

Demand revival

Corporate results show growth momentum continues

An examination of the company results for Q4FY24 (January-March 2024) indicates corporate growth recovery continues with some margin expansion. However, banks and financials have contributed a high proportion of overall profits, and many of the large public-sector enterprises (PSEs) that dominate the energy sector have not released results yet. So trends in certain key sectors may not be readily apparent. Overall, 1,040 listed companies with a cutoff of minimum sales of ₹1 crore in Q4FY24 have reported results. They have reported 10 per cent growth in net sales, 21 per cent rise in earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortisation (Ebitda), and 18 per cent growth in profits after tax (PAT). Excluding volatile sectors such as banks, other financial players, and oil companies, the remaining companies have declared 7.8 per cent growth in sales, 13 per cent growth in Ebitda, and 17.7 per cent growth in PAT. Notably, banks saw 24.5 per cent growth in interest income and 46 per cent rise in reported PAT.

For several quarters, the economy has been driven by government spending with low consumption demand. It's not clear if this situation is changing. In terms of big-ticket consumption, the auto sector is indeed seeing high demand, with better unit volumes and improving average selling prices. In the auto segment, the quarter saw Maruti and the two-wheeler majors — Hero, Bajaj Auto, and TVS — reporting a strong showing. Good volume offtake from the two-wheeler segment and Maruti is usually a strong indicator of consumption demand. However, performances in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector are also considered to be indicative of broader consumption demand and there the results were not so impressive. Sales grew by 7 per cent across the sector but profitability was distorted by Godrej Consumer taking a big impairment in overseas operations due to currency issues. Adjusting for that event, Ebitda rose by 12 per cent and PAT by 13 per cent. However, most companies reported low volume increases and squeezed out better results on the basis of price hikes.

Information technology (IT) and pharmaceuticals are the two sectors that are considered bellwether for exports. IT companies issued cautious advisories as they have now done for the past five quarters. They reported 3 per cent sales growth in constant-currency terms, 8 per cent rise in Ebitda, and 9 per cent rise in PAT. Cutbacks in headcounts continue. The pharma sector did much better with 8 per cent rise in constant-currency sales, 34 per cent rise in Ebitda, and 50 per cent rise in PAT. To a large extent, raw material and supply-chain concerns caused by the impact of Covid on China's Wuhan Province (which is a key production centre for drugs) have eased. The policy focus on infrastructure development has meant strong demand for construction companies and for key building materials like cement and steel. However, the general elections have led to a tapering off in government tenders, which will also affect Q1FY25. The steel industry, for instance, saw flat sales with lower profits and Ebitda as global steel prices have dropped.

The Q4FY24 results are, therefore, mildly encouraging. They do suggest that economic growth continues and there may be a revival in consumption demand. But the soft global economy is cause for concern, affecting demand for software services and commodities like steel and other industrials. Interest costs are also up across the board — the entire sample reported a 30 per cent rise in it and this is hurting profitability even in industries where other raw material costs have eased.

Entry barriers

Workplaces still fall short on women's safety

Since 2014, Indian companies have been pressured by courts and the market regulator to enhance the protection of their women employees against sexual harassment at the workplace. But in the 10 years since the start of such coordinated state action to safeguard the safety and dignity of women at the workplace, corporate India's efforts towards meaningfully addressing the issue appear to be woefully inadequate. First came the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, POSH for short, which was passed by Parliament in 2013, and it made it mandatory for companies to set up internal complaint committees (ICCs) to hear complaints of sexual harassment and disclose this data in their annual reports. In 2018, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) required all listed companies to disclose data on sexual harassment in their annual reports. But the inadequacy of the data and the absence of follow-up by regulatory agencies point to widespread indifference to the issue.

A recent study by Ashoka University's Centre for Economic Data and Analysis, based on 300 listed companies on the National Stock Exchange (NSE), underlines this trend. It shows an increase in the number of cases of sexual harassment reported by Indian companies in their annual reports but a growing gap between the number of complaints and their resolution. To create a representative sample as possible, researchers covered 100 companies with the highest market capitalisation, another 100 in the middle, and the rest from the smallcap segment analysed from 2012-13, a year before the Act was implemented, to 2022-23. In the first year that POSH came into effect, the companies in this sample reported 161 cases; by FY23, the number had jumped to 1,160, suggesting improved reporting and redress protocols. But this is a partial picture at best. For one, the gap between resolution and reporting has been steadily expanding. The POSH Act also requires companies to disclose the number of complaints unresolved and pending at the end of each year; this too has been rising. If the rise in the number of cases suggests that employees are becoming more confident about reporting harassment, the poor resolution could point to the inefficacy of the ICCs. According to a Walchand Plus survey, conducted in January last year, about a third of the organisations do not conduct any POSH training for employees and a third have little faith in ICCs as a means of redress.

Institutional inertia towards addressing workplace harassment is also evident in the starkly uneven pattern of compliance with the laws. Just 81 of the 300 companies in the data set accounted for 1,160 cases in FY23, with half the cases reported across just eight companies. The rest of the sample, 219 companies, did not report any cases, a trend since 2014. The Ashoka University study also reveals that it is the largecap companies that account for 98 per cent of the complaints. Smallcap companies are conspicuous by their absence. When these trends are extrapolated to the corporate sector as a whole, the picture that emerges is that in the third decade of the 21st century the Indian workplace remains hostile to women, that too at a time when women's participation in the workforce remains low.

Jobs, cronyism, and welfare

A lacklustre campaign throws up some differences in economic strategy



ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY

More than 10 days remain in this general election campaign, and it is fair to assume that few new issues will be raised in the time that remains. It has been a relatively dull affair in comparison to many past elections; the personal popularity of the incumbent Prime Minister has perhaps led many to assume that there is no real challenge from the Opposition, thereby rendering the process less interesting. Recent claims that this election has become more competitive seem to have affected the markets and elements of the media discourse, but do not seem to be backed up by anything concrete.

Yet, even if this is not the most competitive general election of our lifetime, it is nevertheless worth unpacking some of the narratives to attempt to identify what, if any, economic issues are considered worthy of democratic debate.

The Congress' manifesto seemed to promise that some such debate might be opened. It was heavily populist compared to previous iterations of the party's platform. It promised major changes, for example, to India's reservations in jobs and educational institutions: an amendment to the Constitution that would remove the 50 per cent cap that currently exists on quotas, and additional quotas for the economically weaker sections of society. The focus on public sector jobs continued with the assurance that the party would fill "nearly 30 lakh vacancies" in the Union government and end the slow process of contractualisation within the state sector. The government's reforms to military recruitment, meant to reduce the Army's excess manpower, were also promised to end.

One would expect that this set of issues would touch off a debate on the best way to create employment growth in India, and whether such growth is inclusive. Given some recent studies have shown that job and wage growth in India has stalled, that would have been a timely and relevant discussion. There are

more than enough arguments to be made against the Congress' preferred mechanism for ensuring job growth. To give him his due, Prime Minister Narendra Modi rolled out some of them in an interview last week. He pointed out that government jobs are not the same as employment generation, and suggested that small-scale "Mudra" loans and infrastructure investment also created jobs — 60 million of them, he claimed. He also attempted to defend his government's changes to recruitment for public-sector jobs. But that may be a losing argument; paper leaks, postponements and cancellations have rendered the recruitment process a nightmare for applicants.

Yet it might be worth pointing out that this strategy clearly also has declining effectiveness. Infrastructure investment — particularly if it results in construction — can indeed expand the opportunities available for unskilled labour. Some studies suggest that construction is, in fact, the only sector where this has happened and thus rural-to-urban migration in India, for example, is disproportionately dependent upon the health of that single sector. Stories from the heartland are run through with concerns that even young people who have sunk money in online coaching classes or entrance examinations wind up working as stone crushers or for building contractors. Broadening these opportunities appears necessary. This subject, of a new job-creating growth paradigm, has been avoided by both the government and the Opposition.

The last general elections, in 2019, were fought — to the extent that economics played a role — around questions of welfare. The Congress promised a basic income scheme of ₹72,000 a year for the poorest 20 per cent of the country. The government, meanwhile, emphasised the improvements it had made to welfare delivery in kind, such as to the public distribution system and the availability of cooking gas. Post-election analysis insisted that the creation of a "labharthi varg", or a class of welfare recipients numbering over 200

million, provided a comfortable cushion to the incumbents' vote share.

Since then, the Bharatiya Janata Party has doubled down on its dominance of this narrative. Its victories in the last round of assembly elections, it has been argued, were a product of the "Modi ki guarantee" slogan, which centred around the effectiveness of welfare, even at the state level, through the Prime Minister's personal intervention. The Congress since then has attempted to one-up the government by promising to double the free food ration to 10 kilograms a month. But there is, perhaps, some fatigue with this particular issue. On the ground, "Modi ki guarantee" advertisements have been slowly replaced over the course of the campaign. It is unlikely that post-2024 analysis will be able to identify welfarism as the major theme of this campaign the way it was in 2019.

The relationship between the state and big business, however, has not gone away as an issue. The initial salvo here was fired by the Prime Minister, when he suggested that Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi was no longer attacking large industrialists because "tempos full of notes" had reached the Congress. Mr Gandhi seems to have, in turn, intensified his rhetoric, attacking the government for its closeness to oligarchs. In one such speech, he said: "The whole public sector will disappear, and the country will be ruled by 22-25 people. Who are these people? They are the billionaires of India ... whose eyes are on your land, forest and water ... All the airports, power stations, ports, infrastructure have been given by PM Modi to these 22-25 people. He has never waived off your loans, but he has waived off loans of 22 richest people for ₹16 lakh crore."

The Prime Minister has shifted somewhat in response to this. In recent speeches in Jharkhand, which has a long history of Maoist violence, he has said that Mr Gandhi is "using Maoist language" and that investors will "think 50 times" before investing in Congress-ruled states as a consequence. Is there a clear distinction being built up here? The Congress has certainly taken a sharp turn left, which has perhaps encouraged the PM to focus on his investment-friendly credentials. The obvious rejoinder — the fact that private investment has not exactly taken off over the past 10 years — has however not been made by the Opposition.

Economic policy might not be the dominant issue in this election. But, to the extent that it is, the difference on matters such as privatisation seems larger than in previous years; but the Opposition has not succeeded in defining itself around the central concern for many voters, employment generation. The government seems to continue to get a free pass, regardless of its record, on that particular issue.

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POLICY RULES

MIHIR S SHARMA

Economy: From Modi 1.5 to Modi 3.0

As we get closer to the final stages of the 2024 general election, we are being told that plans for Modi 3.0 are ready. While expectations among his fans are high that Narendra Modi will put India on a different orbit, I would say we are really at Modi 1.5 now, given the series of ineffective policies, poor governance, and at least one irrational action that has characterised the past 10 years of Mr Modi's rule. Indeed, for most of the first seven years, the government was struggling to show even a glimpse of its much-touted development model. Part of the blame for this lay with the mess left by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), but Mr Modi's entire first term and two years of the second term were largely characterised by wrong, irrelevant and wasteful policies that hobbled the Indian economy. It is only in the last three years that the economy has moved ahead from Modi 1.0 to what I would call version 1.5.

One of the reasons for the long period of economic sluggishness was the shock delivered by the government itself — the decision to demonetise 85 per cent of the currency. It remains the lowest point in Mr Modi's policymaking, causing massive disruption, destroying jobs and businesses, and inflicting widespread misery. By 2019, the combined impact of demonetisation, the ham-handed and rushed introduction of goods and services tax, reduced purchasing power and lack of capital spending meant that the economy was in dire straits. People have a short memory, which helps politicians. To jog your memory, this was the picture in mid-2019: Poor export growth; cries of tax terrorism even from Modi supporters; a collapse of growth in gross domestic product (GDP), a growth rate below 5 per cent (3.5 per cent under the old method); auto sales at a 20-year low; poor manufacturing growth; a crisis in financial services and banking after some big defaults; household consumption at a

four-decade low; unemployment at a 45-year high; and so on. In a desperate move, in September 2019, the government cut taxes for the corporate sector to kickstart growth. This knee-jerk move achieved nothing; companies don't invest just because they have more surplus. They need to see demand.

MODI 1.5

When Covid-19 dealt another big blow to the economy, the government finally stepped in to generate growth through huge capital expenditure. Strangely, Mr Modi

does not take credit for this in his election speeches. The government has spent massive amounts to increase defence production, and on urban infrastructure, railways, renewable energy, transportation, water supply, etc. Government capital expenditure as a percentage of total expenditure hit 28 per cent in FY24 from just 14 per cent in FY14. The government has also incentivised local manufacturing through production-linked incentives for 14 sectors, though it is too early to judge their impact. While the economy and the stock market have benefited from this, such spending will have to continue for a long time because there are many structural impediments to the private sector picking up the baton of growth right now.

This is where the picture gets muddy. Does the Indian government have the capacity to continue such high spending (₹11 trillion, plus inflation) year after year? Already India's debt-GDP ratio is 82 per cent, one of the highest ever. A small crisis would push interest rates higher and the rupee lower, ruining government finances, and, the one engine that is keeping the economy running faster: Government capex.

On the other hand, have there been any structural reforms to help the private sector fulfil the responsi-

bility of generating consistently high long-term growth? Not quite. We need hardcore reforms such as minimising frictional costs of doing business, reducing time for approvals, reducing the cost of infrastructure such as power, toll, and fuel, and improving labour productivity, which is among the lowest in the world. This ought to be supported by soft reforms such as a fair and speedier justice system and drastic elimination of corruption. The government has made no dent in any of these critical areas.

What about corruption?

Remember, "development" is not the only thing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had promised. The primary appeal of Mr Modi in the runup to the general elections of 2014 was his war cry against corruption in the UPA period. Demonetisation promised to end corruption (a peculiar logic accepted by even financial experts), but was a disaster. Not even Modi fans can claim that corruption and the generation of fresh black money have been curbed. Indeed, over the past few years, the BJP has welcomed shady characters from other parties, many of whom had corruption cases dropped against them after they joined the BJP. A party that was dubbed "National Corruption Party" by Mr Modi is now the BJP's ally. Many economists don't think corruption is an important factor in economic growth. But high corruption creates wrong economic incentives, leads to a higher-cost economy, saps enterprise, lowers productivity and ultimately shows up in inflation, weak currency, higher interest rates, and reduced consumption. Like corruption, all elements of the economy under Modi 1.0 have remained the same under Modi 1.5, while increasing tax-and-spend to create growth. If these structural issues are addressed (yes, corruption included) we could brand it Modi 3.0 if you like. For India's sake, let's hope he tackles these issues.

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USA Inc: Woke vs greed



BOOK REVIEW

JAMES B STEWART

It's been 14 years since Goldman Sachs was vilified as a "vampire squid" by Matt Taibbi in *Rolling Stone*. "Organised greed always defeats disorganised democracy," he concluded then. Yet organised greed lives on, a seemingly intractable aspect of human nature, as three new business books make clear.

The age-old swing of the pendulum between greed, excess and regulation is the subject of *Taming the Octopus* by Kyle Edward Williams. Inevitably, greed and scandal breed regulation, which in turn provokes proponents of the free market to decry government overreach. Consider the Glass-Steagall Act, which separated commercial banking from more speculative investment banking during the Great Depression only to be relaxed by the Clinton administration

more than six decades later.

In Williams's telling, the free-market makers may engage in tactical retreats but always re-emerge, perhaps because they can fall back on the rigorous logic of economics, divorced from the messiness of the real world. Williams, a historian and editor, offers a brisk and even-handed overview of corporate regulation. He isn't the first — and surely won't be the last — to conclude that "the corporate octopus is an institution incapable of being tamed."

Behind the *Startup* by Benjamin Shestakofsky, began life as a PhD thesis with the premise that his author would go to work at a San Francisco start-up and write about it, on condition that he not name the company or its employees. The start-up, which he calls AllDone, aims to be the Amazon of service providers, matching customers with mostly small, local businesses.

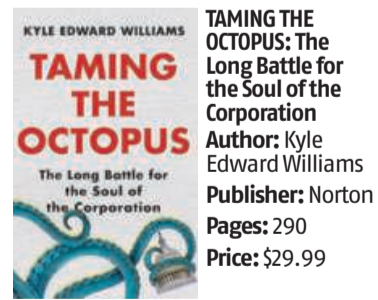
Readers willing to wade through the book's sometimes academic prose will find a real-life *The Office*. Silicon Valley version, alternately comical and poignant, with satellite operations in the Philippines and Las Vegas.

The San Francisco location is

AllDone's nerve centre, filled with software engineers and highly educated tech bros (mostly men) whose "first guiding principle," according to the company's introductory email: "Play to win: We're a professional sports team, not a family." That intensely competitive environment is in stark contrast to the nurturing "family" culture in the fast-growing Philippines hub, where human labour is cheaper than using artificial intelligence.

Las Vegas was the base for the company's call centre, where contractors (nearly all women) fielded customer questions and complaints and, as in the Philippines, worked for low pay with no benefits. It appeared to be a tough job. As one supervisor commented, callers were "pissed off and they want someone to yell at." She advised a rattled employee: "Deep breath in, deep breath out! Go to your happy place!"

Despite efforts to foster the same warm familial feelings and gratitude as in the Philippines, the Las Vegas workers "failed to meet performance objectives, violated managerial directives, squabbled with each other and openly expressed dissatisfaction with managers in San Francisco," Shestakofsky



observes. The Las Vegas operation was eventually shut, its functions moved to Salt Lake City.

AllDone has emerged as a "unicorn". Its founders and the company's venture capitalist investors are enormously rich, at least on paper — unlike its work force. Many readers will no doubt find these discrepancies troubling, as does the sociologist in Shestakofsky. "Among the most glaring social problems associated with venture capitalism is its role in reproducing vast disparities in wealth," he writes. "Venture capitalism is designed to further enrich the wealthiest among us."

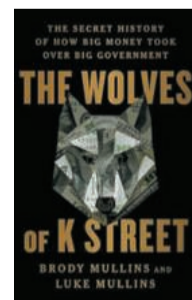
The Wolves of K Street by the journalists and brothers Brody and Luke Mullins, is less about how lobbying shapes policy than about the machinations of its often colourful practitioners. Perhaps it should come as



no surprise that an industry based on access, personal connections, influence and money would attract a rogues' gallery of strivers and opportunists for whom conflicts of interest are cultivated rather than shunned.

These include: Tony Podesta (investigated but never charged as part of the inquiry by the special counsel Robert S Mueller III into Donald Trump's ties to Russia); Paul Manafort (convicted of multiple felonies connected to his lobbying for Ukraine before being pardoned by Trump); and Roger Stone (also convicted of felonies related to the Mueller investigation before Trump commuted his prison sentence).

Many of the tales they recount received extensive news coverage, but the authors bring them to life with considerable narrative skill and



novelistic detail. Podesta, for example, was so obsessed with collecting expensive art that he stayed in Turin, Italy, for an art fair even as his once powerful lobbying firm imploded.

After reading about these lobbyists' lavish spending, self-indulgence and outright frauds, their ensuing downfalls (in most cases) come as a not-so-guilty pleasure.

The Mullins brothers sought comment from Courtovich, who is still plying his trade on Capitol Hill despite brushes with scandal and repeated run-ins with the police at his South Carolina beach retreat. His written response consisted of profanities unprintable here.

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Less Enthusiasm on The Spectrum Front

More because of network rollout, utilisation

Telecom companies are bidding less enthusiastically in the upcoming spectrum auctions, or that's at least what earnest money deposits would suggest. This is partly on account of the low conversion to 5G networks by subscribers of Reliance Jio and Bharti Airtel. Vodafone Idea, the troubled third operator that has been slower off the blocks in the 5G race, needs to catch up. Airtel has to top up on spectrum that is lapsing in select telecom circles. Jio can afford to take it easy after having cornered the biggest chunk of airwaves put up for sale in the previous round of auctions in 2022. In the event, Jio still remains the most hungry for spectrum, signalling its interest to buy three times as much as Airtel, and 10 times as much as Vi.

Part of the reason for low interest has to do with the fact that the previous auction had a lot more spectrum on offer than the upcoming round scheduled for June 6. And it is also a reflection on the financial strength of the bidders. Jio's aggression is based on its rude health, while Airtel is more circumspect, and Vi is not out of the woods despite a government lifeline thrown to the industry. Also, Airtel and Vi had placed an overwhelming part of their bids on spectrum for 5G services in the 2022 auctions at the outset of 5G rollout in the country. The three companies will bid for a little over half the spectrum on offer next month, with frequencies in some super-efficient bands having been exhausted.

The overall picture emerging from bidding intent is India's telecom companies are under less strain in buying what remains expensive radio frequencies. Their lack of enthusiasm is on account of network rollout and utilisation considerations more than in their ability to pay. This is a healthier picture than obtaining prior to changes in spectrum sales rules that allowed for, among other things, payment in parts.

For decades, Indian politicians and officials have been complaining that China has not been doing enough to increase purchases from India and reduce the trade deficit. But this is a rare occasion when Indian business has been reprimanded for taking the 'easy option' of imports, instead of supporting GoI's efforts at reducing reliance on an unfriendly country.

Do It Right, for Sake Of Land Acquisition

In a densely populated developing country like India, there are competing demands on land — farming, housing, infrastructure development and factories. This, on more occasions than one would like, has led to conflicts. According to Land Conflict Watch, there are 781 land conflicts, affecting 9.4 mn people and ₹3.11 tn investments. In this context, last week's Supreme Court judgment on land acquisition is significant. Delivering its order in a case involving the Kolkata Municipal Corporation Act, the apex court said that seven sub-rights of Article 300A — right to notice, right to be heard, right to a reasoned decision, duty to acquire for public purpose, right of restitution or fair compensation and duty of the state to reconstitute and rehabilitate, right to an efficient and expeditious process, and right of conclusion — mark the real content of the Right to Property. Non-compliance will amount to a violation of the right.

This is a welcome judgment. But it must not be construed that the top court is putting a question mark on land acquisition per se. Instead, it is reiterating that these sub-rules need to be followed if the state and industry want to ensure a time-bound acquisition for projects to reduce project delays. India, unfortunately — especially under the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 — has had a history of executive failure to ensure proper compensation to landowners.

Transparency improved significantly after the passage of the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013. But it is still a work in progress. With land demand rising and climate change rendering large tracts unusable, it is imperative that the acquisition process is as per law, and that compensation is fair and time-bound. Otherwise, these regular conflicts will singe the economy and give the kind of signals India can't afford to give out at this stage.

JUST IN JEST
As a bogeyman, this archetypal stereotype remains a threat for some

'Desi Angrez', an Endangered Species

Once again, holding up a mirror to the country's many complexes and petit paranoias, the electioneering politician has thrown up yet another bogeyman: the 'desi Angrez'. Like the ABCD — American-Born Confused Desi — and other archetypal stereotypes (or are they 'stereotypical archetypes?'), the desi Angrez is a figure of both derision and envy, the former emotion covering the latter. The concoction created is infused with a few clichés: one, as the description suggests, anglicisation, or a penchant for speaking not just in English but a kind of hifalutin English; two, as a corollary of the first quality, covertly harbouring derision for 'vernaculars'; three, holding everything that is 'Indian' to be subpar and all things 'phoren' to be of quality, including, say, 'chicken tikka masala'.

While this kind of person may still exist here and there, he or she is no longer the epitome of elite in circa 2024 India. How one holds one fork while delving in sweet Greek salad with spiced feta is no longer seen as an 'issue' since the relative democratisation of such 'Angrezi' khana. But having 'Angrez' in the descriptor still holds a bugbear appeal that allows for a quick denouncement to the 'burey din' of Angrez Raj that, for many, lasted till May 2014. But as far as the entity goes, 'desi Angrez' exists as much as Soorma Bhopali does today.

India will have to find ways to reduce India Inc's over-reliance on a belligerent neighbour

Get Bullish in a China Shop



Saibal Dasgupta

Almost suddenly, many small and big companies have been put in a position where they will have to review their business strategies that involve imports of crucial raw materials and machinery from China. Last week, S Jaishankar obliquely questioned the patriotism of firms that source material from China that could be bought or manufactured locally.

"If peace and tranquillity in border areas are disturbed, would you do business with someone who has just barged into your drawing room and is trying to make a mess of your house fencing? It's common sense that if a country has gone back on written agreements and is doing something on our borders, how can we then say that the business world will continue as normal and other things won't," the foreign minister said at the CII annual business summit in New Delhi last Friday.

The timing of this statement is significant for two reasons. One, it comes just 17 days before EC is due to announce the results of the ongoing parliamentary elections that will lead to the formation of the next government. Two, China has just emerged as India's biggest trading partner surpassing the US, according to figures released by Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI).

The numbers show that Indian exporters contributed just 14% in the total India-China trade amounting to \$18.4 bn, with Chinese sellers taking up the rest. The GTRI figures show that India's exports were worth \$16.67 bn and imports \$101.7 bn in FY24.

"I have a neighbour like China. I



Trading blows

have to learn to compete," said Jaishankar in a recent interview, adding, "By my complaining, China is not going to stop doing things. If I do not build up my strength at home, our foreign policy will be as good as our domestic policy." His comments show that GoI is unhappy about insufficient responses from the industry about 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', which amounts to creating additional manufacturing capabilities, particularly in products sourced from China.

The minister made it clear that GoI was not asking importing companies to entirely stop buying from China. What it expects from firms, according to him, is that they



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explore local alternatives and consider the aspect of national security.

Seen in the context of past efforts in this area, this is the wisest statement on the subject to date. It is also a sign that GoI has begun to review the success of past efforts like the PLI scheme, quality control orders and anti-dumping duties to discourage imports from China.

But it is also essential to ask if 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' that was launched after the Chinese incursion in 2020 was allowed to wane, as India buying from China continued to surge in later years. 'India imported \$4.2 bn worth of telecom and smartphone parts, accounting for 44% of total imports in this category, indicating significant reliance on Chinese components. Laptops and PC imports from China totalled \$3.8 bn, making up 77.7% of India's imports in this sector,' states the GTRI report.

What is often not understood is that heavy reliance on imports is shrinking the elbow room that Indian diplomats need during negotiations with China. What if China was seriously dependent on India for some important products? This would have given our negotiators a special leverage.

For decades, China's steel industry relied heavily on Indian iron ore, which was the most important component in India's export basket. But China has drastically reduced its re-

liance on India after asking its own steel industry to look for alternative sources, even if they prove to be a little more expensive.

Another example pertains to China's import of pharma products from India. Beijing has been under great pressure from Chinese citizens, particularly cancer patients, to import India-made drugs that cost a fraction of their prices from developed countries. But Beijing has refused to sufficiently open up its market for Indian exporters because that



Heavy reliance on imports is shrinking the elbow room that Indian diplomats need during negotiations with China

would give India an edge during bilateral negotiations.

On the other hand, GoI has been asking the Indian pharma industry to manufacture locally and reduce its dependence on China-made active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), the raw material for drug manufacture. Has the industry responded positively? The chemicals and fertilisers ministry told Parliament in December 2023 that import of APIs from China grew from ₹23,273 cr in 2021-22 to ₹25,551 cr in 2022-23.

The question is whether the new government after the elections will push Indian industry to embark on the import substitution route, instead of making it entirely voluntary, as has been the case so far. It is clear that the government will not opt for irrational curbs on imports because that can derail several industries. But it will have to find ways to reduce reliance on a belligerent neighbour that is relentlessly fortifying its position on the LoC.

The writer is author of *Running with the Dragon: How India Should Do Business with China*



THE SPEAKING TREE

Time and Death

J KRISHNAMURTI

We do not know death and we do not know life. We know the turmoils, the anxieties, the guilt, the fears, the appalling contradictions and conflicts, but we do not know what living is. And we only know death as something to be dreaded, feared; we put it away and do not talk about it, and we escape into some form of belief, like flying saucers, or reincarnation, or something else.

So, there is a dying and, therefore, a living when time, space and distance are understood in terms of the unknown. Our minds work in terms of the known, and we move from the known to the known; and when death cuts off this continuity of the known with the known, we are frightened. What we want is comfort, not the understanding of the living with something we do not know.

So, the known is yesterday. We do not know what tomorrow is. We project the past, through the present, into the future; and hope and despair are born. But to comprehend the thing called death, which must be something extraordinary, unknowable, unthinkable, unimaginable, one must learn about it, one must live with it, one must come to it without knowledge and without fear.

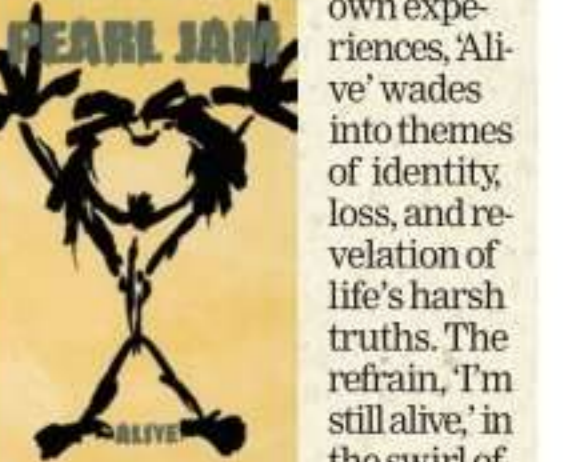
And I say it is possible, that one can die to the many yesterdays. After all, the many yesterdays are pleasure and pain. And when you die to yesterday, the mind is empty; and it is frightened of that emptiness and so it begins again, going from one known to another. But if one can die to pleasure and pain... then the mind is without time and space.



Alive Pearl Jam

From the breaking waves guitar riff that introduces us to this raging song, Pearl Jam's 'Alive' washes over you. A seminal track from the band's 1991 debut album Ten, 'Alive' captures the raw power and diving depths, and yet is goosebumps-inducingly uplifting. The beauty of the song lies in its juxtaposition of heavy brooding while shouting out what it means to be resilient, to survive.

Eddie Vedder's vocals are a force of nature — the very opening line, 'Son / She said / Have I got a little story for you,' carrying a mix of anguish and defiance. Inspired by Vedder's



own experiences, 'Alive' wades into themes of identity, loss, and revelation of life's harsh truths. The refrain, 'I'm still alive,' in the swirl of guitars and skipped-heartbeat drums, becomes a triumphant declaration of existence, turning personal pain into an anthem of perseverance. Mike McCready's soaring guitar solo is iconic, blending intricate melodies with gritty emotion. Jeff Ament's pulsating bass and the relentless drumming of Dave Kruseen ground the song to the earth. It is, as it soars as well as plunges, a modern-day rock classic that makes all of us treat it as personally as a bruise.

Stop Cos Stretching the Truth



Karthik Kondepudi

Recently Patanjali found itself under the scanner of regulatory bodies and Supreme Court in the context of dodgy advertising practices. Welcome as this development was, the ayurvedic major is hardly alone in stretching the truth when it comes to advertising. While regulatory authorities must ensure that advertising adheres to ethical standards and doesn't mislead consumers, such scrutiny should be applied across the board. Every label coming out from FMCG, nutraceutical, cosmetic, pharmaceutical and wellness sectors must be properly checked by

regulators. In this context, Supreme Court rightly pulled up the Indian Medical Association (IMA) last week for not taking action against Patanjali on complaints for the company's alleged 'misleading' claims and 'disparaging' ads against the allopathic system of medicine.

Regulatory bodies should ensure that consumer goods are not allowed to introduce or sell their products in the market where the consumer assumes that products match what they are sold as — and, more importantly, that they are *not* sold as what they are not, especially by making disparaging comparisons.

Many FMCG and pharma companies have little ethics, pretty much eschewing consumer welfare they claim to deliver. They often mislead the public with their false claims and use distorted ads to lure the unsuspecting buyer.

Many nutraceutical supplement products we see on shelves are far



Really?

from 'genuine'. Many of them are filled with 'fillers' used over GRAS — generally recognised as safe — limits. There is also unrestrained use of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), Maltodextrin, a kind of carbohydrate, for instance, is the most commonly used filler. Excess intake of maltodextrin may lead to serious adverse reactions.

Not only does such adulteration threaten consumers but it also points

to a rampant counterfeit culture, especially in the nutraceutical industry. Major online retail stores and pharmacies aid the widespread sale of such counterfeit products. Furthermore, these products are mislabelled as being 'safe' and 'natural' for regular consumption.

Regulatory bodies have made strides in doing their bit that FMCG, pharma and nutraceutical companies aren't immune to the law, and that they can't wriggle out of cases of misappropriation and misdeeds. But as the Patanjali case indicates, they must step up to the plate and do much more.

It's time that companies with questionable standing and intent are alerted of the consequences of fraudulence, and do better in terms of maintaining authenticity and quality of their products. They must be made to use the power of 'exaggerative marketing' restrictively.

The writer is partner, Herbochem

Turnout's Turning Out All Right



Akshay Rout

In the 17 Lok Sabha elections starting from 1951, turnout went past 60% on seven occasions, of which the 65% mark was crossed only in 2014 and 2019. For all the attention to 'declining' turnout, the first four phases of the ongoing polls have registered a score of 66.95%. In absolute numbers, 451 mn people have voted so far. Postal ballots will add up on counting day.

If this rate is maintained in the remaining three phases after today, 2024 could become only the third general election to get past 65%. Globally speaking, this turnout level measures in the top half of countries having democratic elections. Phase 1 turnout has been 66.14%, which moved to 66.71% in phase 2 and 65.68% in phase 3. In the fourth phase, it nudged past the 2019 count with 69.2%, also indicating an incremental rise phase after phase. Everyone who has interest in the game appears to have pushed the envelope a bit after the initial phases.

EC has been bringing new interventions, many aimed at dealing with extreme heat conditions, after the small dip in turnout in the first phase. Major telecom providers have been marshalled to deliver celebrity messages coaxing voters to get out to vote. 'Voting invites', energetically pushed by EC, have permeated all

networks — banks, post offices, petrol pumps, airports and in-flight messages, railway stations, and even at stadiums during IPL matches. All forms of carriages — print, TV and digital — are flush with voting awareness content. Popular aggregators are in the act too, at their own cost. Playful incentives like discounts and prizes by big brands have added to the excitement of the 'democracy festival'. Civil society and India Inc's collaboration in promoting electoral participation, the best of public good, augurs well for the future.

For over a dozen years, Indian democracy has been savouring constantly rising rates of electoral participation, especially the 66.44% and 67.40% turnouts in 2014 and 2019, respectively. This has raised the level of aspiration, with election managers doing whatever it takes to maintain the momentum. It also marks a special shift as, till not long ago, an ideological debate was circulating whether turnout was a

legitimate area of management intervention at all, or if it was better left only to political contestation.

Compared to several other countries where voter education has been a part of statute, India did not have a firm-ed-up approach till it embraced Sveep (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation) programme in 2010. Presently, turnout is at the core of election management, under the close watch of the three-member EC and campaigns like 'Mera pehla vote: Desh ke liye', 'Nothing like voting, I vote for sure', and 'Chunav ka parv, desh ka garv'.

Prior to today's voting, polling is now complete in 23 states, of which eight states have beaten their 2019 turnout levels. Bihar, UP, Maharashtra and the mega-urban centres still hold significant concerns over voter participation among the remaining 164 constituencies. EC has put chief electoral officers in states on extra alert. Along with district election officers, they will need to up the

nudge for voters and further bolster 'ease of voting'.

Weather conditions have not been the friendliest in several parts, especially with heatwave condition warnings announced in parts of the country in the next few days. Those who manage elections have not been short of empathy either. From water, ORS and shamanias at polling stations to air ambulances and helicopters parked for emergencies, they have mobilised it all. Citizens who are 85-plus, or have disabilities, can vote from home.

EC has ordered a task force to review heat conditions before each phase of poll. Farmers, fishermen, factory workers, roadside vendors, etc, take the brunt of the scorching sun and humidity. But a larger number of them come and vote election after election. Queuing up at the polling station is a stout democratic and civic action that isn't dependent on comfort.

Preparing to facilitate the sizeable migrant population's 'ease to vote' is commendable. The over 200 mn young people on the electoral roll should vote to secure their stakes. The urban elite must question herself or himself for choosing not to vote.

But there is no gloom arising out of voter turnout this season. Universal adult suffrage has been a defining foundation of India's democracy. Universal voting will remain an ideal pursuit. Yes, 100% is the best turnout. But 65% in an electorate of 970 mn would suggest voter participation is on track.

The writer is former director general, Election Commission of India



Don't forget your line

Chat Room

Vaghul Leaves Banking Richer

Apropos the news report, 'Narayanan Vaghul, the Doyen of Banking, Passes Away at 88' (May 19), a veteran banker and former ICICI Bank chairman, N Vaghul was a great talent spotter and a believer in gender-neutral meritocracy. He built the ICICI brand and has many firsts to his credit. He was the youngest bank chairman, of Bank of India, at 44, and the youngest chairman of the Indian Banks' Association. It was Vaghul who headhunted K V Kamath, who took ICICI Bank to the next level. Many other financial sector leaders today, Madhavi Puri Buch, Renuka Ramnath, Kalpana Morparia and Shikha Sharma, were all spotted and mentored by Vaghul. He will be remembered for his contribution to the Indian banking sector.

SUDHAKAR PANDEY
Thane

Opinion

MONDAY, MAY 20, 2024



ON GLOBAL TRADE COLLABORATIONS

Union external affairs minister S Jaishankar

“Because trust and reliability have become so important, foreign policy is today charged with creating the comfort levels between governments to make that happen. This is especially so in terms of de-risking supply sources and enhancing collaboration in sensitive, critical and emerging technologies

Unhealthy tax

It's a double whammy: While health insurance is expensive due to the high GST rate, medical costs are soaring

T'S A CATCH-22 situation for most consumers, especially senior citizens. Rising healthcare costs, at 14-15% a year or almost double the consumer price inflation rate, make health insurance a necessity. At the same time, if they have to buy medical insurance, the premiums are prohibitively high. Sample this: According to reports, the average health insurance premiums have risen by almost 50% in the past six years, rising at a compound annual growth rate of 7%. And premiums have risen even faster by 25-50% in just the past year. Things are likely to get worse, with insurers gearing up for another round of hikes after the regulator reduced the waiting period from four to three years for pre-existing diseases and eliminated the age restrictions on health insurance policies for individuals. The even higher rates will act as a further roadblock to improving the insurance penetration of non-life, which is a pitiable 1% in FY23. It's also quite possible that the growth in premium might be coming from the same customer group or even falling, as the population is rising.

While the spike in the premiums as well as healthcare costs have gone up after Covid as insurers had to make significant payouts, it's unfair on the part of insurers to continue raising rates even after the pandemic is long over. Over the last two years, claims have flattened out, evident from the fact that the industry's incurred claims ratio has fallen back to 89% in FY23, after rising from 88% to 109% between FY20 and FY22. If insurers don't stop, most Indians will continue to depend more on their employer's group insurance instead of buying individuals plans. Even senior citizens are often advised to have a personal emergency fund instead of buying expensive health insurance.

To be fair to insurance companies, the government's tax policies have complicated matters. It's quite puzzling that the Goods and Services Tax (GST) is a whopping 18% on health policies — the same rate applicable for televisions (up to 32 inch), shampoos, toothpaste, and services such as cinema, theatre and food and drinks are charged. Members of the General Insurance Council have been saying for quite some time that the GST should be brought down to the minimum 5%, or even zero. It is important as India does not have any social security system for the elderly or the unemployed. In the government's defence, it is giving tax benefits on health insurance under Section 80D. Then, there are the Ayushman Bharat — Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) and various state government health schemes. But at a time when the government is encouraging taxpayers to move to a no-exemption regime, it's imperative that the GST is slashed.

Further, given that the rise in the premiums and healthcare costs have been so dramatic, way beyond the consumer price inflation index, a sharp fall of 13%-18% is needed to somewhat offset this increase. This has already caught the attention of the Supreme Court, which has threatened to impose the Central Government Health Scheme rates on all hospitals as an interim measure. But it is a tricky area as any intervention will lead to strong resistance. The slashing of GST could also have a twin effect — while pressuring insurers to keep premiums under check, it will send a strong signal to healthcare providers that the big brother is watching. Sometimes, signals work better than actions.

WE MUST RETHINK OUR OBSESSION WITH MASTER-PLANNED CITIES AND FOCUS ON THE URBAN EXPERIENCE INSTEAD

URBAN INDIVIDUALITY

Beyond end-state cities

INDIA IS URBANISING rapidly. Any negative consequence of urbanisation leads to frequent calls for better planned cities. So, what does this exactly mean? Since independence, India has been attempting to “plan” its cities using instruments like master-plans, building bye-laws, etc. Yet, the result has been far from satisfactory.

In this article, we argue that this failure arises from trying to force-fit a “complex adaptive system” like a city into a prescriptive, static end-state. It would be far better to use a flexible framework that allows the city to evolve while maintaining civic order, infrastructure, local character of public spaces, and so on.

The key tool used by Indian urban planners is a ‘master plan’, which is basically a layout blueprint, mostly based on the principles of Cartesian zoning, that classify land parcels into residential, industrial, roads, open spaces, etc. Planners decide on desired land uses based on long-range forecasts of population and socio-economic activity. Various urban requirements such as housing, shops, offices, transport, and more are then fixed on this basis. Master-plans then freeze land-use for decades based on these forecasts. The problem is that cities rarely grow in line with forecasts, and we end up with dysfunctional cities.

The problem is not about poor forecasting, but the fact that cities, like other complex adaptive systems, are fundamentally unpredictable. For instance, in the 1980s, no one could have predicted the rise of an IT hub in Bangalore, the agglomeration of global back-offices in Gurugram and Noida, or Bandra-Kurla replacing Nariman Point as Mumbai's financial hub.

Since a static plan is incapable of being adjusted easily to changing economic trends, ad-hoc decisions outside the framework override provisions in the plan. As mentioned by

SANJEEV SANYAL AAKANKSHA ARORA

Respectively, member and joint director, EAC-PM.
Views are personal



urbanist Vidyadhar Pathak, “The implementation of master plan, in terms of works envisaged, does not exceed 25% of the plan. In addition, despite elaborate development control mechanisms, 30 to 50% population lives in squatter settlements and many informal activities take place on streets.”

Similar results have been pointed out in various studies. For instance, a 2014 study by Abhay Pethe and his coauthors studied variation in actual land use from the plan of 1991-94 in the K East Ward of Mumbai. They found that land under industrial use comprised 26% and commercial use comprised 14%, as opposed to 43% and 3% respectively in the master plan. Similarly, actual land use for residential area was 18%, whereas it was planned at 36%.

A second related problem is that our regulations focus heavily on private rather than public spaces. An article by Kunal Kumar in 2023 studied the master plans of five Indian cities—Ahmedabad, Bhopal, Nagpur, Panaji, and Jaipur—and found that 75% of the regulations were about the private realm, including balcony dimensions, building setbacks, plot sizes, and so on. Only 25% regulations were about the public realm, such as street network,

footpaths, gardens, etc.

Moreover, about 60% of the private clauses are laid out in minute detail, as compared with 10% of the public clauses. This fits with our previous article in this series where we argued that excessively prescriptive building bye-laws has led to the drab architecture of our post-Independence cityscape (tinyurl.com/5ecrj3f5).

This essentially means that most of the attention of urban managers is spent on enforcing what private individuals can or cannot do in their own land rather than what public authorities should do in public spaces. This is unhelpful as the character and urban form of the city is largely defined by the public realm.

Note how the current approach is analogous to the pre-liberalisation top-down planning for the economy. Though we have moved away from economic planning, the idea still dominates urban planning. Essentially, Indian urbanism is waiting for its 1991 moment. This does not mean that we are arguing for laissez-faire but as with a well-functioning market economy, for a framework of general rules that allows the system to evolve.

Addressing these issues requires a paradigm shift in our urban thinking. One way of doing this is to use Form-

Essentially, Indian urbanism is waiting for its 1991 moment. We are not arguing for laissez-faire, but as with a well-functioning market economy, for a framework of general rules that allows the system to evolve

Based Codes (FBC)—that uses physical form and “urban experience” rather than land-use segregation as the organising principle. Micro-management of activity or land use is not the focus except for hazardous industries. This approach stresses the intended form as well as the look and feel of a place, not the use imagined by the planner. Moreover, as a more bottom-up approach, specific rules are tailored to local context.

Incidentally, India has traditionally used FBCs for building cities like Jaipur. The city was developed by Sawai Jai Singh with the help of architect Vidyadhar Bhattacharya. The city was designed in a basic grid, with infrastructure like roads and public space laid down in a single phase. After this, construction focused on a following a certain Rajput-Mughal architectural style along with a uniform colour (pink), which ended up giving the city a uniform façade. With time, the palaces have gone from royal residences to tourist hotspots, and the workshops have changed their trade, but Jaipur's old city retains its unique identity.

Urban experience is now widely used as an organising principle in many modern cities around the world. For example, Singapore has deliberately built up a dazzling, ultra-modern skyline in the last two decades by using iconic buildings, “super-trees” and the creative re-use of old buildings. This did not happen in one shot but through iteratively adding to an overall vision of a certain, urban experience. Delhi's Central Vista project—which is both adding new buildings and creatively re-using old ones—should be seen as another manifestation of this idea.

This piece was to start a discussion on the need to rethink our obsession with master-planned end-states. We will discuss form-based codes in more detail in our next article.

US wildfire season is now everywhere, all at once

THE TOXIC SMOKE choking swathes of the Midwestern US this week is a helpful reminder to Americans that Canada exists, and its wildfire season has come early. But Americans shouldn't forget their own season starts much earlier these days, too. In fact, it's getting to the point that wildfire season is all year long.

A new study by the non-profit group Climate Central finds the flame-conductive combination of hot, dry air and strong winds has become more common as the planet gets warmer. In some parts of the Southwestern US, wildfire season is now two months longer than in 1973, with about half of that increase coming in the spring.

The Texas panhandle, which now experiences 34 extra days of wildfire weather per year, suffered through the worst fires in the state's history earlier this year after a freak winter heat wave, putting the nation's biggest nuclear-weapons facility at risk. One apocalypse at a time, please!

It's not exactly breaking news that the Southwest is bursting into flames earlier and more often. But no region of the contiguous US is immune. Northern New Jersey has 10 more wildfire-friendly days each year than it did 50 years ago, according to the study. Massachusetts has 9 more days, as does southern Alabama. Not coincidentally, the number of US acres burned annually has doubled since the turn of the century.

The Size of US Fires Has Doubled in the Past 20 Years | Acreage of US land burned annually by wildfires

And this has happened after just 2.6 degrees Fahrenheit of warming in the Lower 48 since 1970, by Climate Central's measure. Without more effort to stop spewing greenhouse gases, we are on track to possibly double that amount of warming by 2050. The research firm First Street Foundation has estimated that nearly 80 million properties across the US will be under some wildfire threat by 2052, with pretty much everyone west of the Mississippi River at particular risk.

Climate change made 2023's wildfires in eastern Canada twice as likely, according to the group World Weather Attribution, contributing to a record-smashing year for the whole country. Continuing heat and drought have kicked off what will likely be a sequel, with the assistance of “zombie fires” that kept burning under the snow all winter. I wrote last month about how the US wasn't ready for another summer of smoke from these wildfires. It's also clear we're not ready for our own future of longer and more-intense wildfire seasons.

The most obvious first step in preventing them is probably the hardest: We have to admit we have a fossil-fuel problem and stop abusing the climate in ways that will make today's fire-sparking heat and drought seem mild in comparison. While we wait for that miracle to happen, we can take other steps to make the fires that do occur less destructive.

Better forest management, including controlled burns, can limit the fuel available to runaway wildfires. Smarter development and more affordable housing can make people less likely to live in the wildland-urban interface, where fires are more likely to take lives and destroy property. Insurance companies are abandoning fire-prone places, leaving only the wealthy to rebuild on risky but scenic lots, a sort of “gentrification by fire,” as the Washington Post once put it. Instead of subsidizing that trend with disaster relief, our federal tax dollars would be better spent on a managed retreat from such places.

And people who think they're not in harm's way should heed the lesson of longer, further-reaching and more-intense fire seasons: Climate change will find us all eventually.

Is dollar strength exhausting?



JAMAL MECKLAI

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Volatility is again falling but it may be showing signs of another trough. If this is confirmed in the next few weeks, we could see another turning point

THE DOLLAR HAS been “strong” for a long time. From a low of 89.75 in May 2021, the DXY rose to nearly 115 in September 2022, a surge of nearly 28% — around 80% of the rise came during the 12 months starting October 2021. After the pandemic hit in January 2020, the Fed brought down rates (from 1.5%) to near-zero by April to keep the economy from collapsing even further; with rates flat on their back, the economy began to slowly revive as had inflationary pressures, and by October 2021 the market had begun to worry that the ultra-low rates could trigger serious inflation, which might be difficult to control. The Fed took its time to decide — it was clearly behind the curve — and only started raising rates in March 2022, a full six months later. By this time prices were off to the races and the dollar took to the skies.

Interestingly, the DXY peaked while the Fed was still raising rates and, since September 2022, while rates were rising, the DXY actually started coming down quite sharply, and has remained in a range of around 100 to 106 since then. Clearly, markets are not an on-off switch, and even though Fed funds today (5.33) are much higher than they were in September 22 (3.08), the DXY is quite a bit lower.

To my mind, as much as rising rates, it was the fact that the volatility of DXY had fallen to a trough of 4.33% back in October 2021, which triggered the sharp move. Monitoring volatility is an important tool to try and assess turning points — of course, in truth nobody can ever, except by dumb luck, predict an exact turning point in any market.

Currently, volatility is again falling but, at 5.27%, it may be showing signs of another trough. If this is, indeed, confirmed over the next few weeks, we could see another turning point — this

time in the direction of a lower DXY. Indeed, even if DXY volatility does not trough, we could see the dollar move lower — since it ain't going up, it's got to go somewhere. Biden's sabre-rattling towards China, while clearly a political move to try and stymie Trump, could provide the fundamental focus for this kind of market action. Again, as the US election approaches, volatility in all markets (including the value of the dollar) should be the order of the day.

Non-USD exports should increase their hedge ratios.

This would form an interesting backdrop for the rupee, which is currently under a lot of pressure from uncertainty over our own elections. If, indeed, the dollar was to weaken and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) returned to power with a majority, we could see the rupee breaking out upwards to 83 and, perhaps, even higher. We note that inflows in both equity and debt have turned strongly negative since April 1, more, in my view, because of pre-election jitters than the old saw of higher US interest rates, which appears to have played out, as explained above. If the mood turns positive, we could see much more than the nearly USD 5 billion that flowed out in a hurry.

If, again, the dollar was to weaken but the BJP failed to achieve a majority, we could see the rupee fall sharply to 84 and, perhaps, lower, as outflows would accelerate. Having said that, however, we also note that inclusion in the JPMorgan bond index is scheduled to begin on June 28 — while there is no certainty that this date itself would trigger inflows, the reality is that debt outflows would likely moderate and, over subsequent months, we should see strong inflows, which should contain the intensity of any rupee fallout.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Trump syndrome

In US politics, Donald Trump was not the cause of a democratic crisis of faith. He just rode to power on it. Once in control, he leveraged the same disillusionment that helped him into office. This Trump syndrome of relentless polarisation, that spawns apathy and disconnect in polity, is seen creeping into nations across the globe, to keep the political brew on boil. Scandals and crises would shake voters' faith in the political system

occasionally, but an engineered schism and dysfunction in polity with an agenda driven governance turned corrosive. Universally, people feel that democracy is failing as the governments it produced were unable or unwilling to address their greater concerns. In ongoing phase of political apathy, the disillusioned electorate is dispirited to defend a system that has failed to champion its cause. Worse, it could believe more than ever before, that ballots may no longer be the sole guarantee to true

democracy. Apathy to democracy is a gateway to larger unrest.

—R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

Quelling unemployment

Apropos of “High youth unemployment” (FE, May 18), the unemployment among the youth is definitely alarmingly on the higher side. The present ruling regime could not do much in providing sustainable employment opportunities to the

youth, but only provided some funding through bank loans to establish and support small businesses, which has not worked effectively on the ground level. Hopefully, the new government opens fresh opportunities in all sectors by focusing on economic growth, with creation of sustainable jobs and meaningful employment for the youth.

—Fateh Najamuddin, Lucknow



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

As Moscow gets close to Beijing

India needs to be on its toes to ensure that its defence ties with Russia are not compromised

Over the past four years, India has navigated multiple crises, ranging from Covid-19 to the military standoff with China and the fallout of conflicts, nuancing the country's position without compromising on core interests. In his interview with *Hindustan Times*, external affairs minister S Jaishankar spoke of the country — and the world — continuing to grapple with more than one crisis. He mentioned Ukraine, where the war is in the third year, and the possibility of the Israel-Hamas conflict intensifying. India has thus far managed to significantly expand its ties with the US while protecting its longstanding strategic interests with Russia. And it is aware of the ever-lengthening shadow of China, not just at the border but across the neighbourhood, including in the Maldives, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, where Beijing continues to buy influence to enable its pursuit of the pre-eminent position in the Indian Ocean.

It is in this context that New Delhi will be watching the burgeoning bonhomie between Moscow and Beijing. That Russian President Vladimir Putin chose China for his first trip after beginning another term reflects the strength of the ties between the two countries. This was Putin's 19th visit to Beijing as president, though he has opted not to travel to India for multilateral meetings or the annual summit. In a sense, this is understandable as China and Russia stand isolated and criticised by democratic societies for their actions against the rules-based order. For the US, China's growing economic and technology prowess is a challenge to its global supremacy. Washington has tried to contain Beijing through tariffs and sanctions, but it has also worked at engaging with it to ensure that a Russia-China axis, which may include powers such as Iran, does not cut into its influence. In this context, the Xi-Putin joint statement is interesting for the point it makes about a multipolar world of open alliances, driven by interests rather than ideological themes such as democracy or open markets. What must put India on guard is the veiled reference to groupings such as the Quad in not-so-positive terms.

The proximity between Moscow and Beijing is of particular interest to New Delhi because of its dependence on Russia for defence needs, a legacy issue it has tried to overcome by looking at new partners and by self-reliance in armaments. The West is wary of the bond between two aspiring hegemonies in the East, but India should equally be on its toes.

Char Dham pilgrimage needs better oversight

Last week, the Uttarakhand government banned *VIP darshan* at the "char dhams" (four shrines at Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath) in the Himalayas in the wake of a huge influx of pilgrims. In the first six days since the pilgrimage season — which opens in May and lasts till late October-early November — began, 3.3 lakh people have visited these shrines. State authorities have said that over 2.6 million people have so far registered to undertake the pilgrimage, double the number of registrations at this time last year.

These mountain shrines, located in river valleys at altitudes above 10,000 feet, are not equipped to deal with such a large number of visitors. The 2013 floods that claimed about 6,000 lives and wreaked havoc in the Mandakini valley in Kedarnath revealed the dangers of overcrowding in this ecologically fragile region. The rise in religiosity and a push from the state to promote religious tourism has created an unmanageable situation that is disastrous for the local environment. These dhams are located near the sources of the Yamuna and the Ganga. The heavy footfall and the waste produced as a result have a direct impact on the health of these rivers. The promotion of religious tourism has resulted in a demand for wider roads, construction, and a steep rise in vehicles. The climate crisis has been disastrous for the Himalayas, as seen in the spike in landslides, flash floods and forest fires. Excessive human intervention will accentuate the crisis.

The char dhams were meant to be small *padavs* (stations), catering to a tiny stream of pilgrims who brave the inclement weather and risk the trek up the rugged mountain. While the pilgrim traffic may aid the local economy in the short run, these can't be scaled up to match religious centres such as Varanasi or Rameswaram. It is time the *yatra* is better regulated and mass tourism actively discouraged.

STRAIGHTFORWARD

Shashi Shekhar



Politicians need to stop vitiating the poll debate

Divisive and poisonous campaigning has long-term consequences. The Election Commission needs to step in

With the conclusion of the fourth phase of polling for the general elections, the results of nearly 70% of the constituencies lie sealed in electronic voting machines (EVMs). Against this backdrop, most people are likely to have observed a shift in the rhetoric of the nation's political figures leading up to the fifth phase on Monday: Bitterness in their discourse is peaking, with fresh claims and promises as attention turns to the remaining 30% of seats.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies are making big claims, of having won the elections already, and say that they are swiftly approaching the target of 400 seats set by Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi. In response, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav addressed journalists in Lucknow last week, and claimed that it is the

BJP that has lost the elections and that the Opposition has seen a significant increase in its seats in all phases. Modi has talked about dedicating his third term to the country's quick advancement, but he has also targeted Pakistan. At a public meeting in Bihar, he said: "Ham Pakistan ko choodiyaa pahana denge (We will make Pakistan wear bangles)". Meanwhile, home minister Amit Shah has reiterated his determination to make PoK (Pakistan-occupied Kashmir) part of India again.

This is the first time Modi and Shah have used such strong words in public fora. Previously, perhaps due to international pressure, such things were served up prudently in sugar-coated words.

Kharge, on behalf of the INDIA bloc, has promised to double free grain distribution (to 800 million people) to 10 kg and increase the job reservation limit beyond 50%. Are these possible? When I asked a senior Congressman about this, he used Brazil as an example. He claimed that "freebies" have had outstanding outcomes in Brazil, and argued that there is no harm in attempting similar experiments in India.

Mamata Banerjee, who took the lead from the Congress in West Ben-

gal, has also altered her tone. Until a few days ago, she had reduced the Congress to less than 40 seats at the national level. Now she argues that the INDIA bloc will get 300 seats nationwide and that her party, the Trinamool Congress, will support it from the outside to form a government.

What sort of game are they playing?

Meanwhile, divisive and poisonous terms such as temple, mosque, Hindu, Muslim, *kabristan-shamshan* (graveyard - cremation ground), Aurangzeb, colour, and caste are dominating the discourse, creating bitterness. Our politicians do not realise politics based on caste, religion, region, language, or sect, played consciously or otherwise, poisons the minds of future generations. What happened in Punjab in the 1970s and 1980s, and in Kashmir during the two decades that followed, are horrible examples of this. This lethal sequence must be stopped immediately.

I'm not questioning the Election Commission's motives or its machinery here, but why doesn't the Commission, which is supposed to be neutral, double down to prevent this? In a growing and healthy democracy, a variety of issues will arise that can't



Terms such as Hindu, Muslim, colour, and caste are dominating the discourse, creating bitterness among the people

APF

always be ignored.

There is another crucial question. How can some of our politicians speak so irresponsibly?

I want to tell such politicians a story. Last year, while I was tracking developments in Kashmir Valley in the wake of the repeal of Article 370, I met a man with a paralysed leg who was struggling to walk even with the help of a stick and his brother by his side. Terrorists had shot at his legs multiple times for voting in the district panchayat elections. He said the terrorists had warned residents of his village against voting, but he ignored the warning, thinking it was just bluster. The third day after he voted he faced the attack.

If you are wondering why terrorists had not killed him, it was because they intended to use him as a living example of what voting at elections "sponsored by India" entailed. But such elements have failed in the current elections, and the enthusiasm the Valley's inhabitants have shown in the fourth round is a slap in the face of terrorism spon-

sored from across the border. (Srinagar, which voted in the fourth phase, recorded a turnout of 36%, which is the highest since 1996, when 41% polling was reported. To put the figures in perspective, the polling in the 2019 general elections in the constituency was as low as 14.4%.)

Such cases are not exclusive to Kashmir. There are dozens of such people in the secluded areas of India's northeastern states and the Naxal-affected districts of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra. They have made great sacrifices to reinforce the foundations of democracy. I'd also like to remind you of the families of deceased personnel of the armed forces who never hesitated in sending their loved ones to sacrifice their lives to protect the country and its law and order. Who says our democracy can survive without such efforts? How come our politicians forget this so easily?

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, *Hindustan Times*. The views expressed are personal

In Odisha, progress up against pride in elections

The first of the four rounds of elections in Odisha ended on May 13 (the fourth phase of the general elections) and the second round will be held today. Far from Delhi and away from the mainstream noises, elections in this coastal state assume critical significance for two reasons. One, Biju Janata Dal (BJD) supremo Naveen Patnaik, who has been ruling the state for a record five terms, is facing the most critical elections of his very distinguished political career spanning three decades. Odisha, under his long tenure, has witnessed a dramatic rise — from being among the BIMARUO (laggards) to becoming what noted economist and director general of the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) Poonam Gupta calls a "breakout state". But there are visible signs of anti-incumbency and clouds of doubt over his chosen successor. Second, there is an insurgent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) largely aided by Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's popularity. The state BJP leaders are relying heavily on Modi's strong appeal to topple the BJD. What makes the BJP ambitious is the lacklustre presence of the once formidable Congress party.

With an electorate size of 3.29 crore, the state's 21 Lok Sabha and 147 Assembly seats are up for grabs. Although the mineral-rich state experienced huge political and economic upheavals in the 1990s — culminating in embarrassing helplessness during the super cyclone in 1999 — Patnaik's long stint that began in 2000 has provided political stability and an impressive economic transformation. A state that used to catch the national limelight often for wrong reasons, particularly with frequent hunger deaths and natural disasters, has made significant progress on most development indicators. Not only is the state producing sustained high growth under Patnaik's more than two-decade stint, but it is also among a handful of states to have achieved a revenue-surplus status. Significantly, under the Patnaik administration, Odisha has moved from being a natural-disaster vulnerable state to being one with a world-class disaster management model.

Patnaik was brought into Odisha politics in mid-1990s after the death of his father, the illustrious Biju Patnaik, and was seen as a novice who had never lived in the state and did not know its language let alone groomed for the role thrust on him. But, within no time, he deftly picked up political skills not only to outsmart competition from his rivals and BJD kingmakers alike, he transformed the party into an election-winning machine in less than a decade. What helped him to stay on the top of political narratives for so long are his low-profile attitude and a non-confrontational approach with successive central governments. Although he ended the BJD's alliance with the BJP over communal riots in the state's Kandhamal district, he was not shy of building a healthy relationship with the Modi government since 2014. This pragmatism not only helped his party and the state government avoid political machinations that other Opposition-ruled states have been subjected to by the ruling dispensation, but he was also able to extract major benefits for the state in political bargains with the Centre. The long bonhomie could be seen in the BJD supporting many controversial bills of the Modi government in the Rajya Sabha. Importantly, this strategy also helped him to

keep the state BJP leadership in check.

However, after the BJP achieved surprising success in the 2019 elections, with a record haul in the Lok Sabha (winning eight seats compared to one in 2014, and the vote share for the Lok Sabha jumping to 38.8% in 2019 from 32.4% in 2014), it saw a chance to further improve its previous tally. That's the precise reason why it nipped the alliance proposal from the BJD in the bud. Most key BJP leaders including Modi, Amit Shah, and Rajnath Singh have been making frequent trips to the state apart from launching broadsides against the BJD and Patnaik.

For all these years, the BJD ran an energetic campaign on the back of strong performance and Patnaik's famed political management skills. From constituency micro-survey to careful candidate selection to beat anti-incumbency, the BJD had created an enviable election model that promoted meritocracy and new ideas. It built a huge youth base and brilliantly tapped women voters through Self Help Groups (SHGs) schemes (under Mission Shakti). Come 2024, most of these tools look rusty. There are complaints of widespread abuse in the selection of candidates for Assembly and Lok Sabha tickets (inclusion of many turncoats and multiple members of the same families).

However, at the centre of the BJD's current turmoil is the issue of outsider versus Odia *ashmita* (Odia pride/self-respect). These issues have picked up largely due to the phenomenal rise of VK Pandian, Patnaik's former private secretary and someone who has been calling the shots in government and the party. With speculation growing over him becoming Patnaik's political successor, this Tamil-Nadu-born IAS officer has hugely polarised the election and state politics. In fact, much of the Opposition's core is not about the government's performances all these years, but over the issue of an outsider playing an outsized role (with even Modi calling for protecting Odisha from the outsider) while at the same time painting Patnaik as a helpless patriarch. The Opposition's strong and vitriolic attacks on Odia *ashmita* and Pandian's near control of the party and its campaigns have not gone down well with core supporters and candidates. While Patnaik and senior leaders are putting up a spirited defence and appealing to supporters not to get swayed by the criticism, there are palpable anxieties in the BJD camp.

The 2024 elections outcome has clear ramifications for Patnaik's 24-year legacy and the survival of the BJD as a strong regional outfit. A major hope for the BJD is Patnaik's continued goodwill among voters and the BJP's lack of a chief ministerial face who can match Patnaik's stature. Even though the Modi factor and the BJP's energetic campaign are likely to help the party to improve its existing tally in the Lok Sabha, winning the Assembly notwithstanding the Pandian factor would still be a tall order. This is because of split voting — the same voters who vote for the BJP in Lok Sabha are likely to vote for the BJD in assembly seats. The proof is that while the BJP secured a record eight Lok Sabha seats last time, when it came to the Assembly, it won just 23.

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BENNY GANTZ ISRAELI WAR CABINET MINISTER

If you put the national over personal, we will be partners in the struggle. But if you choose the path of fanatics ... we will be forced to quit the government

Addressing Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu on a post-war plan for Gaza



What the rejig in Kremlin means for ties with Delhi

Within days of assuming the office of President of the Russian Federation for the fifth time, Vladimir Putin has made sweeping changes in the Kremlin's elite power structure. The headlines everywhere (India included), underscored the relegation of defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, to the post of secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council (elsewhere known as the National Security Advisor).

The change in the portfolio of Shoigu was not unanticipated. As early as the middle of 2022, within months of Russia's "special military operation in Ukraine", there was intense speculation that some heads would roll for the failure to achieve a swift victory. Later, in 2023, the head of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, publicly criticised Shoigu for the debacle in Ukraine, and called for his removal. By all accounts, Putin had stayed his hand then. After all, Shoigu had been at Putin's side since 2012 as defence minister, including during the critical takeover of Crimea in 2014, and the military intervention in Syria in 2015. Moreover, Shoigu had distinguished himself as minister, the emergency situations ministry, a post he had occupied from 1994 till 2012. It was widely believed that Putin and Shoigu enjoyed a good rapport — the two men had even vacationed together in the outdoors of Russia's Far East in 2021.

Recently, however, there were some straws in the wind about Shoigu's impending departure as defence minister. On April 24, Shoigu's trusted deputy, Timur Ivanov, was arrested on deepening the strategic partnership with India. Like Patrushev, he too is a familiar figure for the defence establishment in Delhi. Shoigu will also head the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (FSVTS) responsible for Russia's defence engagements, including with India.

Meanwhile, Andrei Belousov's appointment as the new defence minister is indicative of the changing nature and unfolding scope of the battle of attrition in Ukraine. The outcome of the protracted war will depend on economic endurance more than anything else. In Belousov, Putin has roped in an economist-technocrat who might prove better at juggling with the resources needed to sustain the war without exacerbating the economic distress.

Interestingly, the new assignment given to

Patrushev relates to his original area of expertise. Patrushev graduated from the Leningrad Shipbuilding Institute in 1974 and had worked as an engineer in the institute's shipbuilding design bureau before the KGB recruited him.

Patrushev rose to the highest echelons of power as part of a conservative pushback in 2008. In 2007, Putin had publicly declared at the Munich Security Conference that Russia's quest for equality with the West was being consistently rebuffed and its red lines were not being respected. As a hardliner, Patrushev played a major part in the direction that Russia took after 2008, including Moscow's military interventions in Georgia in 2008, Crimea (2014), Syria (2015), and more recently, Ukraine (2022).

By giving him an official post in the Kremlin, albeit one of diminished stature, Putin has eased Patrushev's exit, letting him retain certain perks and privileges during the transition. Notably, Patrushev's son, Dmitry Patrushev, the minister of agriculture, has been promoted to deputy prime minister as part of the same reshuffle. This suggests a bargain between Patrushev and Putin as the former walks away into the sunset.

Patrushev will certainly be missed by the Indian establishment. He was a frequent and familiar high-level interlocutor for New Delhi: Over the years, he engaged several Indian national security advisors, starting with MK Narayanan and ending with the current incumbent, Ajit Doval. Shoigu can be expected to follow his predecessor's line on deepening the strategic partnership with India. Like Patrushev, he too is a familiar figure for the defence establishment in Delhi. Shoigu will also head the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (FSVTS) responsible for Russia's defence engagements, including with India.

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The writer is the director general of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. The views expressed are personal



OUR VIEW



Don't add to the burden of regulation on banks

RBI's review of the liquidity coverage ratio of banks should look for better options to reduce the risk of a cash crisis. Limiting some online transactions to business hours might work

While presenting the first monetary policy statement for fiscal 2024-25 in April, Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das has announced that RBI would review its liquidity coverage ratio (LCR) framework to ensure smooth functioning of the system even in the event of acute stress. His concern, he said, was driven by "recent events in other countries [that] have shown that digital channels have been used by customers to quickly withdraw or transfer funds from banks." Today, technology has enabled instantaneous transfers, with the result that banks are faced with a stiff challenge in managing their liquidity position to make sure they have sufficient cash at all times. Under the Banking Regulation Act of 1949, banking is the business of taking deposits "repayable on demand." Hence, banks must always be able to honour any and all demands from customers for repayment.

The governor stressed that it is during "acute stress" that a framework like LCR—a prudential tool to check a bank's ability to meet cash outflows in the near future—is most needed. While this is clearly true, a better option is to fool-proof the system in a way that minimizes the scope for such events, rather than wait for an implosion and then scramble to pick up the pieces. Presumably, RBI does not want to be caught napping, like some of its Western counterparts, and hence is proactively looking to ensure there is no liquidity crisis even during periods of acute stress. This is welcome. After all, there is always space to fine-tune prudential regulations and get them up to speed. But in a scenario where the compliance burden on banks has grown almost exponentially, can we

instead devise an alternate mechanism for banks to manage their liquidity (withdrawals on a day-to-day basis) more efficiently? This task has become much more complicated as online transfers soar across the country, letting virtually all bank customers withdraw funds 24/7 at the swipe of a thumb. Today, one of the main causes of cash-flow uncertainty that banks face is on account of real-time fund transfers; any unexpected large outflow can potentially result in a liquidity crisis. It is true that the 'traditional banking model' of commercial banks in India, by which they raise funds chiefly through current and savings accounts and depend less on bulk deposits, is a cause for comfort. After all, it is highly unlikely that a majority of depositors will pull out their deposits at the same time—a dangerous event called a bank run.

Nonetheless, could we reduce the admittedly low probability of an acute-stress event by the simple expedient of tweaking the existing rules that govern online transfers? Could we allow banks to limit online transfers, particularly real time gross settlement (RTGS) transfers? These tend to be of very high value and are usually business-related transactions, so they could be scheduled from, say, 08:00 to 18:00 hours. Such restrictions are not without parallel. Stock market transactions, for instance, have to be done during the stipulated opening and closing hours. Remember, unlike retail payments that tend to be small and are often unplanned, business payments are both large and typically planned in advance. Hence, these could easily be scheduled during work hours without impairing business efficiency, while adding hugely to the comfort of banks on the liquidity front. Apart, of course, from reducing potential risks to the stability of our financial system.

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

The carbon emissions of war put humanity's right to exist at risk

Wars are not only imminent threats to human survival but they also exacerbate climate change



NITIN PAI

is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy.

The regional head of a well-regarded global philanthropic foundation recently told me that his board had decided to exclusively focus on funding causes concerned with combating climate change. Knowing that it had previously supported work on nuclear disarmament and international security, I asked why those problems were no longer of interest to the foundation. His reply left me bemused. Climate change, he told me, is a long-term existential threat to humanity.

Our conversation was taking place at a time when a nuclear threat had been issued at the onset of a major war, where drones and missiles were flying between nuclear-capable countries, with major powers having withdrawn from arms-control treaties, and hypersonic and space weapons were fast destabilizing the global balance. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists' Doomsday Clock, a measure of how close we are from annihilation, jumped to 90 seconds to midnight last year, up from 120 seconds in 2019. War remains an immediate existential threat. But, unfortunately, it has got overshadowed by climate change in terms of global awareness and activism.

I have seen climate-change activists roll their eyes when the conversation turns to geopolitics. To the extent that they engage with the subject at all, it is

to argue that international politics is a major hurdle to achieving emission targets and other climate goals. They do not sufficiently recognize that war is perhaps the most undesirable source of carbon emissions. The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the Protection of the Environment in Relation to Armed Conflicts (PERAC) in 2022, but the environmental impact of war remains at the margins of the international discourse on climate change. That is an expensive mistake.

Benjamin Neimark and his colleagues found that the "projected emissions from the first 60 days of the Israel-Gaza war were greater than the annual emissions of 20 individual countries and territories." The incremental increase in emissions over the first two months was around 280,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO₂e). If we were to bring this up to date, almost a million tCO₂e has been wastefully dumped into the atmosphere. The researchers estimate the reconstruction of Gaza will create another 30 million tCO₂e of emissions. These are very conservative estimates and the real cost to the environment might be of a bigger order of magnitude. Over in Ukraine, Lennard de Klerk's team calculate that an additional 150 million tCO₂e of greenhouse gases have been emitted in the first 18 months of the Russian invasion, exceeding that of a country like Belgium.

At a time when people in developing countries are being asked to sacrifice their growth prospects to achieve global climate goals, it is a cruel joke to witness such thoughtless and wasteful emissions from extended wars. The world cannot prevent wars, but it can reduce their duration, limiting their intensity and environmental damage. Even before the UN adopted the PERAC resolution, the international community has acted to penalize damage to the environment by aggressors (or, in realist terms, losing sides). An additional Geneva Convention proto-

col prohibits causing "widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment." After the First Gulf War, Saddam Hussein's Iraq was forced by the UN to pay environmental damages after burning Kuwait's oil wells and polluting the Gulf.

In fact, the world prohibited wars of aggression in 1945 and the entire edifice of the United Nations was created to prevent them from happening. We have seen that the UN can limit wars and the international system can hold war criminals accountable. Let us be clear: If wars in Ukraine and Gaza are dragging on for months, it is because at least one permanent veto-holding member of the UN Security Council wants it that way—or more. Fingers must be pointed at them, both for the loss of lives of combatants and civilians and for the environmental damage that harms everyone on the planet.

In the face of the climate crisis, war is no longer only a moral crime against humanity. It is a material one against the survival of the species. It is time to treat it as such. Greenhouse emissions from wars are a global negative externality and it is no longer tenable to let off the actors that cause it.

Everyone on the planet is being asked to pay a price for the world to get to net zero. It makes no sense to allow wilful and egregious polluters to do so free of cost. Making polluters pay into a global fund that can then be deployed to compensate the victims of climate change is not only fair, it also creates the right incentives. In theory.

The problem in practice is that the international system has vested power and impunity in the hands of permanent members of the UN Security Council, ironically making these five the worst threats to human security. Ergo, UN reform ought to be on the agenda of everyone who cares about climate change. Geopolitics and international security are a blind spot that the climate-change movement can no longer afford to ignore.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

You never need an argument against the use of violence, you need an argument for it.

NOAM CHOMSKY

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Alice Munro reported from inside the heads of women

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

The short story is glorified by the gatekeepers of literature, as though the genre is from an oppressed community. It is now common to hear that the short story is more difficult to write than the novel, and that women are better at it than men. But the person who they claim is the finest writer of short stories, Alice Munro, was more measured. She said she persisted with short stories because she couldn't pull off a novel. "I don't really understand a novel," she once told the *New York Times*. "I don't understand where the excitement is supposed to come in a novel..."

She died on 13 May at the age of 92. When she was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 2013, she became the first person to receive the honour exclusively for short stories, and one of the very few laureates, I feel, who were easy to read and a delight.

Her common analysis of herself as a writer was that she was a woman who was primarily interested in the lives of women and what women experienced. The result was not

always compassion for women; but also something sterner, something more useful.

The narrator in her short story *Friend of my Youth* tells us, "...mother had grown up in a time and a place when sex was a dark undertaking for women. She knew that you could die from it. So, she honoured the decency, the prudery, the frigidity, that might protect you. And I grew up in horror of that very protection, the dainty tyranny that seemed to me to extend to all areas of life, to enforced tea parties and white gloves and all other sorts of tinkling inanities. I favoured bad words and a breakthrough, I teased myself with the thought of a man's recklessness and domination."

She did write the male point of view sometimes. I don't know what it is about the male characters of even great female writers, but these men make fine observations about curtains and upholstery. For instance, this moment in the short story, *The Bear Came Over the Mountain*: "Grant caught sight of two layers of front-window curtains, both blue, one sheer and one silky, a matching blue sofa and a daunting pale carpet..."

Munro was kind to men, even considerate perhaps. When she reveals that Grant, who is married to the central character of the story, used to have affairs with his students, Munro

appears to explain that it was very good for his spirits: "What he felt was mainly a gigantic increase in well-being... He ran up steps two at a time. He appreciated as never before a pageant of torn clouds and winter sunsets seen from his office window, the charm of antique lamps... Come summer, he learned the names of flowers."

Munro has said that when she started writing, only women read stories and men did something seemingly more important outside their homes. This contributed to her initial success around a time when the most influential writers in Canada were all men. Even today, I am certain that most of Munro's readers are women. Most readers of stories are women. They are the primary readers of men, too.

Male writers, in general, do not believe that they write about men, or that they are primarily interested in the lives of men. They would claim that their interest is wider and universal, about humans and not gender. They might be more wrong than they

think, nevertheless most of their readers are women. The literary success of men is often a reward given by women.

In a previous column, I had written that women appreciate the works of men, they are generous to exceptional men, but men, in general, do not engage much with the works of exceptional women. It is this gap in generosity that partly finances the progress of men. A similar imbalance in interest favours the West and its artists. We engage more with their works than they do with ours. In this imbalance, Munro is a beneficiary. Indians who have never read a single Indian short story may have read Munro. She may not have read any book by an Indian. But her elevation to greatness might have a more interesting reason.

She has been successful for about five decades, even acclaimed now and then, but the literary establishment began to call her a legend less than 20 years ago, when she was in her 70s. This happens to many artists, and not because they do their best work in old age.

Greatness is not defined by sales figures. It is not a democratic vote. The establishment picks the greats. And establishment writers are usually reluctant to praise their peers. Asked to name the greatest among them, they pick someone who is not one of them. Sometimes they pick a safe foreigner, or a person from the oppressed classes, but often they pick an old person. This is how Meryl Streep is the world's "greatest actress" and why many Indian writers would pick R.K. Narayan as "the greatest" and the West came to rate Alice Munro as the world's best short-story writer.

Munro appeared to see her rise to greatness with a detached amusement. She began writing in her spare time, in between raising her children and running a home. Many writers secretly feel that they are the world's best ever, even though they may not have had the chance to read every writer. I get the feeling Munro was not someone who harboured such views about herself. When she spoke of herself, it was with a degree of self-effacement that was very persuasive. From the way she spoke about the process of writing and writing itself, I often got the feeling that she really did not consider literature the most important thing. I could never grasp, though, what mattered the most to her.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

India must raise productivity for sustainable and inclusive growth

We have been making better use of capital but must improve its deployment so that returns rise and bulk jobs are generated



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Productivity is not everything," economist Paul Krugman famously commented, "but in the long run, it's almost everything." Higher productivity is essential for India to create good jobs and improve quality of life. It is through productivity too that the economy can generate the wealth that government can use to invest in social welfare and environmental progress. Higher productivity is essential to fuel India's journey towards sustainable and inclusive growth.

It is good news then that India's productivity has risen an average of 5.6% a year since 1997, according to recent research by the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI), more than twice the global average of 2.3%. Only China was faster. To put it another way, India's gross domestic product (GDP) per worker rose from \$6,200 in 1997 to \$21,800 in 2022. The challenge is to keep it up, or preferably, do even better. This cannot be taken for granted.

One big issue is investment, or capital formation. MGI estimates that 70% of India's productivity improvement is explained by growth in capital per worker, a figure that almost quadrupled from 1997 to 2022. And yet, at about \$38,000, India's capital stock per worker is still less than half that of China and a third of the level of Central and Eastern Europe.

Another way to look at this is how well Indian companies use their capital. Again, the conclusion is that they could do better. A McKinsey analysis of India's 1,000 biggest public companies found that only 56% earned a return on invested capital (ROIC) greater than the weighted average cost of capital (WACC) in 2023. That is more than in 2014, when it was 43%, which is one reason why the capital intensity ratio has risen over this period. The trend is encouraging. Still, the fact that more than four out of 10 companies are not creating enduring value is sobering.

And it is troubling that ROIC has declined in recent years, from an average of 11.3% in the period 2009-13 to 10.2% in 2019-23; that is slightly less than the WACC. Net profit margins also declined over the same period, from 8.4% to 7%. At best then, on average, the top 1,000 Indian corporates are just about breaking even on the shareholder expectations of return and on WACC.

It's important to note that some sectors (software, pharmaceuticals and automotive) have done much better than others (apparel and energy). It's also true that 1,000 companies form only a subset of the Indian economy. But it is a critical subset, accounting for more than 90% of India's market capitalization and about half of the corporate revenue as a percentage of GDP. And the ROIC performance for mid- and small companies is worse.

What do all these numbers add up to say? Without improving ROIC, capital formation will falter. And without improved capital formation, India cannot achieve its productivity potential. In short,



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India needs to improve how it deploys capital. This is urgent, considering that most of India's infrastructure and factories are still to be built, industry by industry, over the next couple of decades.

At the same time, while India's manufacturing productivity growth is also high, at 5.7%, the sector is notable for its low returns, which explains why it attracts a relatively low share of capital. That also helps explain why the sector accounts for only about 12% of employment, just one percentage point more than in 1997. In other high-productivity-growth countries such as China, Poland and Vietnam, the figure is around 20%. This is an opportunity to be seized.

McKinsey estimates that manufacturing could generate more than \$1 trillion of GDP by 2030, or double the figure of 2020, and provide a significant share of the well-paid jobs needed for the many people leaving farms. One approach to consider is building manufacturing clusters near ports, with free-trade warehousing zones, faster approval processes and more flexible labour laws.

Improving manufacturing processes and capital expenditure deployment could increase productivity three to five times. Smart project planning, procurement and design could improve capital productivity alone by 20-25%—a number that would translate into jobs and competitiveness. For

example, building a lithium-ion cell gigafactory can cost anywhere from \$55 million to \$90 million per gigawatt hour. That large range shows that there is efficiency to be captured through benchmarking and project execution.

Companies that rapidly digitize their supply chains and operations can earn significant benefits: Greater throughput and quality, less wastage and better collaboration among workers, companies and supply-chain partners. Investing in centres of excellence and digital capabilities could reduce operational costs by 15-25%.

Another productivity opportunity for Indian manufacturers is to make higher-value goods, adopt better packaging and address markets with stronger brands. Food processing, capital goods, steel and steel products are areas of high potential. Such efforts can be instituted without massive investment; indeed, higher profits and ROIC mean that these companies could reinvest their capital surpluses rather than seek external investment.

India's productivity record since 1997 is strong. The challenge is to build on this momentum. There is considerable room for improvement to create sustainable and inclusive growth for the many millions who have not yet benefited from our remarkable progress.

Nikhil Malhotra contributed to the article.

Yes, the world is hotter than it has been in 2,000 years or so

A scientific study of tree rings confirms global warming is for real



FAYE D. FLAM
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering science.



Trees that live for thousands of years hold useful temperature records. ISTOCKPHOTO

It's one thing to say the northern hemisphere summer of 2023 was the hottest in 150 years of mercury measurement. This claim is often dismissed by sceptics of global warming who point out that the Earth has a long history of temperature fluctuations. That's why it's important that a new paper shows last summer was actually the hottest in the last 2,000 years—and that our current temperatures are even more of an outlier than we realized.

[The question is] whether our recent warming is a major shift or a blip. Thankfully, tree rings hold records that go back thousands of years. In a paper published in *Nature*, scientists used tree rings to plot summer heat in the northern hemisphere over the past two millennia. 2023 was the hottest of them all. The next hottest 25 have all occurred since 1996. The next runner-up was way back in 246 CE.

What we know of global warming has been changed dramatically by long-term trends revealed by tree rings, ice cores, sediment layers and other such monitors. In 1998, scientists published a 'hockey stick graph' of the last 600 years. It showed that global temperatures rose and fell like gently rolling hills until the mid-20th century, when they suddenly soared.

That gave people a graphic image of how unusual things are today. Since then, there have been dozens of detailed reconstructions of our climate history. This latest one covers only the part of the globe that has the most trees—the mid-latitude northern hemisphere—but it goes back 2,000 years and highlights climate change today in the context of centuries of natural variability.

Even seemingly small fluctuations can have a big impact on human life. Take 536 CE, dubbed "the worst year to be alive" by historian Michael McCormick. An Icelandic volcano erupted, spewing particles into the air and veiling much of Europe and Asia in a dark fog. That caused cold, famines and a wave of plague that coincided with the collapse of the Eastern Roman Empire. That year's summer was just 1.9° Celsius below the long-term average, shows the *Nature* paper, and 3.9° Celsius colder than the summer of 2023.

Volcanoes have been to blame for cooler years. But the cause of past warm spells is not as well understood.

The year 246 CE was also unusually warm. More recently, the medieval-era warm period between 800 CE and 1400 CE allowed orchards and pastures to spread into north Europe, Iceland and Greenland, and also triggered megadroughts, famine and the collapse of civili-

zations in the American southwest. Tree rings are helping scientists decipher the role of climate in that period and others throughout history. The oldest trees, bristlecone pines, can live nearly 5,000 years; scientists can extract a pencil-thin core to study the rings without harming the trees. But researchers don't have to use such ancient trees to explore the distant past because they can also read information from rings in wood that's been incorporated in old buildings and ships or preserved in bogs. Trees growing in cold conditions can reveal temperature history because it is the main factor limiting their growth. The new study depended on such trees in nine different sites analyzed by 15 teams, said its lead author Jan Esper of Johannes Gutenberg University.

Esper said he was interested in better understanding what the Earth's temperature was like in the pre-industrial area, before human-generated emissions started warming the planet. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change defines pre-industrial temperature as the average measured from 1850 to 1900. The Paris Agreement makes it a goal to keep global temperatures within 1.5° C of that pre-industrial period—a level we're about to exceed. But measurements before 1900 were sparse, and Esper says the tree rings suggest the actual pre-industrial era was a bit cooler. From 1850 to 1900, temperatures were already about a quarter of a degree warmer than the average over the previous 2,000 years. That means our current temperatures might be more abnormally warm than we realized.

"You often hear politicians—ignorant politicians—saying climate varies and it's been warmer in the past so don't get too excited about all this greenhouse gas we're putting into the atmosphere," said Ray Bradley, a climatologist of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who was an author of the hockey-stick paper. But the natural records suggest it hasn't been this warm in 2,000 years, maybe longer, "so that's a pretty exceptional situation."

Exceptional, but not hopeless. Today's climatologists say it's not too late to keep global warming within a manageable range. If we listen to what nature is telling us, we can keep 536 CE as the worst year to be alive.

BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | GENERAL DISEQUILIBRIUM

Finance in India has a new bogey called private credit

RAJRISHI SINGHAL



is a senior journalist and author of the recently released book 'Slip, Stitch and Stumble: The Untold Story of India's Financial Sector Reforms' @rajrishisinghal

Prudent regulation of the financial sector requires that rules apply equally to all regulated entities. This, apart from delivering regulatory equity, deters less-regulated entities from mistaking an uneven regulatory regime as an incentive for excessive risk-taking. A uniform regulatory framework for all regulated entities not only acts as a disincentive against excessive risk-taking, but also safeguards financial stability. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) recently harmonized its regulatory framework for project finance to create a level-playing field between both commercial banks and infrastructure-focused non-banking financial companies (NBFCs).

Private credit is another area crying out for such synchronization.

Private credit is advanced by funds pooled together from mostly institutional investors and actively managed by professional managers. These funds usually invest capital in startups and early-stage companies in the form of non-publicly traded debt, without

going through the intermediation of banks or NBFCs. Private credit thus becomes an alternative, non-conventional source of borrowed capital for many privately held companies. Another crucial difference with traditional loans, apart from their repayment structure and security creation, lies in private credit charging higher interest rates.

Private credit has been picking up in India, stepping into the breach after credit markets gummed up and lending activity froze following the 2018 collapse of IL&FS Ltd and other finance companies. A report by audit firm EY estimates that private credit totalled \$7.8 billion (about ₹65,000 crore, 108 deals) during calendar 2023, compared with \$5.3 billion (close to ₹43,500 crore, 77 deals) in 2022. Two deals stood out: a 3-year, ₹1,723-crore refinancing deal for the Shapoorji Pallonji Group and a ₹711-crore refinancing loan for Vedanta Group. In fact, it is believed that a large chunk of the private credit in India during the past few years was earmarked for refinancing stressed real estate loans.

RBI was forced to step in last year when it became clear that a significant portion of private credit being lent by private equity funds was used for 'evergreening' existing loans, or providing a fresh loan to corporate

borrowers on the verge of defaulting on an old loan. The central bank detected that banks and NBFCs were investing in these funds which were then routing money as private credit to companies which had already borrowed from the same banks or NBFCs; the inflows were then used for meet-

ing older repayment obligations. This worked as a win-win for both the borrower and lender. The borrower could avoid loans getting tagged as non-performing assets (NPAs) and being referred for bankruptcy proceedings. The lender, on the other hand, avoided having to recognize loan impairment, which would have entailed reduced income and higher provisioning, both affecting profitability. The credit fund, in turn, earned interest income and was able to keep a lid on risks by offering subordinate paper (which carries lower repayment obligations) to investing banks and NBFCs. RBI forbade banks and NBFCs from investing in funds which were lending money to these stressed borrowers.

This sleight of hand apart, private credit comes beribboned with several potential vulnerabilities. The April 2024 edition of *Global Financial Stability* report from the International Monetary Fund has devoted an entire chapter to risks from private credit.

At a general level, private credit is remarkably opaque in its operations and remains lightly regulated when compared with banks or NBFCs that are subject to relatively stronger regulation and supervision. Even bond markets have some disclosure requirements that impose an element of restraint. In addition, private credit is like a bilateral over-the-counter deal between borrower and lender, with no standardized contracts or terms and conditions. Given this level of opacity, any default by a private credit borrower has the risk of catching the financial sector unawares and acquiring the characteristics of a contagion, especially since institutional investors have extensive ties across the system. Indian private credit's revealed pro-

pensity for refinancing stressed assets is another red flag, in which one risk event can potentially send the entire credit market into disarray.

Then there is the issue of uneven regulation leading to uneven competition. Lending by banks and NBFCs is circumscribed by their capital base; funds extending private credit have no such restrictions. In fact, unlike regulated entities, private credit providers do not have to make any minimum provisions while extending credit. Worse, given the veil of secrecy that shields these funds, there is no clarity when asset impairment gets recognized, or whether the fund has any provisioning standards or documented recovery processes. Most private credit comes structured with lenient restructuring clauses. There is also the question of capability: despite past slippages, most banks and NBFCs have developed deep institutional capacity over the years for credit appraisal, pricing, structuring, monitoring and recovery. Private credit, being relatively new in India, has competence gaps and this has shown up on numerous occasions over the past few years.

Clearly, there is a need for regulatory intervention here. Nobody wants a repeat of the 2008 chaos.

Closer rules and openness can mitigate risks. Recall, RBI had to intervene earlier to curb evergreening



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PAPER WITH PASSION

An intricate puzzle

Kejriwal aide's arrest sparks AAP-BJP war of words amid Maliwal's assault allegations

The alleged assault case involving former Delhi Commission for Women chief and AAP Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal, in which she has named Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's PA Bibhav Kumar, keeps getting murky. The development came within days of Kejriwal's return to campaigning from Tihar Jail, where he had been incarcerated for his alleged role in the Delhi excise policy case. Now the arrest of Bibhav Kumar for the alleged assault has sparked a series of protests and political manoeuvres. The case centres around Maliwal who, interestingly, herself has been under scrutiny by the Anti-Corruption Bureau for alleged appointment irregularities in DCW. After first admitting to the assault, AAP now alleges that Maliwal was blackmailed with the fear of arrest in the case. Bibhav's arrest is linked to this ongoing investigation, adding fuel to an already volatile situation. In response to his aide's arrest, Kejriwal — accompanied by AAP MPs, MLAs and supporters — led a protest march to the BJP headquarters to show solidarity with Bibhav and "expose" the BJP's political vendetta.



In a video message to the Prime Minister, Kejriwal asked the latter to arrest all top AAP leaders at once instead of doing that one by one. Kejriwal also emphasised that the action against Bibhav and Maliwal were attempts to stifle AAP's efforts to combat corruption and improve governance. On the other hand, the BJP has asserted that the law against corruption is being followed diligently. Its leaders argue that investigation is a necessary step in ensuring transparency and accountability in public offices. Interestingly, the Congress has chosen to remain silent on this issue.

This non-committal stance could be seen as a strategic decision to avoid getting embroiled in the confrontation between AAP and BJP, both of whom are its political rivals in Delhi.

Timing is everything in politics; the cauldron is coming to a boil with less than a week to go for voting in Delhi on May 25. Meanwhile, the ongoing tussle between AAP and BJP is emblematic of the larger power struggle between the parties. This incident is likely to have ramifications beyond immediate political dynamics, potentially influencing voter perception and future elections. It would not be wise to assign motives to Maliwal at this point; besides, the case is now sub judice but one can safely say from experience that several of her past statements have been rather awkward. Once she tweeted she was a "proud daughter" and, on another occasion, said she was sexually abused by him when she was a child. The situation also brings to the fore issues of misuse of investigative agencies and the limits of political accountability. As both parties continue to trade barbs, the people of Delhi watch closely, hoping for resolutions that prioritise effective governance and justice over political expediency. As Buddha once said, three things cannot be hidden for long — sun, moon and the truth! We would know soon whether it was a political conspiracy or really a assault by her own party members!

PICTALK



Women carry stajice flowers in bamboo baskets, in Senapati district of Manipur

India tactfully manages US-Iran tensions



BHOPINDER SINGH

As India forges a vital partnership with Iran through the Chabahar port agreement, it must adeptly balance its regional interests against the backdrop of American concerns

Iran has had an unwarranted grip on the sensibilities of the US administrations, irrespective of their partisan divide. The moment for the bilateral fracture in American imagination starts from the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the subsequent US Embassy hostage drama. The wounded memory for the Iranians is deeper and traced to the CIA-aided coup against the popular Prime Minister, Mosaddegh, in 1953. Undoubtedly, the religious puritanism of Ayatollah Khomeini's regime after the revolution pitted it ideologically against the 'West', but the public memory of the US support to Saddam Hussein (later ousting him) in the decade-long Iran-Iraq war, is now conveniently forgotten by the duplicitous American regimes. Later, Americans linked Iran to 9/11 and the birthing of Al Qaeda/ISIL, even though Iran didn't have anything to do with either. If anything, Iran and its proxies fought ISIL in Syrian-Iraqi swathes and were instrumental in decimating the same, though later the Americans killed the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. Because sectarian undercurrents and the chessboard of American 'allies' (Israel and Arab Sheikdoms) have a checkmate from Iran and its proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen - the unjustified demonizing of Iran continues. While countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have contributed far more towards religious extremism and terror, they continue to receive American support, while the Iranians face crippling sanctions. Americans had unilaterally reneged on the Iran Nuclear Deal even when all other signatories i.e., P+1 countries and the UN watchdog agency IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) had confirmed that Iran had complied with all provisions. Pressure from Israel and Sheikdoms ensured that Iran continued getting conflated with everything going wrong in the Middle East, even if Iran did, or did not have any role in the same. While the Hamas group was supported by Iran (as indeed by Saudia Arabia and others, till recently), there is no credible evi-



dence to link Iran with the planning or execution of the 7th Oct 2023 attack, but the phantom of Iran linkages persisted. Pushed to a corner to retaliate to salvage its sovereign pride the Iranians did retaliate, albeit, after getting forced to do so after its senior military officers were killed in Syria, by Israelis. The must-needed justification to 'prove' Iran's purported machinations and belligerence was offered and the Americans lapped it up with both hands - that it is the election year and flexing muscles against the 'enemy' i.e., Iran, brings its electoral benefits, vitiates the situation even further. Now Joe Biden who had earlier come to power with the promise to restore the Iran Nuclear Deal torn by the unhinged Donald Trump, is all but a forgotten memory. Today, Biden is trying to outdo Donald Trump in 'taking on' the Iranians, with even more sanctions. The White House issued a Statement, "Less than a week ago, Iran launched one of the largest missile and drone attacks the world has ever seen against Israel. Together with our allies and partners, the United States defended Israel. We helped defeat this attack. And today, we are holding Iran accountable-imposing new sanctions and export



WHILE INDIA NEEDS TO MAINTAIN ITS RELATIONS WITH THE US TO COUNTERANCE THE CHINESE THREATS, IT ALSO HAS ITS REGIONAL CONCERNS WHICH REQUIRE DE-HYPHENATION FROM US CONCERNS WITH IRAN

controls on Iran". The import of the same goes beyond the USA as it now seeks to potentially sanction any country dealing with Iran e.g., India, which has recently signed a 10-year contract to manage the strategic Chabahar port in Iran. This gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics bypasses Pakistani land routes, offers an invaluable Indian footprint on the other side of Pakistan (counters China-developed, Gwadar Port, in Pakistan) and strengthens Indian ties with the civilisational land of Iran. With the Taliban in Afghanistan tiring of Pakistan and the Iranians signing this deal, Delhi is justifiably excited about the evolved prospects of countering the Sino-Pakistani assertions in the theatre. While India needs to maintain its relations with the US to counterance the Chinese threats, it also has its regional concerns which require de-hyphenation from US concerns with Iran. India cannot be a blind minion of the US as it has its own bilateral and regional imperatives that warrant 'strategic independence' in decision-making, as was done by buying Russian oil and maintaining cordial relations with Moscow, whilst nuancing concerns for

Ukraine. To be fair, the Americans have recognised the Indian positions and compulsions which are not aimed at diminishing the US interest, but only towards protecting its own, hence the restraint in actuality, even as the war of words persists. In any case, the Biden administration will be at its voluble worst and indulge in sabre-rattling (especially on matters about Iran) and therefore important to understand their compulsion of tonality. It is with this backdrop that the Statement of the US official must be understood, when pressed about the Indian agreement with Iran, "You've heard us say this in several instances, that any entity, anyone considering business deals with Iran, they need to be aware of the potential risk that they are opening themselves up to and the potential risk of sanctions". The Americans will say what they have to and the Indians will do what they have to, as it is a well-understood position on both sides. India's strategic equation with Iran is not designed to diminish the US interest. (The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FOLLOW THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Madam — Apropos the news article "Mamata Promises to back INDIA in Power," published on May 16. The Chief Minister of Bengal, Mamta Banerjee, had earlier decided to go solo in the elections. Even the ruling party Trinamool Congress's (TMC) leader's atrocities against women of the Sandeshkhali haven't lowered the spirit of Didi (Mamta Banerjee). Annoyed with the saffron party at the centre and blaming it for hatching a conspiracy in the Sandeshkhali incident, the chief minister has decided to support the INDIA bloc from outside if it comes to power in the centre. Accusing Narendra Modi of not fulfilling any of the promises to the nation, Didi said Publicity and lies are his two weapons. According to the chief minister, the PM is a prachar Babu who does only 'prachar' and nothing else. Using such terms against the PM of the nation is a violation of the code of conduct. All political leaders should maintain the sanctity of the Constitution and follow a code of conduct while speaking publicly.

Abhilasha Gupta | Mohali

CHABAHAR PORT PACT

Madam — It refers to the news article "India And Iran Sign Chabahar Port Pact," this is my response. The Chabahar Port is a cornerstone of India's regional strategy, offering several critical advantages. It serves as a vital gateway for expanding trade with Central Asia, providing a direct, cost-effective route to the region's abundant resources. Additionally, Chabahar acts as a strategic counterbalance to China's influence, particularly in light of China's control of Gwadar Port in Pakistan. The port also offers a reliable alternative trade route to Afghanistan, bypassing the often volatile land routes through Pakistan and ensuring uninterrupted trade and aid flows. This collaboration with Iran further strengthens India's diplomatic ties and bolsters its position in the Asian geopolitical landscape. India's commitment to the Chabahar



Chhetri retires

Apropos the news article, "Stalwart Chhetri announces retirement," published on May 17, this is my response. The news of Sunil Chhetri's retirement has hit the Indian football community hard. As the much-admired and treasured Indian captain announced his decision to step away from international football after the FIFA World Cup qualification match

against Kuwait on June 6, emotions ran high across the country. Chhetri was the face of Indian football in a remarkable career spanning over 20 years. With a legacy that has left an indelible mark on Indian football, the 39-year-old maestro's journey has been an inspiration to millions, reshaping perceptions of this beautiful game in the nation along the way. Since his debut in 2005, Chhetri has amassed a multitude of accolades, including setting records for the highest number of appearances and goals scored for India. With 94 goals in 150 matches, Sunil Chhetri holds the third position on the list of most international goals, trailing behind only the two superstars, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. "A simple ball unites us all," the saying goes. Needless to say, Sunil Chhetri was a perfect example of this soccer quote.

Ranganathan Sivakumar | Chennai

project, despite the potential risk of US sanctions, underscores its strategic autonomy. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar defended the Chabahar Port deal with Iran despite US sanctions warning, emphasising its regional benefits. India views the port as crucial for accessing Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan. Despite US pressure, India asserts its strategic independence through the deal to counter China's influence in the region.

Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

CRUELTY AGAINST ANIMALS

Madam — Apropos the feature article, "Assault most foul for kindness to animals," by Hiranmay Karlekar, published on May 18, this is my response. Compassion for all living creatures has been the philosophy of India. In most Indian households, rural and urban, when people cook, they reserve a portion of the food for cows, dogs and birds. However, human beings, born as a superior species, consider themselves the sole claimant to this planet and its related div-

idents. Dog lovers aiding animals face assaults by impostors posing as human saviors, reflecting a concerning trend of violence. Animals may be mute but we as a society have to speak on their behalf as animals breathe like us and have emotions. Even though India, with its population of over 1.42 billion, still faces significant challenges in addressing animal cruelty. Every minute, an animal in India faces abuse, despite existing laws like Sections 428 and 429 in Animal Laws. The State Government does not take animal abuse cases too seriously, making it difficult to calculate just how common they are. India was given a "C" under the Animal Protection Index (API) and is also a moderate performer under the Sanctioning Cruelty category. Unfortunately, these animal abuse statistics have shown, that animal cruelty is a real issue in India that takes millions of victims every year.

Abhijit Roy | Jamshedpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Promise and challenges of drones in agriculture

Drone technology shows promise in agriculture, offering efficiency and cost savings. Yet apprehensions galore hinder its adoption



HIMANSHU VERMA

Drone technology has gained popularity in the agriculture industry in recent years. Drones provide farmers with several advantages, such as higher yields, lower costs, and enhanced efficiency. However, there are worries that farmers would be hesitant to use drone technology because they don't know enough about it or are afraid of losing their jobs. We will examine the advantages of drone technology for the agricultural industry as well as any obstacles that might be preventing farmers from implementing it. Drones' advantages in the agriculture industry



2. Increased agricultural yields:

Farmers may discover areas that need care by using drones to collect data on crop health. Farmers may raise agricultural yields and profit margins by resolving these problems.

3. Lower prices:

By locating farm areas that need maintenance, lowering the need for physical labour, and lowering the usage of pesticides and other chemicals, drones may help farms cut costs.

4. Increased accuracy:

Farmers can observe their crops in detail thanks to the high-resolution photographs and data that drones can collect. This can assist in identifying problem areas and guarantee that solutions are focused and successful. Drone technology adoption challenges in the agriculture industry Although farms might profit greatly from drone technology, several obstacles may prevent farm-

ers from using this tool. These are a few of the main obstacles:

1. Fear of losing one's job:

Since fewer people will be required to undertake physical labour on farms as a result of the adoption of drone technology, many farmers are worried about losing their jobs.

2. Lack of expertise:

Farmers may lack the expertise or training required to use drones safely. They might not be confident in their abilities to utilize it, which might make it difficult for them to accept this technology.

3. Cost:

Since drones may be pricey, many farmers might not be able to afford to invest in this technology.

4. Regulatory obstacles:

Farmers may find it challenging to use this technology if there are regulatory obstacles to the usage of drones in agriculture. Drone technology usage in rural India's agriculture industry is still in its infancy. This technology is attracting curiosity, but there are also worries about job loss and a lack of education and training. Nonetheless, initiatives are being made to overcome these obstacles and

promote the use of drone technology. The Digital India programme is a major endeavour that seeks to furnish rural regions with digital infrastructure. The initiative's emphasis on education and training may aid in addressing farmers' deficiencies in knowledge and experience. Furthermore, several efforts and organisations are working to further the application of drone technology in agriculture. To promote precision agricultural technology, such as drones, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) developed the Centre for Precision and Farming Technology. Farmers may be reluctant to accept this technology, though, due to worries about job loss and a lack of education and training. Farmers must have the support and training; they need to use this technology efficiently, as well as an understanding of its potential advantages. (The writer is an assistant professor of agronomy, college of Agriculture & environmental technology, Surajmal University, Uttarakhnad; view are personal)

Tackling UP

Alliances often shape the contours of electoral battles, and the saga in Uttar Pradesh stands as a testament to this reality. The recent convergence of interests between the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Congress heralds a strategic shift that could redefine the political landscape of the state. As Uttar Pradesh braces for the electoral tussle in the three remaining phases, the SP-Congress alliance has embarked on a journey that mirrors the BJP's playbook from previous campaigns. By targeting non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits, they aim to expand their support base beyond traditional vote banks. This calculated move signifies a departure from conventional strategies, as both parties seek to navigate the intricate web of caste dynamics that permeate Uttar Pradesh politics. Central to this alliance's strategy is the allocation of seats and the concerted effort to ensure cross-voting in their favour. With the SP leaving 17 Lok Sabha seats for its ally in the INDIA Alliance and the Congress reciprocating by not fielding candidates in 63 seats, the stage is set for a symbiotic relationship aimed at maximising electoral gains. This strategic collaboration underscores a pragmatic approach aimed at consolidating their respective support bases and countering the formidable BJP machinery. However, beyond the arithmetic of seat-sharing lies a deeper narrative of political realignment and ideological convergence. The joint outreach efforts of the SP and Congress reflect a nuanced understanding of the evolving socio-political landscape, wherein traditional fault lines are giving way to new alliances forged in the crucible of electoral pragmatism. At the heart of this alliance lies a shared vision of countering the politics espoused by the BJP. The spectre of constitutional amendments looms large in the narrative, as leaders from both parties caution against the BJP's alleged agenda of altering the foundational principles of India's democracy. By invoking the rhetoric of safeguarding the Constitution and preserving the ethos of social justice, the alliance seeks to mobilise support across caste and religious lines. Furthermore, the inclusion in the joint campaign of Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, a prominent Dalit leader, underscores the alliance's attempt to address the concerns of marginalised communities. His presence on the campaign trail sends a powerful message of inclusivity and representation, challenging the BJP's hegemony over Dalit politics in the state. As the electoral battle intensifies, the SP-Congress alliance faces formidable challenges on multiple fronts. The BJP's formidable electoral machinery and the presence of the Bahujan Samaj Party pose a formidable challenge to their electoral ambitions. Moreover, the complexities of caste arithmetic and the fluidity of electoral dynamics in Uttar Pradesh necessitate a nuanced and adaptive approach. However, as with any political alliance, challenges abound. The delicate balance of power-sharing, ideological coherence and the ever-present spectre of opportunism loom large. The success of the SP-Congress alliance hinges not only on electoral arithmetic but also on its ability to navigate these treacherous waters with finesse and integrity.

Putin-Xi meet

The meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Beijing is emblematic of a deepening relationship that extends far beyond the realm of traditional diplomacy. Amid the lingering tensions following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this engagement underscores a mutual commitment to a partnership that both leaders describe as having "no limits." President Xi emphasised a mutual commitment to "rejuvenate" their nations, reinforcing the partnership's role not just in countering Western influence but also in propelling national advancements. Such rejuvenation speaks to broader ambitions of technological and industrial cooperation, signalling deepened ties that extend into future-oriented sectors. The visit's timing is strategic, coinciding with the start of Mr Putin's new Presidential term, and reflects a concerted effort to showcase solidarity against what they perceive as a US-led world order that seeks to side line their national interests. This show of unity is critical as it comes in the wake of intensified scrutiny and diplomatic pressure from the West, particularly concerning Russia's actions in Ukraine and broader geopolitical ramifications. The two leaders outlined plans to deepen cooperation across a diverse set of fields including industry, high technology, and renewable energy sources. This suggests an evolving partnership that is pivoting towards significant, future-centric sectors such as artificial intelligence and peaceful nuclear energy, which are pivotal for modern economic growth and development. Yet, despite the strengths and the declared "no limits" to the Sino-Russian relationship, there are inherent complexities. The partnership, though robust in declarations, navigates an intricate landscape of mutual benefit and cautious reservation. Russia, while gaining a pivotal ally in China, risks becoming overly reliant on Chinese economic might. Conversely, China must manage its global diplomatic strategy, balancing its support for Russia with its broader international relations, especially with major economies in the West and the Global South. The visit also featured a gala celebration marking 75 years of diplomatic ties since the former Soviet Union recognised the People's Republic of China, underscoring the historical depth and symbolic strength of the bilateral relationship. Such commemorations not only celebrate past milestones but also pave the way for future engagements that could reshape regional and global dynamics. The prominence of this state visit in Chinese media and its significant social media traction demonstrates not only the domestic but also international messaging intent, portraying a united front in a geopolitical context increasingly defined by strategic rivalries. As the world watches how this partnership develops, the impacts are likely to resonate well beyond the borders of Russia and China, influencing global diplomatic, economic, and military strategies. While the Putin-Xi summit may not have resulted in ground-breaking agreements this time, it significantly contributes to the strategic depth of the China-Russia alliance. This partnership, characterised by both opportunity and caution, will undoubtedly continue to shape the contours of global politics in the face of evolving international challenges.

Poetic Odyssey

Through this assertion of intimate communion, 'holy wedlock', we perceive that Tagore was perhaps also addressing the duality of his creative identity, by focusing firstly on the use of language for communication and secondly the use of language for creative expression — a ghare/baire, the known/unknown, familiar/unfamiliar binaries of the existential being and the tension of self-identity

As is well-known, due to unavoidable circumstances Rabindranath Tagore could not attend the Nobel Award Ceremony held in Sweden in 1913. Instead, the telegram from Rabindranath Tagore, read by Mr. Clive, British Chargé affairs, at the Nobel Banquet at Grand Hôtel, Stockholm, on 10 December 1913 stated, "I beg to convey to the Swedish Academy my grateful appreciation of the breadth of understanding which has brought the distant near, and has made a stranger a brother".

In 1913, Tagore proved that he could not only create literature in the colonizer's language, English, but even secure the western world's most coveted prize, the Nobel Prize for literature. Simultaneously Tagore untiringly continued to write in his own indigenous language, Bengali, with equal felicity. I would urge you to notice that throughout his literary career Tagore did not compromise on the writer's vision and ideology, under either local or global coercion, irrespective of his choice of language as a medium of communication and cultural connectivity.

Eventually, in his Nobel Prize Acceptance speech delivered on 26 May 1921, eight years after he received the award in 1913, Tagore had observed with deference,

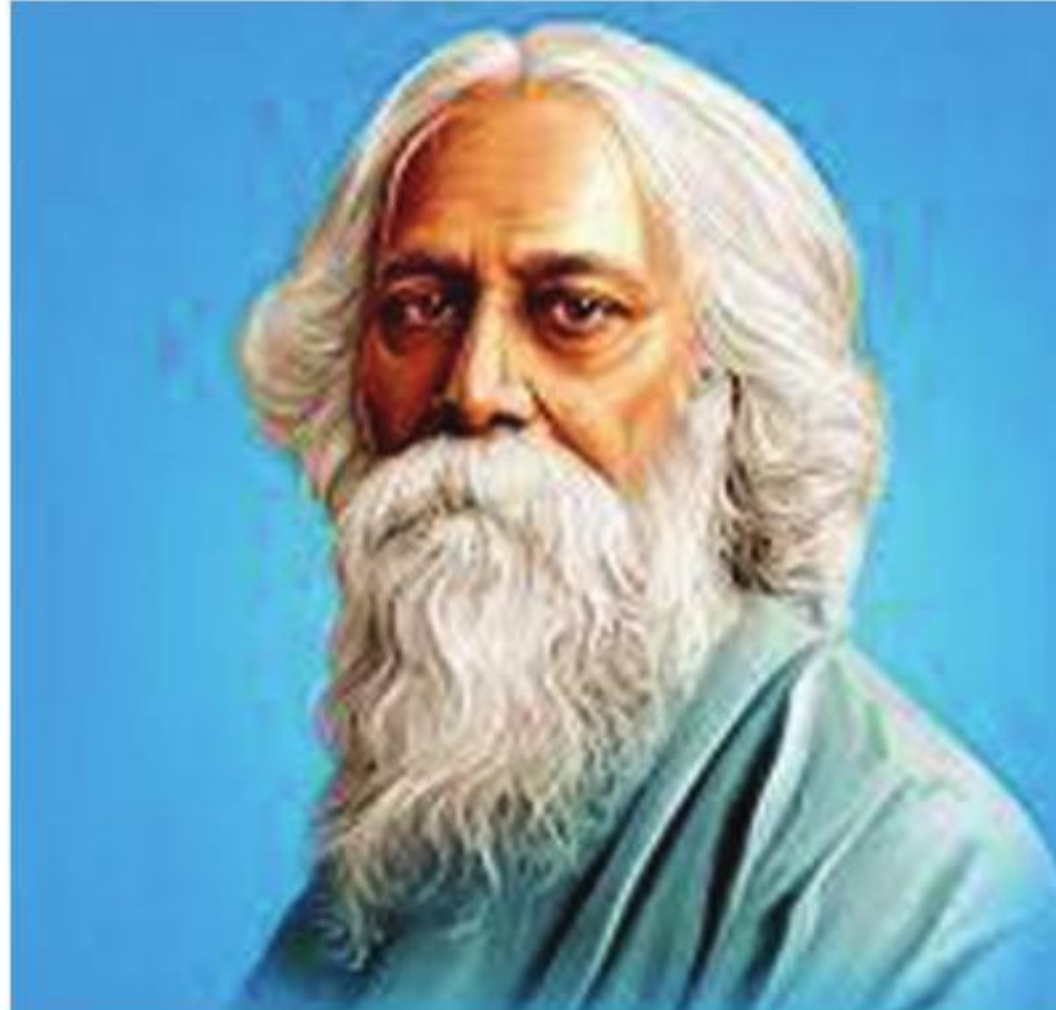
"After my Gitanjali poems had been written in Bengali I translated those poems into English, without having any desire to have them published, being diffident of my mastery of that language, but I had the manuscript with me when I came to the west... I was accepted and the heart of the West opened without delay (Tagore 294)."

Interestingly, when the poet TS Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, though he wrote in English, Eliot foregrounded the importance of cultural transfer through poetry and language.

So Eliot stated in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "To enjoy poetry belonging to another language, is to enjoy an understanding of the people to whom that language belongs, an understanding we can get in no other way. ... And I take the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature, when it is given to a poet, to be primarily an assertion of the supra-national value of poetry".

So we notice that the first initiative in terms of reaching out to a global readership came from Tagore himself when in 1912, he translated his poems into English and handed over a copy of the translated poems to his friend William Rothenstein.

Soon after, Tagore and the renowned Irish poet W B Yeats met for the first time on 27 June 1912, at the home of Rothenstein. Rothenstein had previously sent Yeats the manuscripts of Tagore's partial translation of Gitanjali. On July 7, Yeats gave a reading of these poems to a group of thrilled London literary



elite, including Ernest Rhys and Ezra Pound.

A member of the audience, May Sinclair, wrote a letter of effusive appreciation to Tagore. This letter has been mentioned by Bashabi Fraser in her latest biography of Tagore published in 2019. May Sinclair stated, "You have put into English which is absolutely transparent in its perfection things it is despaired of ever seeing written in English at all or in any Western language." (Fraser 122)

Tagore's translated poems, typed and circulated by Rothenstein, were widely appreciated by the literati of London in 1912. Yeats hosted a dinner in honour

of Tagore at the Trocadero restaurant in London on July 12. While proposing a toast to honour Tagore, Yeats said, "To take part in honouring Mr Rabindranath Tagore, is one of the great events in my artistic life. (I have been carrying about with me a book of translations into English prose of a 100 of his Bengali lyrics, written within the last ten years.) I know of no man in my time who has done anything in the English language to equal these lyrics. Even as I read them in English in this literal prose translation, they are exquisite in style as in thought".

Tagore responded to Yeats by stating, "This is one of the proudest moments of my life. I have a speaking acquaintance with your glorious language; yet I can feel it in my own. My Bengali has been a jealous mistress, claiming all my homages and resenting rivals. Still I have put up with her exactions with cheerful submission; I could do no other. (I cannot do more than assure you that the unfeeling kindness with which I have been greeted in England has moved me far more than I can tell.) I have learned that, though our tongues are different and our habits dissimilar, at the bottom, our hearts are one. The monsoon clouds generated on the banks of the Nile, fertilize

the far distant shores of the Ganges; ideas may have to cross from East to Western shores to find a welcome in men's hearts and fulfil their promise. East is East and West is West - God forbid that it should be otherwise - but the twain must meet in amity, peace and understanding; their meeting will be all the more fruitful because of their differences; it must lead both to holy wedlock before the common altar of humanity"

In other words through this assertion of intimate communion, "holy wedlock", we perceive that Tagore was perhaps also addressing the duality of his creative identity, by focusing firstly on the use of language for communication and secondly the use of language for creative expression - a ghare/baire, the known/unknown, familiar/unfamiliar binaries of the existential being and the tension of self-identity.

A split creative identity between the English Tagore and the Bengali Thakur and the reception of the respective creative texts, can be a crucial sub-text, though this aspect has not been a concern for critics and cultural commentators.

As Tagore remained a prolific bi-lingual writer throughout his life, the tension between the desi Thakur and his bhasha literature and the global Tagore and his writings in English was never regarded as an act of cultural betrayal despite the fact that English in British India was a signature language of imperialism, though in this era of globalization English is now regarded as a de-territorialized global lingua franca. Significantly, Tagore continued to write in Bengali throughout his life along with writing in English. He realized that if he had to reach a larger readership, a global language like English would be a functional tool that would make him engage in a dialogue with the world.

According to many Tagore scholars, one compelling reason

for this bid to introduce himself and his texts, specifically his philosophic, mystical reflections written in English, to the world, was primarily because he needed to raise funds for the maintenance of his dream project - Visva Bharati University, which he did tirelessly, by undertaking multiple international lecture tours.

In a Sahitya Akademi curated conference on Tagore's English writings held at Kochi, the then President of Sahitya Akademi, the celebrated author Sunil Gangopadhyay remarked unequivocally that there can be no fair competition between the Bengali writings of Tagore that comprise thirty-three volumes and the English writings of Tagore comprising four volumes that include many translations by the poet himself. Also it would be rare for Bengalis to prefer reading Tagore in English rather than in Bengali.

Sahitya Akademi's four volumes titled The English writings of Tagore is of course a commendable initiative, as it validates the fact that Tagore could write creatively in not only Bengali but in English as well.

Volume 1 of the English Writings deals with translations or more appropriately Tagore's transcriptions from his own Bengali poems, sometimes even fusing lines and images of two or more Bengali poems in order to create one English poem. While three volumes of Tagore's English writings have been edited by Sisir Das, the fourth volume has been edited by Nityapriya Ghosh.

Interestingly, apart from the English *Gitanjali*, the poems of Tagore written or transcreated in English include - *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon*, *Fruit-Gathering*, *Lover's Gift and Crossing*, *The Fugitive*, *Stray Birds*, *Fireflies*, *The Child*, one Hundred poems of Kabir among others. In fact, there are 17 poems in Crossing which seem to be poems written directly in English, as no Bengali poems could be located by Tagore scholars that even remotely resembled the content or style of these poems.

In a letter from London dated 12 May 1913, to Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, Tagore had stated, "The forms and features of the original become difficult in my translations - the way I do them these days. My translations are more a reflection than an exact replica of the original image." Moreover in response to poet James Henry Cousins's letter about his translated poems that he had sent to Cousins for his views, Tagore wrote (5 March, 1918) - "About the Englishness of my English I have to be careful as the language is not mine own, but about Ideas I think, it is best to have a definitely independent attitude of mind..." (Paul vol 7 313).

By using self-translation and transcreation as crafts of communication and cultural understanding, Tagore disseminated the supra-national value of poetry and showcased Bengal as an outstanding cultural space in British India.

A MEMBER OF THE

ANN
ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES NK cyberattack threat

In what appears to be one of the biggest hacking attacks in recent years, it was belatedly known that a North Korean hacking group had continued to steal a massive amount of personal data from a South Korean court computer network over two years. The hackers, presumed to be from the notorious Lazarus Group, stole a staggering 1,014 gigabytes of data and legal documents from a Seoul court's computer network, according to the police, the prosecution and the National Intelligence Service on Saturday, citing the results of their joint probe into the first-ever breach of cybersecurity involving a local court network.

Contained in the large-scale data heist was sensitive personal information, including names, resident registration numbers and even financial records handled and collected by the court. The scale of the data theft is estimated at around 2.7 billion A4-sized pages. What is particularly chilling is that the hacking lasted from January 2021 through February 2023 without generating any warning signs or alerts to authorities as well as those who operated the court network. Regrettably, it was only late last year that the police noticed the irregularities in the court system. This raises many questions about the fundamental problems with the nation's cybersecurity level in general and court networks in particular. For starters, the country's court networks store not only legal records about private citizens and their cases but also other detailed and potentially

The Korea Herald

highly sensitive data about public institutions and companies. The nature of the massive stolen court data means that hackers could exploit personal information for criminal purposes or attempt to compromise Korea's essential government and military networks.

The joint probe team concluded the hacking was done by North Korea based on the evidence identified so far, including the malicious codes and IP addresses. The problem, however, is that authorities have yet to uncover how the hacking was carried out in detail and through which online and offline channels. Moreover, the joint investigation team has identified only 4.7 GB worth of files, a meager 0.5 percent of the total leaked files, casting skepticism over the chance of tracking at least a meaningful portion of the stolen data. Even though the outlook is far from optimistic, those who failed to safeguard the crucial court network and related data should be held accountable for the lax cybersecurity level that invited hacking attempts, and be required to fix the apparent loopholes without delay. But a bigger question is whether Korea's public agencies as well as private companies have access to top-notch cybersecurity solutions that can stave off continued attempts from hackers in the first place. Government officials are quick to levy cumbersome regulations and draw up obligatory audits for public institutions and companies that collect and utilize certain amounts of personal data from users. But they are slow to proactively identify and address security problems. There is another question about whether the government is taking a balanced cybersecurity approach for public agencies and private companies.

IN MEMORIAM

KUTU DASGUPTA — (Birth - 18-05-1999, Death - 20-05-1999) — Kutu sona, wherever you are stay in peace. — Baba & Ma.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Much to do

SIR, This refers to your editorial "Srinagar's way". A 38 per cent voter turnout is not big but such has been the abysmally low participation in the valley that this year's turnout is being cheered by one and all.

This was the first election after the abrogation of article 370, so all were apprehensive how voters would behave. But voters of Srinagar have responded well with the biggest turnout in the last 26 years. This is a big message that these voters have reposed faith in the electoral process and democracy.

The BJP as expected skipped the valley and preferred Ladakh and Jammu where it has better electoral prospects.

This has once again exposed the gulf between the valley and Jammu/Ladakh. Inclusiveness is still not looked at as a key priority area, sadly.

BJP still has to walk the talk when it comes to providing job opportunities and economic

growth in the valley.

Restoration of statehood should not wait for long after 4 June and assembly elections should be announced soon.

Yours, etc., Bal Govind, Noida, 15 May.

UNHEALTHY EATING

SIR, The information provided in Shovanlal Chakraborty's letter to the editor published today that 56.4 per cent of the total disease burden in India is attributed to unhealthy dietary practices in consuming fast food by the citizens of the country is alarming.

Fast food and packaged food products might be easily available today, but not always cheap and affordable for all. I would like to correlate this reality of change in food habits with the claim of "impressive stride in reducing poverty" done in Gautam Bhattacharya's article on the Perspective page of your edition of 12 May.

Referring to results of the survey on household consumption expenditure, recently released

SUNIL CHHETRI

SIR, The news of Sunil Chhetri's retirement has hit the Indian football community hard. As the much admired Indian captain announced his decision to step away from international football after the FIFA world cup qualification match against Kuwait on June 6, emotions ran high across the country.

Chhetri was the face of Indian football in a remarkable career spanning over 20 years. With a legacy that has left an indelible mark on Indian football, the 39-year-old maestro's journey has been an inspiration to millions, reshaping perceptions of this beautiful game in the nation along the way.

Since his debut in 2005, Chhetri has amassed a multitude of accolades, including setting records for the highest number of appearances and goals scored for India. With 94 goals in 150 matches, Sunil Chhetri holds the third position in the list of most international goals, trailing behind only the two superstars Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo.

Yours, etc., Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai, 17 May.

by National Sample Survey Office, the article had said consumption of expenditure on cereals reduced from 22 per cent in 1999-2000 to 10.7 per cent in 2011-12 and to less than 5 per cent in 2022-23.

But it would be wrong to conclude that the poor today are better placed to spend on items

other than basic meals, rather it indicates the people's growing trend of dependency on fast and packaged food. This might generate a different cycle of economy in trading of consumables, but the health factor should not be undermined. As far as environmental hazards are concerned, the uncertainty in the fate

of such huge and different types of packaging materials is also very crucial unless they can be truly recycled.

Yours, etc., Sukhendu Bhattacharjee, Hooghly, 14 May.

DINONATH DAS

SIR, The 100 Years Ago Occasional Note published today describes the initiative of a resident of erstwhile Calcutta, Mr. Girindrakrishna Mitra to set up pocket-friendly dispensaries in villages to combat malaria.

In this context, an erstwhile rags-to-riches inhabitant of Kanchannagar in Burdwan town, Dinonath Das (1847-1909) set up a charitable dispensary in 1904 in Kanchannagar for the medical treatment of many malaria patients. The charitable dispensary has stood the test of time. Many people in those times addressed Dinonath as 'Doctor' since he distributed quinine to patients, even though he was not a qualified medical practitioner.

Yours, etc., Anindya Ghosal, Burdwan, 17 May.

Learning from West's mistakes

BHARAT DOGRA

In India as in most other developing countries, there is huge admiration for the prestigious universities of Western countries...

Recent protests in the context of the Israeli assault on Gaza have drawn attention to the endowments of prestigious US universities...

Secondly, university administrations have not been sympathetic to students and faculty members getting mobilised to raise issues of larger social concerns...

Thirdly, even though the universities as well as governments are extremely rich, student debts have generally continued to remain at very high levels...

A country as well-endowed as the USA with all sorts of riches is perfectly capable of educating its youth with-



out getting them entangled in such difficult debts. Instead these heavy debts are a reflection of an increasing tendency to try to tie up younger people in such a way with debts that they feel more and more compelled to follow the establishment path...

Coming now to school education, particularly high school education, schools have often been in news due to shooting incidents, bullying and other violence.

According to the data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Data Survey and Trends Report released by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, USA, for the years 2011-21...

According to the data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Data Survey and Trends Report released by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, USA, for the years 2011-21...

increased in a big way, rising from 28 to 42 per cent. Why is sadness and hopelessness so widely pervasive in one of the richest countries with relatively high educational and health spending?

At the same time, this data base revealed that in 2021, 22 per cent of high school students "seriously considered" attempting suicide.

Such alarming official data raises a very serious question - in a rich country with such a high exposure to an immense diversity of entertainment and sports, why should such high levels of distress and stress prevail among high-school students?

According to the Advisory on Mental Health issued by the US Surgeon General in 2021, there was an even higher rise in the suicide rate in the age-group 10-24 from 2007 to 2018 - 57 per cent.

According to the Surgeon General Advisory as well as several other reports, the grim situation in 2019 was

exacerbated during the Covid period. In early 2021 there was a further 51 per cent rise in emergency department visits by adolescent girls in the USA relating to suicide attempts...

In the fall of 2021, a coalition of the USA's leading experts in pediatric health asked for declaring a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health.

All these are alarming facts and figures. The surgeon general stated, "Even before the pandemic, an alarming number of young people struggled with feelings of helplessness, depression and thoughts of suicide - and rates have increased over the past decade."

However, while the data is there, no comprehensive, credible explanation appears to have emerged yet of why, in one of the richest countries enjoying special privileges, children and adolescents are in such an extreme stage of sadness, hopelessness and desperation.

A nationwide survey of 21,678 US high school students by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Yale Child Study Center found that nearly 75 per cent of the students' self-reported feelings related to schools were negative.

A Pew Research Center survey of teens in the 13-17 age group (2018) found that 57 per cent of them (64 per cent of girls) were very worried or somewhat worried that a shooting could happen in their school.

Many studies of problems in high schools are more concerned about achievement levels. The Program of International Student Assessment, in

a ranking of 35 OECD or rich countries, ranked USA at 30 in terms of Math learning of 15 year olds. Other studies have noted that those high school students who make it to college very frequently need remedial education, particularly in the context of Math and English.

This is despite the fact that several educationists have also criticized the high school education system for becoming increasingly obsessed with preparing students for college instead of trying to provide holistic school education that prepares students for many-sided challenges of life.

While these studies no doubt have their own importance, in our humble opinion what is more important is the persistent feeling of sadness and hopelessness among students, and this should get more importance in terms of remedial steps.

Meanwhile, while we in developing countries like India should be willing to learn from what is genuinely good and admirable in the western educational system, for a balanced view we should also be aware of the many flaws and mistakes that have created serious and avoidable problems.

(The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include Protecting Earth for Children, Planet in Peril and A Day in 2071.)

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

The grand exit

A myth prevails that skeptics and atheists turn to God on their deathbed. Out of repentance for their sinfulness or, more likely, out of fear for what lies ahead. I seem to know several who had stoutly continued in their sinful ways.

My hero, Voltaire, had a priest turn up at his bedside to urge him to repudiate Satan while he was breathing his last. Voltaire said, "Is this a time to make new enemies?"

My favourite American, Thoreau, was close to the end when his mother urged him to make peace with God. Thoreau replied, "I am not aware we had ever quarrelled."

A less known writer, Wilson Mizner, dying and just out of a coma, found a priest hovering near and waiting to counsel him. He remonstrated, "Why should I talk to you? I have just been talking to my boss."

I know I have mostly wasted my life, as most of my fellowmen do, but I cannot imagine groveling in the last minutes to an omnipotent proto-plasm to escape hellfire. More than my sins, I am embarrassed about my acts of thoughtlessness, my unthinking unkindness to friends, children, acquaintances, even strangers.

I could have been far kinder to people around me: restaurant waiters, taxi drivers, glum-faced neighbours, boring professors, inept editors, unhelpful colleagues. I should have given more time to good friends, played more with my daughters, taken better care of my loving father, expressed more appreciation to people who cooked for me or drove me around.

I know these are the things I will



Illustration by: Debabrata Chakrabarty

regret on my deathbed, as I regret them even now. I would like to tell my daughters they have been a source of fathomless joy that I might have expressed with abysmal clumsiness. I would like to tell any remaining friends that they have been like a balm in my days of discomfort and like a ballast in my hours of imbalance.

Those are my priorities. I would focus on them in my last hours rather than waste effort in expiating for my sinfulness.

Of course, sinfulness exists in an abundant measure. Not only nasty people in a religious garb who gleefully stone women, burn foreigners and slit the throats of journalists.

More the everyday sinners who step on our feet at every opportunity. All of us have encountered superiors who won't listen to us and make us feel inferior any chance they get. Or landlords who turn a deaf ear to our entreaties and tenants who are thoughtless, irresponsible and eager to deceive.

But I am getting overindulgent or senile and beginning to think that these unpleasant creatures too possibly had some excuses for their unpleasantness. Maybe they had mean parents, cruel bosses, spiteful neighbors or foul duplicitous friends.

Their vile experiences turned them repugnant. In my last moments, like Voltaire, instead of making new enemies, or nursing grudges against old enemies, I should be nourishing brighter thoughts.

My close friend in school was Prabir who would periodically invite me to his home in Maddox Square. They lived in a huge house, presided over by his grandfather, the classic wealthy paterfamilias, and his six sons, with their wives and children.

We sat and waited until the grandfather made his grand entrance. He was a thin, wispy man in his eighties, with white hair and an erect gait, who smiled benignly at me when Prabir introduced me.

He sat down and, to my astonishment, opened a container that had his lunch. Apparently, he believed in the ancient Indian custom that the elderly should themselves cook their special, simple food and not consume the richer food of others. However, he graciously tasted a few spoonfuls of the food two of the daughters-in-law had prepared.

After that, I met the old man a couple of times and always exchanged a few words. Prabir had probably told him of my interest in literature and he invariably asked what interesting new

books I had read. I felt flattered that, when I spoke well of a novel by Tarashankar or a story by Subodh Ghosh, he always wanted to know the exact details, probably to order the book.

I noticed the change when I visited Prabir after a football match one Friday and encountered his grandfather in the living room. There were four other adults in the room, all from the neighbourhood and well-known to him, and I was confused to hear him say goodbye to them though they weren't leaving.

When I joined Prabir in his room, I asked the significance of his farewell, but Prabir said, "I have no idea. Grandpa seldom goes anywhere, and I know well he is not going to visit anybody today or tomorrow." Prabir called me on Saturday morning. "Grandfather passed away last night. This morning he hadn't come out; two of my uncles went to see him. They found him dead in his room." He added, "I went to see him. He was seated in his favorite armchair, fully dressed, even with his shoes, as if he was going someplace. His eyes were closed, but he looked happy. He had on an enigmatic Gioconda smile."

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com)



NEWS ITEMS

THE ROOT TRUST

Apart from the sheer mechanical wonder of the industrial plant that lies waiting for the strangling grip of the Ruhr occupation to be loosened, Germany's effort will be the more formidable for the extraordinary and intricate interlinking of financial manufacturing; distributing and raw materials producing interests.

I have spoken with most of the great industrialists in Germany, and with the shrewd men, like Stresemann, who look after the political end for the magnates; and I found, everywhere that the trend of ideas, was in the direction of Stinnes' conception.

The main idea in the minds of the men who have created and direct Germany's machine is the elimination of competition between themselves and the amalgamation of interest in every field of financial and economic activity. It is a great dream, and one which Britain may before long have to envisage if she is to retain her place among the producing and trading nations of the world.

INCIDENCE OF CHOLERA OUTBREAK

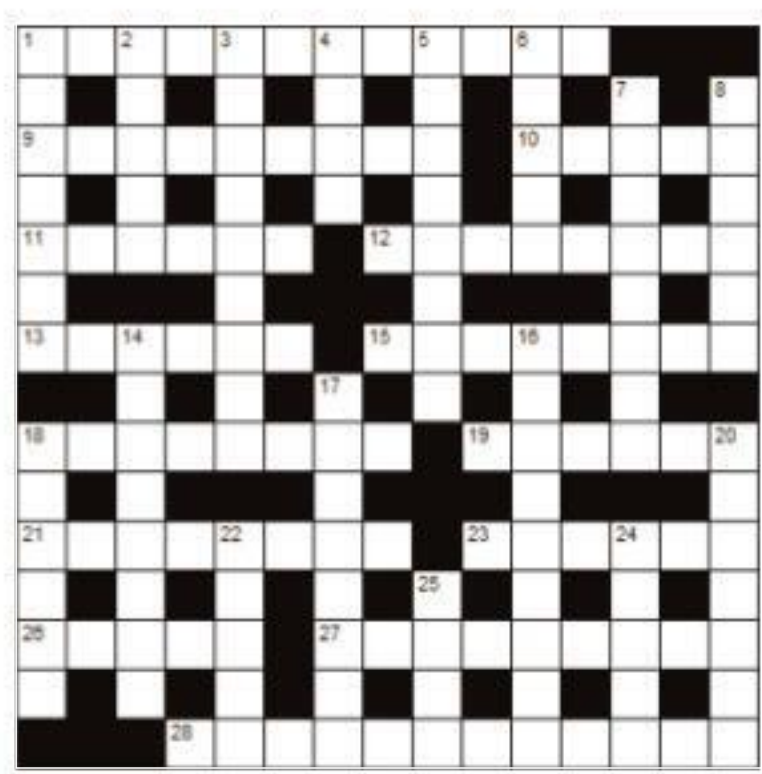
(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.)

THERE has been an unusual amount of cholera this year in various parts of the State, notably, in the Mysore and Hassan districts. Though measures have been taken by the medical authorities to deal with every fresh outbreak with the greatest urgency, it is evident that there is lack of supervision somewhere.

Wandering ascetics are responsible for the conveying, from place to place, of this disease. Some months ago there was an outbreak in the Arkulgud taluq, but effective measures were taken, and the trouble seemed to have passed. Again it has broken out in this same taluq and in the neighbouring Holenarsipur taluq, both of which are not far distant from the Mysore District where it has been prevailing for some time.

CROSSWORD

NO-292785



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



ACROSS

- 1 I start to help war veteran to swim, and provoke an emotional response (3,1,3,5)
9 Isolated nurses returning, provided preparation to prevent infestation carried out quickly (5-4)
10 Complains bitterly as Republican is sick (5)
11 Essentially gazump wealthy financial centre (6)
12 More determined European takes

- husband's place in Elizabeth Castle's Jersey Shore home (8)
13 Head kissing has no boundaries (6)
15 Swede's routine appropriate for adoption by wannabe teetotallers (8)
18 In a little while, policeman will accept Penny not thinking for herself (5-3)
19 Excited to furtively look over maintenance expenses (6)
21 Man beset with problems in a low place (8)

DOWN

- 1 TV programme about flying sausage shown before noon (7)
2 Spill valve discovered in this place (5)
23 Head away from carnival? Just the opposite (6)
26 Adult liable to finish early, overall (5)
27 Curse lone working in yard (9)
28 People spreading worrying rumours 50% of American Congress is corrupt (12)

- 3 New version of left-wing coup? (9)
4 Wife in thong (4)
5 Choose dodgy gold alloy (8)
6 5 Gaelic lines of poetry (5)
7 Foolish duchess picked up mineral (8)
8 Both sides dismissed in void court case in Balkan region (6)
14 Lineker accepts defeat describing list of technical terms (8)
16 Instrument panel damaged by bit of butter (9)

- 17 Dancer, possibly, almost certainly stops concerning Rambert's principal (8)
18 Small group of married couples with time for midnight rendezvous (6)
20 Son of God is intrinsically American (7)
22 Wild fellow in charge (5)
24 Critical to take steps about university strike, finally (5)
25 Fiddle about during kinky sex (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)



CONTRAPUNTO

We have to free half of the human race, the women, so that they can help to free the other half

-EMMELINE PANKHURST

Don't Play This Game

Poll rhetoric that weaponises women victims is a new low

Women voters outnumbered men in the May 13 phase of elections in Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and Bengal. In Lok Sabha election 2019 the gap between male and female turnout ended - women voted at higher rates than men for the first time.

But such focus has a dark underbelly. No Lok Sabha election has seen the weaponising of violence-against-women to this extent. The Swati Maliwal case is only the latest in a string of high-profile cases where political brass, even a constitutional authority, and/or their associates, have been accused of physical violence and sexual assault.

Such allegations should mean swift investigation and closure, whether Sandeshkhal or Hassan Lok Sabha candidate Prajwal Revanna's videos, or allegations against Bengal governor Ananda Bose. On Swati Maliwal's FIR, her alleged abuser has been arrested. Yet, politicians will not allow the Rajya Sabha MP the space she requires to de-traumatise but have embarked on making the case a trial by election.

The political slugfest started before poll season - to last year's video from Manipur that shook the nation into demanding central action into the months-long violence and killings. At the party-level, the response was to accuse Rajasthan and Bengal of being "more unsafe for women".

The political tit-for-tat rhetoric, playing 'protector', on survivors is reprehensible. It is a new dehumanising of victims, and highlights mostly the decay in investigative institutions and alignment of police with political powers - victims be damned.

UNCUET

NTA's exam prep still leaves much to be desired. Too many students are paying the price

In its inaugural year the CUET-UG exam stretched up to Aug 30, one painful glitch after another. In 2023, it wrapped up by July 5, snags remained but were dramatically reduced.

Delhi doldrums | All the candidates appearing at test centres across Delhi got a rude jolt on the eve of the very first exam day, with the scheduled tests postponed to May 29 "due to unavoidable reasons".

Kanpur woes | Also sitting for exams on May 29 will be the unfortunate students from a Kanpur exam centre, who were handed the wrong question papers. Students from an Indore centre have similarly complained that they were given the Chemistry paper in English, despite having selected the Hindi option.

Meghalaya murmurs | From Meghalaya there are reports of a stampede-like situation because of poor coordination between NTA and a Shillong test centre. While this listing can go on, the point is surely already clear: The quality control of test centres that was the biggest challenge in 2022, still leaves much to be desired.

Ebony in India

On foreign spouses, desi parents and rough relations

Bikram Vohra



They just celebrated their 45th wedding anniversary. Was it just the other day in 1979 my friend 'trunk called' from Houston (only three minutes) and said, hey I'm getting hitched tomorrow, no one knows, coming home next week, be at the airport, this might be rough.

Except, Ebony (Ebs to her friends and admirers) is an Afro-American, like burnished coal, stunningly beautiful, a nuclear physicist to boot, even more breathtaking than current supermodel Nyakim Gatwech.

With me being the only one privy to this bridal information, we all trooped up to Palam airport just after midnight. His family was there en masse, nervously excited about meeting their American bahu. Garlands were held in hands trembling with anticipation and a few relatives and neighbours had also fetched up, buoyed by a mix of curiosity, envy and conjecture, what would this phoren bride be like...

The flight landed and weary passengers staggered out in post Immigration & Customs clumps. Then I saw him and her. Somewhere Eb had been tutored that the Indian way of greeting was to prostrate yourself in front of your in-laws.

The entourage reached home, mummy leapt into bed with palpitations, daddy, always so liberal, froze into a 'how could you do this to us' posture and sundry rishthadars commiserated about today's youngsters and their values as tension zinged through the house.

The couple moved to a hotel the next morning. He called me and said bring the car, we must get out of here. We drove away with Eb wondering what she had done to invite such wrath. They never came back. But they have three adult kids and a great marriage. You think Sam Pitroda was racist. Look within and ask what are we if not...then what.

VOCAL DALITS, SILENT MUSLIMS

Notes and whispers from travels in UP in poll season • Yogi's made UP better • Strong opposition is necessary • MPs don't inspire • Who'll lead Dalits?

Anand.Soodas@timesgroup.com



Life confuses Amit Sharma. Elections too. Not very long ago he had three taxis in Ghaziabad, with all-India permits. Then, during Covid, he lost two of his cars. Back at square one, he said, "I'll need to work my heart out to retrieve the vehicles I had to let go."

Ferrying passengers in the middle of the poll season in UP, where voting in its 80 constituencies is spread over seven phases, he was amused elections could throw up such tough choices.

400 one too many? | Articulating a sentiment often heard while travelling across UP, Sharma said he agonised over weeks whether he should vote for the dispensation in office or look for a formidable

POLLITICS Special Series on Elections

rival, "just to strengthen the opposition". Administrations, he said, should be on their toes to do their best work for citizens.

"And that can happen when numbers in Parliament aren't so utterly skewed. Too much concentration of power leads to misuse. Badhiya virodhi dal toh bilkul chahiye (A robust opposition is absolutely necessary)." In Shahjahanpur, trader Pulkit Garg said he'd feel "uncomfortable" if BJP did go on to win "400 seats as promised". His vote for the saffron party, he is quick to clarify: "Just that it's not good for democracy."

Missing Behenji | Mayawati's 'absence' from the political arena suddenly seems to have hit home among large sections of Dalits in the state. In these elections more than any other, SC voters are feeling the vacuum. Whether Nagina with a sizeable Dalit presence or Hathras, where the killing of a young woman and the quick disposal of her remains in 2020 had shaken the country, members across its various sub-groups spoke of a strong BSP with longing.

Vociferous in their calls for 'leaders' and organisations who would clearly prioritise the cause of the downtrodden, they hoped for Behenji's resurgence and Chandrasekhar Azad's rise. They often mentioned words like 'identity' and 'existence'. "It'd have been an

easier decision for many among us to take," said Sanoj Nigam, a teacher, in Muzaffarnagar. Asked if he, too, was afraid the Constitution could be tweaked by a party that manages to get an overwhelming majority post these elections, he answered, "I personally don't think so, but in debates with my friends and relatives, it does come up quite a bit. There is some apprehension, for sure. INDIA played this well."

They then went on to say how they follow political news and developments on social media but restrain themselves as much as possible from speaking out. "It takes nothing for things to flare up. We've never profited from a polarised election. We're silent, we're afraid and we're careful. But I feel there will be greater voting by us this time. We've chosen candidates and parties with some care. Votes won't be split unnecessarily. Not just in UP, I think that's the guiding thought elsewhere too. Let's see..."

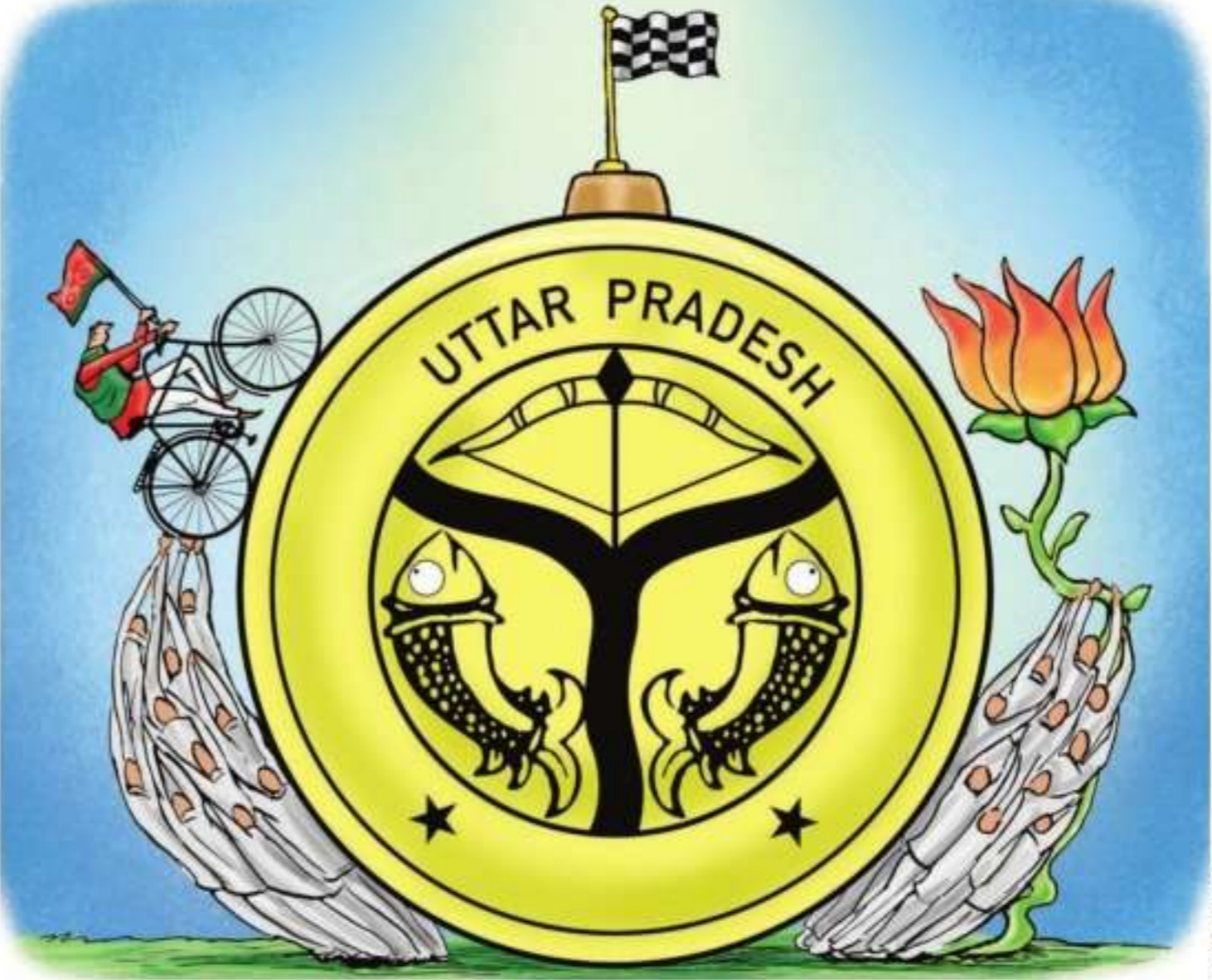
India shining | The new Ram Mandir in Ayodhya has filled many Hindu hearts with pride and joy. As have reports of the "disappearance of stone-pelters" in Kashmir. UCC and CAA were hardly mentioned at chaupals and street corner addas during exchanges and altercations, but India's "growing stature" in the globe was in discussion.

However, even the staunchest of some BJP supporters complained that a bunch of the party's MPs had become lazy and stopped nursing their constituencies. "All they keep doing is Modi-Modi," hotelier Samrat Gupta said in Bareilly. "And they now talk about UP's improving law and order situation. Shouldn't that be left to Yogi Adityanath as the CM to brag about? MPs hardly broach local issues. A lot of people are extremely upset with them for ignoring their seats. Elections can't be about the Centre alone."

Building roads | In catchment areas for army jobs - large swathes in UP - Agniveer has been a sore point. Young people also spoke about paper leaks and joblessness. And yes, roads. Everyone wanted shiny thoroughfares. In fact, in Farukhabad one of the biggest grouses against the sitting MP was that he'd done little on that front. A persistent remonstrance was: "Look at districts like Mainpuri. We demand an expressway to take us where the prosperous regions have gone."

It may be premature to say Congress is on a certain comeback trail in UP, having frittered away opportunities, lost comrades - or sat in sullen silence as they jumped ship - in the past decade and more, but the frequency with which it was mentioned as an alternative, especially by Dalits and Muslims, was somewhat striking. There is, of course, vast ground to cover. But it's something the Gandhi siblings would perhaps do well to build on.

UP votes today (14 seats) in the fifth of its 7-phase polls



Agniveer has been a sore point. Young people also spoke about paper leaks and joblessness... It's premature to say Congress is on comeback trail, given how it frittered away opportunities the last decade, but it found frequent mention as an alternative, especially by Dalits and Muslims

Silence speaks | At a bustling workshop in Meerut's Ghanatagar, a group of young Muslim men asked to see my 'press card' before replying to a few questions. "Sorry," one of them apologised. "We need to know who we're talking to."

Flying For Democracy: IAF & Voting

Air force works closely with EC to transport election manpower and equipment for every polling booth. There are challenges aplenty. These are also overcome away from public limelight

Manmohan Bahadur



Indian armed forces have a halo of being protectors of the nation - which they surely are. However, there is also a not too publicised side of their work, as nation-builders. The foundation of our Republic is our secular democratic base, and holding of free and fair elections is the cornerstone of nation-building.

Foundational airlifts | IAF started its life in free India through its emergency airlift of army troops to Srinagar valley on October 27, 1947, to save Kashmir from Pakistani raiders. This is how the map of India was stabilised into the form we see to date.

There was also the year-long airlift to the besieged Poonch garrison, with IAF Dakotas landing (including at night) on a makeshift kutcha runway to supply food and ammunition to the civilians and army troops. IAF's decades-long air dropping supply missions in the outlying border areas of Northeast (where road connectivity was non-existent) fulfilled one additional vital need of the populace - that of an emotional connect with the 'mainland'.

Of course, in the four wars thrust on us, the offensive element of IAF came to the fore.

The work relationship with EC | What the man on the street is not conversant with is the fact that no national poll can be completed without the involvement of IAF. As the 2024 elections move toward the concluding phases, the role of IAF continues to be discussed only in dribbles in media. But it is crucial and here is how it happens.

Election Commission of India holds meetings with air headquarters, represented by Assistant Chief of Air Staff looking after operations of transport aircraft and helicopters - ACAS (T&H), many months before elections start. Initially, it's just an outline of ECI requirements that are spelt out, region-wise and state-wise. As time progresses, these meetings increase in frequency, with details of election manpower and equipment that have to be transported for every district and polling booth.



Also added on is the humongous requirement of movement of police and central para-military personnel, which could be from one end of the country to another - literally anywhere to anywhere.

So, one is talking of heavy lift aircraft like C-17 and Il-76 for troop transportation down to the complete helicopter inventory of Mi17, ALH Dhruv and the Chetak/Cheetah fleet for the last-mile carriage of EC poll parties to inaccessible and insurgent-prone areas.

And these requirements change if the law and

order situation deteriorates or someone in a polling party falls sick and requires replacement.

The massive 2024 exercise | While the air warriors on the flightline ensure timely task completion through their flying, in the Directorate of ACAS (T&H) there is never a dull moment and the ACAS's cell phone never stops ringing. I write this from the experience of holding the ACAS position in 2009 when elections were held in five phases - this year there are seven!

In just the first phase this year, according to EC, IAF flew 439 sorties, the highest being in Maharashtra where 850 officials for 206 polling booths in the Naxal-affected areas were deployed (and brought back). Similarly, 1,000 personnel were positioned in 156 polling stations in the violence-affected Bastar area.

The flying effort required to transport troops by transport aircraft would be huge too. Going by past data available in media one can easily expect around 1,000 hours of helicopter flying - and transport aircraft flying hours in hundreds by the time the elections get over on June 1.

Thereafter, the task of de-induction of police forces back to their bases by heavy lift transport aircraft would start.

Your duty, their duty | Are there hiccups in the three-month period of electioneering? Of course there are, but have you ever heard of polling not taking place at a remote polling booth at 14,000ft in the Ladakh hills due to non-deployment of a polling party?

So, as you look at your inked finger signifying completion of your duty of electing your govt, spare a thought for the men and women in blue who have done their part in this endeavour of nation-building.

Air Vice Marshal Bahadur (retd) served as Assistant Chief of Air Staff

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace. We need the tonic of wildness... At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, untrampled and unfathomed by us...

Romancing Honeybees That Give Us Life

Narayani Ganesh

When the bee population dies out, it will spell the end of life on earth, conclude scientific researchers who are ringing alarm bells to conserve and respect bees. Hence, we have a special World Bee Day, and this year's theme is 'Bee Engaged with Youth'. The idea is to get young people involved in creating awareness of the importance of bees as a species that is integral to the continuation of our ecosystem, and for our very survival.

What comes to mind is the charming depiction of Kamadev's bow and arrows - Madhuyasti Dhanush, the bow, is made of sugarcane; the arrows are fragrant flowers, and the bowstring is composed of bees. His vehicle is the parrot. As the counterpart of Cupid in Hindu mythology, Kamadev - known as Manmada, one who agitates the mind and as Madana, one who intoxicates -

symbolises love and romance. Perhaps bees in this case indicate fertility, vital for propagation of life and desire, the seed of creation. Kama is the son of Vishnu and Lakshmi, and his consort is Rati. In other puranic references, he is the manasaputra - mind-born son - of the god of creation, Brahma.

When Shiva was in deep meditation, the young, handsome Kama was sent to distract him. When he shot his love arrow, a disturbed Shiva opened his third eye, reducing Kama to ashes. The story goes that Kama was reborn on earth as the eldest son of Krishna and Rukmini, as Pradyumna. Kama, which means erotic desire in Sanskrit, is the reason why life comes into being. The Rig Veda describes creation of the universe as arising out of divine desire, intense heat, resulting

in a situation similar to the scientific theory of the big bang and this was followed by formation of celestial bodies and germination of life. In mythology, the bee is seen as the sacred bridge between the natural world and the underworld.

Bees are pollinators; they feed on honey in flowers, and when they rub their legs together, the pollen sticks to them and is carried forth to other places, enabling propagation of species. The Smithsonian describes the process thus: "Pollination is an essential part of plant reproduction. Pollen from a flower's anthers, that is, the male part of the plant, rubs or drops onto a pollinator who carries this to another flower, where the pollen sticks to the stigma, the female part. The fertilised flower later yields fruits and seeds."

Not only do bees act as pollinators,

propagating life, they store the collected honey in their hives which beekeepers harvest for human consumption. The virtues of honey as healing agent have been well-known since ancient times. The shelf life of pure honey is almost infinite. Tombs of pharaohs have been discovered to contain pure honey in sealed jars that are unspoiled and edible even after centuries.

It is no surprise, therefore, that bees have been venerated as life-givers in some mythologies across cultures. In some stories they are seen as creators, in others, as sustainers. Other pollinators like butterflies, beetles, moths and hummingbirds have not gained the primacy given to bees as ace pollinators, as their reach and extent of work far exceeds those of others. Hence the oft-heard saying, 'Busy as a bee' - the hardworking species that ensures life goes on.

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The Tribune ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Phase V poll

Amid campaign heat, real issues eclipsed

AS voters head to the polling stations today in the fifth phase of the seven-phase Lok Sabha elections, they will determine the fate of 695 candidates vying for 49 seats across six states and two union territories, including Ladakh. With this phase, 428 seats would have been covered, leaving 115 for the final two phases. Key candidates in this round include the BJP's Smriti Irani (Amethi) and Rajnath Singh (Lucknow) and the Congress' Rahul Gandhi (Raebareilly).

Terror attacks in Valley

Centre must ensure that people vote without fear

TERRORISTS targeted a former sarpanch in Shopian and a tourist couple from Rajasthan in Anantnag on Saturday night ahead of polling for the Baramulla Lok Sabha constituency. The attacks, which claimed ex-sarpanch Aijaz Sheikh's life and left the visiting duo injured, remind us again of the fact that the security forces cannot afford to let their guard down. The violence is clearly an attempt to disrupt the electoral process in Kashmir. Baramulla goes to the polls today, while voting for the Anantnag-Rajouri seat will take place on May 25.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune. LAHORE, TUESDAY, MAY 20, 1924

Result of 'obstruction' in Bengal

A CLEAR note of irony runs through every line of the lengthy communicate, a full text of which is now available, that has just now been published by the Bengal Government, giving reasons for its decision to abolish certain of its departments as a consequence of the rejection by the Swarajists of money grants covering those departments. This "being a transferred subject", says the communicate, "His Excellency does not wish to deprive the Legislative Council of the responsibility which Parliament has placed upon them in such matters."

Hindu-Muslim binary looms large

The CAA is a political ploy to demonstrate that the government is pro-Hindu



TRYSTS AND TURNS JULIO RIBEIRO

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi said last week: "If I do Hindu-Muslim, I won't be fit for public life." He was commenting on the Election Commission of India's (ECI) notice to the BJP president on Modi's statement at a recent election rally in Rajasthan, where he said that the Congress was intending to snatch the assets accumulated by his supporters over the years (including their wives' mangalsutras) to redistribute the wealth among 'infiltrators' and their 'large families'.

Every citizen of our great country knew who the PM was referring to. Caught in a bind, he said he was referring to the 'poor' of India when he talked of those with large families. But he refrained from explaining his simultaneous reference to 'infiltrators' when he spoke about the Robin Hood tendencies of his political enemies. He had crossed the limits set by the ECI's model code of conduct and this was a possible escape route he was trying to explore. In politics, some lies are to be expected. The problem arises when lies get rolled out every day, especially during election rallies. Take Modi's statement that he would not be fit for public life if he encouraged the Hindu-Muslim divide. Then what is the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that he and Amit Shah boast about, if not an attempt to divide? Last week, we were regaled with the news of the first beneficiaries of the CAA. A family of Gujarati Hindus, settled in Pakistan's Sindh province, had applied for and succeeded in



PUZZLING: Modi has claimed that he would be unfit for public office if he fuelled Hindu-Muslim discord. PTI

receiving citizenship in India. How was it any different from the million Hindus from Sindh and elsewhere in Pakistan who had crossed over the years to be with their co-religionists? Did any of them face rejection? It would be surprising if even a single instance of such rejection were quoted. The CAA is a political ploy to demonstrate that the government is out-and-out pro-Hindu, which the BJP dispensation led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee was not. I do not see any motive for introducing the CAA except to needle the minority Muslims and tell them that they are not wanted in Bharat. Hindus crossing over from Pakistan, both West and East, were always welcomed. Why is the BJP trying to prove that it was otherwise, when it was not? I am happy that Modi clarified in his defence of his Rajasthan speech that large families are to be found largely in poorer households, irrespective of the faith of the couples involved. I hope his clarification is read and believed, particularly by his followers in Gujarat. I had a friendly altercation with them in March 2002, some 15 days after the Godhra train incident and the riots that followed all over that state. I had

I hope Modi's clarification that large families are to be found largely in poorer households is believed by his followers, especially in Gujarat.

gone to Ahmedabad to find out from my former police colleagues why they had failed to control the rioters. In 1985, I had headed the Gujarat Police for four months. The officers in charge in 2002 had worked as my juniors and knew what had to be done to control communal conflagrations. Gujaratis have been my friends since my school and college days in Mumbai. The Gujaratis of Ahmedabad were well disposed towards me. I was invited to dinner by a respected doctor. He had two dozen couples as guests. After dinner, we

sat down to discuss the happenings in Ahmedabad. It was soon apparent that communal passions predominated at that dinner. The more vociferous of the guests asserted that every Muslim had four wives and, of course, four or more children from each wife. I asked if in Gujarat there were four million Muslim women for the million Muslim men living there. Of course, my question stumped them, but it did not stop a chorus of voices from asserting the veracity of the original claim. I pointed out to them that in Kerala, with a 27 per cent Muslim population, the community's reproductive rate was reportedly no higher than that of Hindus or Christians because there was 100 per cent literacy among women and their men were gainfully employed in West Asia. I cannot claim they were convinced. Communal passions were too high at the time of my visit. If Modi really means what he says, he should convince his followers in his own state and other states of India that large families are a corollary of poverty and illiteracy, especially among womenfolk. Religion cannot be blamed for that.

The PM's assertion that he does not dabble in Hindu-Muslim dissensions puzzled me. When I returned from Romania in January 1994 and occupied my flat in the city of my birth, I was approached by fellow citizens concerned about the communal divide in Mumbai following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and the riots that followed. Then Police Commissioner Satish Sahney conveyed to me the views of then CM Sharad Pawar that the alienation of the Muslims was a matter that needed the state's undivided attention. Sahney and I, with the help of Sushobha Barve of Rajmohan Gandhi's Moral Rearmament outfit, started the Mohalla Committee Movement in the city's slums where arson, loot and killings had taken place in 1992-93. Over the years, after numerous visits to those localities and the active support of the police, we restored a semblance of civility and understanding in the relations between the two communities that live cheek by jowl in those slums. Just when we started licking our chops and patting ourselves on the back, the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 brought in a BJP government headed by Modi. By 2019, our workers on the ground reported a perceptible change, with fear followed by hatred taking root. Disheartened, the workers had reported that 20 years of positive progress in communal amity has been replaced by divisiveness and hate based on fear. Now, they would have to work much harder to get the two communities to understand each other. The only saving grace, if one wishes to call it that, was that the probability of clashes between the communities had receded because those who usually engineered violence were now in the driver's seat and those who organised defences felt the futility of doing so in the altered scenario. So, the PM's contention that he would be unfit for public office if he fuelled Hindu-Muslim discord will continue to puzzle observers like me.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY Intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit. —Mahatma Gandhi

Cocktail of piety and politics

RK PRASHAR

ONE afternoon in April, I was having a cup of tea on the verandah when the gate of my house clanged open. A woman with a big smile on her face handed me a flyer which carried details of a religious congregation to be graced by a guru in a sports hall. She repeatedly asked me to attend the gathering. The guru's name, which was printed on the handbill, rang a bell. A few years ago, I had spotted one of his books that lay on the desk of my colleague, who was his devout follower. As I had quickly browsed it in the colleague's absence, I perceived that the guru's writings bore an uncanny similarity to those of Osho Rajneesh. The venue for the congregation had a festive look. Keen followers from remote hill districts and neighbouring states had already swarmed into the hall. A few stalls busily sold devotional merchandise to avid followers. The organisers, with an air of humility, hustled around discharging their duties. As I weaved my way into the hall, a chirpy girl helped me to a corner, where I sat reservedly, intently watching the gathering build up. Before the guru had arrived, a saffron-clad, bearded baba, holding a trishul upright with a damru strung around, came out of nowhere. With saintly quietude, he occupied a seat in the front row. A hush fell over the audience when a clutch of local politicians, including a candidate of a major political party in the upcoming elections, arrived a few minutes before the guru's entry. The crowd was joyously yammering for the guru's darshan. Anticipating his arrival, the followers broke into high-pitched singing of bhajans. Lo and behold! The sprightly guru entered the hall amid a deafening applause. Attired in an off-white wrap-around dress, he waved to the adoring crowd and reached the dais. He had not yet settled down on the couch when the politicians came up the stage and bowed to touch his feet. They huddled together and whispered something to him. They resumed their seats, visibly happy with the guru's tacit electoral blessings. The goings-on did not strike a chord with me, nor was there any palpable mystical aura about the guru. An exchange of pious platitudes between him and a posse of followers was followed by a Q&A session, during which he gave hopelessly unimpressive answers to mundane questions. By then, I had concluded that the congregation was a heady mix of piety and politics. Before it became too horrible to bear, I walked out in a huff, pitying the people who fell prey to such humbug.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AAP's moment of truth

The alleged assault on AAP MP Swati Maliwal by Bibhav Kumar, a close aide of CM Arvind Kejriwal, is a stark reminder of the pervasive gender injustice within Indian politics. Maliwal's detailed account of the incident and the distressing nature of her allegations highlight a grave issue: no party, including AAP, is immune to such scandals. The unverified videos targeting Maliwal further complicate the narrative, showcasing the ugly political tactics at play. Kejriwal's silence is deafening and undermines his past advocacy for women's rights. This case is not just about individual culpability but also a test of AAP's integrity and the broader political commitment to gender justice. A transparent investigation is imperative for restoring the public's faith in our political system.

GURDEV SINGH, BY MAIL

Modesty of woman MP

Apropos of the editorial 'Assault on Maliwal'; Bibhav Kumar, the aide of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal accused of assaulting the AAP Rajya Sabha MP, has also filed a police complaint against her, alleging that she had breached the security of the Delhi CM's residence. But it is unfortunate that the AAP national convener has failed to address the incident so far. He must break his silence now; otherwise, it would give the public the impression that he had a hand in the assault on the MP. It is not merely a political issue. It is about the modesty of a woman parliamentarian.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

A matter of gender justice

With reference to 'Assault on Maliwal'; the case is a test for political ethos on gender justice. It underlines the pathetic state of affairs in national politics. The woman MP's allegations of being slapped and kicked by Arvind Kejriwal's aide deserve the attention of the entire nation. How can a prominent woman leader—a Rajya Sabha member—be thrashed like this, and that too, at the CM's residence in the national capital? The top AAP leadership must take a serious view of the episode and address it. When will women in politics start being

treated as dignified human beings with the same rights and privileges as men? RAJ BAHADUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

Don't politicise religion

Refer to the news report 'PM Modi: Congress will bulldoze Ram Temple if elected'; it is a classic case of a politician exploiting the religious sentiments of a particular community amid the election season to yield electoral dividends. Such irresponsible utterances are beneath the dignity of any leader, let alone a sitting PM. The Congress must raise the matter with the Election Commission of India (ECI). It is now more important than ever to ensure that all political parties and leaders, including the BJP, comply with the code of conduct. No leader should be politicising a religious matter for votes.

JAGDISH CHANDER, JALANDHAR

Making all voices heard

The facility to vote from home provided by the Election Commission of India to those over the age of 85 years and the ones who are differently abled is welcome. Thanks to the initiative, my 95-year-old, ailing mother got to exercise her franchise. Whole teams of people from the district election office have been reaching out to such voters to make sure that their voices are heard. The ECI and government officials performing their duties during the peak of summer and reaching the doorsteps of elderly and specially abled people deserve kudos. This is a big win for Indian democracy.

VINAY KUMAR MALHOTRA, AMBALA CANTT

Chhetri's retirement

Football legend Sunil Chhetri has announced his decision to hang up his boots at the age of 39. Understandably, the news has left millions of his admirers across the world heartbroken. He proved himself to be an incomparable player, a leader and a sportsman par excellence. Football enthusiasts have travelled miles to watch him play in person or stayed glued to TV screens for hours, just admiring his skills. He never let them down and always lived up to their hopes. He has done the country proud.

SPS NARANG, GURUGRAM

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

External affairs add spice to Amritsar contest



KP NAYAR
STRATEGIC ANALYST

IF there are a fistful of Lok Sabha constituencies in India where election campaigns overly emphasise external affairs, Amritsar leads them. This is more pronounced in the 2024 contest — four-cornered — than in the previous two parliamentary battles from Amritsar, which this columnist has observed. Gastronomy is fundamental to the good life in Amritsar. The 2019 contest, among other things, enhanced the international culinary profile of the city, much to the delight of the Punjabi diaspora worldwide. Soon after that election, Hardeep Singh Puri, who contested unsuccessfully from this constituency, was appointed Minister of State with independent charge of Civil Aviation. He recast the in-flight menu of Air India — then a government undertaking — to include Amritsari kulcha. It turned out to be hugely popular on Air India's long-haul flights, which served full meals. Emirates, one of the most popular airlines in the world, noticed the development. Not to be left behind, this flag-car-

rier of the UAE, posthaste got its flight kitchen conceptualisers to taste Amritsari kulcha. Emirates has been far more discriminating than Air India in its choice of food and does not hesitate to copy successful experiments by other airlines, especially in its business and first-class cabins. Finding approval after quick but rigorous vetting by the airline's multinational chefs, this signature Amritsari dish was soon on the in-flight menu of the global airline headquartered in Dubai. Emirates also added Amritsari chhole to its breakfast menu. The core passenger revenue of Emirates is owed to flyers from the sub-continent, of which India is at the top. Punjabi and Malayali cuisines are potentially big draws for ethnic Indian passengers. Dishes like Amritsari kulcha have made the grade in this respect, but cuisine from Kerala, like appam or puttu, is yet to be on the dining menus of global airlines. The jewel in the crown of such internationalisation of Amritsar's foodie culture was when The Oval, among the world's most highbrow sporting venues, served Amritsari kulcha in the press box at the 2019 ODI World Cup, jointly hosted by England and Wales. The ingenious move of serving this desi preparation during the June 9 India-Australia match proved so popular that on June 27, the Old Trafford stadium in Manchester served Amritsari chhole for breakfast



PLEDGE Candidates are promising that India-Pakistan trade through the Attari-Wagah land route would be resumed. ISTOCK

during the India-West Indies match. Edgbaston, a cricket ground in Birmingham, also served Amritsari kulcha during the India-England match on June 30. The foreign policy exceptionalism of candidates of all parties who are traditionally in the fray in Amritsar would surprise — even shock — practitioners of diplomacy in New Delhi, both in Chanakypuri, the national capital's diplomatic enclave, and the South Block, seat of the Ministry of External Affairs. This election is no different. All candidates in the current election are promising that India-Pakistan trade through the Attari-Wagah land route would be resumed. This is of critical importance for farmers, small

and medium enterprises and exporters in Amritsar district. How they will do it is not clear because India's policy is that terror and bilateral talks cannot go hand in hand. Without bilateral talks, the idea of reopening the land route for trade is a pipe dream. Of the four main candidates in the contest, Taranjit Singh Sandhu, the BJP's nominee, is more practical. Without waiting for the reopening of border trade, he is looking at Dubai as a re-export destination for goods from Amritsar that are in demand in Pakistan. For many decades, Dubai has been a transit point for Indian goods like sugar and processed rubber products like truck tyres to Pakistan. It is perhaps a reflection of

Without bilateral talks, the idea of reopening the land route for trade is a pipe dream.

the globalisation of Amritsar's aspirations that two of the four candidates put up by the political parties that matter in Punjab have been non-resident Indians (NRIs). It was the same in the Lok Sabha election five years ago. MA Yusuff Ali and Mukesh Aghi are not in the electoral fray in Amritsar, but their names are often heard not only in the urban segment of this Lok Sabha constituency but also in the border village of Attari. In last year's *Forbes* list of billionaires, Ali was ranked 27th among the richest Indians. Anticipating another term of the Narendra Modi government, Ali is a regular caller on the BJP's Sandhu. Ali's Lulu Group, with an annual turnover of \$8.4 billion, according to *Forbes* magazine, has established a footprint in Punjab since 2019 in meat processing, agriculture value chains and real estate, including a mall and hypermarkets. Ali has put all his eggs in Sandhu's basket in this election because he anticipates the BJP candidate to be a bridge between Amritsar and New Delhi, irrespective of whether Sandhu wins or loses. Aghi is the President of the Washington-based US-India Strategic Partnership Forum, which is committed to promoting business relations between the two countries. Aghi, several NRIs from Amritsar and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries recently set up the Viksit Amritsar Initiative. It has raised \$100 mil-

lion for startups and human development-focused enterprises in Amritsar. Elected to the 16th Punjab Vidhan Sabha from Ajnala, near Amritsar, Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal, the incumbent Minister for NRI Affairs and AAP's Lok Sabha nominee from Amritsar, gave up his American citizenship to become into state politics. To be precise, therefore, he was a Person of Indian Origin for consular purposes, an enlargement on an ethnic Indian's NRI status. Puri and Sandhu were NRIs in the technical sense, since they lived in the US as government servants, posted to New York and Washington. Because the deepest aspirations of the people of Amritsar have an international dimension, most of Dhaliwal's speeches in the ongoing campaign are about NRI affairs. Punjab is the only state that has a legally constituted NRI Sabha registered under the Societies Act. Last year, Dhaliwal announced that the state government had decided to hold regular elections to this representative organisation of Punjabis living abroad and returnees to the state. The incumbent MP Gurjeet Singh Aujla, is the only major candidate who does not overly stress Amritsar's external aspirations. But his social connect with people is obvious at weddings, childbirths and funerals. If re-elected, he may have to change course because globalisation is set to expand in this city.

Use the power of the ballot to bail out democracy



NEERA CHANDHOKE
POLITICAL SCIENTIST

WHAT is at stake in the 2024 elections? A great deal because for the past 10 years, the spectre of autocratisation, a process that whittles away the substance of democracy while retaining the façade, has been hanging heavily over our heads. Autocrats have done away with substantive democracy. More troublingly, they have cynically provoked intense polarisation among a people who had re-learned to live together. In the process, we bear witness to the death of the spirit of democracy, ie solidarity. In the heyday of Communism, solidarity referred to fellow feeling among the working classes. Today, the sentiment is important if we want democracy to survive. Solidarity, or its cousin fraternity, is enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution. Consider the tasks that the Constitution makers had to confront. A

people who had been divided along lines of politicised religion had to accept each other as fellow citizens in a democratic political community. They had descended to the lowest level of humanity during the Partition. The makers of the Constitution tried to introduce a modicum of sanity in the charged atmosphere. They brought to the forefront the normative precepts of political theory — freedom, equality, justice and fraternity — in the Preamble. Indians who were in thrall of religion were offered an alternative: solidarity, which is important for at least two reasons. One, democracy falters if people do not care about others, about their ill health or poverty, or if a particular community is subjected to rampant injustice. Without solidarity, we become a bunch of rights-bearing, self-interested individuals. Without solidarity, we will continue to live in Hobbes' state of nature, isolated and cut off from the virtues that make us complete as human beings. Two, history shows that when people come together in shared webs of solidarity against oppression, they move the proverbial mountain. They dislodge regimes that claim to rule by divine right. They dis-



FRANCHISE: Defiance takes different forms — we have the vote, ANI

mantle powerful imperial empires. They challenge governments that abuse power merely by assembling on the streets, as they did in 1989 in Eastern Europe. In Iran, women called out patriarchy by publicly cutting off a lock of their hair. Germans brought down the Berlin Wall. In doing so, they have passionately and courageously propelled solidarity as the centrepiece of the political agenda. It is not surprising that autocrats, who are in the business of accumulating power, try to divide people. There is nothing quite as awesome in history as the spectacle of masses with-

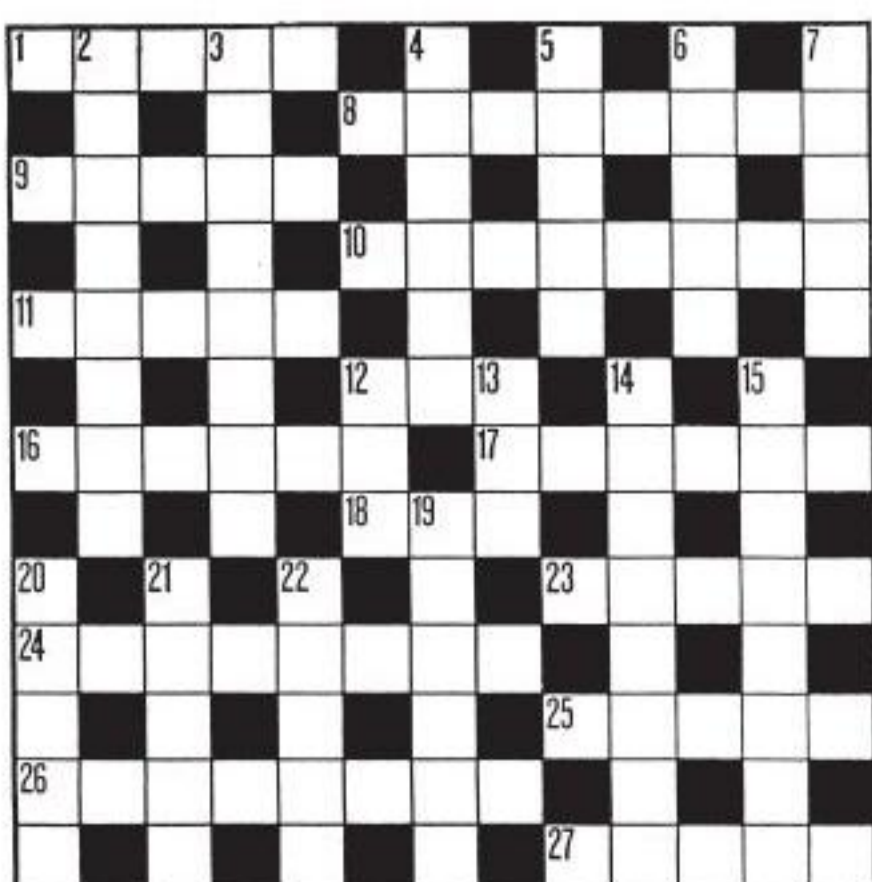
out leaders or organisations spontaneously arising to defy unjust laws. Defiance takes other forms — we have the vote. We do not need to cut off the King's head, as in the French Revolution. We need to use the vote prudently. Why is our vote significant? In 2014, a sizeable number of Indians put their trust in Narendra Modi. His charismatic personality was extensively written and spoken about. Charisma in excessive doses can, however, be hazardous for democracy's health. Consider the relentless targeting of the Muslim minority in peculiarly uncivil terms. This is accepted because the leader

is charismatic. So, our Muslim fellow citizens have neither names nor distinct biographies; neither worthwhile belief systems nor languages. The minority is just a sack of potatoes and a mash of potatoes, as Karl Marx had once remarked in a different context. Perhaps, it is easier to inflict violence on people when they have become faceless. They are simply a part of a group that has been vilified through the politics of hate. The deleterious consequences of right-wing majoritarianism are clear. Slurs that, till 10 years ago, were confined to the subconscious have been catapulted to the forefront of the political agenda and public sphere. We, the people of India, gave to ourselves a Constitution that created a democratic political community. We, the people of India, have been once again divided by cynical power politics. This is the tragedy of contemporary India: the closing in of the Indian mind through unbelievable stories of manufactured enmity. And we, passionate defenders of democracy, justice, freedom, equality and solidarity, are suffocated when the ruling class casts a pall of fear over the country and when our fellow citizens suffer. Philosopher Brahm

Prakash, author of *Body On The Barricades*, writes that at least some of us are feeling suffocated by the situation shaping Indian society. We are feeling barricaded, chained in our bodies and spaces. I am looking for words and phrases to describe the times we are living through. For me, no other words match the potential and vulnerability of 'I can't breathe'. I am looking for a figurative image that can capture this situation in body and action. The image I see is that of the body on the barricades. A caveat is in order here. Power that stifles democracy is constantly stalked by Goddess Nemesis, who punishes hubris. The 'significant other' of power is resistance. Resistance does not refute the legitimacy of the state; it rejects the idea that laws are justifiable simply because they have been enacted by the government. In the Gandhian sense, resistance is justified by the belief that ordinary human beings have the moral competence to protest against unjust laws. In solidarity, we protest, we march and we sing revolutionary songs for the sake of democracy and justice. Above all, we vote — one of the most potent weapons of resistance, provided it is used for democracy.

The tragedy of contemporary India is the closing in of the Indian mind through stories of manufactured enmity.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Temporary stop (5)
- 8 Light-hearted (8)
- 9 Ardent enthusiast (5)
- 10 Commercial dealings (8)
- 11 Wild hump-backed shaggy ox (5)
- 12 Impudence (3)
- 16 Steal (6)
- 17 Relating to sight (6)
- 18 Surpass (3)
- 23 Concur (5)
- 24 Assign (8)
- 25 Unpromising (5)
- 26 Wartime guerrilla fighter (8)
- 27 Not sleeping (5)

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Lacklustre, 6 Slit, 10 Spasm, 11 Superstar, 12 All the go, 13 Agent, 15 Outward, 17 Thunder, 19 Contend, 21 Abysmal, 22 Rabid, 24 Salutory, 27 Arbitrate, 28 Drape, 29 Nile, 30 Pretty well. **Down:** 1 Last, 2 Charlatan, 3 Limit, 4 Suspend, 5 Rapport, 7 Lathe, 8 Turn turtle, 9 Treasury, 14 For certain, 16 Anecdote, 18 Demarcate, 20 Despair, 21 Ailment, 23 Babel, 25 Today, 26 Tell.

SU DO KU

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

V. EASY

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

- MAY 20TH 2024, MONDAY**
- Shaka Samvat 1946
 - Vaishakh Shaka 30
 - Jyeshtha Pavishte 7
 - Hijari 1445
 - Shukla Paksha Tithi 12, up to 3.59 pm
 - Siddhi Yoga up to 12.10 pm
 - Chitra Nakshatra
 - Moon enters Libra sign 4.35 pm

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	44	27
New Delhi	44	28
Amritsar	44	27
Bathinda	45	27
Jalandhar	44	29
Ludhiana	45	28
Bhiani	46	30
Hisar	47	27
Sirsa	46	30
Dharamsala	36	24
Manali	28	14
Shimla	29	21
Srinagar	29	14
Jammu	42	26
Kargil	26	09
Leh	20	08
Dehradun	40	26
Mussoorie	28	18

TEMPERATURE IN °C



WORDLY WISE
NOBODY MAKES A GREATER MISTAKE THAN HE WHO
DOES NOTHING BECAUSE HE COULD DO
ONLY A LITTLE. — EDMUND BURKE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

PUTIN & XI

Delhi has reasons to worry that Putin's support for China in Indo-Pacific could undermine India's efforts in the region

THE 43RD MEETING between the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, last week in Beijing underlines the growing anti-Western convergence of strategic interests between two of the world's longest serving leaders. The expansive agenda outlined by the two leaders demands that Delhi carefully recalibrates its own great power relations and compensates wherever necessary to blunt the negative consequences of the Sino-Russian entente. Since he took charge of Russia in 2000, Putin has made a sustained effort to boost ties with China even as he explored a *modus vivendi* with the West. At the turn of the 2000s, a rising China was celebrating its special ties to the United States and Europe but found it useful to develop strong ties with Russia. Since his ascent to the top in Beijing, Xi Jinping has challenged the US primacy in Asia and doubled down on a strong partnership with Russia.

As their contradictions with the US began to deepen over the last decade, both Putin and Xi have elevated their bilateral collaboration into a comprehensive strategic partnership. On the eve of his invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Putin travelled to Beijing to proclaim an "alliance without limits". Since then, Putin and Xi have surprised the Western observers who had been arguing that Russia and China can't get too close to each other given the range of their competing regional geopolitical interests and the intensity of their stakes in economic engagement with the West. Yet, Putin and Xi have shown that they can put their divergences aside in building a new axis rooted in their shared interest in challenging the West. The latest summit has highlighted their efforts at political coordination and mutual support on their respective national priorities — Ukraine for Russia and Taiwan for China. Putin and Xi also denounced the US interventions in Europe and its effort to build new coalitions like the Quadrilateral Forum (in which India is a member along with Australia, Japan and the US), Putin and Xi also underlined their commitment to build a "multipolar world". They reaffirmed their ambition to counter American hegemony over the domain of international finance. If America has been pressing China to limit its cooperation with Russia, the usually wooden Xi thumbed his nose against Washington with a rare hug to Putin.

Delhi, like many Western chancelleries, had been betting on the thesis that Moscow and Beijing would not collaborate beyond a point. In a corollary to this thesis, Delhi has been hoping that Putin will not ignore India's concerns in drawing too close to a China that has emerged as India's principal external challenge. The time has come for Delhi to reexamine its Russia thesis and its corollary. Moscow today is more dependent than ever before on Beijing, especially since Putin burned its bridges with the West in invading Ukraine. There is no doubt that China is the senior partner in the relationship with Russia. Delhi has strong reasons to worry that Putin's support for China's positions in the Indo-Pacific, would undermine India's effort to build a 'multipolar Asia' and magnify India's security vulnerabilities in relation to China.

TWO SELF GOALS

Congress President Kharge's snub to Adhir, TMC's positioning games — INDIA bloc needs to remember the voter is watching

CONGRESS PRESIDENT MALLIKARJUN Kharge's public put-down of the West Bengal veteran of many political and electoral battles, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury — who, apart from being one of the few Congress leaders in West Bengal who still commands popular support, was leader of the Congress in the outgoing Lok Sabha — is a reminder of the party's infamous and imperious high command culture. While commenting on the relationship between Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress with the INDIA bloc, Kharge said that Chowdhury was "no one to make decisions" on the matter, which is up to the "high command". This was in response to Chowdhury saying, earlier, that Banerjee — who has chosen not to be part of INDIA in West Bengal, as a result of which the TMC is fighting alone in all the state's seats — is an "opportunistic leader" who is "hand in glove with BJP".

If Kharge's unseemly snub to a party colleague points to a Congress syndrome, Banerjee's changing positioning vis a vis the joint Opposition alliance points to an unresolved problem of the INDIA bloc in a high stakes battle against the BJP. From being a "founder member" of INDIA, the TMC all but left the alliance when it could not come to a seat-sharing arrangement in Bengal with the Congress and Left Front. Banerjee said last week that the TMC would provide "outside support" if a non-BJP government is formed at the Centre. A day later, she amended that to say that the TMC was "a part of INDIA". By all accounts, the bruising acrimony and violence that scars the ground-level competition in West Bengal, and parties' different political calculations — while the TMC is fighting to retain its dominance, it is a battle for survival for Congress and the Left — has made an Opposition alliance in the state all but impossible. But Bengal only illustrates a problem that the INDIA front faces nationally — the difficult navigation of conflicting interests internally. In the process, all too often, there is a risk of losing sight of the fact that the alliance is people-facing.

INDIA leaders should know that questions of "outside support" or joining the government only arise after June 4, if at all. For now, in the poll arena, many voters are asking: Who and what is the alternative to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the dominant BJP? The answer need not be one person, or one party. The Opposition could make the argument that it has several capable leaders. But it first needs to look less like a group-thing that is so caught up with its internal jostling that it has forgotten that an election is on — and the voters are watching.

FREEZE FRAME

EP UNNY



A story of J&K and PoK



SYED ATA HASNAIN

Reading an upswing in voting in Kashmir and protests across the LOC

IF YOU STAND back and view the contrasts emerging from the post-election scenario in Pakistan and the ongoing electoral exercise in India, it proves helpful in drawing conclusions. More so if you leave aside everything else and just focus on Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) where the first of the five phases of the general election ended a few days ago. The 38 per cent turnout of the Srinagar electorate was a definite surge from the abysmal 14.4 per cent in 2019. In 1996, it was 41 per cent, pointing to the downward spiral of terrorist and separatist violence after the initial spurt in 1989-90; in fact, the graph of foreign terrorists from Afghanistan had reached a low that year before rising sharply because of the presence of terrorists, mainly from Pakistan.

The Srinagar constituency comprises many of the known badlands of Budgam, Pulwama and Shopian where radical influence prevented electoral participation. From grenade blasts to the kidnapping of political workers, all kinds of deterrence were used to stop people from voting. This was particularly true for the parliamentary polls. In the case of assembly elections, panchayat and municipal polls, the reluctance to vote was always much lower, given its association with local issues and development. From 2008 onwards, however, it was in these very areas that stone-throwing became a popular pastime. Separatist sentiments brought hordes onto the streets to express their pushback against India. There is a sea change now, with tourism, the inflow of investment funds, rising youth aspirations and not even a single call for a "bandh". In the five years since the amendment to Article 370, a whole new chapter has begun in J&K.

Can it be sustained? Hopefully, the Srinagar narrative will play out in other constituencies, too. With Uri, Tangdhar, Machil and other areas which have traditionally been pro-India and returned figures of 70 per cent and more turnout in the past, Kashmir may well have an average 50

Hopefully, the Srinagar narrative will play out in other constituencies, too. With Uri, Tangdhar, Machil and other areas which have traditionally been pro-India and returned figures of 70 per cent and more turnout in the past, Kashmir may well have an average 50 per cent voter turnout for the first time in years. There has been no threat of violence or intimidation either. With Jammu expectedly bringing in good figures, democracy would be the winner, cementing a process begun long ago but given shape, substance, leadership and polish from August 5, 2019, onwards.

per cent voter turnout for the first time in years. There has been no threat of violence or intimidation either. With Jammu expectedly bringing in good figures, democracy would be the winner, cementing a process begun long ago but given shape, substance, leadership and polish from August 5, 2019, onwards.

Not everyone will agree with the deductions that good voting figures signal support for India. However, by not fielding its candidates in the Valley constituencies, the BJP, in many ways, has also signalled its willingness to work with some or all of the local parties, expressing a level of trust in them. The real test will, of course, be the assembly polls which could take place before the end of September. That said, I can hardly recall an incident-free parliamentary election in the Valley before this.

Poll time was one occasion when certain elements used to have a field day, targeting booths and people. The Army would invariably be chasing terrorists in south Kashmir. All these did not occur this time as the people exercised their franchise. That is the element of change, although one interpretation continues to harp on the notion that a large turnout is actually a pushback — it signifies a vote against abrogation. But this is not in keeping with local strategies exercised in the past.

There is change also occurring just across the LoC, in PoK. Economic stress can bring out the worst in a nation and Pakistan may consider itself fortunate that its weak civil society has, thus far, neither questioned the obviously rigged polls that led to the setting up of a government of convenience for the Pakistan Army, nor come out on the streets to protest the mismanagement of the national economy.

Protests in PoK that have broken out a few days ago, however, indicate a spark. As the past has shown, all "spring movements" invariably commence with a spark — recall the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010 which triggered Tunisia's

Jasmine Revolution. In PoK, the exorbitant electricity bills for a region which provides much of it to the national grid, and the skyrocketing price of wheat flour have hit the common man like never before. In a region where there are many families divided by the border, modern-day social media and communication lead to frequent information exchange. The stark difference in the quality of lives, the degree of freedom symbolised by the free and fair electoral exercise underway in J&K, opportunities due to rising figures of tourism, investments, and a quiet "feel good" factor that the people of J&K enjoy, have the potential of creating a storm in PoK, due to inevitable comparisons. The Pakistan government's relationship with PoK has always been uneasy and discriminatory. A temporary reprieve may have been achieved with some fire-fighting measures by the current government but it does not take long for a subjugated populace to erupt once it realises that a highly negative future looms for the people. The emotions are even stronger if a sunshine situation exists among the same people, separated artificially.

It may be unwise to speak of the obvious at this juncture. However, most pragmatists in India who know J&K well, have always expressed the belief that the dream of integrating J&K and PoK would eventually happen through the socio-economic route when the people of PoK themselves demand it. For the last few years, many luminaries in India have expressed a sentiment to see an integrated J&K, which includes PoK. Some years ago, I wrote that this would eventually happen but a peaceful re-integration based on the strength of India's democratic and developmental approach would obviously be the best option. Can the current electoral exercise and the assembly elections thereafter be the harbinger of the "PoK Spring"?

The writer is a former corps commander of the Srinagar-based 15 Corps

THE CURSE OF SMALLNESS

Definition of MSMEs doesn't do justice to enterprises that have the lowest revenues



KINJAL SAMPAT

THE RECENT back and forth over an order demanding timely payments to MSMEs has once again revealed the gaps in knowledge about the structure as well as the everyday functioning of these enterprises. A government order, clearly in the interest of MSMEs, has led to unforeseen repercussions, marginalising smaller enterprises in the short term. In this context, the importance of a systematic understanding of enterprises that fall within the MSME ambit cannot be overemphasised. A parliamentary panel was looking into separating the category of micro-enterprises from the larger MSME umbrella. For now, the standing committee has recommended a regular revision of the definition every five years.

In 2020, the definition of micro-enterprises was changed to include all under an annual turnover of Rs 5 crore as micro-enterprises, higher than the previous limit of Rs 50 lakh. This was meant to discourage firms from reporting lower revenues to retain the benefits and incentives extended to micro enterprises by the state. The new definition, however, masks a significant skew in the distribution.

According to the National Sample Survey Organisations (NSSO) Unorganised Enterprise Survey 2016, 95 per cent of the enterprises surveyed reported revenues under Rs 50 lakh per annum. Of them, 89 per cent reported an annual revenue of under Rs 12 lakh. In the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), more than 66 per cent of the enterprises reported an annual revenue of less than Rs 50 lakh, and of them, 45 per cent re-

ported annual revenues of Rs 12 lakh. While it is common knowledge that more than 98 per cent of the MSMEs are "micro" in size, within this category, those reporting annual revenue of Rs 50 lakh and less (Category 1) vastly outnumber those reporting annual revenue of Rs 50 lakh to Rs 5 crore (Category 2). In the enterprise survey, only 2 per cent of the firms reported their revenue to be above Rs 50 lakh per annum. In the ASI, about 30 per cent of the enterprises reported their yearly revenue as above Rs 50 lakh per annum. Even in Prowess, a dataset exclusively for those firms that publish their annual reports thereby implying a greater degree of formality, only 40 per cent of enterprises in the category of below Rs 5 crore, reported a yearly revenue of less than Rs 50 lakh in 2016. No matter which way one dissects, all three measures of central tendency — mean, median and mode — tend to cluster at the extreme right quadrant of the micro category.

Since 2016, we do not have systematic data on enterprises that are not registered under the Factories Act and thereby captured under the ASI. The Udyam registration data categorises enterprises as micro, small and medium without revealing their annual revenue. But, as per the 2022 GST data, about 63 per cent of firms belong to the category of under Rs 50 lakh, and 30 per cent of total enterprises in the micro category belong to the under Rs 10 lakh annual revenue segment. The GST data corroborates the rightward skewness.

Units falling within a category ought to be more similar rather than dissimilar when

compared to units lying outside of the said category. In 2016, as per NSSO's 73rd round, less than two in 10 enterprises in Category 1 borrowed capital for their operations, whereas twice as many enterprises falling in Category 2 operated with borrowed capital. The median borrowings of enterprises in Category 1 was about Rs 0.57 crore a year whereas the median borrowings in Category 2 were about Rs 8 crore.

The formality of the workers employed shares a direct relationship with the size of the enterprise. As the size of the revenue increases so does the number of formal workers to informal workers. Notionally, for every nine informal workers there is one formal worker in enterprises clocking annual revenues below Rs 12 lakh per annum. This ratio drops to a little under half for enterprises clocking revenue between Rs 50 lakh and Rs 1 crore. Those at the top end of the micro-enterprise category have one formal worker for every two informal workers.

The weakened understanding of how the largest category of enterprises operate in our economy makes it difficult to design effective interventions. Reviewing the category of micro-enterprises and further classifying enterprises within it is needed to reduce the opacity created by new definitions and the lack of systematic data.

The writer is senior researcher, Indian Institute of Human Settlements (IIHS), Bengaluru

MAY 20, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

20 DIE IN ARSON

TWENTY PEOPLE WERE burnt alive when a mob set fire to a house on the outskirts of Bhiwandi town as the second day of violence in Bombay and in neighbouring Thane district claimed 57 lives, taking the toll to 67. The arson, looting and killings continued unabated in Bhiwandi and other areas despite the presence of the Army and paramilitary forces. All of the arson victims had taken shelter in the building following violence in the town. The police shot dead a man at the scene of the carnage.

PUNJAB LAW & ORDER

TERRORISTS FIRED AT A police patrol and

robbed a bank in the Amritsar district, while the police claimed success in solving some cases of terrorist crime in the state. A Nihang was shot dead in Bhatinda. A relative has been arrested and a case registered. The Ferozepur police have arrested 16 persons during the last fortnight and 16 cases have been registered under the Arms Act.

ASIAD HOMES UNSOLD

THE SALE OF Asian Games Village flats may be bogged down in litigation, as the contractors who had built these flats have requested the Lt-Governor, P G Gava, to stay the sale and allotment of these flats till their pending bills were cleared. In a letter to the Lt-Governor, the DDA Builders Association

has urged for an urgent interview to put the facts before him. The association general secretary, R K Bahl, said the pending bills had not been cleared in a majority of cases on the plea of "bad quality".

THE MISSING MANGOES

THE DELICIOUS DUSSERI mangoes of Uttar Pradesh seem to be turning "sour" for both the politicians and the horticultural scientists. While the mango crop failure has become a major poll issue in the Malhabad by-election, scientists are still not sure as to what caused the loss of fruit. The unprecedented fruit drop immediately after flowering in February is being attributed to a sudden fall in temperature.

THE IDEAS PAGE

House is the key

Providing workers housing could help empower labour force and unlock the country's manufacturing ambitions



SANDEEP BEDI AND NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN

THERE IS A Hindi proverb, "Chhoti chabi bada tala khol sakti hai" (a small key can open a big lock). This may hold some lessons when it comes to big-picture thinking on a particular reform agenda that has recently captured policymakers' attention: Transforming India's manufacturing sector.

The ambitions are clear — to grow India's economy to \$10 trillion by 2035, and with it, grow manufacturing's share from 15 per cent of GDP to 25 per cent. The goal of this shift is to increase the employment elasticity of growth, which is to provide greater employment per unit of output. This implies a four-fold growth in manufacturing.

With the serendipitous opportunity offered by China post-Covid, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has not spared any effort. Everyday, we see announcements related to Production Linked Incentives (PLIs) and Make in India, particularly for focus sectors like electronics and semiconductors.

Before the country went to elections, the government had asked all ministries to prepare a 100-day plan so that it may hit the road running. States are not far behind in engaging on this, rolling out the red carpet to large-scale manufacturers like Foxconn, Micron, and Tata, and creating critical mass in specific industries like the rapidly emerging assembly and packaging industry in Sriperumbudur and the Electric Vehicle hub at Hosur. There is increasing talk of football-field-sized mega factories dotting the industrial landscape across India, the first few of which have already been established.

Amidst the fervent debates over fiscal incentives and land-related policies, there exists a narrative often overlooked. Picture this: A young factory worker, his hands calloused from years of labour, his dreams weighed down by the relentless grind of productivity quotas. This worker is not merely a cog in the machinery of industry; he personifies the essence of the third factor of production — labour. While attention is lavished upon capital and land, his plight remains shrouded in the shadows of neglect. The key to unlocking India's manufacturing prowess lies not only in setting the right policies but also in the empowerment of its workforce.

One way to enable this empowerment is through safe, on-premises or factory-adjacent workers' accommodation. This will range from housing for managers and supervisory personnel to dormitories for entry-level workers. It has the power to address other aspects related to skilling, productivity, and attrition as well.

Speaking recently to *The Economist*, Josh Foulger, a pioneer in setting up assembly and packaging plants for many multinational firms said, "Women only or women majority factories can create a virtuous cycle of both worker and women's empowerment." Recognising



CR Sasikumar

the importance of this, Apple, which manufactures its iPhones directly through Foxconn International in India, has committed in principle to putting up 78,000 units for its assembly workers.

Currently, most of India's factories are sourcing their workforce from ad hoc accommodation in cities and peripheral areas. This arrangement is fraught with challenges: Our study of select factories around Bengaluru showed that workers travel by bus for approximately two hours each way to the factory. This has a cost as well as a productivity problem — costing more than Rs 5,000 per worker per month, and leaving workers exhausted even before they begin their shift.

There are lessons to be learnt from other countries that have solved this issue, each in their own way. China is famous for its *in situ* housing for workers, including mega-factories like the Foxconn one in Guangzhou, which has dormitories for over 3,00,000 workers. Clearly, scale is important, but too big a scale may also pose some challenges like they did for China during Covid. It is critical to recognise what can work in a democracy like India and ensure that the right conditions are enabled. Korean parallels may be more suitable for us, with their stringent labour laws and worker-friendly policies.

In post-Independence India, we have examples both among public sector undertakings like Bhilai, as well as in the private sector (Tata Steel Jamshedpur) where housing and community were a central aspect to the establishment of large-scale factories. The circumstances today are different and there are more choices in the operating mechanics, but the central idea is still the same: Addressing the issue of workers' accommodation is crucial, in both a practical and moral sense, to our desire to ignite large-scale manufacturing in India.

Are there specific policy implications of adding workers' accommodation to the policy framework for manufacturing? Yes.

Amidst the fervent debates over fiscal incentives and land-related policies, there exists a narrative often overlooked. Picture this: A young factory worker, his hands calloused from years of labour, his dreams weighed down by the relentless grind of productivity quotas. This worker is not merely a cog in the machinery of industry; he personifies the essence of the third factor of production — labour. While attention is lavished upon capital and land, his plight remains shrouded in the shadows of neglect. The key to unlocking India's manufacturing prowess lies not only in setting the right policies but also in the empowerment of its workforce.

First, land allotment must extend beyond factory construction to include workers' accommodation. This will require tweaks in industrial land allocation regulation at the state level, including flexibility in the operating arrangements for this enabling infrastructure — built either by the state government, or run by the company itself, and, better still, by specialised institutions that focus on creating and/or managing workers' housing assets. This is already happening in student housing — with investors and operators having emerged over the past decade because the market opportunity and unit economics are attractive.

Second, the recognition that this is not just a state government issue. The Union government's role is to catalyse this enabling infrastructure by offering the right tax incentives like GST reduction and other fiscal incentives for investments into workers' accommodation. Priority sector tagging for the construction finance of this infrastructure, and collaborative financing through vehicles like the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) for credible projects in this space will add further impetus.

Even after these steps are taken, it will require leadership from private sector entities to establish top-notch workers' accommodation. Economic factors will steer this enlightened self-interest: Reduced transportation expenses, heightened productivity, enhanced training capabilities, mitigation in workforce attrition, and lower carbon footprint.

This triangular leadership between the Centre, state and the private sector firms can help deliver on this important agenda. The "chhoti chabi" of workers' accommodation could well be the key that unlocks the *bada tala* of India's manufacturing ambitions. It deserves to be a part of the 100-day plan for the new government.

Bedi is CEO and Ramchandran is an advisory board member of Janaadhar

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"More needs to be done to strengthen sanctions and deny Mr. Putin the resources to carry on the war. Like so many wars throughout history, this one has turned into a contest of smarts and stamina, which Ukraine and the West cannot afford to lose." — THE WASHINGTON POST

BJP's many layered appeal

After a focus on consolidating its Hindutva voter base, its campaign is addressing a new constituency



HILAL AHMED

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's comments that he does not do "Hindu-Muslim" because of his enduring commitment to the "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vishwas" policy and that he has a great faith in the true form of secularism has provoked an interesting debate. A section of political commentators has argued that these comments reflect Modi's emotional side and his caring attitude towards all sections of society, including Muslims. According to the critical view, on the other hand, the statements made by the PM in this interview are entirely contradictory to what he has said in a series of electoral speeches. This criticism draws its legitimacy from the fact that the second-level BJP leadership has been defending the Prime Minister's previous controversial remarks. They do not hesitate to describe the Opposition, especially the Congress party, as an anti-Hindu entity.

The scope of this media-driven debate on BJP's Muslim outreach should be expanded to analyse the possible electoral implications of Modi's recent statements. For that reason, the BJP's 2024 electoral campaign must be seen in its entirety: The promises made in the Sankalp Patra (manifesto), the identification of core voters and the strategic ways to mobilise them in favour of BJP candidates at the constituency level. The campaign has been organised in such a way that each facet of it continues to revolve around the figure of Modi. For instance, electoral promises given in the Sankalp Patra are described as "Modi ki Guarantee"; the identified voters are called "Modi ka Parivar"; and Modi is recognised as the chief campaigner in virtually every state.

It is worth noting here that the Sankalp Patra gives more emphasis to Modi-centric welfare and underplays the Hindutva agenda. Yet, it remains silent on the question of Muslim backwardness. Even the slogan "Sabka Saath..." is used very carefully to avoid any reference to Muslim communities. This strategic omission is interesting. For almost three years, the BJP has been actively campaigning to emphasise the plight of Pasmada Muslims. In fact, a strong impression was created that the party would use the Pasmada outreach to expand its electoral support, especially in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

The BJP establishment became over-conscious just before the first phase of the election. Instead of highlighting Modi's welfare or "guarantees", the party leadership decided to take up the Congress manifesto as a reference point. The manifesto was criticised for promoting separatism and Muslim appeasement. It was asserted that Congress will restructure the affirmative action framework to provide reservation to Muslims on religious grounds. The entire campaign of the BJP eventually became Muslim-centric. The Prime Minister's interview, in this sense, certainly goes against this style of electioneering.

The writer is associate professor, CSDS

A mob on campus

US university protests show what happens when a minority dictates the agenda



BALBIR PUNJ

ONE CAN'T AGREE with Bhaskar Chakravorti ('Don't write off campuses', IE, May 1) more, when he says "While we can legitimately worry about the state of American universities, I have confidence in their resilience."

There is little doubt that US universities, inspired by ideas of pluralism, liberty and democracy (as opposed to a Left-fascist paradigm) will soon bounce back to their former glory. The fabled institutions have survived much worse in the past, particularly after the Vietnam War in the 1960s, and eventually emerged unscathed as centres of academic excellence and free thinking. However, the last line of the article — "With a Trump return, campus protestors will have much more to protest about" — reveals the trigger responsible for the present crisis. It is this trigger that has thrown several American and European universities into chaos and ignited sporadic bushfires that continue to singe several parts of the world, including India.

Donald Trump's return to the US presidency is possible only if the American electorate approves of him and his policies. He would, of course, be perfectly within his rights to act on the mandate received. If he doesn't, he would be rightly accused of cheating his mandate. His critics and detractors too have a right to criticise or censure him, as per their understanding of the issues involved. That's what democracy is all about.

However, the problem arises when a small, organised and determined minority tries to hijack the mandate and seeks to disenfranchise the majority through strong-arm tactics. This reduces democratic processes to

a farce. For want of a better monicker, this toxic minority can be termed "wokes", an expression used by the US House of Representatives Speaker Mike Johnson in the present context.

This vocal minority usually draws heavily from the archaic leftist lexicon to build its narratives and suffers from a sense of entitlement. It takes a stand on an issue of public importance and holds a gun to the establishment's head. Its war cry is submit or perish. Its toolkit includes prolonged sit-ins, selective violence, mob action, disruption of the normal life of other citizens, intimidation and bullying — all under the guise of "peaceful protest".

In such circumstances, the state, pushed to a corner, resorts to coercion to contain the anarchic situation. The agitators then play the victim card. That's what happened in India during the anti-CAA, NRC and farmers' protests, and it is happening in the US now.

The current protests in the US and Europe were started by students against the American government's support of Israel in its war against Hamas, a dreaded terror outfit. To begin with, the ostensible demand was that colleges cut their financial ties to Israel and divest from companies that are "enabling" the deadly Gaza conflict. Soon, the pro-Palestinian demonstrations and sit-ins were reeking of anti-semitism. Scores of Jewish students have said on camera that they are feeling insecure and are afraid to enter campuses.

"We are Hamas" is reportedly a chant and placards saying "Al-Qassam's next targets" have been spotted. Al-Qassam is the armed wing of Hamas. Footage of loud threats that the October 7 attacks on Israel will be re-

peated, not once, not twice, not a hundred but ten thousand times, has gone viral.

What does the ongoing mayhem on the American university campus mean in practice? Four things.

One, shorn of hyperbole, the agitators — students and non-students — are seeking to encroach on the realm of both the elected government and universities. The mob, accountable to no one, wants to appropriate the universities' right to manage their finances. It's also seeking to hijack US foreign policy, which is essentially the domain of the US president and legislature, both democratically elected.

Two, the American establishment will likely give in to this blackmail. The National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said President Joe Biden believes students occupying an academic building is "absolutely the wrong approach," and "not an example of peaceful protest". Trump is even more harsh on the protestors. According to media reports, he said, "To every college president, I say remove the encampments immediately... vanquish the radicals and take back our campuses for all of the normal students who want a safe place from which to learn."

The ruthless crackdown on the agitators matches the American establishment's words. In less than two weeks, thousands of students have been arrested, suspended, put on probation and, in some cases, expelled from the institutions they were enrolled in.

Some of the videos (in circulation on social media) of the demonstration are graphic, revealing brutal police action against the agitating students and even senior faculty

members. Among those arrested at Washington University was presidential hopeful, Jill Stein, of the Green Party, who accused the police of resorting to aggressive tactics that provoked the sort of trouble they are meant to quell.

Three, the American establishment has double standards. When India faced similar sponsored protests against CAA, NRC and the blockade of national highways for months together in the name of "farmers protests", the US was pontificating to India on respecting dissent and democratic norms. That too when India had hardly used any force against the agitators. In contrast, the US police has used excessive force, even in dealing with many of the student groups, who were peaceful, and merely squatting on the university lawns.

Four, in the new emerging multi-polar world, wokes too are a powerful pole, capable of paralysing functioning democracies and rendering legislatures redundant. There are loaded moneybags to fund such dubious operations to refashion nations and societies as per their playbook, sans any public mandate, accountability and legitimacy.

There are serious allegations in the American media that many outsiders have infiltrated the students' protests, and the usual suspect, George Soros, at least partly funds the messy show. This scenario would surely resonate with many in India who have suffered Shaheen Bagh and months-long stand-off at the Singhu border.

Punj is the author of the recently published, *Tryst with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A SIMPLE TAX

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Ease the compliance' (IE, May 18). Revenues from GST crossed the Rs 2 lakh crore mark for the first time in April. The Finance Minister has termed last month's revenues a "landmark", attributing them to a strong economy and efficient collections. This should put to rest the Centre's concerns from a few years ago that returns from the GST regime, now 82 months old, had been underwhelming. For the next government, the easy part would be to upgrade revenue targets in the annual budget. The more critical imperative is to plan and execute the expansion of the GST net, and expedite the long-awaited reboot of its complex rate structure to make it a simple tax for consumers and investors.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

DAMAGING RHETORIC

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'PoK will be in India within 6 months of Modi as PM again: Yogi' (IE, May 19). Indian ruling party leaders who have a habit of using volatile foreign policy issues to score domestic brownie points don't realise that our nuclear-armed neighbours might take these theatrics seriously. It bears repeating that within a year of Home Minister Amit Shah's statement on

Kasai Chin in 2019, the Chinese army was making aggressive moves into the territory. We have, time and again, allowed rhetoric to subvert diplomacy.

SS Paul, Nadia

THE VOTERS' CHOICE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Please choose wisely' (IE, May 18). The article emphasises the importance of choosing the right candidate for a better future. It argues that the BJP's track record of governance in the last 10 years has been great enough to merit another term. Why then are BJP spokespersons, including the prime minister, playing the Hindu-Muslim card in their campaigns? There is evident anti-incumbency — Choose wisely, indeed.

Arun Francis, New Delhi

TO DO BETTER

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Crash in Ghatkopar' (IE, May 18). That it took the death of 18 innocents to wake up the BMC is a thing of shame. This bill-board is not an exception. Very few hoardings in Mumbai are legal. The MCD in Delhi and other civic bodies in other cities should also review bill-boards in their respective cities to make sure they are up to code.

Bal Govind, Noida