social basis of power remains unchanged and incumbent, by and large, is retained. The 2014 Lok Sabha elections was a critical election in that sense, and 2019 consolidated the patterns of the BJP's national dominance. Such levels of political dominance require extraordinary mobilisation to challenge the incumbent. Everyday issues do not provide

sufficient ammunition to break through the walls of systemic dominance.

However, it is possible that the state-level and local factors may acquire more salience in the 2024 elections in comparison to the last two. And, given that the BJP has not re-nominated more than 100 incumbent MPs and a similar number of party's candidates are defectors from other parties, there is going to be a lot of friction within the BJP internally. This may increase the uncertainty around the final outcome in several constituencies. Such cases would get cited in political discussions to make several types of claims and counter-claims.

Does this mean that the outcome of the 2024 elections is a toss-up? Is it possible that we may see a repeat of 2004 in 2024? The BJP was expected to be the single-largest party in 2004, but eventually, the Congress emerged as the largest player. However, these two elections are poles apart in a number of ways. The Congress was a bigger party in terms of voter share then, and the gap between the seats was marginal. In this decade, the BJP is twice the size of the Congress in terms of vote share and five to six times bigger in seats. The BJP's national footprint today is larger than the Congress, both socially and geographically.

The Congress would need a double-digit swing in its vote share to be able to reach a three-digit seat total. Such swings are rare in normal elections. So while it is highly likely that the BJP may not achieve its target of 370 seats, the base effect of 2019 would be in play.

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



The unprecedented nature of the Iranian strike cannot be overstated

REUTERS

I was not unprecedented, the damage to the Iranian Consulate in the process compelled Iran to declare it as a red line, especially in the face of recent Israeli rhetoric calling to fight Iran directly. Tehran's response, in turn, was at a higher rung on the escalation ladder — using drones and missiles for a direct (on Israeli soil) and overt (without plausible deniability) attack on Israel. The minimal damage caused and the impressive effectiveness of the combined air defence aside, the step-up along the escalation ladder was unarguable.

The unprecedented nature of the Iranian strike cannot be overstated, especially for Israel which effectively links deterrence to its survival as a nation. Hence, Iran arguably matched its threatened consequences, breaking from the cat-and-mouse mode of engagement and setting new terms. Naturally then, Israel, which

has never suffered a direct attack on its soil by Iran, declared this as a breach of Tel Aviv's own red line, and a declaration of war. However, while the Israeli strike on April 19 was direct (on Iranian soil), it remained covert, with Tel Aviv refusing to take responsibility, and implying that the United States leaked the information needlessly. In any case, Washington had been asserting since April 13, that it would not support Israel in a direct war with Iran (while imposing fresh sanctions) and coaxing Israel to view the successful air defence as victory in itself. Effectively then, with its hand restrained (and neither Washington nor Arab capitals showing appetite for military entanglements with Iran), Israel refrained from climbing up the escalation ladder with a higher-rung response. It reverted to the old modus operandi of direct but covert attacks within Iran.

At the end of it, Israel's red lines created a commitment trap, with Tel Aviv eventually seeking escalation control by not claiming the Isfahan strike; National Security Minister Ben Gvir implicitly even termed the Israeli response, "lame". With Iran having thrown the plausible deniability approach out the window through its large drone/missile strike, it is Israel that is staring at deterrence failure in the long run. Hence, instability in West Asia can only be expected to increase as Israel works to restore deterrence, even as the war in Gaza continues, now having killed almost 34,000.

Bashir Ali Abbas is a research associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi, and a South Asia Visiting Fellow at the Stimson Center, Washington DC. The views expressed are personal

## Why we need to highlight clean air as a poll concern

With the 2024 elections now underway, we find ourselves at a juncture where political choices intersect with the realities of our environment — the need for decisive action is more urgent than ever.

The United Nations (UN) has declared access to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a universal human right. Organisations like Friends of the Earth in the UK and the National Environmental Scorecard in the US are urging political leaders to prioritise climate and nature action. However, in the vast democratic landscape of India, a dichotomy persists. While Indians express support for climate action, the issue fails to garner attention as compared to other concerns like inflation and employment. Climate Trends polls revealed that only a small

percentage of citizens view the climate crisis as a major issue. Even though the climate crisis found its way into the election manifestos of major parties in 2019, the ground reality reveals a gap between promises and perception. According to the 2023 World Air Quality Report by IQAir, India is the third most polluted country in the world. Not only has Delhi been the world's most polluted capital city for four years in a row but 83 of the world's 100 most polluted cities are in India.



Bhavreen Kandhari

She is an advocate for clean air and environmental justice.

The 2019 poll manifestos acknowledged the need to combat toxic air, unlike the silence on the issue in the 2014 elections. The National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) in India aims to achieve a 40% reduction in PM10 and PM2.5 by 2026, as revised from the initial target of 20-30% by 2024. Amidst these electoral dynamics, the role of citizens, particularly

mothers, becomes crucial. With nearly half of India's population being female and a significant number of female voters, there is a collective voice that can shape the electoral narrative. Citizens must demand clean air as a fundamental electoral issue. We need a new pledge from our politicians, transcending mere promises to tangible second-generation measures. The success of past initiatives should embolden leaders to make hard decisions in the interest of public health, demonstrating that effective city governance can prevail without external pressures.

The fight against India's toxic air is not just an environmental concern but a matter of public health and survival. As citizens, this is our chance to advocate for #SwachhHawa-Chunav and #CleanAirElections.

As mothers and parents, our advocacy for clean air gains more resonance when we consider the profound impact on the well-being of our children and the next generation. A recent study conducted by the Potential Energy Coalition and Yale Program on Climate Change Communication revealed a compelling message that resonates globally. The study underscores that the most influential message transcends economic factors or policy considerations — it is the profound love for our children

and the desire to protect the planet for the next generation that moves the world to take action on climate. This unifying sentiment, identified as 12 times more popular than creating jobs, serves as a galvanising force for individuals and communities worldwide. In alignment with this message, parent movement organisations like Our Kids' Climate, Warrior Moms and Parents For Future Global supported by parents in over 40 countries, play a pivotal role. The data affirms the message these mothers bring loud and clear into a shared human aspiration — to hand down a safe, healthy planet to future generations.

As mothers and parents, our collective voice gains strength from this universal desire to safeguard the well-being of our children. This reaffirms that our message carries a unique power in the electoral agendas, emphasising the need for clean air not just as an environmental imperative but as a fundamental act of love and responsibility toward the generations that will inherit the Earth. Let's not shy away from demanding it now. Later is too late!

Bhavreen Kandhari is an advocate for clean air and environmental justice. The views expressed are personal

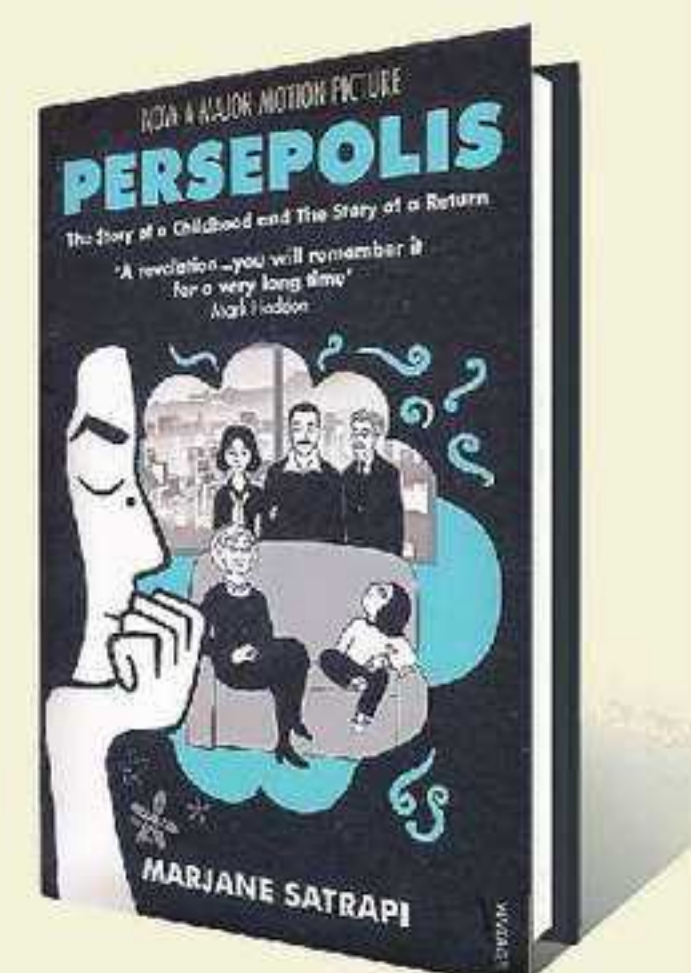
### { EDITOR'S PICK }

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

### UNDERSTANDING IRAN

The situation in West Asia has turned volatile, with Israel hitting Iran with missiles on Friday. The missile attack was in retaliation to Iran launching more than 300 missiles and drones into Israel after the latter targeted a diplomatic compound in Syria causing the death of two Iranian officials. The spotlight has now shifted from Gaza to Tehran and Tel Aviv as the fear of escalation in hostilities looms.

This week, we recommend *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. This autobiographical graphic novel focuses on a ten-year-old girl's experiences growing up during the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the 1980s. Marjane Satrapi paints a vivid portrait of the internal struggle of her protagonist contrasted with the tumult in Iran following the revolution, which culminated in the devastating Iran-Iraq war. Through this deeply personal story, Satrapi shines a light on what brought about the creation of the Iran that we know today and serves as a stark reminder of the human cost of war and political repression.



Persepolis: Marjane Satrapi  
Year: 2000



**WORDLY WISE**  
IF I COULD SAY IT IN WORDS THERE WOULD BE NO REASON TO PAINT.  
— EDWARD HOPPER

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
**RAMNATH GOENKA**

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# At the heart of Iran-Israel

The conflict makes it clear that peace in West Asia hinges on resolving Palestine's statehood



BERNARD HAYKEL

IN THE LAST few weeks, Israel and Iran have crossed all the red lines in their decades-long shadow war. Israel did this on April 1 when it bombed an Iranian consular building in Damascus, killing several high-ranking Iranian revolutionary guard officers. On April 13, Iran retaliated by launching an attack from its mainland on Israel. This is the first time Tehran has done this, whereas in the past it relied on non-state proxy militias to do its work, giving it plausible deniability and the cover of ambiguity. Now, however, Iran launched the world's largest combined drone, cruise, and ballistic missiles assault. The war is in the open and no longer being fought in the shadows. As a result, we have witnessed an Israeli retaliation by missiles and drones on Iranian military bases — another step closer to a broader war in West Asia and one that may drag the United States and other Arab countries into the fray, with severe global consequences.

Unlike Israel's successful strike on April 13, Iran's projectiles were entirely blocked by Israel's air force and anti-missile defense systems, albeit with the help of US, British, French allies, and Jordan because many of the drones flew through its airspace. The Iranians intended to do great harm to Israel, despite claims to the contrary, and their failure to accomplish this represents a humiliation. Hence, President Biden counselled Israel not to retaliate but rather to "take the win" of having blocked Iran's attack. Yet, as expected, Israel's Prime Minister and his right-wing government have rejected America's prudent advice and sought to re-establish deterrence by attacking Iran directly.

Unfortunately, this most recent attack will only speed up Iran's nuclear weapons programme, which is close to breakout time. The immediate question now is whether Iran will retaliate again or take a longer time to do so. The messages about this from Tehran have been mixed, with some claiming the most recent Israeli attack to be insignificant, and thus not worth responding to, while other officials have stated that there will be a massive response.

Whatever the case may be, the gloves are off between Israel and Iran, and this is a troubling sign of worse things to come. What makes the leaders of these two countries en-

gage in such high-risk attacks that can destabilise the entire region? The answer lies in the nature of the two regimes in Tehran and Jerusalem, who, despite their differences, share several characteristics: Existential fear, radical politics and arrogance. Let's address the case of Iran first and then turn to Israel.

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran is convinced that the United States, and its regional incarnation Israel, are determined to topple its regime. Iran's leaders are scarred by the eight-year war with Iraq (1980-88) in which Iraq was backed by the Western powers and hundreds of thousands of Iranians were killed and maimed. One of Iran's tools for projecting influence, and thus self-defence, is its revolutionary ideology, namely, the radical Islamist thought of Ayatollah Khomeini — the revolution's leader — with its mixture of anti-imperialism, Islamic supremacism, and social justice. The regime has sought to defend itself by promoting Khomeini's ideology throughout the Middle East, with the creation of loyal militias that would exert pressure through the threat of violence against both the US and Israel. Hezbollah in Lebanon is the prime example of this effort and forms the principal line of deterrence for protecting the Islamic state in Iran. With its 150,000 missiles aimed at Israel and its well-trained militia, Hezbollah constitutes a formidable threat to Israel. This model has been replicated by Iran with comparable militia forces in Syria, Iraq, Hamas in Palestine and the Houthis in Yemen. For example, the Houthis have shown the ability to block maritime shipping through the Red Sea, effectively blocking two choke points, the Bab al-Mandab and the Suez Canal, at Iran's behest. With these militias, an arrogance about power has developed in Tehran, which today is on full display with its claims to want to destroy Israel and to expel the US from West Asia, thereby establishing its own hegemony over the region. In other words, Iran is a revisionist state that seeks to protect itself by dominating West Asia — disruption and instability of the existing order are its top priority because these serve its interests.

Like Iran, Israel's present government is radical and revisionist. It seeks to eliminate the possibility of a future Palestinian state,

thereby denying the people its right to self-determination. It wishes to create a greater Israel in the West Bank and engages in acts of repression of Palestinians and expropriation of their land. In so doing, Israel is allowing the Palestinian cause to fester, which generates radical and violent action, as we saw in the despicable acts on October 7, 2023, but also in many earlier attacks on Israelis. Iran benefits from and encourages such deeds because it focuses attention on the injustice of Israel (and the West) towards the Palestinians, and this resonates deeply throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds and beyond. In Saudi Arabia, for example, a country that is ostensibly about to normalise relations with Israel, the war in Gaza has generated nearly two million individual donations for a total of \$190 million — this effectively means that half the Saudi population has contributed to alleviate Palestinian suffering. For Israelis, however, all this support for the Palestinians amounts to a desire to see Israel destroyed, and this plays on their existential fears.

The war in Gaza has made clear that the denial of Palestinian rights — and unless their right to a state is granted — there will be instability and violence in West Asia. Spoilers against peace and stability, like Iran and the right-wing government in Israel, will take advantage of this chaos to achieve their maximal goals. Desiring a different outcome, the US, Jordan, Egypt and the Arab Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia have been pleading with Israel to give binding commitments for the creation of a Palestinian state. Their proposal is to return to the two-state solution as envisaged by the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Yet, Israel's existential trauma after October 7, the ideology of its right-wing government and the arrogance produced by its military superiority have so far led it to refuse any acknowledgement of a Palestinian state. Unfortunately, without this, there will be no peace or stability in West Asia, and the open wars between Iran and Israel will escalate with dire consequences for all.

*The writer is professor, Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University and the Nelson Mandela Visiting Chair in Afro-Asian Studies at Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala*

## PUNJABIYAT DIPLOMACY

Maryam Sharif's speech at Kartarpur Sahib seems an olive branch to Delhi. India must proceed with cautious optimism

SPeAKING TO AROUND 3,000 Sikh pilgrims at Kartarpur Sahib, Maryam Nawaz, the Chief Minister of Punjab and heir apparent of three-time Pakistan Prime Minister and PML(N) supremo Nawaz Sharif extended an olive branch to India. She invoked the linguistic and cultural similarity among Punjabis on both sides of the border. Pakistan's Punjab is the country's largest province and much of its political, military and cultural elite is Punjabi. Maryam spoke of friendship with India, religious tolerance and celebrating Eid, Baisakhi and Holi. Quoting her father, she said, "don't fight wars with neighbours... open the doors of friendship... open the doors of your hearts". Behind Maryam's emotional appeal are the hard economic and geopolitical realities confronting Pakistan. Less than a month ago, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Muhammed Ishaq Dar said that "Pakistani businessmen want trade with India" and that his government was "seriously considering" the matter. Rawalpindi and Islamabad are also faced with increasingly restive Western borders with both Afghanistan and Iran. The Army, too, may want a measure of stability on the eastern front.

Maryam's outreach is of a piece with earlier attempts at improving bilateral ties. As Chief Minister of Punjab in 2013, Shehbaz Sharif (now PM) made it a point to visit Punjab on his visit to India. In 1999, Parkash Singh Badal, then CM of Punjab in India, visited Lahore with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. There have also been attempts at deeper cross-border economic and energy cooperation. As recently as 2014 — after Shehbaz's visit in 2013 — Pakistan evinced interest in importing power from India. In India, GAIL was receptive to the idea of supplying natural gas across the Wagah border from Jalandhar. Unfortunately, the cooperation did not materialise, not the least because of the Pakistan Army scuppering them. The PML(N), Nawaz Sharif in particular, has often faced resistance from Rawalpindi because of its overtures to India. Now, though, things appear to be different. Maryam's statement, for example, would not have been possible without at least tacit support from the Army — there is no doubt that the current government in Pakistan is supported by the Army.

A major stumbling block in bilateral ties, especially after the August 5, 2019 abrogation of Article 370, has been Pakistan's intransigence on the "Kashmir issue". The new government seems to be continuing that trend, with President Asif Ali Zardari calling for the restoration of special status this week. PM Shehbaz Sharif too has made similar statements, as has the Army. However, the fact also is that the relationship has been stalled because of the "core concerns" on both sides — terrorism for India and Kashmir for Pakistan. The current moment may provide an opening to pick low-hanging diplomatic fruits, especially restoring trade ties. What is needed over the next few weeks is quiet back channel diplomacy, especially of the kind that led to the 2021 ceasefire along the Line of Control — this ceasefire has largely held. Behind-the-scenes conversations can lay the ground for the next Indian government after the Lok Sabha polls to move the needle forward.

## PLAYING TO ANXIETIES

Allahabad Court's varying interpretation of 'love jihad' law has implications. Courts must ensure the law doesn't imperil rights

THE FACT THAT consenting adults should require the state's approval — and protection — for their relationship with a person of their choice is telling in itself. But a report in this paper shows how in UP, the interpretation of a provision of the state's anti-conversion law has led to contrasting outcomes in orders by the Allahabad High Court in matters related to inter-faith live-in relationships. Since August last year, different benches of the Court have dismissed pleas for police protection for at least 12 interfaith couples in live-in relationships, stating the criminalising of such relationships under UP's Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021. In three other cases, including one from early last year, conditional protection was granted. The law has already been challenged in the Supreme Court along with similar laws from several other states but the arbitrary nature of interpretation has implications for those who find themselves at its receiving end.

In February 2020, in response to a written question in the Lok Sabha, then Union Minister of State for Home G Kishan Reddy had said, "The term 'love jihad' is not defined under the extant laws. No such case of 'love jihad' has been reported by any of the central agencies". The Constitution empowers citizens with the freedom to practise and propagate any religion, he had added. Yet, the bogey of "love jihad" continues to stoke paranoia. It puts interfaith relationships under intense scrutiny from family, society and state machinery in a manner discordant with the notion of diversity that guides Indian democracy. The anxieties around such relationships have led to the formation of "love jihad" laws in several states, including Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh. Worse, prejudice has put individual rights enshrined in the Constitution under constant threat of violence, infantilised women and undermined their independence and agency.

In circumstances where relationships have to overcome such insurmountable odds, often, the only hope of justice rests with the judiciary. Arbitrary interpretations of an already narrow law set a precedent for other restrictive explications and put young people at grievous risk. The challenge before the court, therefore, is to ensure that it is consistent in upholding the individual's constitutional rights. It also falls upon the Supreme Court to speed up the process of hearing the petitions pending before it on the matter so that the autonomy, dignity and privacy of individuals are not imperilled at the altar of a bad-faith law.

## THE VENETIAN BARGAIN

In a troubled world, Venice Biennale's attempt to make room for all, regardless of political stance, is a step in the right direction

AT THIS YEAR'S Venice Biennale, its first Latin American curator Adriano Pedrosa might have intended for the event to be a celebration of diversity and tolerance with its theme, "Stranieri Ovunque" — Foreigners Everywhere. But rumblings of discord, heard in the lead up to the opening of the international exhibition today, are an indication of the enormity of the task.

In February, this year, Italian Culture Minister Gennaro Sangiuliano quelled pro-Palestinian petitions calling for Israel's exclusion from the Biennale, asserting that it will always be a "space of freedom, meeting and dialogue and not a space of censorship and intolerance". But artist Ruth Patir and curators representing Israel rocked the boat. Their exhibits are inside the Israel Pavilion in Venice, but the doors are locked. Taped on a window is a sign that reads, "The artist and curators of the Israeli pavilion will open the exhibition when a ceasefire and hostage release agreement is reached." Across the canal city, meanwhile, are protestors chanting "Viva, viva Palestina!".

The "Olympics of the art world" may stand for free expression, but since its first edition in 1895, the Venice Biennale has seldom managed to remain distant from political influences. The permanent National Pavilions once belonged solely to imperialist powers, starting with Belgium in 1907, followed by Germany, Britain and Hungary in 1909. In Mussolini's Italy, the event became a means for propaganda. In 1974, a year after Augusto Pinochet grabbed power in Chile, the event stood in solidarity with the South American nation, reportedly under the direction of the Italian Communist Party. While there was a ban on South Africa until 1993, when Apartheid was rolled back, the Russian pavilion has not been included since the invasion of Ukraine two years ago. That the Biennale and its curator are now making room for all, regardless of political convictions, is surely a step forward.

## A BITTER SWEET

Added sugar in baby food increases threat of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease



ANOOP MISRA

IN 2006, WE published a report describing a cohort of 51 children and young adults with Type 2 Diabetes — this was a surprising finding at the time. Little did we know then that a supplement used at six months of age containing added sugar (such as in Cerelec and others produced by Nestle, as detailed in a recent report by the International Baby Food Action Network, IFBAN) could also contribute to obesity and diabetes. Interestingly, prior to the current report, a study conducted in India in 2021 revealed that 28 per cent of baby food products had a "high sugar profile". These revelations are particularly concerning for several reasons.

First, considering the heightened propensity of Indians for developing diabetes and its complications, every effort must be made to avoid any potential triggers from an early age. Introducing sugar-containing feeds at the age of six months is highly detrimental to Indian infants who are already fragile. Damage to organ systems at this stage leaves permanent metabolic scars.

How does such baby food harm the tender livers and pancreases of infants? Constant exposure to simple sugars places an additional burden on the pancreas to produce insulin (resulting in "hyperinsulinemia"), leading to its exhaustion. This process

also induces resistance to the hormone leptin and in the process contributes to obesity. Both pancreatic exhaustion and excess body fat raise blood sugar levels and release harmful substances known as "inflammatory cytokines", which can damage the kidneys and heart and lead to hypertension. Additionally, formula-fed infants continuously exposed to a predominantly sweet taste are more likely to develop a preference for such flavours later in their lives. This has the potential to foster a dependence on sweet intake, perpetuating early organ damage in adolescence and early adulthood. It would be worthwhile to conduct long-term studies on children who have received such products from an early age to assess their risk of developing diabetes and heart disease.

Second, there is a notable discrepancy in the treatment of developing countries regarding the presence of excess added sugar in infant formulas. While formulas without added sugar are available in developed countries, those in developing nations, including India, often contain added sugars. This double standard is unjustified and unethical, particularly because some developing countries do not even list the amount of added sugar on product labels.

Third, the promotion of sugar-contain-

ing infant formulas in India and other developing countries raises concerns. Cerelec, a popular brand with substantial sales is promoted as "supplementary food for babies from 10 to 12 months", despite containing significant amounts of added sugar. The high sugar content is alarming and is unacceptable for anyone, let alone infants.

Equally concerning are the other unhealthy practices being pursued by other companies — these include influencing doctors, medical societies and media celebrities endorsing unhealthy products and claims that infant formula is healthier than breast milk, etc. There is often also an effort to promote such unhealthy products by engineering expert and celebrity endorsements.

The inclusion of added sugars in infant formulas amplifies the threat of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease at an early age for populations, like India's, with a known propensity to such diseases. It's akin to pouring gasoline on a smouldering flame, intensifying an already critical health concern. Regulation in this matter demands unequivocal stringency.

*Misra is chairman, Fortis C-DOC Hospital for Diabetes and Allied Sciences and the author of Diabetes with Delight*

## APRIL 20, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### CHAOS IN PUNJAB

SIX PEOPLE WERE killed and at least six injured in violence in Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh. Part of the railway track on the Firozpur-Bhatinda section was blown up by extremists. One person was killed and another injured in Chandigarh when Sikhs took out a procession defying prohibitory orders in protest against recent violence. Two policemen and the driver of their car were shot dead by extremists at Ambala Cantonment.

### OPPOSITION WALKOUT

REPORTS ABOUT THE landing of a Pakistani

aircraft in Punjab and the arrest of its two occupants sparked off a furore in the Lok Sabha which culminated in a walk-out by the entire Opposition in protest against the government's silence on the incident. Neither the Prime Minister nor the Defence Minister were present in the House.

### HATHRAS VIOLENCE

ELEVEN PERSONS, INCLUDING four policemen, were injured in Hathras in group clashes. Following this, Section 144 was promulgated in the town, about 35 km from Aligarh. Twenty-one persons have been arrested by the police on charges of rioting,

arson and damage to public property and more arrests are likely, according to district officials.

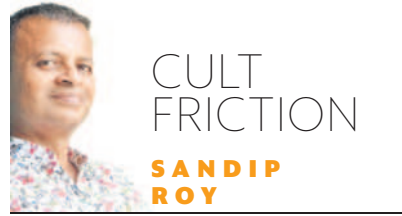
### ZIA HITS OUT AT INDIA

PAKISTAN PRESIDENT, ZIAULI Haq, denied reports that his country has a hand in current developments in Punjab, according to Radio Pakistan. "Pakistan does not want to interfere in the internal affairs of any country," he told newsmen in Lahore. Gen Zia said the Home Minister P C Sethi's statement in Parliament about Pakistan's involvement in Punjab affairs was meant to "malign us". "Pakistan believes in principles," he added.



# A little kindness to lower the temperature

Chances are, because it's summer, more of us are using services that require others to run around in order to allow us the luxury of being indoors. Practise some rituals of kindness



CULT FRICTION  
SANDIP ROY

The doorbell rang in the middle of a hot April afternoon in Kolkata. It was yet another courier, the third of the afternoon.

The temperature was already inching towards 40 degrees Celsius and the humidity was high. The family had drawn the curtains, turned on the air-conditioning and settled in for a post-lunch siesta. But it seemed that every courier in the city had timed their deliveries to coincide with our siesta.

"As soon as it's afternoon, the bell rings non-stop," grumbled my mother. "No one can rest or work in peace," I agreed.

Bills, packages, books, groceries, medicines, gas cylinders—they kept coming, delivered by men on bicycles and motorbikes. Every time I opened the door, the heat hit me like a sledgehammer. The streets were deserted. Even the street dogs were nowhere to be seen. Not a leaf stirred in the *baul* (Bengal quince) tree outside the house. I stood impatiently at the gate in the blazing sun, waiting irritably as the delivery person rummaged in his rucksack looking for our parcel. I wondered what it would have hurt to have had the package ready before he rang the doorbell.

Then I looked at the man. He had a handkerchief tied around his head. But he was still drenched. This was a few minutes of discomfort for me but it was a whole day's work for him, all afternoon, probably every day.

"I hope you are drinking plenty of water," I said lamely. He gestured towards the plastic bottle he was carrying. "What to do?" He said. "Just because it's summer, the deliveries don't stop."



India is seeing increasing heatwave events.

ISTOCKPHOTO

In fact, chances are because it's summer, more of us are using services that require others to run around so as to allow us the luxury of being indoors. The grocery delivery apps, the food delivery apps, the errand running apps are all working overtime so we can keep our cool.

This summer we will need more of their services than ever. India has just invoked a 21-year-old emergency provision to operationalise its gas-fired power stations from 1 May to 30 June as the electricity demand is likely to spike because of a projected prolonged heat wave. According to *Business Today*, last year peak power demand hit 243 GW in September, an all-time high. This year, the power ministry is projecting it might hit 260 GW. Much of gas-powered generating stations are under-utilised because of commercial considerations.

From a consumer's point of view of course, these emergency measures are far preferable to power cuts or load shedding. Once newspapers would publish a zone by zone chart of projected power cuts. The reality often outstripped those projections. Sometimes the power would go for minutes, sometimes for hours. If it went in the middle of a favourite television serial or a crucial football match, the curses would ricochet around the neighbourhood.

Load-shedding nights meant dragging a mattress on to the terrace, looking for the hint of a breeze. I remember lying on the terrace looking at the silhouettes of the buildings around us and the patch of night sky above. My sister and I invented stories about a ghost family who lived in the *neem* tree behind the house. We could see the neighbours in their windows, some of

the rooms lit up by the smoky light of oil lamps. When the lights suddenly came back on, a cheer would echo through the neighbourhood as televisions would flicker back to life. "Let's hurry and have dinner before it goes again," my mother would say.

As power cuts became routine, people started investing in battery inverters and generators, and every time the power went out, the generators cranked up. That loud rattling noise too became as much part of the city soundscape as its trundling trams and wheezing Ambassador taxis. We looked forward to summer holidays with eager anticipation but then were bored within a week as we lay in pools of sweat, scanning the skies for a thundercloud that might usher in the relief of a nor'wester storm in the late afternoon.

But no one talked about climate

change and global warming. Summers were hot and sticky but record-high heatwaves did not yet feel inevitable. We still looked for a few blessings of the Indian summer—mangos, litchis, summer holidays. We called summers grudgingly of course and complained endlessly as our mothers doused us with prickly heat powder, but now all of that seems strangely nostalgic.

These days, power cuts are a distant memory in Kolkata. Many would say that's because the state lost so much of its industries over the years. Whatever the reason, we don't worry about the lights going out as much anymore. In fact, shops, malls, restaurants, homes are air-conditioned beyond anything any of us had grown up with. During summer, our school had "summer school", where we started early and finished by lunchtime so that we could go home and rest during the afternoon, though it also meant we had to return home panting under the noon-day sun. The cars of course were not air-conditioned. Now students pay a fee for air-conditioned classrooms and during the hottest days, school itself is suspended.

When the first air conditioner arrived in our house, we only had it in our parents' bedroom. There were just a few special nights when it was deemed hot enough to turn it on. AC nights were treat nights for me, for the whole family piled into my parents' bedroom. It was like a pyjama party and I would feel guilty about hoping and praying some nights that it would be muggy enough to be designated an "AC family night". But there were strict rules. The air conditioner had to be turned off by 7 in the morning. If we used it in the afternoon, it had to be switched off by five. Even after we had turned it off, if we kept the doors shut tightly, the floors remained deliciously cool for hours. My mother would scold us if we went in and out too much. "All the cold is escaping" she would say, as if the cold was something the air-conditioning genie caught and stopped in a bottle. We complained about our beastly summers, but we

could probably count the number of AC nights on our fingers. Now every bedroom has air-conditioning, as do living rooms. The other day I said ruefully I didn't want to host a dinner party in the summer because there was no air-conditioning in my living room. No one batted an eye.

But all the air-conditioning, instead of making us forget about summer, somehow reminds us even more grimly about the heat outside. There are few places as freezingly cold as the innards of an Indian mall at the height of summer. And the moment we step outside, the heat hits us like a slap across the face.

There are many reasons for our changing summer beyond climate change. It doesn't help that the cities are losing tree cover and water bodies, and concrete blocks are replacing the old airier houses. Now we design our cities for air-conditioning. The International Energy Agency estimated last year that India's demand just for running household air conditioners will expand ninefold by 2050 and outstrip total power consumption in all of Africa today.

We live in a country that is seeing increasing heatwave events and strange anomalies. Kolkata was hotter than Churu in Thar desert this week while Delhi was more pleasant than sweltering Bengaluru. The old quaint rituals of summers past have fallen by the wayside. But there are new rituals we can practise even as we shelter from the mutated summers of today.

Offer water to the delivery person. Refill the water bottle of the man who comes to service the water filter. Put out a bowl of water for birds and stray animals.

It might not lower the temperature outside, but a little kindness will lower the temperature inside, now that our summers of discontent are here to stay.

*Cult Friction* is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against.

Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr

# The language of ecofeminist art

Ecofeminist art, or the intersection of feminism, politics, ecology and art, has expanded in scope and themes

Avantika Bhuyan  
avantika.bhuyan@tntlive.com

Sudipta Das has witnessed drastic changes over the years in her hometown of Silchar in Assam. "These days, we are getting excessive rainfall during what are supposed to be dry months. Nature is disturbed. Floods arrive earlier than usual, and with greater ferocity," says the 39-year-old artist, who is currently based in Vadodra, Gujarat.

Das has observed that these natural calamities have a disproportionate impact on women in Silchar. It is the women of the household who have to flush out the water from homes, arrange for food and take care of the farmlands. "They end up falling ill the most during this time," says Das, who is known for her figurines, crafted from rice paper and Hanji paper, depicting the migration of communities due to political and geological changes. Deeply touched by the suffering of women during natural upheavals, the artist, who calls herself an ecofeminist, has been creating works for the series, *Mother and Child*.

Ecofeminism—the intersection of feminism, politics and ecology—isn't a new term. It was coined by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. She wrote: "Ecofeminism relates the oppression and domination of all marginalised groups (women, people of color, children, the poor) to the oppression and domination of nature (animals, land, water, air, etc.)."

As the world goes through drastic ecological changes, ecofeminism has acquired greater urgency. "The climate crisis is not 'gender neutral'," states a February 2022 report on the UN Women website. "Women and girls experience the greatest impacts of climate change, which amplifies existing gender inequalities and poses unique threats to their livelihoods, health, and safety. Across the world, women depend more on, yet have less access to, natural resources."

## TAKING ART TO ITS ROOTS

Art has been responding to the concept of ecofeminism since the 1970s. A landmark 2020 exhibition, *ecofeminism(s)*—curated by Monika Fabijanska, an art historian who specialises in women's and feminist art at the Thomas Erben Gallery in New York—offered a historical perspective of this genre. The curatorial note stated that "ecofeminism is one of the richest hidden caches of contemporary art. It is art that delights the eye, provokes the mind, and can inspire change. It restores art's function to what it was before the Enlightenment, when both science and art were tools to understand the world and propose solutions." The exhibition looked at the works of pioneering artists such as Betsy Damon, Ana Mendieta, Aviva Rahmani and Cecilia Vicuña.

In India too, over the past few decades, contemporary artists such as Vibha Galhotra, Sonia Mehra Chawla, Navjot Altaf and Rohini Devasher have consistently been responding to political and environmental ecologies, but without really defining themselves as ecofeminists. However, there has been a change in the way artists are now excavating complex relationships between gender, ecology, capitalism, oppression and society. The scope has expanded to include queer histories, anti-nuclear war sentiments, and privatisation of land resources.

The mediums too have moved beyond painting and sculpture to include performance art and multimedia. Bhavna Kakar, founder, Gallery Latitude 28, Delhi—who represents ecofeminist artists such as Das and Manjot Kaur—feels that this genre of art plays, now more than ever, a pivotal role in amplifying suppressed voices, evoking empathy, and inspiring action towards collective responsibility to protect our ecosystem for future generations.

2023 witnessed some of the highest temperatures on earth, and many countries around the world grappled with extreme weather conditions. It is no wonder then that the past two years have seen a rise in the number of exhibitions focusing on ecofeminist art as well in response to these changes. For instance, the Tai Kwun Contemporary in Hong Kong presented *Green Snake: Women-Centred Ecologies*, between 20 December 2023 and 1 April 2024. Curated by Paris-based artist historian and writer Kathryn Weir and Xue Tan, a writer-producer from Hong Kong, the show explored mythology, feminism and ecology in the context of accelerating extreme weather events, and pre-



sented works by more than 30 artists and collectives from 20 countries. "Rather than unfolding a bleak, dystopian view, *Green Snake* asks what alternative narratives are activated through artists' visions that celebrate nature as an all-encompassing and generative force—many of them grounded in notions of care and interrelationship that are central to ecofeminism," stated the exhibition note.

## NEW VISUAL STORIES

Manjot Kaur was one of the Indian artists, whose work was displayed at *Green Snake*. Using miniature painting traditions with contemporary themes, the artist combined ancient stories and precarious ecologies with "speculative visions of alternative relationships between deities, humans and the environment".

According to Kakar, Kaur's work transcends the traditional confines of gender and nature by exploring new visual stories that provide us with alternative routes to "un-civilise" from the masculine capitalist culture. "In her series, *Ecosystems are Love Stories*, Manjot's visual narratives intertwine the sovereignty of ecologies with the autonomy of women's bodies, challenging established power dynamics," she explains. "... (the artist

'Entangled Relations', gouache and watercolour on paper (2024).

COURTESY GALLERY LATITUDE 28

underscores the symbiotic relationship between motherhood, ecology, and resistance to oppressive structures, inviting viewers into a dialogue on agency, and the fluid boundaries between human and non-human realms."

## CHANGING VOCABULARY

The 2024 edition of *Colomboscope*, which opened in Colombo in January, also looked at ecofeminist art in a big way. Co-curated by Sheelasha Rajbhandari, Hit Man Gurung and Sarker Protick, with Natasha Ginwala as the artistic director, the event had many artist-led conversations on the theme. For instance, *Ecofeminist kin*, featuring Cecilia Moo, Emma Nzioka, Eisa Jocson, Venuri Perera and Rajbhandari, looked at how ecofeminism has historically been practised through ceremonial offerings, indigenous activism, domestic and agricultural labour.

The change in artistic vocabulary is evident in indigenous, or traditional, forms as well. While ecofeminism has been practised in contemporary art since the 1970s, traditional themes have been rooted in nature since time immemorial. Artists from Gond, Madhubani, Bhil and Baiga traditions have commented on the interdependence of humanity and nature

While ecofeminism has been practised in contemporary art since the 1970s, indigenous art has been rooted in nature since time immemorial.

since the very genesis of art forms.

The changing weather conditions and their impact are more visible than ever in the art that comes from the grassroots. Take, for instance, *Burning of Bandhagarh*, an acrylic on canvas by artist Jodhaiya Bai Baiga, based out of Umaria district in Madhya Pradesh, which commented on the rising number of forest fires in the region. It was shown in 2022 as part of the exhibition of indigenous art, *Bhumijan: Artists of the Earth*, presented by the Crites Collection at the Visual Arts Gallery in New Delhi. "For women from traditional communities, who have limited agency and voice, art is becoming a powerful tool to make themselves heard," says Minhazz Majumdar, a Delhi-based writer, designer and curator specialising in Indian traditional arts, who also curated the *Bhumijan* show.

Pushpa Kumari, who is based in Ranti, Bihar, and Delhi and practises the Madhubani art tradition, was the only Indian artist to be invited to the 23rd Sydney Biennale in 2022. She consciously examines feminist themes relevant to the 21st century within ecology. Her 15ft-long work, *Ganga Maiya* (2021), shows the hypocrisy of society in deifying a river as a mother goddess, while having no qualms about dumping garbage and industrial waste in her waters.

Then there is Ramrati Bai, who like Jodhaiya Bai, is based in Umaria, Madhya Pradesh and hails from the Baiga tribe. "The Baigas are a displaced tribal community, who were forest dwellers and now live on the margins of society," says Majumdar. "Ramrati Bai (born 1979) paints memories of the enchanted forests of her childhood and what the Baiga life used to be like."

In *The Dance of Devi Matas*—measuring 22x6ft—she evokes the divine feminine in different avatars as worshipped by the Baigas. The work featured in the Roots show, earlier this year in Delhi, curated by Alka Pande and Mitchell Crites. "She has fused two concepts dear to the Baigas in this work by giving each of the venerated mother goddesses a musical instrument," writes Majumdar in her curatorial note about Ramrati Bai's practice. "Traditionally, the goddesses are not associated with playing an instrument. Bai is very concerned about the younger generation of Baigas losing touch with their culture, with many of them moving far away to work as migrant labourers. By depicting the goddesses with traditional musical instruments such as the daffi, madaar, timki, matka, Bai hopes to commit to public memory the ways of her people."

## Numbers must count

India stands at a crucial juncture in its quest to harness the potential of its demographic dividend. Renowned economist and former RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan's recent remarks underscore the urgent need for concerted efforts to unlock the benefits of this demographic boon. As the world's largest democracy, India boasts of a youthful population, a demographic advantage that, if properly leveraged, could propel the nation towards becoming an advanced economy by 2047. Mr Rajan's observations paint a stark picture of the current scenario. Despite being in the midst of the demographic dividend, India is failing to reap its rewards. High levels of unemployment, coupled with disguised unemployment, highlight the pressing need for policy interventions aimed at improving human capital and enhancing skill sets. The alarming trend of highly educated individuals resorting to menial government jobs underscores the severity of the employment crisis gripping the nation. One of the key challenges identified by Mr Rajan is the mismatch between the skills possessed by the workforce and the demands of the job market. Addressing this disconnect requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing both education reform and targeted skill development initiatives. Investing in vocational training programmes and promoting apprenticeships, as advocated by Mr Rajan, can bridge the gap between academia and industry, equipping individuals with the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving job market. Furthermore, Mr Rajan's critique of India's skewed focus on capital-intensive industries at the expense of labour-intensive sectors is particularly pertinent. While initiatives such as subsidising chip manufacturing may be necessary for technological advancement, neglecting sectors like leather and textiles, which have the potential to generate significant employment opportunities, is short-sighted. Revitalising these traditional industries through targeted interventions and addressing underlying structural issues can create a more inclusive growth trajectory. Moreover, Mr Rajan's observations regarding the exodus of Indian innovators to foreign shores raise questions about the ease of doing business and access to markets within the country. Streamlining regulatory processes, fostering innovation ecosystems, and enhancing access to finance can incentivise entrepreneurs to stay and thrive in India, contributing to economic growth and job creation. The recent pre-poll survey findings indicating concerns about the difficulty of finding employment further underscore the gravity of the situation. It is imperative for policymakers to prioritise job creation and formulate holistic strategies that address the multifaceted nature of the employment challenge. India stands at a crossroads, poised to either capitalise on its demographic dividend or squander its potential. Mr Rajan's insights serve as a wake-up call, urging stakeholders across the spectrum to redouble their efforts towards unlocking India's true economic potential. By investing in human capital, promoting inclusive growth, and fostering an enabling environment for innovation and entrepreneurship, India can pave the way towards a brighter, more prosperous future for its citizens. India has the numbers. It must make them count.

## Ripple effects

The US Federal Reserve's recent stance on interest rates has sent ripples of uncertainty through both domestic and international markets. As expectations for rate cuts diminish, investors and policymakers are grappling with the potential ramifications of a prolonged period of higher rates. The Fed's pivot away from dovishness reflects a cautious approach to combating inflationary pressures, which have persisted despite earlier hopes for swift resolution. With consumer price inflation surpassing expectations for the third consecutive month and retail sales showing robust growth, Chairman Jerome Powell's acknowledgment that the battle against inflation is taking "longer than expected" underscores the severity of the challenge at hand. While the US economy has demonstrated resilience in the face of higher rates thus far, concerns linger regarding the sustainability of this resilience over an extended period. The prospect of companies needing to refinance corporate debt acquired during the pandemic, coupled with mortgage rates nearing 7 per cent, threatens to weigh heavily on both corporate and consumer sectors. Moreover, the escalating cost of servicing government debt presents a formidable fiscal challenge, with implications for budget allocation and economic stability. Financial markets, buoyed by the Fed's previous dovish stance, are now confronted with the reality of a less accommodative monetary policy. The recent stock market boom, fuelled in part by expectations for rate cuts, now faces the prospect of correction as investors adjust to the new normal of higher rates. Lingering vulnerabilities in the banking sector, exacerbated by unrealised losses, further compound the uncertainty surrounding market stability. Beyond America's borders, the ripple effects of higher interest rates are felt acutely across the global economy. While some economies grapple with their own inflationary pressures, none match the intensity of America's economic heat. The resultant strengthening of the dollar poses challenges for export-dependent economies, even as it enhances their competitiveness on the global stage. However, the dual pressures of a surging dollar and rising oil prices threaten to squeeze economies reliant on commodity imports, adding another layer of complexity. In the face of these challenges, the Fed's monetary policy decisions assume heightened significance for the rest of the world. While a return to rate cuts may offer respite in the future, for now, the spectre of higher interest rates looms large, casting a shadow of uncertainty over financial markets and economic growth prospects. Furthermore, the Fed's pivot underscores the need to balance economic growth with containment of inflationary pressures. As policymakers grapple with the complexities of monetary policy, the need for a nuanced approach becomes apparent. Finding the right balance between supporting economic recovery and preventing runaway inflation will be paramount in guiding the trajectory of both domestic and global economies. As the Fed navigates this minefield of pressures, the reverberations of its policy decisions are felt far beyond America's shores.

## Rethinking Lenin

Lenin was a successful revolutionary leader who presided over Russia's transformation from a country ruled by Tsars to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the name of the communist Russian State from 1922 to 1991. What Marx and Engels saw as glimmerings of revolutionary potential in Russia came to fruition with the genius of Lenin's revolutionary theory and practice. His Ideology against the hierarchies and the capitalists would later become the foundation of modern anti-imperialism

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Vladimir Lenin, the architect of Russia's 1917 Bolshevik revolution, politician and political theorist was considered as one of the most significant and influential figures of 20th century world history.

Lenin was such a personality in history who brought about significant change in his country that reverberated around the world and impacted the lives of millions. He was the founder of the Russian Communist Party, leader of the Bolshevik Revolution and architect and first head of the then Soviet Union.

He was born in Simbirsk (at present Ulianovsk), Russia on 10 April 1870. In November 1891, he passed his law examinations and graduated with a First Class degree. He moved to the then St. Petersburg in August 1893 and started working as a public defender and part of a group of revolutionary Marxists.

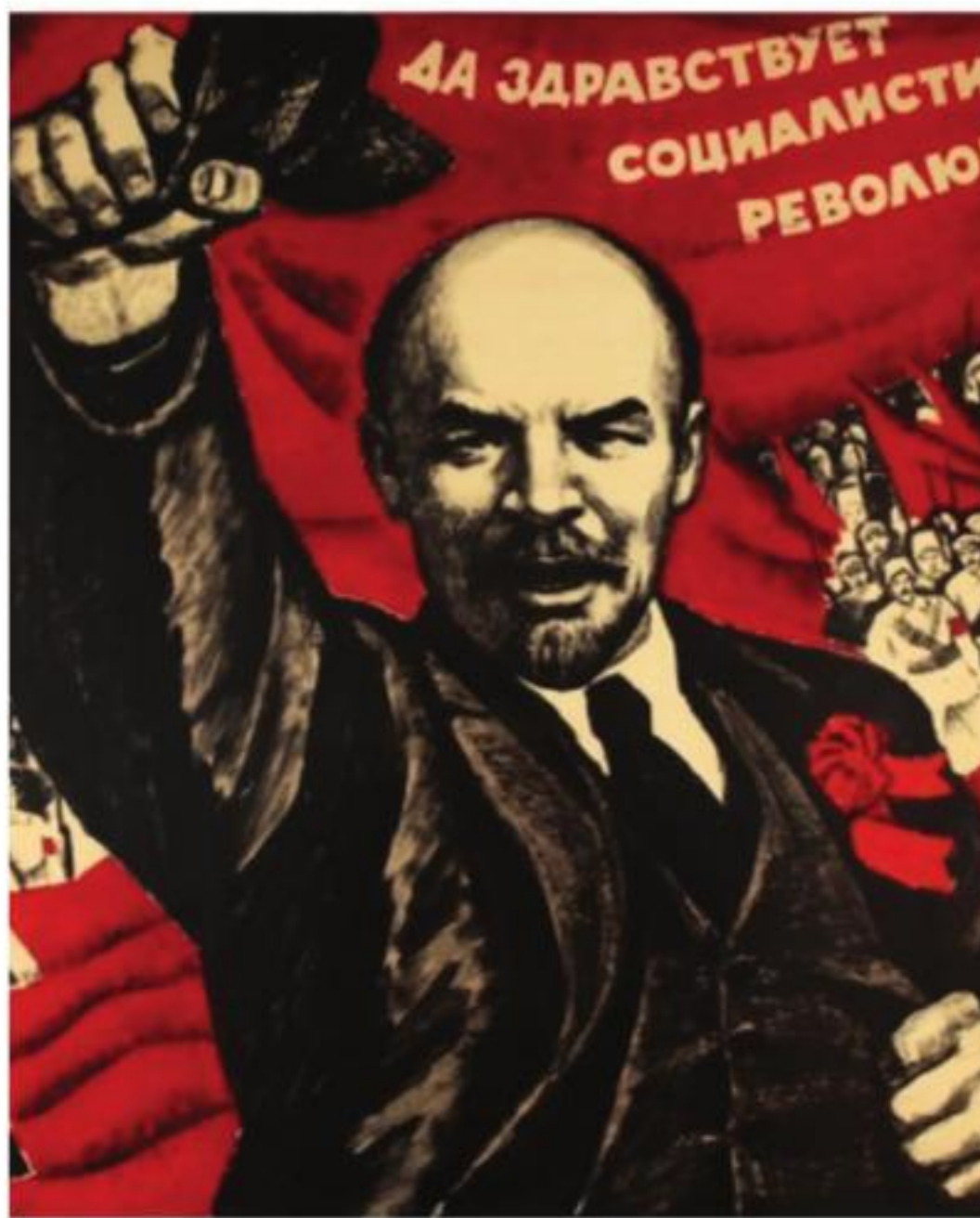
At that time he was associated with revolutionary Marxist circles. While practicing law in 1892, he largely represented poor peasants, which led him to develop a hatred of the class bias he found in the Russian legal system.

In the mid-1890s, he quit his law practice and settled in St. Petersburg. There he became associated with a group of radicals who were similarly impressed by the ideas of Marx as well as the influential Russian Marxist, Georgy Plekhanov.

At the time of staying in St. Petersburg in 1893, he continued to write and distribute political pamphlets about socialism as well as tried to stir up rebellion among the working people. He, with other agitators, strived to form the League of Struggle for the emancipation of the working class and was soon arrested for his political activities. From prison in St. Petersburg, he was sent to Siberia from 1897 to 1900.

Following his release, he moved through Russia and Europe, developing his thoughts on Marxism and quickly became recognized as a leading thinker and prominent figure in the international Marxist revolutionary movement.

In 1903, Lenin argued with the leadership of the Russian Social Democratic workers' Party. The moderate, led by Martov (whose real name was Yuliy Osipovich Tserdbaum), wanted to keep the party open to all who agreed with its politics. The



radicals, led by Lenin, insisted that only those truly committed to immediate revolution should be members.

In 1903, Lenin became the leader of the 'Bolshevik' faction of the Russian Social Democratic Worker's Party following the split within the social revolutionaries. This was about the same time he published a pamphlet 'What is to be done?' outlining his beliefs about the way towards a socialist state. The implications of Lenin's vision for the Russian Marxists became evident in the second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) held in 1903.

In 1904, Russia went to war with Japan. Following a string of military defeats, by the beginning of 1905 various segments of Russian society including students and liberal members of the nobility were calling for political reform. In October 1905, the emperor issued his October Manifesto, in which he made a number of political concessions, including a commitment to estab-

lish a popularly elected legislative assembly called DUMA.

In December 1907, Lenin began his second extended stay in Western Europe, settling first in Geneva, Switzerland and then in Paris. In 1912, Lenin and his supporters organized a party conference in Prague.

At this conference, Lenin formally broke from his Menshevik opponents and the rest of the RSDLP to form an independent Bolshevik Party.

It was World War I that speeded up revolution in Russia. Lenin was still in Western Europe when the war began in 1914 and he saw the war as an opportunity to advance the international workers' revolution he had worked for.

When the February Revolution of 1917 led to the abdication of the Tsar and the development of the Russian Provisional Government, Lenin returned to St. Petersburg (now called Petrograd). By 1917 it seemed to Lenin that the prospect of revolution was rapidly receding and it was time for Soviets to take over power.

He arrived in Petrograd on 16 April 1917, one month after the Tsar had been forced to abdicate. He put three demands which were known as Lenin's 'April Thesis.'

On 25 October 1917, Lenin led his leftist revolutionaries in a successful revolt against the ineffective provisional government, an event known as the October Revolution.

It was also known as Red October, the October Uprising or the Bolshevik Revolution and it was a seizure of state power from the provisional government of then Russia.

Lenin, a leader of the communist party, became the new head of the newly formed USSR.

Lenin, founder of the Bolshevik political party was a successful revolutionary leader who presided over Russia's transformation from a country ruled by Tsars (emperors) to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the name of the communist Russian State from 1922 to 1991.

What Marx and Engels saw as glimmerings of revolutionary potential in Russia came to fruition with the genius of Lenin's revolutionary theory and practice.

His Ideology against the hierarchies and the capitalists would later become the foundation of modern anti-imperialism.

Written in 1916, in the middle of the First World War, Lenin's Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism is an essential work for understanding the phenomena of war and imperialism at present.

According to Lenin, imperialism is not the result of nationalist values, ideas or policies but of concrete economic imperatives.

His understanding is the way of understanding international politics today. The war of Ukraine is the consequence of the struggle between the two gangs of imperialists.

Just as in Lenin's time British hegemony was threatened by the rise of the new socialist USSR, we are witnessing the rise of China and Russia which are challenging US hegemony today.

The death centenary year of the genius leader Lenin is an occasion for us to appreciate his great contributions to explain today's capitalism from the viewpoint of all oppressed nations all over the world.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

## Tolly's Nallah

SIR, I am born and bred in Kolkata, in the Kalighat area. My residence used to be near the Kalighat market which lies adjacent to "Tolly's Nallah" also known as Adi Ganga.

A navigable canal between the 15th and 17th centuries, by the 1960s, the canal had lost its vitality as a water route and transformed into a drain due to the dumping of untreated industrial and domestic waste. The National Mission for Clean Ganga has outlined a detailed project report for the pollution abatement of Tolly's Nallah.

The major components under the project include sewerage and drainage network replacement, construction of modern Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) with SBR technology, dredging works, restoration of the canal lining, renovation of ghats, reha-

bilitation of slum dwellers, stormwater management, and public awareness programs.

Despite the above, the canal is currently heavily polluted, with untreated wastewater from various sources flowing into it.

There are also issues with slum areas, markets, and unauthorized commercial activities along the bank of the nallah that dispose of solid waste and sewage into it.

Once, the high and low tides of Hooghly used to wash some of its pollutants but due to construction and blocking partly from Karunamoyee Bridge towards the southern side, it is now but a stagnant pool of water, an oasis for insects, filth, rubbish and what not.

Given the situation that the roads cannot be expanded beyond a certain point in Kolkata, the

government can seriously consider increasing the navigability through measures like dredging which can allow suitable boats or rafts to ply.

This can be a swift mode of transport, resulting in decongestion of the already choked roads.

Apart from these benefits, the efforts to rehabilitate and clean the canal could have positive environmental, social, and economic impacts if successfully implemented.

Yours, etc., T. Kannan, Kolkata, 12 April.

## US HEGEMONY

SIR, This refers to Mahir Ali's top-class article "Israel and Iran must show restraint" (18 April). In the Mid-east conflict, America is the real culprit and Israel its stooge. Israel knows that it does not need to show any restraint as long as Uncle Sam is with it; hence it is ready to take any risk.

Unless the combined mili-

tary prowess of China and Russia counters the US globally, the Middle-East will remain under absolute US control. The global hegemony of the US needs to be broken.

Yours, etc., Aranya Sanyal, Siliguri, 18 April.

## LEFTIST RANT

SIR, A recent subscriber to *The Statesman*, I am curious as to why a paper of your repute carries the venomous rants of the Islamist

sympathizer Mahir Ali.

Surely, there are more balanced and nuanced readings of the situation in the Middle East, where Israel, like India, has always fought back in self-defense.

Perhaps *The Statesman's* views on Israel align with Ali's. Maybe I need to stick to the cross-words each day and give these tiresome, preachy Leftist-Islamist opinion pieces a wide berth.

Yours, etc., Noshir Mehta, Kolkata, 18 April.

## POLL RHETORIC

SIR, Apropos your editorial "BJP's Blueprint" (*The Statesman*, April 17), the Congress Party on Sunday trashed the BJP Lok Sabha poll manifesto as a jumla patra (rhetorical document), with party chief Mallikarjun Kharge saying PM's guarantee is a "warranty of jumlas" as he has failed to fulfill promises made in the past.

The Congress also accused the BJP of not fulfilling promises made on issues such as jobs, doubling of farmers' incomes, and price rise and inflation, and alleged that the PM is now shifting goalposts by talking about 2047 instead. Kharge charged that the prime minister did not do any major work during his tenure which would have benefited the people, youth and farmers of the country.

The Prime Minister released the BJP's Lok Sabha poll manifesto at the party headquarters in Delhi on Sunday. The manifesto professes to provide special focus on the poor, youngsters, farmers and women. But there is no accountability for old guarantees, just empty jurglery of words.

PM had promised to bring back black money by forming a special task force, but electoral bonds came instead. He also promised to strengthen law and order in the North-East, but today violence is continuing in Manipur, on which PM is maintaining silence. The BJP had promised to build 100 new smart cities but they were never made and instead, China is building "smart villages" on the border.

Yours, etc., Bhagwan Thadani, Mumbai, 17 April.





## A thought for today

War was not a game where masters would keep her from sustaining any real harm. War was a nightmare

RF KUANG

## That's Enough

Israel, Iran should now stand down

Again sending the international community into a tizzy, Israel reportedly carried out a direct strike against Iran yesterday. Although Tel Aviv hasn't officially owned up to the strike — which unconfirmed reports say was carried out by drones targeting an Iranian military base — it led to a spike in oil prices and panic in some international markets. Iran too has been dismissive about the attack, which was limited in nature.

**Problem Israel** | There's even speculation that the Israeli drones were launched from within Iranian territory. If true, this would mean Tel Aviv wanted to demonstrate it could infiltrate Tehran's domain in response to Iran's April 13 missile and drone launches against Israel. However, right-wing Israeli politicians like national security minister Ben Gvir weren't happy with the scale of the Israeli strike. This has been the problem with Netanyahu's gov't — it's allowed the Israeli far-right to pressure it into escalatory tactics, both in Gaza and now with Iran.

**Problem Iran** | Tehran has taken on the mantle of defending Palestinians. And with its array of militias, it can cause much regional disturbance. Plus, Iran's current hardline gov't can't afford to lose face vis-à-vis Israeli strikes. This means Tehran can't be seen as not having the last word in any military exchange.

**Military sparring** | So far the military strikes from both Israel and Iran, have either been advertised well in advance, allowing the other side enough time to prepare, or have been low in scale. But things could go wrong quickly. What if the Iranian April 13 strikes had caused serious damage in Israel? What if Israelis hit an Iranian nuclear facility? The escalation matrix could spin out of control.

**Cool heads needed** | War between Israel and Iran will be hugely damaging to both and burn West Asia. No Israeli or Iranian wants that. Thus, the best way for temperatures to cool is for Israel to wind down its Gaza operation and for Iran to rein in its militias. Tel Aviv and Tehran have scored enough political and military points. Tit-for-tat strikes must end now.

## Vasuki's Tales

Not a land of snake-charmers, but a land snakes have charmed

A colossal 50-ft snake fossil called Vasuki indicus was discovered in Kutch, the largest find of the madtsoiidae species that lived across the southern hemisphere some 47 million years ago. It's a clue not only into primaevial snake species, but also of how continental land masses shifted and collided, and species dispersed and evolved around the world. "We have been able to show that we have some of the most remarkable snakes in India," said the scientists who studied the fossil. We certainly do, no surprises there.

Snakes may be somewhat maligned in Christianity and Islam. But they have been potent symbols across most ancient and indigenous cultures. They often signify protection and healing, right from the Greek symbol of a staff with a serpent that represents modern medicine. Mythologists and psychologists have dwelt on the rich ambiguities of the snake motif, of danger, guarding treasure, of sexuality, of awakening potential.

India has its own fount of snake legends in Hinduism, Buddhism and indigenous traditions. Vasuki was the great serpent who became the rope to churn the ocean, Vishnu rests on a great snake. Serpent worship is an ecological tradition that became entwined with more recent religious forms, like the sacred groves in Kerala. The icchhadhari naagins of Bombay cinema and popular dance moves attest to this lingering fascination in popular culture too. We're not the land of snake-charmers, we're the land snakes have charmed.

## Our Prehistory Is Made To Order

Theories about early humans are reflections of current biases, agendas

How did humanity emerge? Theories of the deep past have shaped our history and present, says *The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence and Our Obsession with Human Origins* by Stefanos Geroulanos. And these theories are self-serving fictions.

All the influential stories we have been told are tied to the wishes and fears of the storytellers. From the 'violent state of nature' to accounts of dinosaurs and floods, from 'man the tool maker' to 'primitive communism', from 'mitochondrial Eve' to the 'reptilian brain', we've been spinning yarns based on vanishingly little evidence.

Because so little is known or knowable, prehistory is more a narcissistic fantasy than a field of inquiry — unlike, say, a history of World War I. We search for what we share with hominids from tens and hundreds of thousands of years ago, and try to establish something meaningful about 'human nature'.

Take enduring concepts like the 'state of nature' and the 'ages of man', that have been useful to the West. Indigenous people were usually cast as the representatives of 'natural man'. Human evolution is seen as a matter of life stages. The past, the child-stage, can be seen as a lost purity, or a blank slate in need of rational instruction. The East was described as 'humanity's cradle', to whom Christianity would bring maturity.

Prehistory, as a field, was born in the tumultuous 1860s. Through the 19th century, human progress was choreographed in stages of three: savage, barbarian and civilised, or later, the Stone, Bronze, Iron Ages.

Why did homo sapiens, anatomically modern humans, outlast other hominids? Their experiences are supposed to answer questions about what our essential nature is, or whether violence is ingrained, or whether peace, love and non-hierarchy was our early state. Was there a patriarchy that was displaced by property, marriage and monogamy? Communist and capitalist theories have wrangled over this to prove the other side aberrant. 'Man the hunter' theories had long held sway, in line with the biases of the 19th century, with new theories vehemently dismantling it now.

Another powerful idea is that of the 'thin veneer of civilisation' behind which we are all brutish and instinctual. Instinct became the opposite of reason; we have reason, they have instinct. It was used in army pamphlets around World War I, to claim the enemy was a predator and that our side needs to tap into 'primal instincts' too. It excused the modern savagery of the 'civilised' by putting the blame on humans' earliest ancestors — with little evidence to suggest those early humans had been savage themselves.

The book does not deny the advances in understanding the deep past. There have been solid findings in understanding the Neanderthal genome, in migration patterns and so on. But reliable science is harder to identify with all the glib storytelling. Cherry-picking facts and projecting our own values onto early humans to speculate about 'human nature' is the problem. Historically, it has only served to bolster hierarchy, conquest and the workings of power.

## mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



## Young, Bored &amp; Not Voting

No surprise that only 38% of 18-year-olds bothered to register as voters. They respond to a good contest or a cause. Both are missing in these elections

Dipankar Gupta



Only 38% of the freshly minted 18-year-olds have registered themselves as voters for the 2024 elections. This has the experts worried. Have the young lost interest in democracy? Is the future bleak in their hands?

Actually, none of the above, and the young are not damaged goods. It's their youth that makes them wary of dull routine, which voting day can become. In a flash that changes if there's a glorious crusade attached to an election. When that happens, polling becomes a carnival and the turnout of voters below 25 can put older adults to shame.

Otherwise, elections are for old folks; people who brood and chew the manifesto cud over and over again. Let them trudge to the polling booth in the same boring way they have led their lives. Without the drum roll of a campaign when a competitor must be vanquished, voting is a dull affair!

The 2024 elections have failed to give young voters that zing for they believe they know the outcome already. Therefore, as in the past, their numbers will lag behind in voting statistics. In Bihar, Delhi and UP, less than 25% of the just-turned 18 have registered as voters. Bihar is the lowest at 17% but politically alive Maharashtra is not much better at 22%.

Contrast this scenario with 2014 when young voters swamped booths to give BJP an absolute majority. Overall votes polled by the 18-25 age group was 2% higher than national average and in the case of votes polled for BJP, it was 3% more than it was for general voters. Unlike the past, this time around, young voters were not behind the curve. In 2014, those born after the great

reform of 1991, were ready to get their first shot at voting and weren't they lucky? Till then, all they saw, from the age-barred sidelines, were sloppy, potbellied aging fighters slugging it out in full-blown fatigue. Outcomes of these duels were inconsequential and the victor always won by a split decision.

Now, at last in 2014, the young felt they had a clear mission to accomplish. On the one side there was a charismatic, articulate, outsider against an ancient

why between 2014 and 2019, BJP's support among young voters jumped from 61% to 68%. This was not just a 7% bump up, but also contributed to a 4% increase in the proportion BJP gathered nationwide that year.

When Election Commission and others wonder how best to get young people to vote, they overlook the significant fact that they are now addressing a crowd that thinks differently. The hormones coursing among the 18-

killed and there was the fear of Sikh militancy, new voters sensed a campaign and voter turnout shot up to a high 64%. This record was bested only in 2014.

The young Indian is not unique in this respect. It has been observed, globally, that the overwhelming bulk of voters are middle-aged. In this respect, the very old and the very young are probably singing the same song, for the enthusiasm to vote goes down as a person crosses over from being middle-aged to geriatric.

In US too, persistent youth apathy is disturbed only when there's an election with a cause and an enemy to be vanquished. Clinton and Obama won with ladies of youth support and so did Biden against Trump. The states that recorded the highest number of youth voters in 2020 were New Jersey, Minnesota, Colorado and Maine, and Biden won them all.

The young may not beat the alarm clock and wake up on election day in sleepless excitement, like their elders, but they are not politically disconnected. They enter the fray only when there's thunder and fury and ideological partisanship is out in the open. This is why they are the life and soul of public demonstrations everywhere, though they are slow to vote.

In India, the youth led the charge in the Nirbhaya agitation and also in Anna Hazare's campaign. In France, while just 13% of youth voted in the 2021 municipal elections, yet in 2019, during the 'yellow vest' strike, they had gathered a million people on the streets of Paris. Likewise, it was the youth again that steered the 2011 'Occupy Wall Street Movement' in US.

Give the 18-year-olds a good fight and they will come out swinging on election day. They young hate to punch below their weight.

The writer is a sociologist



worthy, now well past his prime, but supported by the establishment. The young sensing a thrilling battle, stepped into the breach to give the challenger a clear win. The mood shift was evident six months before polls.

This sentiment held in 2019 too because Modi's victory needed consolidation lest it slip back into the hands of the same inert people who ruled earlier. This explains

25-year-olds seek a cause and not a process. If the 2024 elections have failed to amp them up it's because the young don't see a competition at all.

Though there are no accurate figures on age-related voting in earlier Indian elections, yet one might safely suggest that the rise in voting numbers is because of the youth. In 1984, for example, after Indira Gandhi was

## POLLITICS

Special Series on Elections

## Impactful In IPL, Irrelevant For India

India's T20 team lacks all-rounders. Impact Players bury chances of unearthing one. Entertainment gets priority. World Cup gets short shrift

Avijit Ghosh@timesgroup.com



Now a seductive 17, IPL has become cricket's biggest business idea since Kerry Packer's World Series in the late 1970s. And not just because it is currently valued at \$10.7 billion by Brand Finance, the brand valuation consultancy. The game-changing marriage of willow and glitz has delivered more moolah to more cricketers, spawned similar templates in other sports, including kabaddi, and spearheaded franchisee-driven cricket culture worldwide.

IPL club owners have acquired teams in both traditional cricket centres (South Africa, West Indies) and emerging markets (UAE, US).

On the pitch, it's been an orgy of entertainment this edition. Six hitting is at an all-time high like BSE Sensex. In 2009, an average 8.5 maximums were struck per game. In the first 30 games of 2024, the average has zoomed to about 17.5. Its spillover reflects in scores; the 260 mark has been breached on five occasions.

In another era, it would have been a decent total in a 50 over match. Mayank Yadav, Shashank Singh, Nitish Kumar Reddy, Ashutosh Sharma — the game keeps throwing up potential stars and one-night heroes; all picked up for a measly ₹20 lakh. Every third contest has as many surprises as a *Game of Thrones* episode. No wonder, even in election season, viewership continues to surge.

Which is why IPL is not only BCCI's cash cow No. 1 but also its playing

calendar's centrepiece. But the nagging question is: has it helped in making Team India a T20 superpower on the pitch?

India's lone T20 WC triumph happened in 2007 before IPL arrived in 2008. In the seven editions since, India has entered the final only once (2014) and semifinal twice (2016 and 2022).

A common feature in India's WC winning teams of 1983 (ODI), 2007 and 2011 (ODIs) was a wealth of all-rounders. But in recent years, India has suffered a shortage of quality multi-dimensional players in T20 cricket. Hardik Pandya is an exception. But despite his tendency to break down, little effort has been made to groom replacements.

Introducing Impact Players, mid-game substitutes similar to football, in IPL won't help, as captain Rohit Sharma has correctly pointed out. Rather than remedy the

shortage of all-rounders, the concept enables IPL teams to bypass the problem. Will Impact Players help Team India's cause in the World Cup, where there's no such rule? Take the case of Shivam Dube. A power hitter, the World Cup probable

could have tested and upgraded his bowling skills in IPL to be of more value to Team India, if selected. But since Impact Players were instituted in 2023, he hasn't bowled a single delivery in IPL.

Shortage of high performing all-rounders isn't Team India's lone weak spot. In recent T20 World Cups, India has often floundered in



BOWLING WHILE FLYING: Mayank Yadav

pressure games.

That's what happened against New Zealand and Pakistan in 2021. Again, against England in the 2022 semifinals, the top six batters, barring Pandya, failed to take charge. Between them, the bowlers couldn't manage a single wicket.

In contrast, unheralded Mathew Wade produced the innings of a lifetime to turn the tide in favour of eventual champion Australia against Pakistan in the 2021 WC semifinal.

Strong teams bat deep, possess abundant bowling options, and field and catch out of their skins. But most of Team India's specialist bowlers are one-trick ponies: sub-par fielders who can hardly bat. Compare this with defending champion England. Adil Rashid, slated

to bat at No. 11 in the 2022 final, has 10 first-class centuries in his resume.

The World Cup squad is likely to be announced early next month. selectors need to be brave in their choices. Remember, a new captain in a team filled with newbies, including Rohit Sharma, won us our only WC in the game's bonzai version. Serial underperformers in high-pressure knock-out games need to be weeded out. We have stuck too long with the consistently faltering superstars who are also superbrands. Team India needs cricketers who privilege team needs over self-preservation.

India also needs in-form, hungry players who relish pressure. It's good to see Rishabh Pant rapidly discover his 'munchiness'. This IPL has also seen the maturing of Riyan Parag and the emergence of Mayank, the kid with lightning in his arms. Currently injured, he should be handed a BCCI fast bowlers contract, enabling him to avail of NCA's restoration facilities. It is also time to revive the old Kul-Cha (Kuldeep Yadav and Yuzi Chahal) combo, the best T20 spinners in India. And what about Rahul Tewatia, whose game awareness and match-winning efforts, seldom gets the amount of attention it deserves?

In 2021, IPL finished just two days before the World Cup; this time the gap's five days. Even though some players are likely to leave early, is this the best way to be primed for Team India? In a T20 World Cup year, the national team has played only 3 T20s — that too in Jan. With the players engaged in nine weeks of intense club cricket, who prepares for the World Cup? It's clear who's winning the country vs club debate.

## Calvin &amp; Hobbes



## Sacredspace



And here's a gem from a book of Bhutanese wisdom: "Do not chirrup too much about your happiness, and do not whine too much about your unhappiness." Which makes me think: Happiness shared is an act of compassion; happiness flaunted, an act of violence.

Ruskin Bond

## Ridvan, Dawn Of A New Dispensation

Sheriar Nooreyzzan

Many holy scriptures promise the advent of a redeemer to restore the fervour of faith in men's hearts, end injustice and inequity, and unite mankind.

Accordingly, the Hindus await their promised Kalki avatar, the Buddhists the advent of Maitreya Amitabha, Zoroastrians for Shahbahram, Jews, Christians and Muslims for their Messiah, Christ-returned, and Imam Mehdi, respectively. Scriptures also indicate the time and describe world conditions for the promised advent. The general condition is described to be the darkened spiritual horizons, the sinking of man into the mire of materialism, the decline in fervour of faith, and point to the mid-19th century as the time of the advent.

History reveals accounts of two

events of religious significance during the predicted time. The first was the announcement in 1844 by the Bab in Iran, of the imminent advent of the promised Manifestation. In heralding the advent with convincing proofs from the Quran and Hadith, the Bab attracted thousands of believers but also the wrath of the clergy. Upon his execution in 1850, the mantle of leadership of the followers of the Bab fell upon Mirza Husayn Ali, an eminent scholar and avid follower of the Bab. Mirza Husayn Ali too was arrested and imprisoned in a dark dungeon, where He was blessed with the divine intimation of his Prophethood. Provisionally saved from execution, he was exiled, as a prisoner first to Baghdad and eventually to the prison

colony of Akka in Palestine. The second event of religious significance was the momentous proclamation of Mirza Husayn Ali as the promised millennial Manifestation, in a garden named Ridvan, on the outskirts of Baghdad, over a 12-day period between April 21 and May 2, 1863. Thenceforth he was titled Baha'u'llah, meaning the 'glory of God'. The anniversary of that historic declaration is celebrated by the Baha'i community as Ridvan, over 12 days as the dawn of a new dispensation. During the 40 years of imprisonment, an ocean of revelation flowed from the pen of Baha'u'llah. Describing humanity as "the leaves of one tree and the fruits of one branch", Baha'u'llah called for the cessation of

empire-building, urging the end of wars and ushering in an era of peace. While yet a prisoner, Baha'u'llah unveiled God's redemptive plan for mankind. He outlined a plan for the establishment and preservation of universal peace through a federal system of world government, a world judiciary and executive with its own army to ensure peace, equitable sharing of the world's natural resources, a global economy with a single world currency, and universal education with a world auxiliary language. God's plan is slowly but surely being inadvertently implemented. We are being driven towards our ultimate destiny of spiritual unification. Vasudhaiva kutumbakam is in the making, when the world will happily chant, "The earth is one country and mankind its citizens."

April 20 is the first day of Ridvan



THE SPEAKING TREE

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## West Asia on the boil

Iran-Israel conflict impacts crude oil prices

ISRAEL launched a tit-for-tat attack on Iran on Friday, days after Tehran unleashed drones and missiles on Israeli territory. The development has raised the spectre of a wider West Asian conflict amid the prevailing hostilities between Israel and the Iran-backed militant group Hamas. The reverberations of the Iran-Israel confrontation are already being felt beyond the region, with the benchmark Brent crude price rising to above \$90 a barrel before falling a bit. This is a matter of concern for India, which imports over 85 per cent of its crude oil requirements. A steep hike in global oil prices could significantly raise the country's oil import bill and make the rupee depreciate due to the larger outgo of foreign exchange. It's the purchase of cheaper oil from sanctions-hit Russia that helped India reduce its import expenditure over the past year or so.

Supply disruptions caused by geopolitical turbulence have prompted India, the world's third biggest oil consumer and importer, to firm up plans to build its first commercial crude oil strategic reserve. Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Ltd, a special purpose vehicle created by the government, has invited bids for constructing an underground storage facility in Karnataka. However, the project is expected to be completed only by 2029-30. In the immediate future, India will continue to be heavily dependent on oil imports. The resilience demonstrated by the country in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war is now being put to the test by the shocks originating from West Asia.

India has been quick to express concern over the 'new emerging realities' and has noted that any escalation of hostilities between Israel and Iran will threaten peace and security in the region. A global economic upheaval can be avoided if neutral countries like India impress upon both sides the vital importance of exercising restraint.

## Cut sugar &amp; salt

A call for health-oriented action in food industry

THE renewed spotlight on significantly high sugar, salt and fat content in food has sparked a debate about public health and transparency. Some major business houses — Cadbury, Nestlé and IndiGo — find themselves at the forefront of this discourse, facing scrutiny and accountability. This affords an opportunity for the stakeholders to reaffirm their commitment to consumer wellbeing.

Nestlé's responsive approach to reducing added sugars, sodium and saturated fats in its products and aligning with global dietary guidelines over the years reflects the market risk faced by a company failing to recognise the importance of providing healthy options. From revising sodium levels in Maggi Masala Noodles to cutting sucrose content in infant cereals, the FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) giant has been trying to foster healthier lifestyles to remain on top of the business. However, the latest allegations about higher sugar content in its baby food in developing countries like India are worrisome and warrant an investigation. Adherence to regulations is crucial to rebuilding trust and nutritional integrity. Similarly, IndiGo's response to concerns about the sodium levels in on-board meals emphasises the need for transparency.

Consumer awareness is pivotal in shaping food choices and driving industry practices. As people become more informed about the health implications of their dietary decisions, companies face pressure to prioritise nutritious alternatives and provide accurate information about the ingredients. The food industry must reassess its practices and the food regulators strengthen their enforcement strategies. This need is particularly significant in India, where the burden of nutrition-related non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular ailments, is rapidly escalating. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from consumers and the food industry to promote healthier eating habits. Initiatives such as the taxation of the addictive high-fat sugar salt foods offer a glimmer of hope.

## ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, APRIL 20, 1924

## Labour and India

ALTHOUGH nobody in India really expected any good to come out of the debate on Viscount Curzon's motion in the House of Commons, it is safe to assert that in taking up the position it did on the occasion, the Labour Government threw away what may easily prove to have been its last opportunity in regard to India. It knew as well as the rest of the world that dark clouds were thickening in the political sky and that at any moment there might be a storm resulting in its overthrow. Already within the short period it had been in office, the government had been defeated in two divisions, and about the very time when this debate was taking place in the House, an important meeting of the Liberal members of the House was being held under the presidency of the leader of the party himself and addressed by its most puissant member, which might lead to important developments any day. Even a Labour Government cannot, in a self-governing country, forever go on ignoring the results of divisions in Parliament, and there may come a day in the not-distant future when, owing to a succession of defeats on major issues, Mr Ramsay MacDonald will have no choice but to resign and either make room for Mr Asquith and go into the wilderness or make an appeal to the country. In either case, the contingency of removal from office can no longer be dismissed as remote. And if it does take place, what will be Labour's answer to those who will put to it the question, "What have you done for India, for whose aspirations you professed such boundless sympathy in the days of your impotence, and what have you done to solve the most important of all outstanding imperial problems?"

## Congress slow off the blocks

The party is yet to hit the ground running in states where the BJP could find the going tough

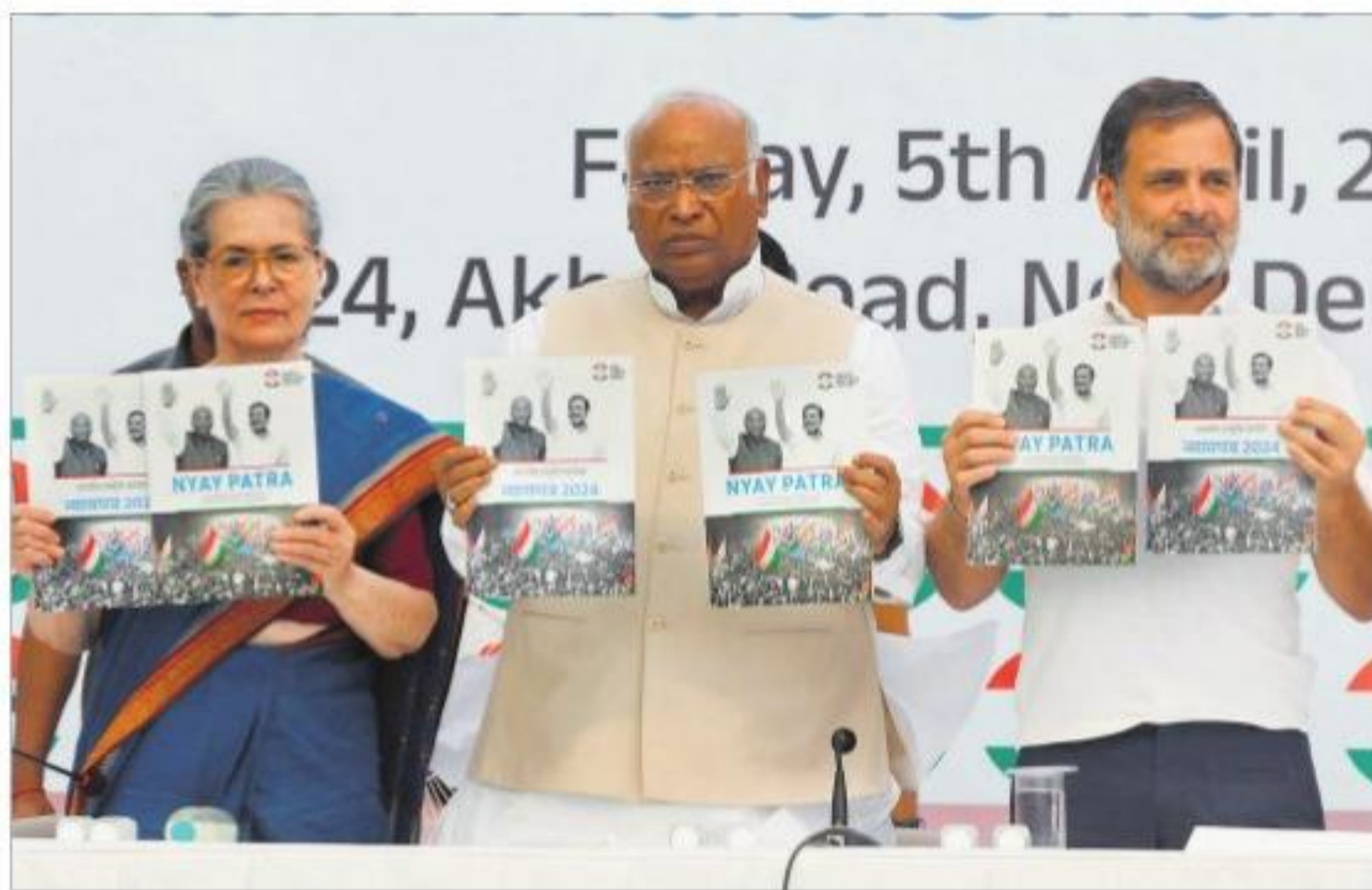
NOUS INDICA  
RAJESH RAMACHANDRAN

IT is indeed tempting to do crystal-gazing and predict poll results based on news reports, political briefings and conjecture. In fact, most of the time, that is what passes off as election prognosis. Then, like astrologers, political commentators too rationalise their failed predictions, blaming them, instead of the planets, on the politicians: "If only they had done this and that and the other." So, one is carefully desisting from any attempt at poll prediction.

But it was hard to miss the brouhaha over allegations of a polling company deleting its X post and also about a fake survey. The allegedly deleted post from pollster Pradeep Gupta's Axis My India handle talks of a fierce battle ahead for the BJP in 13 states; and then there were survey results being attributed to the same company, claiming that the NDA was losing the polls. Soon, Axis My India clarified that this information was fake and that the company only did exit polls, not opinion polls.

But it indeed looks like the BJP is in for a tough contest in many states where it had swept the polls in 2019. Then, for the Opposition to benefit from such a close fight, it ought to be prepared to slug it out with the BJP. A fake survey or a deleted X post are not going to be enough to take on the juggernaut that is rolling relentlessly. The polling has begun, the first round is over, but the Congress is not yet ready.

Being in Chandigarh, it is impossible not to be affected by the theatre of the absurd opportunism that is playing out in this



STRATEGY: The least the Congress has to display is an intent to put up a good fight, not exhibit a divided house. REUTERS

beautiful city. In fact, the neighbourhood's beauty often hides its bulging underbelly of quid pro quos. It is a bipolar contest in the city and hence easier to campaign, contest and possibly win for either of the two parties — the BJP and the Congress. The first party to announce its candidate was the BJP.

Despite having four strong contenders — a sitting MP, a former MP and two former city party chiefs — there was not a murmur of dissent from those who missed out over the choice of the candidate. The announcement of the nominee was followed by the launch of the campaign. But not for the Congress. After its candidate was announced, a former MP, who was defeated in the last two polls, kicked up a storm of protest instead of the campaign dust.

There was nothing but infighting being talked about in the local media for about a week. Finally, an emissary from the high command had to fly in to mollify the defeated, but defiant, leader. What the high command's assurance — a euphe-

The party needs to understand that it is all about an ideologically neutral, disenchanted voter, for whom the Congress is but an instrument to dislodge the incumbent, whenever the voter decides to do so.

mism for quid pro quo for the sake of peace — is anybody's guess. In the neighbouring constituency of Patiala in Punjab, the Congress has a candidate who had defeated the incumbent in 2014 with his clean image of being an idealistic, patient-friendly doctor. But that is not enough for local Congressmen.

Instead of seeking votes, all that is being done by local Congress leaders is bickering in Patiala, when there is but a little

over a month left for polling. Punjab's voters have no dearth of options: it is a four-cornered fight between the ruling AAP, prime Opposition party Congress, the Shiromani Akali Dal and the BJP. Yet, the Congress is hesitant to announce all the candidates, and none of the other three parties has displayed backbiting of this magnitude. AAP has declared all 13 candidates and has started its campaign in full throttle. If at all a party has to be the choice of the disenchanted voter, the least it has to display is an intent to put up a good fight, not exhibit a divided house.

Haryana is going to the polls only on May 25, yet the BJP announced all its candidates in late March itself. Haryana, like Punjab, ought to be one of the difficult states where the BJP could find the going tough. The BJP has named former state Congress president Ashok Tanwar and former MP Naveen Jindal among its nominees, and they have all hit the ground running in a desperate attempt to stem the anti-incumbency tide. Sushil Gupta, the lone candidate of AAP, which is part of the

INDIA bloc, is also campaigning hard. But the Congress has not yet announced its nine candidates in the state.

Can Indian democracy or electronic voting machines be blamed for Opposition candidates not being announced in states where the BJP fears heavy losses? The unsaid logic of the late announcement of Congress candidates is to contain dissidence and keep the damage of rebellion to a minimum. But then, arm-twisting and blackmailing of the leadership cannot be termed a democratic norm; it is just extortionist bullying of a very weak leadership by power-hungry individuals.

These individuals mattered when the high command was strong enough to dispense favours of power and pelf. They were instruments to keep mass leaders on a tight leash. But now they are a nuisance. These individuals are counterproductive in a situation where the party is winning only out of the people's anger against the incumbent and not because of its organisational strength. The Congress does not have a strong ideological or organisational framework to talk about. It was always a party of governance, seeking power.

Rahul Gandhi, in a recent video, termed Congress workers the party's backbone and DNA who are fighting an ideological battle. He should have known better about those in Chandigarh or Patiala or elsewhere who only fight for a ticket. When they are denied it, they rebel and quit the party. Ideological wars can never be fought by those who aspire for power and its perks. Instead of burdening a regular Congress worker with highfalutin ideology, the party needs to understand that it is all about an ideologically neutral, disenchanted voter, for whom the Congress is but an instrument to dislodge the incumbent, whenever the voter decides to do so.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The right to vote is a sacred right and an onerous responsibility you owe to the motherland. — APJ Abdul Kalam

## A curious case of mistaken identity

SANKAR SEN

A Commission of Inquiry headed by Justice JC Shah was set up in 1977 by the Janata Party government to look into the excesses committed during the Emergency, which had been imposed by the previous PM, Indira Gandhi. At that time, I was working as an Assistant Director in the Intelligence Bureau in Jamshedpur. On my promotion as DIG, I joined the commission and was given the responsibility of investigating cases of gross abuse of police authority and harassment of leaders belonging to Opposition parties.

Justice Shah was determined to complete the exercise within the allotted period of one year. The commission examined the circumstances leading to the proclamation of the Emergency. A team of officers, including me, visited several districts of Haryana to investigate. Our work was arduous and unenviable, but there were some comic interludes. While camping at Hisar, I informed the district authorities that I wanted to visit Haryana Agricultural University (which was later named after former PM Chaudhary Charan Singh). My intention was to get a bird's eye view of the renowned university and its sprawling campus. But by a strange quirk of fate, I was gobsmed by an unexpected turn of events. Mine was an unscheduled private visit and I wanted it to be a low-key affair. But to my bewilderment, I found that the Vice-Chancellor (VC) was waiting for me in the portico of the administrative building. He was extremely deferential and wanted to take me around the university complex. Before I could say anything, the VC started 'sirring' me profusely and explained with great enthusiasm the landmark achievements of the university. An obliging cameraman appeared from nowhere and started clicking pictures.

Accompanied by the VC, I visited various departments, whose heads vied with one another to explain to me the latest research that was being carried out there. Bombarded with information, I made some amiable, though perhaps not exactly appropriate, remarks.

While I was taken around the library building, the librarian asked me to record my name in the visitors' register. After I had written my name, I could notice a distinct change in the VC's manner. He became stiff and standoffish, and after a while he took leave of me.

I could sense that something had gone wrong. The red-carpet welcome and its abrupt end baffled me. The truth finally dawned on me when my batchmate, the Hisar DIG, told me that someone not kindly disposed towards the VC and having a wicked sense of humour had sent a message to him that Justice Shah, chairman of the commission, would be visiting the university. It was a classic case of mistaken identity.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Hospitals reel from staff shortage

The editorial 'Haryana hospitals' reflects the sad state of affairs. Staff shortage, a short supply of medicines and inoperative hospitals add to the patients' woes. So many patients battling serious health issues have to endure a long wait. They often don't even get proper treatment, and occasionally, they bear the brunt of medical negligence. Even those suffering from chronic and infectious diseases fail to get timely treatment at times. Addressing the lapses in healthcare provisions and the management of funds allotted for healthcare needs a comprehensive approach. It is crucial to ensuring quality care for all patients.

PRIYANKA, AMRITSAR

## Ensure enforcement of laws

Refer to the article 'Need to review functioning of food & drug regulatory agencies'; there are innumerable companies and clinics promoting herbal medicines for the treatment of arthritis, psoriasis, etc, on TV. Many ointments and creams are also being advertised for various skin disorders and the 'enhancement of beauty'. Celebrities advertising *pan masala* is very unfortunate. Further, it is a matter of concern that roadside eateries and food joints selling adulterated and unhygienic items have been mushrooming in the country. The onus is on food and drug regulatory agencies to ensure that customers or consumers are not sold any harmful product. The implementation of the existing laws should not be lax.

O PRASADA RAO, HYDERABAD

## Monitor advertisements

With reference to the article 'Need to review functioning of food & drug regulatory agencies'; the author has rightly called for the strict enforcement of the laws to rein in misleading advertisements related to drugs, remedies, health products and food supplements. The authorities concerned need to take a serious view of violations and help save the common man from falling prey to unethical marketing strategies. Besides, the publication and telecast of advertisements needs to be properly monitored. A consumer's health or safety must not be played with.

VIJAY LAXMI, AMRITSAR

## Protesting farmers disrupt trains

Refer to the report 'No let-up in farmers' protest, 61 trains cancelled, 64 diverted'; the cultivators from Punjab and Haryana are not wrong to push for their demands. However, squatting on railway tracks and disrupting rail traffic is not the right way to protest. Many passengers were inconvenienced as several trains were cancelled and others diverted because of the agitation. Sadly, farmers in the region have turned into troublemakers. Nevertheless, the authorities concerned must take into consideration the legitimate demands of the cultivators. But the tillers should also be more responsible and call off the stir at the Shambhu railway station.

KRISHAN KANT SOOD, NANGAL

## A humane solution to dog menace

The mauling of a man by a pack of stray dogs in a Nabha village is shocking. Cases of dog bite have long been common, but someone being mauled to death is a rarity. Despite a spate of dog attacks on residents every year, the authorities concerned have taken no concrete step to tackle the menace, showing complete disregard for human life. Civic bodies have failed to carry out sterilisation of stray canines to check their population. It is the scarcity of food that may be prompting dogs to turn aggressive and attack humans. The government must set aside funds to arrange food, shelter and treatment for stray dogs.

COL RS NARULA (RETD), PATIALA

## Don't entertain frivolous pleas

Apologies of the news report 'SC reserves verdict on EVM-VVPAT tallying, says can't suspect everything'; such pleas are often driven by unwarranted fears and vested interests. These cases are a big drain on the resources of constitutional courts. Dismissing such cases or allowing the withdrawal of frivolous petitions is sometimes not enough. Courts would do well, as a rule, to impose heavy costs on the petitioners to dissuade them from making a mockery of the judiciary so that the focus remains on serious disputes. No court should entertain a plea on insignificant matters.

LALIT BHARADWAJ, PANCHKULA