

Ratings and reforms

Fiscal position should be improved with sustained growth

In a recent interview, a senior executive of one of the big global rating agencies said the inclusion of Indian-government bonds in global bond indices would not considerably increase the government's strength to fund itself, and improving debt affordability will be a crucial criterion for an upgrade. There is considerable enthusiasm — both in the government and financial markets — about India's inclusion in global bond indices. JPMorgan has announced it will include Indian bonds in the emerging market bond index from June this year. The inclusion, according to market estimates, is expected to bring in stable foreign flows of \$25 billion. Bloomberg Index Services has also announced it will include Indian bonds in the emerging markets index from January. Meanwhile, FTSE Russell has kept India on the watchlist. Although the scale may not make a material difference at this stage, tapping foreign savings to finance the fiscal deficit will technically ease the pressure on domestic sources over time as more bonds are issued under the so-called fully accessible route. What will help improve credit ratings is the implementation of structural reforms and strong growth momentum, which will help improve the fiscal position. India must focus on these aspects anyway.

There has been a considerable debate in India on how rating agencies view it. These agencies have assigned the lowest investment-grade ratings to India, even though the country has never defaulted on its debt obligations. A collection of essays, released by the Office of Chief Economic Adviser in the Ministry of Finance, in December 2023 highlighted issues related to the methodology adopted by rating agencies and noted: "Our review of the credit rating methodologies reveals that there is considerable reliance on qualitative variables to capture 'willingness to pay'." Dependence on qualitative variables often raises questions about rating actions. For instance, as the essay highlighted, between 2020 and 2022, over 56 per cent of the countries in Africa rated by one of the three big rating agencies were downgraded. In Europe, on the other hand, it was only 9 per cent.

Rating agencies have often remained behind the curve. This was clearly witnessed during the global financial crisis and later through the European debt crisis. However, irrespective of the debate on methodology and their performance, credit ratings are extremely important in financial markets. A better rating lowers the cost of debt finance. Money managers are often mandated to hold papers of companies or sovereigns above a certain level of credit rating. However, given the size and complexity of the Indian economy, delays in potential rating upgrades should not hold it back. India has been growing at 7 per cent plus in the post-pandemic period and policy interventions should be focused on sustaining the momentum.

However, it is worth noting that economic growth has been significantly driven by the government's capital expenditure, which has led to slower fiscal consolidation after the pandemic. From the perspective of credit ratings and the cost of borrowing, in general, it is important to reduce the general government budget deficit and public debt to more manageable levels, with minimal impact on growth. The Indian economy will have to find growth drivers beyond government capital expenditure. It will thus be crucial for the next government to push forward structural reforms, which will increase business confidence and help revive private-sector investment to sustain economic growth. Rating upgrades will follow a strong fiscal position supported by sustainable growth.

No fake reviews

Review regulation for e-commerce platforms will help consumers

The pervasive issue of fake news and misinformation in the digital age has got the attention of policymakers across the world. The deluge of information in the digital format has fundamentally changed the way people consume news and information, and has made it difficult for individuals to discern between what is fake and what is authentic. At a time when the world is struggling to deal with fake news, another aspect of digitisation has come to haunt regulators and other stakeholders — the problem of fake online reviews on e-commerce websites. In this regard, the Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) is planning to enforce quality standards and regulations for consumer reviews, and making compliance with such quality norms mandatory must be welcomed. E-commerce firms that participated in the stakeholder meeting with the DCA have also voiced their support for the government's initiative.

The proposed quality control order (QCO) will likely prohibit e-commerce platforms from publishing consumer reviews online with biases and prejudices, editing reviews to alter their message, or preventing or discouraging negative review submissions. Regulations, once put in place, may also require identification and verification of the credentials of review writers. Besides, there are talks of implementing the IS 19000:2022 standard for online consumer reviews. Reviews play a crucial role in shaping consumers' online shopping behaviour. Reading other people's recommendations can be seen as the digital equivalent of testing and trying out products in physical stores. In this context, online reviews act as a substitute for knowing about the quality of products which cannot be physically inspected. By bridging information asymmetries between buyers and sellers and providing information that may not be otherwise disclosed, online reviews serve a valuable economic function. In fact, a global study shows that for websites displaying online reviews, conversion rates can increase markedly. A report by customer acquisition security vendor CHEQ suggests that online reviews influenced around \$3.8 trillion of global e-commerce spending in 2021. Additionally, with opinion sharing moving to the internet and social-media platforms, businesses and online retailers are able to monitor consumers' views about their products.

On the other side, false and sponsored reviews drive consumers towards making wrong purchase decisions, thereby distorting the market outcome. It also affects the credibility and trustworthiness of such digital platforms. Often, malicious users and bots are employed to create fake reviews to benefit a particular firm or seller. Search rank algorithms on the internet often depend on online reviews, thereby affecting product visibility and sales. This creates powerful incentives for sellers to manipulate their product rankings. In the medium term, however, such reviews often end up hurting sales and revenue figures since they usually push low-quality products. The number of complaints registered on the National Consumer Helpline regarding online fake reviews on e-commerce platforms, for instance, has seen a staggering 366 per cent increase from 2018 to 2023.

In this constant battle to detect and remove fake reviews and sustain consumer trust, it is imperative to leverage artificial intelligence (AI). By employing textual-analysis methods, AI can help identify fake reviews. Regulation must also be put in place regarding the publishing of paid reviews and demanding full disclosure of promotional content. The success of the proposed government regulations will ultimately depend on their implementation.

A twisted road to justice



BOOK REVIEW

ARUNDHUTI DASGUPTA

Twenty years and counting, the protracted battle to allow women entry into the Sabarimala temple in Kerala is no closer to a solution than it was at the start. It has turned into one of those disputes in which no intervention is too big to fail. Even a Supreme Court judgment declaring the ban on women (in the age group 10-50 years) unconstitutional has not moved the needle.

The irony is lost on none; women are being denied the right to enter a temple in Kerala, a state that has counted more women than men in

every census since 1901 and, whose female literacy rates (94 per cent) are the toast of the nation. The state has also been always seen as a progressive and liberal role model for religious freedom and social development. How does such a state accept and support openly discriminatory attitudes towards women?

Deepa Das Acevedo, author of the book and legal anthropologist by training, writes that she was drawn to the incongruity of a fight of this nature, in a state such as Kerala. The case struck a chord for the "remarkable ways in which it blends the peculiar with the familiar," and led her to write the book that brings together the numerous and diverse views and ideas that have shaped the story of women's entry into Sabarimala temple.

Ms Acevedo casts an academician's eye on the fight, which is refreshing and a far cry from the cacophonous public posturing that has passed for debate, for

years now. Readers can step away from the intransigent binaries that the issue has been cast into and get a glimpse of the complexities involved.

The battle for temple entry goes back a long way but things came to a head in 2006 when the Indian Young Lawyers Association (IYLA) filed a public interest litigation petition before the Supreme Court, challenging the Sabarimala Temple's prohibition of women from the temple premises. The petition yielded a judgment that called such a practice unconstitutional. But not even the might of the highest court in the country has helped enforce the judgment that has since been mired in review petitions and agitations.

The book examines how the political reality of the state, and the country, intersect with the religious and cultural imperatives of the temple. For instance, the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB), whose writ runs large over Sabarimala, no

matter which political party rules Kerala, has had an oversized role in the entire battle. The TDB's word has proven to be stronger than that of the courts and the political establishment.

The TDB denies women entry into the temple because their presence, they say, would defile the home of Ayyappa, who is a celibate god. When two women entered the temple, after the Supreme Court order upheld the right to equal access to a place of worship, the Board had its priests carry out elaborate cleansing rituals to restore the purity of Sabarimala.

Bias and bigotry have often been disguised as tradition, but perhaps never as blatantly. The TDB's power, Ms Acevedo writes, "derives from the special orthodoxy of Keralite *tantrists* (temple rule makers and priests), who are always Nambudiris" and who are

"not just your garden-variety Brahmin." They are feudal elites who were always seen as first among equals.

Social structures are strengthened by a legend that says that the Nambudiri family's custodianship of Ayyappa and the Sabarimala temple was granted by Parasurama, the warrior-sage incarnation

of Vishnu. An elaborate legend that talks about how an ancestor parted the oceans at the behest of Parasurama and was therefore appointed as Ayyappa's guardian sanctions the supreme power of TDB over the temple and the annual pilgrimage to Sabarimala.

It is important to note that origin myths that valorise ancestors and justify the supremacy of clans via an ancient act of courage are common across all ancient cultures. The Nordic sagas have several



THE BATTLE FOR SABARIMALA: Religion, Law and Gender in Contemporary India
Author: Deepa Das Acevedo
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Pages: 241
Price: ₹1,595

such legends, as do stories about Marduk and his priests in Mesopotamian mythology. These stories are more about the need to establish identity and mark one tribe out from another; they are not badges of lifelong racial superiority.

Mythology and legend exist in the realm of subtleties and interpretations. To read it as divine endorsement of a people or treat it as the word of law, leaches it of all substance.

The book lays bare the many different legends that have influenced the battle and also tracks the legal, political and social issues that have tied up the Sabarimala case in a million gnarly knots. It unpacks the idea of exclusion, of gender and secularism around the worship of Ayyappa and wades deep into notions of power, equality and faith. It is an important book, but if only it had been simply written and had fewer digressions (into other cases and minor points about the law) it could have had a wider reach.

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and co-founder of *The Mythology Project*

A better way to fix MGNREGS

The problems of the rural job scheme should be tackled through stricter monitoring, not by burden-sharing

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or MGNREGS appears to be under scrutiny. It may even be overhauled, if recent media reports are to be believed. MGNREGS was launched by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government after the passage of a legislative Bill in 2005 to provide for at least 100 days of work at specified wage rates for each rural household in a year.

Despite many doubts and questions that MGNREGS was subjected to over the past several years, it appears to have stood the test of time, not least because it turned out to be a major instrument for helping rural workers during the Covid years. Indeed, as the accompanying chart shows, the use of MGNREGS funds has a direct correlation with the level of economic distress in the Indian economy.

Within a couple of years of its launch, economic growth in the country dipped to 3.1 per cent in 2008-09, thanks to the global financial crisis. It was a sharp decline from the 7.7 per cent growth in 2007-08. Although gross domestic product (GDP) recovered in the following years, the impact on jobs was significant. Not surprisingly, job demand and the money spent under MGNREGS spurted.

Something similar happened during the Covid years. Even as managers of the Indian economy were battling its worst contraction, the scheme for creating rural jobs turned out to be a useful tool, with the demand for jobs under MGNREGS jumping in 2020-21. Indeed, since the launch of MGNREGS, the only years when the share of financial outlay for this scheme rose above 3 per cent of the total annual Union government expenditure, or above 0.5 per cent of GDP, were the ones when the Indian economy was struggling to deal with the impact of either the global financial crisis or the Covid pandemic.

If MGNREGS has indeed proved to be handy in times of economic distress, what could be the reasons for overhauling it? As the accompanying chart shows, the financial burden on government finances decreases with the decline in the intensity of economic distress and the consequent demand for jobs. For instance, MGNREGS accounted for only 1.9 per cent of the Centre's total expenditure in 2023-24, a level that prevailed in 2014-15 or even earlier in 2006-07, when the demand for jobs was much lower as the economy was in better shape.

And if the demand for rural jobs continues even after the crisis years, it is a signal to policymakers that not all is well with the rural economy, in particular. Thus, the demand for jobs under MGNREGS also provides an indication to policymakers if there are signs of economic distress in rural India, which plays a significant role in sustaining demand in the economy.

But it appears that MGNREGS has caused concern for the government and, therefore, prompted its review for two specific reasons. One, MGNREGS is one of those schemes where the Centre alone bears the entire cost of running it, but the work done under the scheme is monitored by the states. It is argued that if the states have a financial stake in the scheme, the quality of the work funded under MGNREGS will improve, leading to the creation of more productive and useful assets.

The second factor at play is the possibility of some states misusing the provisions of the scheme. MGNREGS is meant to be a demand-driven scheme where money should be spent on projects only when there are distressed workers seeking jobs. Existing projects that are to be implemented by the states under their own respective budgets should not be financed through MGNREGS outlays. At pre-



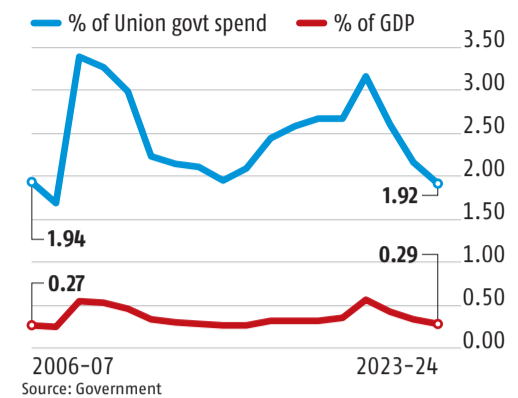
RAISINA HILL

A K BHATTACHARYA

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NREGA SPENDING PATTERN



Source: Government

sent, the lack of monitoring can result in such unintended use. Media reports note that such misuse appears to be more prevalent in states where the wages are relatively high, and these states could be diverting the scheme's outlays to fund their own welfare schemes.

There is yet another trend that could be a cause for concern. Data for the last few years shows that between 2018 and 2022, West Bengal was the largest user of funds under MGNREGS, followed by Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Karnataka. Moreover, the data for 2023-24 showed that just five southern states — Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana — accounted for over a third of the total money spent by the Centre on MGNREGS. In 2022-23 and 2023-24, West Bengal was denied funds under this scheme as per Section 27 of the MGNREG Act, 2005, due to non-compliance of directives of the Union government.

The obvious question that arises, therefore, is if the Centre has the powers to withhold funds under the scheme from a state that is non-compliant of the rules, why cannot the machinery to monitor the utilisation of MGNREGS funds be strengthened to prevent such misuse? The idea of asking the states to share a part of the costs of running MGNREGS appears to be an easy prescription without addressing the key concerns arising out of the scheme's misuse. Asking the states to share 20 or 40 per cent of the expenditure incurred under MGNREGS in their respective states would only reduce the fiscal burden on the Centre, not solve the problem of fund misuse. In any case, the law will also have to be amended if the states are made to share the cost of the scheme. MGNREGS is one of many useful short-term instruments for tackling a jobs crisis in rural India. The Centre should be focused more on fixing its implementation problems perhaps through a collaborative monitoring mechanism, instead of just reducing its fiscal burden.

Boards need to embrace AI

Boards of companies often face the imperative to embrace technological advancements to stay relevant in a rapidly evolving business environment. While some innovations, such as Cloud computing and digital transformation, are revolutionary, others like blockchain have struggled to gain traction.

Certain developments, like robotic process automation or virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR), may initially impact specific industries. Additionally, emerging technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), 5G, and quantum computing have the potential to reshape the competitive landscape in future, suggesting that the board keep an eye open for developments in this space.

Furthermore, developments in cybersecurity and privacy laws demand the board's attention to mitigate risks and ensure compliance. Currently, the spotlight is on artificial intelligence (AI), which presents both opportunities and challenges that boards must address to navigate the shifting technological landscape effectively.

AI stands out as a transformative force, capable of reshaping entire industries and business models. As boards of companies grapple with the imperative to embrace AI, it's evident that their oversight must evolve to keep pace with this explosive growth.

While true artificial intelligence — a machine's ability to perform cognitive tasks akin to human intelligence — remains a distant goal, contemporary AI encompasses machine learning-powered technologies like ChatGPT, computer vision, and self-correcting algorithms. In this article, "AI" is used as shorthand for current technologies that enable machines to execute tasks traditionally carried out by humans.

The journey towards effective oversight begins with education. Board members must cultivate a foundational understanding of AI concepts, capabilities, and limitations. This can be achieved through

various means, including engaging external expertise, or leveraging internal resources within the management team. Equally important is staying informed about the legal and regulatory landscape surrounding AI. India currently does not have specific codified laws or regulations that specifically regulate the use of AI, but is looking at balancing innovation and risk. There are a few discussion papers that outline the context, including at least three approach papers published by the NITI Aayog, and another by seven expert groups from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY). A few others, including the EU regulations, will also help boards navigate the evolving standards.

However, familiarity alone is insufficient. Boards must translate their understanding of AI into actionable strategies within their organisations. This involves fostering collaboration among cross-functional teams comprising business, legal, and technology experts. These teams play a crucial role in developing a preliminary framework for AI implementation, identifying areas where AI can enhance business processes and improve efficiency, while also assessing associated risks and monitoring industry trends.

Building a robust AI infrastructure requires more than just technological prowess; it demands a foundation of high-quality data. David Edelman and Vivek Sharma highlight this in their *Harvard Business Review* article. They write, "All AI models are based on data, your proprietary first-party data, especially about customers and their behaviours, is pure gold." And that "the more you interact with and capture information about your customers, likely by integrating data about them from across the enterprise, and creating new data as you test innovations, the richer your AI models will be."

The journey towards AI integration is iterative, and progress must be monitored closely. Quarterly reviews conducted by the board serve as checkpoints, allowing for the assessment of AI initiatives'

efficacy and alignment with strategic objectives. These reviews provide opportunities for course correction, ensuring that AI remains a value-adding proposition for the organisation.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist. One notable concern is the widening gap between AI's rapid advancement and boards' capacity to oversee it effectively. While in an earlier column for this newspaper, I have argued that AI may not replace corporate boards, its transformative potential necessitates proactive engagement from board members.

A 2023 McKinsey global survey highlighted the year as AI's breakout year, and noted that less than a year after many of these tools debuted, one-third of respondents reported regular use of generative AI tools in at least one business function. A recent *Financial Times* article puts this number at 75 per cent. The study noted that AI is already on the boards' agendas for over a quarter of companies. Further, 40 per cent of respondents said their organisations will increase their investment in AI overall.

This trend underscores the need for boards to recognise AI's potential to disrupt traditional business models and industries, implying they need to proactively adapt to AI-driven transformations within their respective sectors.

In navigating this landscape, boards must not only focus on the technological aspects of AI but also consider its ethical implications. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into business operations, questions surrounding fairness, accountability, and transparency loom large. Boards have a responsibility to ensure that AI initiatives adhere to ethical standards and uphold the organisation's values.

AI represents a watershed moment for corporations and demands a recalibration of boards' oversight functions. By prioritising education, collaboration, regulatory compliance, data management, and continuous evaluation, boards can navigate the complexities of AI integration effectively. Moreover, by embracing AI comprehensively and ethically, boards can position their organisations for sustained success in an increasingly AI-driven world.

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Ghar Wapsi, a Start Up the Right Path

India's regulatory regime has also helped

'Reverse flips' by Indian startups such as Pine Labs underscore welcome structural shifts in the ecosystem. Startups incorporated in India choose to transfer ownership to holding companies in the US or Singapore because it's easier to do business there, to benefit from tax arbitrage and to gain greater access to capital. The decision to flip, or reverse flip, is shaped by outbound and inbound investment rules, apart from tax implications. Principally, though, the overriding concern for a startup remains its valuation before and after listing. This is the key reason late-stage Indian startups, too small to generate institutional investor interest abroad, choose to return home. Even if that means forgoing tax benefits on accumulated losses and vesting periods for sweat equity.

India's regulatory regime has also facilitated shifts in both directions. Outbound investments were made easier by regulators clarifying what constitutes bona fide business when a startup intends to relocate abroad.

Inbound investments also face more clarity over transfer of assets, apart from overall lower sectoral restrictions on foreign investments. India's offshore investment hub in Gujarat allows companies to relocate with a greater degree of certainty over treatment of beneficial ownership than provided through treaty benefits. With progressive harmonisation of playing rules in GIFT IFSC and other offshore jurisdictions, the reverse flip may become easier to accomplish.

The pull of Indian investors' appetite for startups was established in fancy listing valuations of a clutch of unicorns a couple of years ago that didn't sustain in the secondary market. Regulators have since increased their vigil on VC valuation methodologies. The tax structure for early-stage startups is designed to encourage fair valuation. With guard rails in place, regulators derive greater comfort in exposing retail investors to the startup ecosystem. PE, too, finds an easier exit with India's strong investor investment and is instrumental in guiding the domicile decision. All of which should add momentum to the trend of reverse flips.

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Missing On Our Roads: Real Red Lights

By any metrics, being on the road in India is a dangerous activity. Deplorable levels of abiding by road rules and idiosyncratic policing have led to such a state of things being normalised. In Delhi alone, 518 people have died in 511 accidents already this year. Along with speeding, driving under the influence (DUI) and 'wrong-side driving', primary causes of road accidents are plain bad driving and anarchic pedestrian behaviour and conditions. The latest 'accident' in Pune involving a reportedly inebriated 17-year-old in a sports car killing two people on a motorbike is yet another addition to this sad, bad and dangerous roster.

Much blame should land at the door of authorities. Maharashtra deputy CM has rightly condemned the Juvenile Justice Board for letting off the guilty with not much of a rap on the knuckles. The minor's 'punishment' was writing a 300-word essay on accidents, working with traffic police for 15 days and undergoing counselling for his drinking. If that serves as a deterrent against driving without a licence and DUI, best of luck to Indian road safety.

But the daisy chain of culpability is long. On paper (read: Motor Vehicles Act), underage driving — one can be eligible for a car licence if one is 18 or above — can result in imprisonment, and the guilty person's parents being fined up to ₹25,000. In practice, some guilty parties get to write a mea culpa essay. Serving liquor to minors has its own set of non-implementation of law. A lax society leads to two things: one, unsafe anarchy to be the nation's default state; and, two, a two-tiered law-and-order system where the well-connected guilty can get away, while the 'regular' guilty serve the purpose of the law enforcement appearing shipshape. Not the ideal recipe for becoming viksit.



JUST IN JEST

Will someone please tell the good citizens to go easy on the 'I've voted' displays?

Voters, Enough of Showing the Finger

At one level, everyone showing the finger is cute. At another, it's truly maha-eyeroll-worthy. Sure, you've voted, and you want everyone to know you voted. If you're not someone famous or worthy, then you can even post your own 'press photo' showing you flipping the bird, marked with the sacred blue dye on social media and wait till the 'likes' come home. But seriously? Showing your index inked finger with a beaming smile as if you've saved democracy from the clutches of impending dictatorship — and from the insidiously-suspicious-of-the-non-West Western media? Puh-lease.

Come voting day, all social feeds feed this frenzy. There are just variations of that one pose: a democratic smile, a 'I have decided the future of the nation' finger pointing to the sky, with the caption or its variants, 'Been there, done that' — with the unsaid line: now, mere saat khone maaf. Enough of this finger-wagging, peeps. Which doesn't mean that we're suggesting that voters should get all coy after voting. Why can't you, upright citizens at least for a day, be a little more imaginative? Get some nail paint done on those cuticles while you're at it — 'it' being your date with the EVM. Mehendi your hands. Wear branded gloves snipped at the fingers. Just not the same old, same old blue dye day faux-Cannes parade of your phalange, please.

SWAMISPEAK The paradox of foreign investors neglecting India's booming stock markets

Why FIIs Are Taking Flight



Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

India is the fastest-growing major economy in the world, a locomotive of the global economy pulling along other countries, including rich ones. Its GDP growth has averaged more than 8% in the first three quarters of 2023-24. Morgan Stanley and other investment houses have declared that India is one of the best places for investors in emerging markets. So, billions of dollars should be flowing into our stock markets, right?

Well, it's not happening. If we take 2022, 2023 and 2024 to date, the net inflow has been very low, close to zero. An outflow in 2022 was followed by an inflow in 2023. But 2024 has seen a net outflow, largely on account of an exodus of \$3.5 bn in May (partly caused by rumours of poor BJP performance in the general election). The markets are volatile, with some months seeing big inflows and others big outflows. But, on balance, astonishingly little has come in even as India's stature has improved.

Why? Paradoxically, the main reason has been India's resilience in the face of Covid, the Ukraine war and El Niño. These three factors have laid low many developing countries. India's three neighbours — Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka — have all gone to the IMF for rescues. But India is solid as a rock.

Historically, Indian markets have been very sensitive to foreign inflows and outflows. Once, FIIs were said to own half the entire floating shares in the market. When they exited in the Asian financial crisis of 1997-99, Indian markets were pulverised. The same happened after the dotcom bust and 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. The only reason FIIs didn't exit en masse was that there were no Indian buyers.

The trend has now reversed completely. Indian stock markets are being driven by massive domestic inflows, not foreign inflows. This was most vividly demonstrated during Covid, when FIIs exited en masse but domestic investors came to the rescue. The Indian middle



Beam 'em up, Scotty

The Russian market has crashed. China has been hit by overcapacity, a real estate bubble and Western sanctions. (Joe Biden has just raised import duty on Chinese EVs to 100%.) These have tarnished China's future prospects, even if their initial impact is limited. Stock markets in Hong Kong and Shanghai have plummeted in the last year, even as India's have broken records.

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class has fallen in love with systematic investment plans (SIPs), in which they have a certain fixed sum deducted from their salary every month and invested in a mutual fund. Amateurs generally perform badly in stock markets. They tend to panic and sell when markets crash, and buy when markets are bloated and about to burst. Experts have long counselled them not to try to time the market. The best way is to systematically invest a fixed sum or proportion of salary every month — this applies to the self-employed as well as the salaried — into an MF and leave the choice of portfolio to a professional fund manager. This strategy has proved very successful in the last decade, and has become increasingly popular.

Currently, India has nearly 90 mn SIP accounts, an amazingly high number in a country with 300 mn households. In addition, markets are getting steady

flows from insurance companies. Indian insurance is growing from a very low base and has huge expansion potential. The National Pension System invests 50-75% of its inflow into equities. All these factors keep domestic inflows steady even in stormy conditions.

You might think these are excellent reasons for FIIs to cascade into India. But they are bemused that domestic investors have pushed Indian stock markets so high as to look extremely expensive compared with other emerging stock markets.

One of the biggest MF managers told me three months ago that Indian markets were eight times more expensive than Russia's, three times more expensive than China's, and 2.5 times more expensive than Brazil's or South Africa's. I'm not sure what criteria he was using for these comparisons, but one thing is clear — India is king of the BRICS in stock market valuations right now.

But precisely because Indian markets are so expensive, FIIs think it wiser to pull out of India and diversify into cheaper emerging markets. This has given China a much-needed boost recently.

Twenty years ago, Indian markets crashed when FIIs exited. This meant FIIs could not exit beyond a point without paying a heavy penalty. But, today, market resilience provided by domestic investors means FIIs can exit without paying a steep penalty, and many are doing so. Foreign shareholding in HDFC Bank and ICICI Bank was once close to the RBI limit of 74%. But it's down today to 47% and 44% respectively.

It is good for Indian investors to control stock markets rather than foreigners. It's good in the long run for foreign investors too, although they find the market expensive in the short run. India has become a relatively safe haven among emerging markets in stormy times. And that is a feat.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Building a New Society

A K MERCHANT

The historic declaration made by the Prophet-Herald, known as the Báb, marks a new era. For members of the Bahá'í Faith, this new age, the age of fulfilment of prophecies in the sacred scriptures, began when Báb addressed the 'peoples of the West', bidding them to 'issue forth' from their 'cities' to 'aid God and become as brethren' in his 'one and indivisible religion'. This process was taken forward by Baha'u'llah, the founder, when he proclaimed to the emperors, rulers and generality of humankind to resolve their differences, establish peace and rule with justice and equity.

The confusion and chaos currently prevailing on Earth, with all its myriad complexities and divisive tendencies, threaten the collapse of not only the civilisation as we know it but the entire sphere of the planet. Most countries need a supporting culture for collective awakening today.

The pathway towards mutual tolerance and sustainability will be one of empowerment, collaboration and continual processes of questioning, learning and action. It will be shaped by the experiences of women, men, youth and children, governors and the governed, as each can play their rightful role in constructing a new society.

Bahá'í Faith was established on May 23



PEAS IN A PODCAST

Bougainville Ahoy!

The world may have many frequent flyer miles-collecting jet-setters, but how many of you will ever get lucky enough to visit Bougainville, largest of the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, that's part of Papua New Guinea (PNG)? Fret not — for there's '80 Days: An Exploration Podcast' hosted by three self-described Ireland- and Britain-based history and geography nerds.

While the podcasters were inspired by Jules Verne's 1872 bestseller, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, they take a more leisurely approach, exploring one place at a time. In

the Feb 2022 episode, *Bougainville*, we get the lowdown on the most remote of PNG's 19 provinces.

Inhabited by humans for at least 29,000 years, Europeans got to know about Bougainville in 1616 and named it after Louis Antoine de Bougainville, an early circumnavigator — yes, after whom the flowers plant gets its name. After being 'passed around' from Germany to Australia during WWI, to Japan in 1942, following a failed bid for self-determination, Bougainville became an autonomous region of PNG in 1976. Despite a 2019 referendum for independence, it remains part of PNG.

And don't forget the podcast's footnotes where we can pursue deeper into things like Francis Ona's attempt to be Bougainville's king, bamboo bands music and even a lesson in Tok Pisin, the creole language most spoken in PNG. To the South Pacific, then!

Chat Room

Kissa Sarkari Kursi Ka

Apropos 'No Quota, Reform Salary' by Manish Sabharwal and Kartik Narayan (May 21), the writers make a valid point about lakhs of applicants for a few government jobs that pay too much at the bottom. However, more pertinent aspects that make government jobs more lucrative are job security, lack of accountability and a possible opportunity to make a quick buck. Significant checks and balances need to be put in place to bring accountability in government employees to the fore and put an end to the iron-clad job security by bringing this on a par with the private sector where job security is an offshoot of performance.

SAMARTH S RAJNAYAK
New Delhi

Fund Pool, More AIFs Than Buts



Siddharth Shah & Deep Shah

The year is 2015 and the budget speech has just concluded. There is jubilation on Dalal Street. The Indian investment funds industry has been revolutionised through a series of groundbreaking policy measures like the granting of tax pass-through status for PE and VC funds, SEBI's release of the Alternative Investment Policy Advisory Committee report, and permitting foreign investments in alternative investment funds (AIFs) through the automatic route. The message was to create a robust PE-VC industry onshore to fund Indian companies.

Nearly a decade later, while the message has remained consistent, there is uncertainty among regulators that may impact the progress made since 2015. Last December, RBI issued a circular placing an effective ban on lenders from investing in AIFs, with the purported intent of preventing overgreening of their loans. A subsequent SEBI consultation paper

echoed RBI's apprehensions on AIFs facilitating loan overgreening and circumventing financial regulations. Clearly, a concerted strategy was being adopted by RBI and SEBI to address concerns.

This sentiment has persisted, with RBI recently recommending subjecting investments, by AIFs receiving a majority of their capital from offshore LPs, to FDI regulations, as recorded in SEBI's recent board memorandum. Moreover, SEBI has imposed stringent due diligence obligations on AIF investment managers to prevent regulatory circumvention.

Admittedly, some regulatory concern may not be unfounded. But when such misgivings give rise to clearing every weed taking precedence over growth and nourishment of the larger crop, unintended consequences tend to follow. This may be time to refocus attention on the larger picture at play for the industry.

In 2015, when investment in AIFs was made permissible under the automatic route, rules on indirect foreign investment were also recalibrated. Downstream investments by companies were categori-

sed based on the origin of invested capital. However, for AIFs, emphasis was placed on control over deployment of the capital, rather than the capital origin, indicating a nuanced regulatory approach to foreign investments under the extant framework.

So, could regulators not have specifically tackled abuses by errant players within the extant framework, rather than initiating another set of regulatory changes for the industry at large?

While industry should align with regulators in mitigating any abuse of AIFs that may circumvent FDI norms, it warrants consideration whether the proposed move away from the existing test (based on control of the manager/sponsor) towards examination of the source of capital is the correct approach, and its implications for the industry at large.

The purpose of the regime back then was to encourage free inflow of offshore capital into long-

term investments in India through AIFs. This may be adversely impacted by implementation of the proposed amendment, which would force managers to

curtail foreign capital to under 50% of the fund size to safeguard domestic investors' interests.

This, in turn, may foster an unfavourable climate, as despite deepening sources of domestic capital, foreign capital continues to be a key driver of investment and growth. Moreover, some recent policy changes by sectoral regulators seem to have applied brakes on the flow of domestic institutional capital into AIFs.

The earlier regime was also driven by the objective of onshoring management of funds. The simplicity and flexibility of the current regime encourage AIF managers to manage combined pools of domestic and foreign capital onshore. Consequently, the recommended changes are likely to cause global LPs and fund managers to consider managing the offshore pool from offshore.

This could trigger another wave of 'brain drain' if fund structures start migrating abroad. Any conflicts between industry and regulators may lead to an unfavourable outcome. This could also be a wake-up call to weed out practices that may have pushed regulators this far. Regulators should also recognise that in India's dynamic and expanding market, a targeted approach may yield better results than a broad one.

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Of More Import Than Just a Port



Seema Sirohi

Connectivity is key to meeting, and potentially beating, the competition in a contested world. Countries are doing what they must to create new corridors for commerce. The 10-year agreement between India and Iran on the Chabahar port is a good example of a regional strategy that meets geopolitical needs.

But less than a week after the deal was signed, Iran's president Ebrahim Raisi and foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian were killed in a helicopter crash. Both were key supporters and had pushed the process. While Iran's domestic politics will churn for some time, interim leaders — Mohammad Mokhber as acting president and Ali Bagheri Kani as acting foreign minister — are familiar with India. Mokhber is a special envoy for India, and Bagheri, as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, has been a familiar figure in New Delhi.

If seen without ideological baggage, the development of Chabahar on Iran's coast as a trading hub is a net positive not only for India and Iran but also for Afghanistan and landlocked Central Asian countries. More trade means more stability as governments deve-

lop stakes, and Chabahar — meaning 'four springs' in Farsi — lives up to its name.

The big question is if the deal triggers any part of the sprawling US Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act, as a spokesman hinted last week. When asked to clarify, a State Department spokesperson emailed me: 'We cannot speak to the potential impact of US sanctions on a deal that has just been made public. We are in the process of learning more about the announced agreement, which will inform our ongoing implementation of US sanctions laws.'

In other words, the US administration is assessing the deal and may or may not take a decision soon. Meanwhile, sanctions on Iran 'remain in

place and we continue to enforce them', and those considering business deals should be aware of the potential risk.

Last month, the US Treasury Department sanctioned three Indian companies for 'facilitating and financing the clandestine sale' of Iranian UAVs. While the Chabahar deal is not a military project, and received a US exemption in 2018 when Donald Trump was president, it's not clear whether Joe Biden will take the same view.

The sword will hang over Chabahar as Indian diplomacy gets into gear to convince Washington of the project's strategic importance. S Jaishankar said last week that it's a 'question of communicating, convincing and getting people to understand...'. Thus far, the Biden administration has shown noticeable flexibility vis-à-vis India, even when New Delhi's positions have caused political difficulties for the White House. India's mostly neutral stand on the Ukraine war has been a challenge.

Chabahar's strategic importance for India is obvious:

▶ The port overrules Pakistan's geographic veto, which Islamabad has deployed to abandon to deny India access to Afghanistan and beyond.

▶ If Chabahar becomes a hub as envisaged, it would be a counter to China's ambitions in the region, especially its 'string of pearls' strategy to encircle India with a network of dual-use ports. China's pearl-in-chief — Pakistan's



Rising trade lifts all boats

Opinion

WEDNESDAY, MAY 22, 2024



TECH GROWTH

MoS for electronics & IT Rajeev Chandrasekhar

I can certainly today tell with confidence, that we are at a point in the history of our nation that has never been like this ever before. This is certainly the most exciting time for anybody in tech, anybody who is even a remote stakeholder

Injecting panic

Covid-19 vaccines far outweighed the risks, so far-mongering must be avoided

A YEAR AFTER it was officially declared that the Covid-19 global health emergency is over, the ghost of the pandemic continues to linger. Except that it isn't any strain of the virus but fears over the side effects of vaccines that are spooking many. Anglo-Swedish drugmaker AstraZeneca recently withdrew its vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India, after citing low demand and availability of updated vaccines that target new variants of the virus. This was after the company, which was facing a class action lawsuit in the UK, admitted that the drug could cause extremely rare but life-threatening side effects of blood clotting and low platelet count. The news sparked concerns, including in India where the drug, branded as Covishield, was administered to a majority of the population.

Now, a study by researchers at Banaras Hindu University has said that nearly one-third of surveyed individuals who were administered Covaxin reported long-term adverse events of special interest. Bharat Biotech, the manufacturer of the indigenously developed vaccine, has pointed out lapses and the Indian Council of Medical Research has distanced itself from the study, calling it "poorly designed".

Given their potential implications to public health, the fears triggered by these episodes are understandable. They also provide grist to the mill of anti-vaxxers and naysayers. A wiser option is to pay heed to the evidence. A 2021 paper in *The Lancet* — based on a study in April-May that year when the delta variant of the virus ravaged India with lakhs of fresh cases daily — found that Covishield remained effective against moderate-to-severe Covid-19. The risk of the serious side effect that AstraZeneca admitted to — thrombosis with thrombocytopenia or TTS — is as rare as two to three individuals per 100,000 who are vaccinated. A *Lancet* study also reported an efficacy rate of 77.8% for Covaxin in fighting the coronavirus; during the vaccine's phase III trial, 12% of over 24,000 participants reported common side effects with 0.5% citing severe side effects. Researchers as well as the World Health Organization (WHO) flagged Covishield's potential link with TTS soon after it began administering the drug in 2021. But at the same time, estimates suggested that the vaccine saved over six million lives in 2021 alone.

The most important takeaway is that the benefits far outweighed the risks associated with vaccines as the world tried to contain the threat posed by Covid-19. In an interview to *The Indian Express*, Soumya Swaminathan, former chief scientist at WHO, pointed out that those who have contracted Covid-19 are at a higher risk of suffering health conditions linked to the brain, respiratory, or nervous systems. According to her, "clotting due to Covid is perhaps 100 times more than clotting caused by a vaccine". Vaccines are a revolutionary contribution of modern medicine that has helped bring down child mortality and prevent lasting disabilities. Their pace of development, too, has grown dramatically. Public anxiety over Covid vaccines persists because of the speed with which they were introduced — barely a year, as opposed to years or even decades. The Covid drugs were a result of factors such as global urgency owing to the scale of the crisis, benefits from past research on tackling infectious diseases, and a drastic pruning of time spent on regulatory approval. All stakeholders, be it researchers or the media, should recognise these realities and not engage in fear-mongering which benefits no one.

Iran's President Raisi was a failure

ALL IRANIAN PRESIDENTS since the early 1980s have in essence been expressions of what the supreme leader thought he needed at the time. Ebrahim Raisi was not only a protégé of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, but also closer in his purist religious and political views. So it matters that at home — where the future of the regime will ultimately be determined — the man chosen to restore faith in and obedience to the Islamic Revolution failed.

Raisi came to power in 2021, claiming that Iran didn't need a by-then-defunct nuclear deal with the West and could prosper by facing its "resistance economy" squarely to the east. He also quickly imposed a crackdown on female dress codes, in a turn to a past where his revolutionary credentials — as "the Butcher of Tehran", responsible for mass executions of regime opponents in 1988 — were impeccable.

By the time of his death in a helicopter crash on Sunday, however, both policies had proved disastrous. There were fireworks in the streets of Tehran, as some celebrated an unloved president's demise. One of his earliest decisions was to order a crackdown ostensibly to ensure female modesty and chastity. That resulted in the death, just weeks later, of 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini, an ethnic Kurd arrested for not wearing her hijab in the dictated manner. The protests that followed were the largest in the history of the Islamic Republic, posing the greatest domestic threat to the regime's survival since the revolution.

Raisi did no better on the economy. Despite a significant rise in oil exports as the US eased sanctions enforcement and a large boost to government spending, the International Monetary Fund projects Iran's economy to grow by 3.3% this year. That may sound healthy enough, but it's a poor outcome that signifies declining living standards, given the high pace of inflation. According to Iran's central bank, consumer prices rose 42.7% year-over-year in the first quarter of 2023, the latest data it reports.

Yet totalitarian regimes don't need their populations to be content, so long as they have security forces willing to kill to suppress dissent. At the same time, Russia's setbacks in Ukraine and US troubles in the Middle East have shuffled the global order in Iran's favour. As Russia, cut off from the West, seeks new markets and sources of arms to sustain its war, Iran has stepped forward, solidifying its position in an emerging coalition of autocracies that includes China, Russia and North Korea.

I recently heard this bloc dismissed as an "alliance of jerks", but I think that's both arrogant and misleading. The coalition has broken Iran's international isolation and has considerable appeal in the so-called global south. China's presence also ensures the prospect of economic and technological sustainability for its pariah partners. Add to that the sea change in international opinion that's being caused by Israeli actions in Gaza and you have an Iranian regime that's infused with new confidence.

Even so, the reliance of Khamenei and his idea of Iran's destiny on security forces at home and abroad has increased the power of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps over the last decade, whose businesses have stepped into the sanctions void created as Western companies have withdrawn.

Khamenei has already confirmed Mokhber's constitutionally mandated move to the post of interim president, ahead of a snap election that should be held within 50 days. That by no means makes him frontrunner or perhaps even a candidate for the presidency, but Raisi's death has opened new possibilities on succession to the only job that really matters, that of supreme leader.

The coming presidential vote will again have no value as an exercise in popular choice, but it will be important to the regime factions already jostling for the succession. It's hard not to conclude that Raisi's death, after such an unsuccessful experiment in ideological purity, will have weakened his camp and strengthened that of the IRGC. They, too, are deeply loyal to Khamenei, and their rise would likely promise an equally aggressive regime, albeit one that's a little less prone to self-harm at home.



MARC CHAMPION
Bloomberg

THERE HAS BEEN a huge backlash against "Crush", the ad Apple put out earlier this month, to promote its ultra-thin iPads. In the ad, a hydraulic press squashes a piano, a trumpet, books, paint cans — symbolising all tools of human art and creativity — and then reveals the new iPad Pro. The ad hit a raw nerve almost immediately, forcing Apple to apologise. Samsung smelt an opportunity in Apple's embarrassment and aired a new ad called "UnCrush," which showcases a person playing a broken guitar on a paint-covered industrial press, using a Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 to read sheet music.

The result: two of the world's biggest corporate giants were crushing or uncrushing human creativity to market their products. That's no way of instilling confidence in tech giants, amidst the widespread anxiety about AI having the potential to replace humans. Though the point of its ad was to show off that the new iPad can pack a lot of apps into a small package, the message Apple gave out was, "We are going to crush you and your careers and we are going to make billions of dollars off it."

There is no doubt that Apple will be able to weather the crisis because of the reservoir of goodwill among its consumers over the years — Brand Finance named it as the world's most valuable brand, with its brand value growth increasing by 74% to \$517 billion.

But Crush raises a serious question: Why do some of the most iconic companies make such mistakes in their brand communication that chips away at their reputation? The reasons can be many — taking the audience for granted, failure of adequate research, a temporary creativity block, etc. But the biggest reason is that in their urge to do something different, companies forget to figure out who

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their audience is and what they want.

As a result, sometimes good intentions go horribly wrong. For example, one Pepsi ad featured Kendall Jenner ending a heavily policed demonstration by approaching an officer and handing him a can of Pepsi. Pepsi was trying to "project a global message of unity, peace and understanding". However, the ad received backlash and accusations that the brand was trivialising protests — in this case, the Black Lives Matter movement. The video was removed 24 hours later.

Just like Pepsi trivialised social justice movements, Hyundai trivialised the heartbreak and devastation of suicide. To promote the release of their new vehicle, the ix35 crossover, the ad depicted a failed suicide attempt in a garage thanks to the vehicle failing to produce enough harmful emissions. The offensive film quickly became viral and the backlash followed. Hyundai apologised and removed the ad.

Another such misdirected ad came from Ford. The advertisement for the Fido hatchback promoted the trunk's space by fitting three women inside. Ford failed to see the issues with having three women tied up in distress being driven off. Ford was forced to issue an apology.

Then look at this Heineken campaign

that raised debate worldwide for being "terribly racist". The ad showed a bartender sliding a bottle of Heineken Light along the bar, passing numerous people of colour, before arriving at a woman with lighter skin. "Sometimes lighter is better" appears, and the ad ends there. As you can imagine, the ad was as well received as a dog at a pedigree cat show.

Some resorted to plain deception. An example of such a campaign was the case of Poonam Pandey faking her death due to cervical cancer. This tactic aimed to shock people into paying attention to the issue. The campaign received widespread criticism for being deceptive, offensive, and potentially causing emotional distress. Many felt it trivialised the seriousness of death and disrespected those affected by cancer. The campaign ultimately did not achieve its goal of raising awareness. Instead, it sparked negativity.

Many defend such shocking advertisements (shockvertisements as they are known) by stating that grabbing the attention of consumers is becoming increasingly difficult, so brands want to push boundaries to stand out. One advertiser said, "We live in a world littered with advertising, but much of it is ineffective. How many billboards do

Creating controversial ads can be a fine line between an ad that gets people talking and one that consigns your brand to the bin of shame

A chink in Indian payment armour



JAIJIT BHATTACHARYA

Founder and president, C-DEP

Duopolies controlling our payment systems and the dependence on foreign-owned platforms raise questions about India's digital sovereignty

IN FEBRUARY 2024, a report submitted by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology highlighted apprehensions about the prevalence of fintech applications owned by foreign entities within the Indian ecosystem. It underscored the need to prioritise the promotion of local players to address these concerns effectively.

According to the report, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) held a dominant 73.5% share of total digital payments by volume in FY23. Unlike credit or debit card transactions, many Indian banks facilitate UPI payments at a very low or zero cost. These features have made the UPI model exportable to various countries, with an increase in its demand post-India's G20 presidency and the push for digital public infrastructure.

Unfortunately, as is now being widely recognised, India is slipping back into a scenario where the last mile of the UPI system is dominated by two payment tech players that are owned by US companies.

This trend has become even more pronounced over the past year. Between April 2023 and April 2024, PhonePe's market share increased from 47% to 49%, while Google Pay saw a rise from 35% to 38%. Paytm, on the other hand, experienced a significant decline in its market share, dropping from 13.3% to 8.4%. Rather than benefitting smaller competitors, Paytm's decreased market share has simply been absorbed by the existing

dominant players, further increasing their control over the market.

To be fair, besides GPay and PhonePe, there are many players that offer UPI-based payment apps such as Cred, PayZapp (HDFC Bank), Slice, FamPay, Zomato, Groww, and Flipkart. However, their market share is not significant, especially after the regulatory actions taken on Paytm.

The National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) is aware of the matter and its urgency. It therefore held a meeting recently to address the issue, inviting the smaller players in the ecosystem. The key question is, what stops this crop of companies from growing and capturing a larger segment of the market? Are there any discriminatory policies at play? The answer is that from a regulatory perspective, it is a level playing field. There are no discriminatory policies.

However, issues such as first-mover advantage and "capital as a moat" come into play. First-mover advantage essentially implies that those who started offering payment solution early have a larger brand recall and already have reduced fixed costs per transaction due to their existing volume of transactions. This makes it very difficult for a new entrant to get an appreciable space in the market.

"Capital as a moat" implies that

companies bring in large amounts of capital that can be used to give freebies, promos, cashback, advertisements, etc. to lure users away from other players who do not have an assured supply of capital. This is where the US companies score high. Both GPay, backed by Google, and PhonePe, backed by Walmart, two of the biggest corporations in the US, are loaded with capital. They can burn cash while competing with other players.

So what is the solution? Can and should government agencies intervene? As we see, even though there is a regulatory level playing field, there are significant non-regulatory issues that are distorting the playing field. Since payments are critical for any economy to prosper, the government needs to intervene, and that is precisely what the NPCI is doing.

Unfortunately, it is a difficult issue and, according to reports, the NPCI meeting was short of evolving a consensus on mechanisms to solve the matter. One of the suggestions was for the NPCI to promote the alternative Indian payment mechanisms. Perhaps that is not its mandate.

In November 2020, the NPCI issued a notification stipulating that third-party apps such as PhonePe and GPay are restricted from acquiring more than 30% share of the market. It was subsequently decided to postpone the

enforcement of the rule until December 2024. However, it is not clear as to what will happen if a company continues to have over 30% market share or how will a company refuse its users from doing transactions on its app because it has crossed the 30% mark without disrupting the ease of digital payments among citizens.

Digital monopolists such as Google already have substantial market share in the overall digital space and its monopoly in the app store market has caused significant headache for the Indian digital and start-up economy. Recently, a case against Google was made before the Competition Commission of India after the company decided to delist 10 Indian apps from its Play Store on account of non-compliance with its payment policies. Clearly, concentration of market power through monopolies or duopolies leads to unacceptable business practices. We cannot afford to have such a situation with our payment systems.

Duopolies controlling our payment systems and the dependence on foreign-owned platforms for critical financial transactions raise questions about India's digital sovereignty and the potential vulnerabilities of our financial infrastructure. The government is taking the right steps to try and find a solution to this vulnerability to the Indian economy. Given the current geopolitical instabilities, this process should be accelerated and the industry should urgently support the government in resolving the vulnerability.

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Crypto in India

Apropos of "Regulate cryptocurrency", in light of the Securities and Exchange Board of India's (Sebi) proposal, a comprehensive regulatory approach involving various government bodies could effectively oversee the cryptocurrency landscape. By examining established frameworks, Indian policymakers can gain valuable insights. Additionally, implementing a

pilot programme overseen by Sebi could serve as a crucial testing ground for regulated cryptocurrency exchanges and offerings. This approach would allow policymakers to evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of such regulations before broader implementation. Given the continued growth of cryptocurrency adoption in India, a proactive approach from policymakers is essential. This measured strategy can foster

responsible innovation within the sector and ensure investor protection in a rapidly evolving market. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Poll prognosis

Assessment by independent analysts in the wake of the completion of five phases of polling is that the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is unlikely to cross the halfway mark of 272 to form the next government. The

overconfidence of BJP leaders is widely seen as a strategy to give an impression that it is still invulnerable. It should not come as a surprise if the BJP fails to retain its seats in any state. The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance has largely succeeded in presenting itself as a better alternative to the NDA. Results will show if voters were convinced. —G David Milton, Maruthancode

[OUR TAKE]

The leadership crisis in Tehran

President Ebrahim Raisi's death is unlikely to impact Iran's relations with the world but complicates its domestic politics

The death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash is not expected to result in any drastic change in the country's domestic or foreign policies as true power lies in the hands of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the security establishment led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). However, the death of Raisi and foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian comes at a time when tensions between Iran and Israel are at an unprecedented level, with the shadow warfare waged by the two sides coming out into the open following Tehran's recent firing of hundreds of drones and missiles at Israeli targets in retaliation for an air strike on an Iranian diplomatic compound in Syria. Amir-Abdollahian was the face of Iran's diplomatic efforts to address these tensions, and Tehran has done well to speedily replace him with Ali Bagheri Kani, who has been involved in negotiations with the West on sensitive issues, including the now defunct Iranian nuclear deal.

While Iran's state-run media has attributed the helicopter crash to technical problems, this hasn't prevented theories being circulated about the possible involvement of Israel. Israeli officials have dismissed such reports, but it would be in Iran's own interest to speedily conduct an investigation into the crash. This would remove any lingering uncertainty about the incident and prevent the risk of miscalculation by both sides, as also the possibility that some actors may wish to capitalise on the situation created by Raisi's death. The world community, including India, does not want the situation in West Asia to spiral out of control and efforts should continue to involve Iran in finding a solution to the Israel-Hamas conflict. Iran's involvement with armed groups in Gaza, Lebanon and Yemen underlines the urgency of such efforts.

Raisi's death will have a significant impact on the succession plan within Iran, especially as he was seen as a possible successor to the ageing Khamenei. First vice president Mohammad Mokhber has been made acting president and will have the task of conducting a presidential election within 50 days against a backdrop of growing voter apathy. With reformists and moderates completely sidelined, there are already concerns about different hardline factions jockeying for position, with a resultant increase in repressive measures on the Iranian people.

Dry dams portend looming distress

The monsoon has arrived in the Andaman Sea and is expected to hit the Kerala coast on May 31. Meanwhile, an intense heat wave is sweeping northern India while water levels in the country's 150 reservoirs monitored by the Central Water Commission are alarmingly low at just 25% of their total capacity. The storage position in most of these reservoirs is lower than the corresponding period of last year and less than the normal storage. Particularly striking is the deficiency in the Godavari, Krishna and Cauvery basins, which can have a debilitating impact on meeting drinking water needs, irrigation and hydropower generation.

Major cities of southern India including Chennai, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad have reported major water crises, with rationing mooted in parts of the Karnataka capital. The storage in Kerala's reservoirs is better than for the corresponding period last year, but an extended dry spell has forced the government to declare it the state's worst drought in 40 years. Exceptionally high temperatures have led to a spike in power demand, which governments are struggling to meet since power generation from hydro-power projects is under stress. The situation has been blamed on El Nino conditions that impacted both the monsoons last year. An above-normal Southwest monsoon is predicted this year with La Nina conditions, a weather phenomenon known for bringing excess rainfall, which, hopefully, will offset the fall in agriculture output.

However, states must prepare to ensure that the La Nina bounty is not wasted. Much of the water crisis in summer months has to do with the failure to augment storage during the monsoon. Reservoirs, ponds, and tanks need to be dredged ahead of the season so that excess rainfall is conserved. The climate crisis is changing the monsoon pattern and leading to short bursts of heavy rain rather than extended rainfall across the season. This can have disastrous implications such as urban flooding in the absence of infrastructure to channel the excess water.

Missing in the debate on quotas for Muslims

While Congress is guilty of invoking religion for unfair inclusions, the BJP is guilty of unfair religion-based exclusions

The squabbling match between the BJP and Congress over the Muslim quota is intimately connected with the elite consensus and dissensus in the run-up to the Independence and the traumas of Partition under a colonial gaze. The discourse around Muslim quota returns every electoral season as a code for visceral memories of national vivisection that keep the political narrative trapped in the Hindu-Muslim, majority-minority, secular-communal, and Islamophobia binaries. This conceptual matrix works as an elite containment strategy that displaces the broader questions of pan-religion class/caste exclusions and social justice.

Much has been written on the colonial prioritising of religion over other identities in intellectually and politically accessing South Asia. In the late colonial period, the combination of colonial governance strategies, endemic communal violence, and religious revivalism spurred the emergence of objectified all-India "Hindu" and "Muslim" communities, led by their privileged caste elite — the *dvijyas* and *ashrafs*, respectively. The ensuing politics on the axis of religion was in a tense relationship with anti-caste mobilisations. In the case of Muslims, the "myth of Muslim decline into backwardness," as Paul Brass puts it, can be traced back to the Hunter Commission Report (1882), wherein the entire Muslim community was spuriously characterised as disadvantaged based on the exceptional data of Bengal.

For instance, between 1881 and 1921, the proportion of Muslims in public employment went up from 34.8% to 47.2%, while during the period, the population of Muslims varied between 19% (1881) and 23% (1921). Interrogating this data from the vantage point of the strong correlation between caste and class would reveal the cornering of the colonial patronage benefits by the Muslim Ashraf elite, owing to cultural capital, at the expense of the peripheral lower caste Muslims. The myth of Muslims as a backward community, among other things, strategically bolstered the formation of the All-India Muslim League (1906), the acceptance of a separate electorate for Muslims (1909), and a separate 25% quota in government services for Muslims (1926), in turn producing a unified and enclavist "Muslim community" led and profited by the Ashraf aristocracy. The persistent rival narratives of "Muslims under siege" or that of "Muslim appeasement" peddled by the elite classes have deep colonial roots and reproduce the politics arranged on the Hindu-Muslim binary at the expense of the social justice aspirations of the marginalised to this day.

Babasaheb Ambedkar was consistently frustrated with the colonial Muslim-first approach to representative/redistributive measures for minorities, as was Abdul Qayyum Ansari, who led the lower caste Muslim organisation, the Momin Conference, from the late 1930s onwards. The Momin Conference characterised the Muslim League as an Ashraf Muslim formation and contested Muhammad Ali Jinnah's two-nation theory and the demand for Pakistan in alliance with the Congress party. In 1939, the Momin Conference demanded a universal adult franchise and a separate electorate for lower caste Muslims

as opposed to being accommodated within the separate Muslim electorate. The restricted franchise rested on property, tax-paying, and educational qualifications that protected the interests of the higher-class Muslims represented by the Muslim League. However, the tragedy of Partition could not be averted as the 1946 election, also hailed as a referendum on Pakistan wherein the Muslim League won handsomely, involved a restricted electorate where only 10% to 13% of Muslims, mainly Ashraf sections, had the right to vote. The votes of most peripheral lower caste Muslims were not even put to the test. In the complex negotiations during the proceedings of the Minorities Sub-committee in the Constituent Assembly, the colonial practice of religion-based electorate and quotas was discarded as religion had become a suspect category due to Partition. Except for Sikh representatives, who argued for political safeguards for a few Sikh Dalit castes, the Muslims and Christian representatives in the subcommittee, primarily upper castes, settled for cultural rights without any concern for the socio-economic upliftment of their lower caste community members.

The Muslim Ashraf classes broadly endorsed Jinnah's call for Partition, while the lower caste Muslims challenged it and worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress. However, in a strange reversal in Independent India, the erstwhile "communal" Muslim Leaguers were accommodated within the Congress party through the discourse of "mainstreaming Muslims" with the efforts of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. In time, this Ashraf leadership became the key interlocutor for Muslim matters in the Congress party at the expense of the developing lower caste Muslim leadership.



Khalid Anis Ansari

President Raisi's demise leaves Iran at a crossroads

On May 19, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi, foreign minister Hossein Abdollahian and two other top provincial officials were killed in a helicopter crash in the mountainous terrain of Iran's East Azerbaijan province, bordering Azerbaijan. Raisi was returning after inaugurating, along with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev, the jointly constructed dam on the Aras River at the shared border. Raisi's visit had marked the thawing of tensions with Baku, which had closed its embassy in Tehran in January 2023 after an armed assault by an Iranian man had left the head of the security service of the embassy dead. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the Supreme Leader has the ultimate authority and sets the broad contours of national security and foreign policy, the untimely death of a president does not necessarily constitute a shock to the system. But, in this case, Raisi's rise to the presidency had been systematically brought about by current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as part of a smooth generational change in Iran's political leadership.

Raisi, like Khamenei, hailed from the north-eastern city of Mashhad, a holy city built around the burial place of Imam Reza, the eighth Imam in Twelver Shia Islam. In 2016, Khamenei appointed Raisi as the custodian of Astan Quds Razavi, which manages the Imam Reza Shrine and the wealthiest religious endowment in the country. After Raisi lost the presidential race to moderate Hassan Rouhani in 2017, he was appointed as the judiciary chief in 2019 and also appointed to the executive board of the Assembly of Experts, the 88-member clerical body responsible for electing the Supreme Leader. As chief justice, he carried out a comprehensive anti-corruption campaign in the judiciary, which gained him popularity, while his support for the enforcement of mandatory *hijab* established his conservative credentials.

Raisi's victory in the 2021 presidential election was predetermined by the Guardian Council, which disqualified not only reformist hopefuls but also traditional conservatives such as former parliament speaker Ali Larjani and former two-term president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who posed challenges to Raisi's candidacy. The qualifying criteria for the position of Supreme Leader is that the candidate must be a cleric with religious scholarship at the rank of Ayatollah and must have political experience in the executive branch. Raisi not only had a theological background, like Khamenei and Khomeni before him, he was also a *sayyid* — a descendent of the Prophet. If any more signals were needed about Raisi's centrality to Supreme Leader succession, in the elections to the Assembly of Experts simultaneously held with parliamentary elections in March this year, Raisi was elected from the South Khorasan province with no challenger; prominent contenders such as former president Hassan

Rouhani were disqualified. The Assembly was to meet this week to elect the new chairman, and Raisi, who held the position of first deputy, was widely seen as the frontrunner.

In 2019, on the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, Khamenei had outlined his vision of ideological revival amid generational change under the slogan of "the second phase of the revolution". At a time when many of the leaders and movements that defined Iran's politics over the past three decades have faded away from the scene, Raisi, as Khamenei's protégé, was to lead the next generation of conservatives who will maintain tight control over the Iranian society to prevent any political challenges to the system from below as well as enhance both the military capabilities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards and Iran's regional influence as deterrence against external foes.

The Raisi government's enforcement of the mandatory *hijab* in the face of popular challenge in the form of the "Women, Life, Freedom" protests, and a resurgent "axis-of-resistance" to take on the United States and Israel in West Asia, had left no doubt that he was the man to carry out Khamenei's "second phase of revolution." It is for these reasons that Raisi's death has derailed the succession planning in Tehran.

Given none of the former presidents have been deemed suitable for the position of Supreme Leader, the twin task of finding a new president and a possible leader is fraught with challenges. First, the reformists and moderates have been crowded out of the political system, leaving a much narrower political spectrum in Iran, to the extent that all elections in Iran since the 2020 parliamentary elections have been primarily a competition among the conservative factions.

The Supreme Leader will have to manage the infighting and divisions among the traditional conservatives and younger generation of hardliners who are vying for top positions, whether of parliament speaker or ministerial berths. The second possibility is that the next presidential elections, which have to be held within the next 50 days, are open for wider competition, including those who have been pushed out of the system. Such a change may, on the one hand, have the effect of increasing popular participation in the process while, on the other, could encounter a backlash from the conservative and security brass which won't like to loosen their grip on power.

The Islamic Republic, which has survived the last four decades despite numerous internal and external challenges, excels in the survival game. It will find a way or muddle through yet another phase of uncertainty and change.

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The discourse around Muslim quota returns every electoral season AP

By recruiting the guilt-ridden and docile Ashraf politicians, the Congress also arrested the evolution of any futuristic organic and assertive Muslim leadership whatsoever.

In independent India, both the First (1955) and Second (1979) Backward Class Commissions, popularly known as the Kaka Kalelkar Commission and Mandal Commission respectively, refrained from treating Muslims as a monolithic, socially backward community and excluded the privileged castes/groups within them. The Mandal Commission Report, by enlisting 82 lower caste Muslim groups as backward, opened the way for broader pan-religion solidarity of oppressed castes. The Pasmanda movement, headed by Ali Anwar, has consistently opposed the demand for a Muslim quota and demanded judicious accommodation of similarly placed pan-religion Backward, Dalit, and Adivasi groups within the extant quota categories without invoking the principle of religion.

By the early 1990s, most Muslim lower castes, constituting about 85% of the Indian Muslim population, were already availing of reservations by being enlisted within the central and various state OBC lists. However, Ashraf inter-looters of the Congress have sought to consistently jeopardise the minimum rights accrued to the Pasmanda sections either by pushing for the demand for the Muslim quota or introducing the principle of religion within the OBC category. The inclusion of the Muslim quota in the Congress manifesto (2004), the move to grant 5% reservations to the

entire Muslim community within the Andhra Pradesh state OBC quota (2004), the announcement of a 4.5% sub-quota for backward sections within minorities in the Central OBC quota (2011) and so on are illustrations of this logic. The notion that the condition of Muslims is worse than Dalits, attributed fallaciously to the Sachar Committee Report, is advanced by the Ashraf classes and their Left-liberal allies to promote a caste-blind approach to Muslim backwardness.

Prime Minister Modi has recently hit the Congress strongly on its convoluted approach to Muslim quota. However, while the BJP frames this as Muslim appeasement, it is essentially Ashraf appeasement that the Congress is guilty of. While it is not clear what Rahul Gandhi's cryptic admission that the Congress has made mistakes in the past means, the party will do well to revisit the career of Muslim backwardness from "Hunter to Sachar" with a critical lens. While Congress is guilty of invoking religion for unfair inclusions, the BJP, on the other hand, by strongly opposing the inclusion of Muslims and Christians of Dalit origins in the SC quota, is guilty of unfair religion-based exclusions. Transformative anti-caste politics must be imagined beyond the closures of Congress-BJP and the immediacy of electoral politics to create meaningful solidarities of oppressed castes and classes across religions.

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{ KIREN RIJJU } EARTH SCIENCES MINISTER



This icy expanse is not just a frozen desert; it is a dynamic, living laboratory that demands our highest commitment

At the 46th Antarctica Treaty Consultative Meeting



Focus on caste and faith will derail India's march

The usual suspects are busy painting Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party as ogres waiting to devour Indian Muslims as a part of some devious ideological agenda. Meanwhile, they are happily promoting bizarre ideas that seek to split India into numerous caste and class silos.

Caste is an Indian reality. It has lost most of its bite over decades for various reasons, including rapid urbanisation and the spread of education. In day-to-day life, its influence is waning — but politics is keeping it alive. The new politics of Rahul Gandhi is one such enterprise. It seeks to set Indians against Indians. The idea is to elevate the caste identity to a level that subsumes all other identities. An Indian would be known, first by his caste and then by anything else. The next promised step is to redistribute the national wealth among different caste and ethnic groups in proportion to their respective numbers. Gandhi's catchline is *jitni aabadi, utna haq*. The party's manifesto may not have explicitly said this — but the articulation has been specific in several of Gandhi's public speeches, and the direction is evident from others. However, one thing is for sure. The equalisation plan will push back the country by half a century, when income tax was 97.5% in the top bracket. Daily necessities were then either unavailable or sold in the black market. Emphasis was on the redistribution of wealth and not on its creation.

Some may dismiss Gandhi's plans as electoral hyperbole. Such people underestimate his sense of entitlement. Here is a recall. On September 27, 2013, he made a surprise entry at a press conference. "I'll tell you what my opinion on the ordinance is. It's complete nonsense. It should be torn up and thrown away," he told a stunned audience. The ordinance was to save convicted legislators from disqualification. Gandhi's public censure led the government to withdraw the ordinance, which had been cleared by the Congress party's core group, including the then PM Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi.

While Rahul is pushing his divisive agenda, his allies have called for "vote jihad" against the BJP. India is at the cusp of a take-off at this

point in history. All the communities should benefit from the newfound prosperity. It was in this context that Modi asked Indian Muslims to introspect about the community's backwardness. He said, "I want to say this to the Muslim community. I am telling this to educated Muslims. Please introspect. Think."

In office, Modi walked the talk. The Modi government has spent over ₹34 lakh crore delivering direct cash benefits to over 900 million people. Over 25 million homes have been built since 2016 under the rural public housing programme. The welfare programmes include providing cooking gas, free grain, houses, toilets, piped water, electricity, bank accounts and beefing up a long-running jobs guarantee programme. Many benefits — pensions, subsidies, loans and scholarships — are delivered as cash transfers to bank accounts linked to biometric identity cards held by over a billion Indians. A yearly handout of ₹6,000 is extended to over 110 million farmers. The resource transfers are without any leakages or corruption.

These benefits are disbursed without asking about the caste, creed, or religion of the beneficiaries. For the Modi regime, the poor Indian is just a poor person in need of help. Poverty has no caste or creed. Rahul Gandhi wants to overturn this paradigm.

In office, Modi has treated all the 140 crore odd Indians as equals. Modi's anguish and plea for introspection by the Muslim community resonates with the views of Sardar Patel expressed soon after Independence. Speaking at Lucknow on January 6, 1948, Patel said: "I am a true friend of the Muslims although I have been described as their greatest enemy... I believe in plain speaking. It is your duty now to sail in the same boat with other Indians and sink or swim together." Isn't it ironic Modi and the Sardar are on the same page, even after a gap of 76 years?

It's time for India to move out of identity politics and continue its march to become a fully developed nation by 2047, as PM Modi has envisaged. It's an achievable goal.



Balbir Punj

Balbir Punj is the author of *Trust with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India*. The views expressed are personal



OUR VIEW



Chabahar port project: It'll test our diplomacy

The death of Iran's Raisi may prove a setback for India's port agreement with Tehran. Blame geopolitics. The US may grimace, but New Delhi should press ahead with strategic autonomy

The death of Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash has given a new twist to India's geopolitical choices and manoeuvring over Iran's Chabahar port. It was only a few days ago, on 13 May, that India renewed its commitment to this Gulf of Oman port, considering the facility's strategic location on the southern tip of Iran's Sistan Baluchistan province and a stone's throw from its border with Pakistan. In fact, shipping minister Sarbajit Chatterjee took special permission from the Election Commission to take a break from the poll campaign to visit Iran for signing the agreement, which replaces the investment pact of 2016. The new 10-year deal provides for joint development and operation of the port and commits India Ports Global to invest \$370 million in upgrading it. Mutual ties have thus been strengthened amid tightening US sanctions against doing business with Iran. As India's foreign minister S. Jaishankar said recently, it was Raisi's personal interest and initiative that facilitated the port partnership.

With Raisi's unfortunate and untimely demise, there is now some uncertainty about his successor's outlook towards India in general and Chabahar in particular. In all likelihood, an election due within two months will put another hardliner in political power, as candidates will be hand-picked by Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei. The Chabahar project, to be sure, is vital to Tehran's interests. It not only gives Iran access to different markets, but may also provide a multiplier effect to its economy wounded by US sanctions. And yet, the new president's priorities are likely to be the pressing geopolitical threats Iran faces before he can turn his attention to such trade enablers.

This setback comes over and above other challenges. The larger question mark over Chabahar's progress could emanate from the US disposition towards it. Having waived sanctions on its joint development earlier, it has made noises lately about the possibility of punitive sanctions. A lot will depend on who wins the White House this November. The second challenge lies north of the Hindukush range. When Chabahar was originally conceived as a three-way trade project between India, Iran and Afghanistan, an embryonic democracy was being nurtured in Kabul. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 has skewed that equation and could jeopardize the original plan of extracting Afghan ores and minerals for Indian refineries.

Chabahar is critical for India's geo-strategic ambitions on multiple fronts. New Delhi's tacit support for Israel and tactical ambivalence on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, driven primarily by its multi-platform security partnership with Tel Aviv, was threatening to undermine our long-held position of 'strategic autonomy.' The renewed deal with Iran balances that out somewhat. Even otherwise, Chabahar can play a pivotal role in India's ambitious trade routes and logistical chains. The India-Middle-East-Europe Economic Corridor, finalized at last year's G20 summit, could complement the access to Europe that Chabahar is placed to grant via the planned North-South Transport Corridor. But the real problem lies more than 300km to the port's east: Pakistan's Gwadar port is being developed jointly with China as part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. India's negotiating skills, geopolitical acumen and staying power will be severely tested as the country juggles numerous balls up in the air on account of Chabahar alone.

GUEST VIEW

Audit fees must be fair to ensure quality and no overdependence

It should be high enough for auditors to do the job well but not so high that their independence is hit



ASHOK HALDIA
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Auditors for years have lamented low audit fees whenever audit quality is questioned by regulators, the government or other stakeholders. Data released by Prime Database and other sources on audit fees paid by listed entities suggests a meagre increase of 6% in 2022-23 and about 28% over the 2018-23 period.

Audits serve the public interest and are relied upon by investors, lenders and others while making investment decisions. It is difficult to fathom such a meagre increase. It doesn't match even the general 10-15% increase that employee salaries see every year. The situation for unlisted companies and for medium and small size firms is worse.

Audit firms lack the resources needed to invest in technology-based audit tools, build multi-disciplinary expertise, upgrade skills and recruit as well as retain talent as a *sine qua non* for quality audits. Irrespective of their size, these firms cannot pay competitive salaries and are facing an exodus of chartered accountants, who are joining industry or consulting firms. Auditing is no longer a preferred career option for many young chartered accountants.

Inadequate audit fees could lead to either a compromise in due diligence exercised during audit processes, or an impairment of the audit firm's independence in carrying out audit work, as it may make them seek the favour of

non-audit assignments from clients to boost overall earnings and compensate for low audit fees. Disciplinary orders issued or inspections of audit firms conducted by the National Financial Reporting Authority (NFRA) point to: (a) inadequate capacity, competence and capability among audit firms in terms of knowledge, use of tech-based audit tools commensurate with the size and nature of audit clients and audit risks involved; and (b) compromises on audit independence that raise conflicts of interest and other ethical concerns.

When an audit firm accepts audit work at a low fee, it survives financially by reducing the effort on audits or by compromising its quality. As audits are a matter of public interest, this is a worry. The adequacy or otherwise of audit fees must not be an excuse for any audit firm to compromise quality.

Ironically, quality auditing in India does not command the premium it deserves. Many companies do not see value in the process, treating it as no more than a statutory requirement. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), Reserve Bank of India (RBI), NFRA and institutional investors in recent years have taken measures to enforce audit quality by strengthening the role and responsibility of the board of directors, independent directors, audit committee and auditors. The increased rigour of regulations and supervision in recent years has sensitized managements, boards and audit committees to the need for reasonable audit-fee payouts. This, however, has not raised audit fees by much. In contrast, the audit fee of firms in the US after their registration with the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board, an audit regulator in the country, has seen a significant increase. Hopefully, the role being played by NFRA will have the same effect in India.

Higher than reasonable audit fees is as bad as low fees. High fees may make audit firms more financially dependent on clients, which could lead to their

reluctance in making appropriate inquiries and asking difficult questions during the audit process. It is thus important to ensure that audit fees are always reasonable, neither too high nor low. The responsibility for this lies with audit firms themselves, apart from audit regulators, audit committees and other stakeholders at large.

An audit firm, before accepting an assignment, should estimate the cost and effort involved and resources required for the task. The company's audit committee, while determining the audit remuneration, should discuss with the audit firm its own assessment of the time, effort and resources required, taking into account the size and complexity of the company's operations and the basis on which the auditor has quoted its fees. In addition, the company's annual report should disclose, among other things, the methodology adopted by the audit committee to satisfy itself on the audit fee. The NFRA, while carrying out its inspection of audit firms (and during disciplinary proceedings if any), should look into the basis for fixing fees and their revisions to check their reasonableness. High or low audit fee should raise red flags as they may *prima facie* indicate a possible quality problem. Such an approach will deter audit firms from undercutting one another and companies from selecting an audit firm that charges especially low fees. The cardinal principle is that an audit firm should not accept an audit job at a fee that is not sustainable, and the company shouldn't appoint an audit firm at a remuneration that will not enable it to meet quality standards.

It is imperative that audit firms invest in people and technology. Audit fees are their only available source of funding, and if it is unreasonable, audit quality may suffer. Allowing audit firms to raise equity finance is a questionable proposition and is beset with practical difficulties. If Indian audit firms are expected to go global, among other things, they need to be paid audit fees by global standards.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The family serves the business. Neither will do well if the business is run to serve the family.

PETER DRUCKER

THEIR VIEW

The Godrej split: It holds lessons for family businesses

TULSI JAYAKUMAR



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The 127-year old Indian conglomerate Godrej's split, driven by a decision of the Godrej family to realign ownership for smooth succession, is a notable example of both the process and end-goals of strategic decisions taken by family businesses. Founded in 1897 by two brothers, Ardeshir Godrej and Pirojsha Burjorji Godrej, the group now has fourth-generation leadership. The family pact divides the conglomerate into two groups: Godrej Enterprises and Godrej Industries. One faction of the family gets unlisted companies and a substantial land bank, while the other gains control of five listed firms.

Family businesses go through various ownership stages through their life cycle. Typically, they progress from 'controlling owner' stage, where an individual owner controls the business (often with a spouse) to 'sibling partnership' stage, where siblings jointly share ownership and control, and eventually to a 'cousin consortium' stage, where a group of cousins assumes owner-

ship control, adding diversity and complexity to family and business dynamics.

Complex structures of ownership are exemplified by the Godrej group, which began as a lock-maker, operated at a sibling stage and transitioned to its second generation without a change in ownership structure. It was led by the four sons of Pirojsha Burjorji Godrej, as Ardeshir Godrej died childless, and the business moved into the cousin consortium stage upon the entry of the third and the fourth generations. With the third generation having joined the business in the 1960s, Godrej has been in its cousin consortium stage for nearly six decades. This stage is often characterized by issues such as accepting differences among various branches of the family, managing issues related to sharing of wealth and its psychological impact, redefining and realigning family members with the family mission, and in general maintaining unity and organization within the family.

Interestingly, after the split, the ownership structure will likely witness a reversal to the sibling partnership stage in the next round within each newly created entity or sub-entity. The textbook characterization of this stage highlights common issues such as sibling tensions arising from the distribution

of power and perceptions of fairness, balancing dividends with reinvestment and hiring professional managers.

An important lesson for family businesses is to understand the evolving dynamics of family ownership, recognize the challenges of each phase and work proactively to mitigating the risks associated with various ownership structures.

The Godrej family had institutionalized an internal structure that accorded equal ownership rights to all family members, in order to avoid conflicts arising out of these issues. Such clear structures and transparency in ownership served the group well throughout much of the cousin consortium stage. However, cracks within the Godrej family reportedly began to appear almost a decade ago, primarily over the jointly-owned real estate business. Despite internal differences, the group's governance mechanisms prevented these from becoming public and did not hamper the competitiveness of various businesses.

A second lesson is the importance of clear governance mechanisms at both the family and corporate levels to support the group's corporate strategy. Effective governance structures can help manage and mitigate conflicts, ensuring that personal disputes do not interfere with business operations. They

provide a framework for decision-making, conflict resolution and strategic planning, aligning family interests with business goals. Note that family groups face unique challenges in balancing multiple goals that encompass business, ownership and family objectives. These businesses may adopt different orientations, being family-first, business-first or family business-first entities. Unlike family-first entities, which prioritize family or business aims respectively, family-business-first entities strive to achieve both business performance and family cohesion.

Details of the Godrej deal again illustrate how the family has prioritized the family as well as the business. The pact was concluded

in a "respectful and mindful" manner, featuring a unique "no-compete" clause for six years, seeking to ensure family harmony and brand reputation. Under this clause, no entity will compete in the other's market for six years, except in real estate. Even after this period, new competing ventures cannot use the Godrej brand. This helps maintain brand integrity and prevents brand dilution.

A third lesson from the Godrej split is the need for family enterprises to focus on keeping families in business, rather than just preserving the family business. Trans-generational legacies are important, but must take into account rapid changes in the business landscape, the evolving nature of families and also the differing mindsets and aspirations among family members. Family groups can reconcile these contradictory forces through various strategies, with a split being only one such strategy. In this context, the split need not be seen as a vindication of the saying, "Shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations." Rather, a split may serve as a precursor to a surge in innovation associated with a controlling-owner stage, unlocking the entrepreneurial potential of the next generation and enabling younger leaders to re-imagine the group's legacy.

These are the author's personal views.



THEIR VIEW

America's strong dollar: Would a Trump presidency weaken it?

The US Fed is bent on curbing inflation but the former president appears to view currency strength as an export dampener



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The United States' dollar has strengthened sharply in recent months, and against Asian currencies in particular. A rising crescendo of apocalyptic financial talk threatens to spook markets. The Japanese yen, for example, appears to be on the verge of collapse. China may feel compelled to devalue its currency, with damaging consequences for itself and the global economy. So, can anything be done to head off the dollar's strength, and even if something can be done, should it?

First, the facts. The Japanese yen has fallen dramatically, reaching ¥160 to the dollar at the end of April, down 13% since the start of the year and more than 50% since the start of 2021. The South Korean won is down by about 10% against the dollar since the beginning of the year. And the Indonesian rupiah recently fell to a four-year low against the greenback.

But these Asian currencies are not typical. In fact, the broad nominal dollar index, which measures the dollar's value against a basket of other currencies, is up by less than 3% since the start of 2023.

Moreover, the dollar's strength is not a sign of market dysfunction. It reflects the fact that the United States has performed better economically than other parts of the world.

Rapid US growth creates expectations of slow US disinflation. Hence the US Federal Reserve Board is apt to keep interest rates high, or at least to disappoint hopes for multiple rate cuts this year. Meanwhile, weaker-than-expected growth elsewhere means that other central banks have less reason to worry about inflation, which makes it correspondingly more likely that they will cut policy rates of interest.

Recall that the Bank of Japan's much ballyhooed abandonment of yield-curve control in March led it to increase its interest rate to just 0.1%. This accommodative policy will remain appropriate until it is clear that the BoJ has vanquished deflation. And with the US Fed's benchmark federal funds target rate at 5.25-5.5%, it is equally appropriate that the dollar should be strong against the yen.

So, why worry? It is not as if Japanese financial institutions are at risk from the dollar's rise. Japan's banks and companies have extensive investments outside the country, including in the US, where their value rises and falls with the dollar. While import prices have risen by more than 50% over the last four years, Japan is hardly on the verge of hyperinflation. Consumer prices rose by about 2.5% year over year in April, which is just where the BoJ wants them.

The fear, evidently, is that at some point confi-



dence will collapse, taking the yen with it, and inflation will spiral out of control. In theory, anything is possible. But against the backdrop of decades of Japanese deflation, this scenario hardly seems plausible.

Still, for those who think that the greenback's strength is a problem, what might be done to address it? Market intervention is one possibility. The BoJ evidently intervened in the foreign-exchange market in late April, or so currency traders suspect.

While the yen strengthened to 154 against the dollar in the wake of this operation, we know that market intervention has a sustained impact on the exchange rate only when it signals a future change in monetary policy. In fact, the BoJ intervened surreptitiously not because it is now prepared to change policy and raise interest rates, but precisely in order to avoid having to do so.

Equally, the Fed is unlikely to cut rates in response to the dollar's rise. Its models suggest that a 3% broad dollar appreciation, as we have seen this year, takes at the very most 0.3% off of inflation. And even that modest disinflationary effect is apt to be temporary. Hence the case for high US interest rates remains intact.

What about concerted intervention, whereby

the Fed, BoJ and other central banks intervene in the foreign-exchange market together? This was tried in 1985 during an earlier period of dollar appreciation. The Plaza Accord, named after the New York City hotel at which it was agreed, is sometimes thought to have successfully moderated the greenback's strength at the time.

But it is not in the Fed's interest today to engage in an internationally coordinated foreign-exchange operation, when fighting inflation remains its priority. And in 1985, the dollar already had peaked and begun falling prior to the intervention. Given recent weak US jobs numbers, one wonders whether the same might be true today.

One thing that could change the picture dramatically would be a second presidential term in the United States for Republican candidate Donald Trump, who is a low-interest-rate man, from what can be made out of his record. Trump appears to see a strong dollar as handicapping US exports. Rumours are afoot that he intends to install a like-minded Fed chair, or even require the central bank to follow the president's dictates. This would be enough to bring down the dollar. But it would also probably bring down American financial markets.

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MINT CURATOR

Thailand's U-turn on cannabis is a cautionary tale for others

Its marijuana legalization policy needs reform and not a reversal



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Thailand legalized weed in 2022 but has had second thoughts about it REUTERS

Turns out you can have too much of a good thing. Last week, Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin ordered a U-turn on the country's cannabis policy, saying the plant should soon be classified as a narcotic again and its use limited to medical and health purposes. This decision comes two years after former premier Prayuth Chan-Ocha's administration decriminalized the drug. His aim? To bring tourists back to Thailand after the pandemic, open up a multibillion-dollar medical marijuana business opportunity and give farmers another cash crop to grow.

Thavisin's announcement shouldn't come as a surprise. The new government has been weighing its options. The weed experiment hasn't gone as planned. Reversing it won't be easy, but the kingdom should persevere trying to regulate this sector—even if the consequences are painful. Ignoring it will affect Thai youth and social harmony. Ultimately, the industry is only benefiting businesses, not poor farmers.

Walking through Bangkok's narrow alleyways recently, it was impossible to miss the numerous cafes that spilt on to the streets or the distinct scent of marijuana wafting through the balmy air. These dispensaries sprang up seemingly overnight after the 2022 decision to legalize cannabis. Even then it was controversial—and ever since, competing forces have been trying to reverse the decision. Of course, there can be benefits in decriminalizing marijuana. One is less pressure on courts and prisons. There are major overcrowding issues in Thai jails, where 75% of inmates are there on drug-related charges. Research has also shown that taking cannabis off the underground illegal market helps drive it out of the illicit drug trade.

Many parts of the US have already been through this evolution. Cities like New York have adopted a far more liberal approach to decriminalization, but are also struggling with the consequences. It is unlikely that Thailand could learn from its experience. Culturally it is a far more conservative society, and sits in a region with harsh drug laws around possession and consumption.

Thailand used to have those laws too, but now it is the anomaly in Southeast Asia. Singapore, for instance, imposes the death penalty for trafficking. It considers cannabis a highly addictive narcotic, has banned its consumption, and runs campaigns that seek to show how much damage it has caused in other countries.

In Indonesia, the death penalty is also

used as a deterrent, although until recently it was rarely enforced. I had reported on the harsh drug laws and outgoing president Joko Widodo administration's decision to prioritize cracking down on drugs. It's a policy that is likely to be continued under the next leader, Prabowo Subianto.

In contrast, Thailand became the first country in Southeast Asia to allow the use of marijuana for medical purposes in 2019. Almost 8,000 dispensaries and many consumer-agro firms have cropped up across the country, selling everything from cannabis buds and oil extracts to weed-infused candy and baked goods. Foreigners have also reportedly entered the unregulated market, opening shops and selling weed. Under current decriminalization laws, cannabis products must not contain more than 0.2% tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychoactive compound that provides a high sensation, to be considered lawful.

Part of the push to legalize the plant was motivated by economics: The University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce said in a 2022 report that the domestic cannabis industry could be worth \$1.2 billion by 2025. But the U-turn is also being prompted by some real concerns, particularly over the social and health impact on young people. Recent research has shown that a quarter of 18-to-65-year-olds had used cannabis since decriminalization—up from 2.2% in 2019. Young people are also smoking more weed: 10 times as much. Anecdotally, doctors have reported more patients seeking treatment after they've fallen ill or tried quitting cannabis. If the government does push through with its plans and classifies cannabis as a category-five drug, its possession could result in a jail sentence of up to 15 years and a maximum fine of 1.5 million baht (\$40,600).

Banning the drug outright will no doubt cause a lot of pain to farmers, small business owners, tourists and consumers. A middle-ground approach to return to medical usage would be wise. Taxing marijuana would also help to boost government coffers, and weeding out foreigners from the trade would help to regulate the sector and allow locals to benefit more—which was policy's original intent. Thailand has enjoyed the high from this lucrative field long enough. It is now time for a managed and rational come down. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Restrictions on open-source AI models will help nobody

RAHUL MATTHAN



is a partner at Trilegal and also has a podcast by the name Ex Machina. His Twitter handle is @matthan

In the late 1980s, concerns began to arise about the privacy of email communication. Though not yet as ubiquitous as it was destined to become, email had already become a common enough means of exchanging messages that people had begun to worry about what would happen if they were intercepted. It was this anxiety that Phil Zimmermann set out to address when he created Pretty Good Privacy (PGP), a software program designed to make online communications more secure.

Initially, PGP was just a command-line program to encrypt messages. As it gained popularity, it was adapted to integrate with various email clients. I remember installing PGP on Thunderbird, even though at the time it seemed like a futile exercise, since none of the people I communicated with had it installed on their computers.

Almost from the moment PGP emerged, it faced a spate of legal challenges. Governments have long been uneasy about encryption technology getting into the wrong

hands, fearing that if it ends up with a hostile adversary, national security would be jeopardized. This is why US export control regulations have always prohibited the export of encryption technologies. Since PGP could be downloaded anywhere from the internet, export curbs designed for physical products were powerless in keeping it within US borders. And so the US Department of Justice launched an investigation into PGP.

While concerns about encryption may have been reasonable in earlier technological contexts, since PGP was built on the RSA algorithm, messages remained confidential as long as the private keys of participants stayed secret. It made no difference that the underlying technology was publicly known.

This distinction was lost on the US government, which argued that PGP should be treated as a "munition" under the rules, as it could be used to encrypt sensitive military information. Though the case was eventually withdrawn, and over time there has been a significant relaxation in the US government's stance on encryption regulation, we'll never know the cost the world has paid on account of this delay.

Today, we stand at the threshold of an epochal technology revolution. Artificial intelligence (AI) is poised to disrupt every

aspect of human knowledge and become the world's first general-purpose technology since the commercialization of electricity.

Today, it is the famous large language models (LLMs) of US Big Tech companies that are the visible face of the AI revolution. These systems can be accessed in a variety of user-friendly ways, such as through chat interfaces and application program interfaces (API), or directly be integrated into other services that we regularly use. While this is ideal for lay users without technical expertise, developers building AI use-cases prefer working with open-source alternatives. Not only are these models free to use, they are almost always accompanied by model weights and documentation, giving developers the flexibility they need to get things done.

Over the past few months, however, voices of opposition have begun to be raised in the US against the very idea of open-source AI. One of the concerns seems to be in relation to safety. Opponents of open-source AI

models argue that it is impossible to place guard-rails on models if they are released as open source, which would make them fundamentally unsafe.

Then there are geopolitical concerns. If future wars will be won by powers that have AI superiority, distributing AI models as open source might erode the hard-won competitive advantage of the US. While this is largely a function of the extreme Sinophobia that has gripped the US, draft legislation is already underway to make it easy for the US administration to impose export controls on AI models.

In my view, both these fears are overblown. LLMs today are so small that they can be copied on a USB drive and run on an ordinary laptop (all the research for this article and some part of the text was generated on the 8-billion-parameter version of Llama3 that I am running locally on my 2021 MacBook Pro). Given that models are so small that they can be smuggled out in thumb-sized storage devices, attempting to impose

export restrictions would amount to bolting the stable door after the horse has bolted.

As for model safety, this, in many instances, is a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Proprietary models, despite all the reinforcement learning and constraint training they have been subject to, hardly have an unblemished track record of safety. On the other hand, since open-source models come with weights and the documentation, any bugs that surface can be dealt with by the community—and that too, often quicker and more efficiently than would be possible in large slow-moving corporations.

The US proposal to impose restrictions on the export of open-source AI is reminiscent of its restrictions on PGP. While this might be a reaction to the Chinese geopolitical threat, its effects, like in the case of PGP, will be felt by countries that depend on these base models to develop their own bespoke AI solutions.

I am especially concerned for India. Much of our AI strategy is based on pre-training and fine-tuning open-source AI models to produce solutions that can address the diverse needs of this country. If we are suddenly denied access to them, it will put our ambitions of being the AI use-case capital of the world in serious jeopardy.

These are useful models. Both the safety and geopolitical worries being voiced in the US are overblown



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Iran at crossroads

Ebrahim Raisi leaves behind a rich legacy and an uncertain future for his country

Iran is grappling with an unprecedented political crisis as both President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian were tragically found dead in a helicopter crash under mysterious circumstances. The sudden loss of these key figures has plunged Iran into uncertainty, creating a significant leadership void and fuelling various speculations and conspiracy theories. Raisi, known for his hardline stance and involvement in controversial actions, leaves behind a complex legacy. His death, alongside Amir-Abdollahian, not only creates a leadership void but also raises questions about the trajectory of Iranian politics and foreign relations. The circumstances surrounding the helicopter crash, which occurred in heavy fog near the Azerbaijan border, have fuelled speculation. Given Raisi's past, including his involvement in mass executions in 1988 and some contentious actions such as uranium enrichment and missile attacks on Israel, the possibility of foul play cannot be easily dismissed. Conspiracy theories abound, ranging from internal power struggles to foreign interference.



President Raisi had numerous domestic adversaries, from moderates marginalised by his policies to conservatives critical of his presidency. Israel, a long-standing rival of Iran, also enters the conjecture. Recent escalations, including the assassination of an Iranian General by Israel and subsequent missile exchanges, add fuel to speculations of Israeli involvement. Mossad has conducted such operations, but assassinating a head of state is a risky move even by Israel's standards. Both Israel and US Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer have denied involvement.

The big question is Raisi's succession and Iran's trajectory going forward. Md Mokhber has been appointed the Acting President, while Ali Bagheri Kani, who was Deputy Foreign Minister, has been elevated in the Ministry. The election date has been set for June 28. Raisi was a hardliner cleric but by no means a saint. During the summer of 1988, Raisi was a key member of the "Death Commission" responsible for the execution of thousands of political prisoners, primarily members of the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (MEK) and other leftist groups. A prominent figure in Iran's power structure, Raisi was poised for further advancement until his horrifying death. While his demise creates speculation about the successor to Supreme Leader 85-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, it's unlikely to significantly alter Iran's political trajectory. The conservative-dominated system will prioritise continuity and stability, albeit amidst internal jockeying for influence. Raisi's successor faces a daunting agenda amid economic turmoil and societal discontent, with the spectre of continued international sanctions looming large. With internal dissent simmering and external pressures mounting, the succession process becomes pivotal. The coming days will decide if any discernible change takes place or if the old order continues where moderates and leftists have no role to play.

PICTALK



A man feeds a parrot's chick that fell off a tree, in Guwahati

PTI

The rise of online internships for students

Students are opting for online internships to gain practical experience, develop crucial skills and prepare themselves for the evolving job market

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, students are increasingly recognising the importance of proactive engagement in shaping their future careers. Embracing the adage of "building a door" to their professional aspirations, school students are turning to online internships as a means to gain valuable experiential learning opportunities and prepare themselves for the dynamic job market that awaits them upon graduation.



Online internships have witnessed a surge in relevance in recent years, offering school students an array of benefits that extend beyond traditional in-person placements.

Flexibility and Accessibility: Unlike traditional internships with fixed schedules, online internships provide students with a flexible work environment tailored to accommodate their schedules. This flexibility allows them to optimise productivity according to their peak hours of concentration while balancing other commitments such as classes or extracurricular activities. Additionally, the absence of commute time associated with virtual internships fur-

ther enhances students' ability to dedicate time to their roles.

Skill Development: Engaging in tasks aligned with their field of interest, interns acquire practical experience and hone essential competencies crucial for professional success. By demonstrating initiative and self-reliance in completing assigned projects remotely, interns showcase their readiness to thrive in diverse work environments. These experiences not only deepen their expertise but also bolster their resumes, setting them apart in competitive job markets.

Access to Talent Beyond Geographical Boundaries: Online internships offer employers access to a diverse pool of talent unrestricted by geographical boundaries. This expanded reach enriches organisations with diverse perspectives, skills and cultur-

al insights, fostering innovation and collaboration within teams. Additionally, it prepares companies for the evolving dynamics of the modern workforce by developing remote work capabilities.

Exploration of Career Paths: Online internships serve as a platform for students to explore different career paths and gain insight into various industries. This exploration phase allows students to clarify their interests, identify strengths and weaknesses and make informed decisions about their future career goals.

Networking Opportunities: Despite being remote, online internships provide students with networking opportunities that can be instrumental in their career development. Interacting with professionals within their chosen industry, connecting with fellow interns and building relationships with mentors and supervisors can lead to mentorship opportunities, job referrals and valuable insights into industry trends.

Innovative Learning Experiences: Through interactive projects, virtual meet-

ings and online training sessions, online internships offer innovative learning experiences that complement traditional classroom education. These immersive experiences bridge the gap between theory and practice, fostering critical thinking.

Cultural Exposure: Working with colleagues from diverse backgrounds exposes students to different perspectives, communication styles and work cultures, enriching their understanding of the global economy's interconnectedness.

Engaging in online internships significantly boosts students' resumes and bolsters their prospects for future employment. These experiences serve as tangible evidence of their initiative, adaptability and capacity to thrive in dynamic work environments, positioning them as desirable candidates poised for success in their chosen career paths. Thus, online internships not only enrich students' skill sets but also empower them to navigate the complexities of the modern job market.

(The author is the Founder, Zamit; views are personal)



AARUL MALVIYA

Delhi's Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal, has overcome numerous obstacles in the past decade.

Yet, his unwavering resilience has been a beacon of inspiration. He and his party are currently facing the biggest crisis in the liquor policy case.

Despite the challenges, Kejriwal's political journey is a testament to his indomitable spirit. From a brief 49-day tenure and losing all seven seats in Delhi in 2014, he orchestrated a remarkable comeback, securing 67 out of 70 seats in the 2015 Delhi Assembly polls.

The arrest of Kejriwal in the Delhi liquor policy case last month, which involves allegations of corruption and misuse of power, has cast a shadow of uncertainty over the future of the Aam Aadmi Party. Will this be the end of the party's road, or can they weather this storm and continue their political journey?

The Apex court's decision to grant bail to Kejriwal, allowing him to campaign for his party in the ongoing elections, is a beacon of hope for Kejriwal's supporters. This positive development paves the way for Kejriwal's success, especially if he garners public sympathy.

Kejriwal presents himself as the underdog, highlighting Prime Minister Narendra Modi's alleged persecution and his colleagues' imprisonment. Kejriwal and his party have been trying to show the public how he was mistreated in prison and how he was denied insulin and his diabetes medication.

Kejriwal's arrest is the biggest crisis for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) since its founding in November 2012. The party has faced numerous challenges, including internal conflicts, allegations of corruption and the need to maintain its image as a party for the common man. Over the years, many of Kejriwal's associates from the India Against Corruption (IAC) days have been dumped and he remains a despot. Kejriwal has introduced a personality cult centred around him.

The Aam Aadmi Party's rise to power has been quite dramatic.

It originated from the India Against Corruption movement led by Anna Hazare in 2012. The party came into power within months, but Kejriwal's resignation within 48 hours was unsurprising. However, he returned in 2015 and 2019, winning the Delhi Assembly polls with a significant majority. These events have sparked curiosity about the party's political trajectory and Kejriwal's resilience. Kejriwal has always been ambitious. He positioned himself as a prime ministerial candidate and even ran against Modi in Benares in 2014 but lost. This bold move significantly boosted Kejriwal's and his party's profile.

In the recently formed INDIA coalition, a significant political alliance that aims to challenge the dominance of the BJP, the AAP stands out as the only party other than Congress to rule more than one State. This alliance could pave the way for his party's expansion beyond Delhi and Punjab.

However, currently, AAP will have a significant political impact in only 20 constituencies. Kejriwal's national influ-

ence depends on his party's performance. The AAP currently holds one seat in the Lok Sabha and ten in the Upper House. The party has expanded its influence to other States and was granted national party status in April 2023.

The Aam Aadmi Party's rise to power in Indian politics is fascinating. Unlike the BJP or the Left parties, it has no solid ideological stance. It has not relied on regional or socialist backgrounds like the AIADMK, DMK, Samajwadi Party, Biju Janata Dal, or Rashtriya Janata Dal. Instead, it has gained power by championing development and the freebie culture.

The AAP is now contesting elections in Delhi with the Congress party, while Punjab is contesting 13 seats independently. These alliances offer a promising outlook for Kejriwal's political journey. The Aam Aadmi Party is not just a political entity. It is poised to fill the void left by Congress and target politically bipolar States like Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Modi has promised a "Modi ki guarantee," while Kejriwal

has outlined a ten-point agenda. This agenda includes "freeing" Indian land from Chinese occupation if the I.N.D.I.A. bloc forms the Government at the Centre, attaining Statehood for Delhi, ensuring a 24/7 power supply and providing free education. These promises reflect Kejriwal's focus on national issues. The Delhi liquor policy case has become inconvenient for the AAP and convenient for the BJP, as elections are underway. It raises questions like, is it the end of the road? Can the second rung of ladders like Gopal Rai, Saurabh Bhardwaj, Sandeep Pathak, Raghav Chadha and Atishi Run the party, or will Kejriwal, with his usual luck, return? Kejriwal is optimistic and hopes that luck will be on his side. This positive outlook has served him well so far. His popularity will rise if his party secures a respectable number of seats in the current Lok Sabha polls. Only the voters can decide and their decision will shape the future of Kejriwal and the Aam Aadmi Party in Indian politics.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

As Kejriwal presents himself as an underdog fighting against perceived persecution, this election will be pivotal in determining the trajectory of both his career and the AAP

Can AAP survive its ultimate resilience test?

KALYANI SHANKAR



THE AAM AADMI PARTY IS NOT JUST A POLITICAL ENTITY. IT IS POISED TO FILL THE VOID LEFT BY CONGRESS AND TARGET POLITICALLY BIPOLAR STATES LIKE HIMACHAL PRADESH, HARYANA, RAJASTHAN AND GUJARAT

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Secularism over politics



Propos the news article, "Economic crisis takes a backseat in elections", published on May 20, this is my response. It is a pity that religion rather than economic issues take the stage in the election campaign for the ruling party at the Centre in our secular country. Earlier in feudalism, a king or a feudal lord used to favour his religion over other religions. History witnessed that such a practice spelt disaster on every occasion. The people felt the need for a complete separa-

as well as responsibility in them like never before. An extended lifespan increases susceptibility to non-communicable diseases like cancer, diabetes and hypertension. As life expectancy in India is projected to rise, addressing behavioural and metabolic risks is crucial for healthy aging over the next two decades. Health outcomes can be significantly improved by efficiently addressing the risk factors. Furthermore, a safe environment and adequate vaccination can go a long way.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

HAPPINESS IS A SKILL

Madam — Apropos the feature article, "Connecting the Mind and Body," by Ravi Valluri, published on May 20, this is my response. Happiness is a skill that human beings must teach themselves. A lot of people spend so much time ruminating about the past or thinking about the future that they forget to enjoy the most beautiful gift they have received from God—the present moment. Our society is structured in a way that keeps reminding us of our

tion of religion from politics. This gave birth to secularism. All modern progressive nations have embraced secularism after learning how painful it would be to deviate from its path.

Mixing religion and politics destroys accountability, enables corruption and favours one religion over others, undermining democracy. Politicians should be elected based on policy, not religion and churches should focus on spirituality, not politics. It divides the citizens and damages the unity and integrity of the country. It does not allow the policymakers to follow the progressive ideals of equality and fraternity. Rather, it attracts negative things such as discrimination, marginalisation, conflict and unrest. Some of our neighbouring countries have experienced the danger of not walking in the path of secularism. India must follow secularism and let religion be a personal matter between God and a person.

Sujit De | Kolkata

failures in the past and makes us anxious about our future. We need to consciously make efforts to silence our minds by incorporating daily practices into our daily routines.

Spending time in nature is one of the best-known ways to reconnect with your inner self. Meditating for 20 - 30 minutes daily can also provide you with a treasure trove of peace. Journaling can help you manage your emotions and teach you to focus on the present moment. Expressing gratitude to loved ones for being a part of your lives also goes a long way in nurturing the relationships you have with people that eventually become a source of joy for you. Exercising daily is also a good way to take care of your health. Staying away from social media and all the unrealistic expectations it imposes on you is imperative. All these practices when done every day can help you augment your happiness levels and enjoy life to the fullest.

Charvi Kathuria | Delhi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Litmus test

With the dust settling on the fifth phase of the general election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are navigating a complex political landscape. Mr Modi, who is seeking a rare third term as Prime Minister, faces major challenges that could reduce the NDA's promised numbers significantly, giving it a weaker mandate than the 400+ than was projected. To that extent, this election is proving to be a litmus test for the BJP, highlighting both its vulnerabilities and the resilience of its opposition. A key factor in this election is voter fatigue. The initial enthusiasm that characterised Mr Modi's earlier campaigns has waned. This sentiment is evident in the lower voter turnout compared to previous elections. The BJP's ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has stepped in by ramping up efforts to engage voters, but the challenge remains substantial. The BJP's concern is palpable, as the party seeks to galvanise its base and rekindle the support that propelled Mr Modi to power in the past. Economic issues are at the forefront of voter concerns, overshadowing the religious and nationalist fervour that had previously bolstered BJP campaigns. Unemployment, agrarian distress, and discontent over economic policies promoting inequalities have provided fertile ground for the opposition. In states like Maharashtra, Bihar, and Haryana, the economic discontent is palpable. Protests by jobless youth and farmers' grievances over export bans underscore a broader dissatisfaction that the Prime Minister is seeking to address through media engagements on an unprecedented scale. The opposition, led by Congress' Rahul Gandhi, has sought to capitalise on these issues, presenting a more united front than in previous elections. Mr Gandhi's rebranding as a grassroots leader through his padyatras, and his willingness to form strategic alliances with regional parties, has invigorated the opposition. This coalition, once dismissed as a ragtag assemblage of conflicting ~ and vested - interests, has proven to be more formidable than expected.

The BJP's internal challenges compound its electoral struggles. Mr Modi's dominance within the party has marginalised other leaders, reducing the effectiveness of a broader campaign strategy. Many prominent leaders of the party appear not to have been as influential outside their strongholds, leading to a campaign overly reliant on Mr Modi's persona. This centralisation of the campaign risks alienating voters who are looking for tangible solutions to their problems. Moreover, the BJP's missteps, such as the UP chief minister's proposal to ban cow slaughter nationwide, have backfired in rural Uttar Pradesh itself where stray cattle are a significant problem. These issues, coupled with the economic distress faced by farmers, have fuelled voter sentiment in key battleground states. In Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP has always enjoyed substantial support, the party's narrative has turned defensive. While the metaphor of a "rogue wave" may not be apt, disparate and unconnected events are converging to make an impact on the BJP's initial projections.

Iran's Transition

The untimely death of President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash near the Azerbaijan border marks a significant turning point for Iran, a nation at the crux of some of the most crucial geopolitical tensions in the world. Mr Raisi's presidency, although short, was one of profound conservatism and strict adherence to the principles of the Islamic Republic as envisioned by its clerical leadership. A hardliner within the Iranian political spectrum, Mr Raisi was often viewed as a possible successor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. His policies, notably his firm stance on morality laws and his unyielding position in nuclear negotiations, reinforced the ideological purity that the regime sought to maintain amidst domestic and international challenges. His approach was to strengthen Iran's resolve against Western pressures while securing its regional interests through alliances with non-state actors across West Asia. Under Mr Raisi's administration, Iran saw a resurgence of the enforcement of stringent social codes, which sparked significant unrest within parts of the Iranian population. The death of Mahsa Amini, which ignited nationwide protests, was a stark reminder of the societal divisions that run deep in Iranian society. These events, under his watch, highlighted a regime often in conflict with the evolving demands and aspirations of its younger population. The consequences of Mr Raisi's headline policies extended beyond Iran's borders. In the realm of international relations, his tenure did little to alleviate tensions with Western powers, notably the United States. The nuclear deal, which has been a pivot of contention, saw no significant breakthroughs during his time, leaving the region in a continuous state of uncertainty regarding nuclear proliferation and economic sanctions.

The implications of Mr Raisi's sudden death are profound for Iran's future. It removes a key figure aligned closely with Ayatollah Khamenei and disrupts the anticipated continuity of the hardline faction within the regime. This could either pave the way for a period of significant political restructuring or further entrench the conservative elements within the government, depending on how the succession unfolds. Regionally, Mr Raisi's absence may alter the dynamics of Iran's engagements in proxy conflicts from Syria to Yemen. His aggressive posture had ensured a continuity of Iran's regional policies established by his predecessors. The new leadership, depending on its ideological and strategic dispositions, might recalibrate these engagements, which could either escalate conflicts or open new avenues for dialogue with regional adversaries, including Saudi Arabia and Israel. Mr Raisi's headline stance represented a challenge to international diplomacy, particularly in how the West engaged with Iran on nuclear issues and regional security. The world will be watching closely to see if his departure offers an altered approach, one that sees greater diplomatic outreach. Mr Raisi's tenure and his unexpected demise are not merely a footnote in Iranian history but could be a precursor to a transformative era for Iran and its role on the global stage.

Traumatic Tales

Alice Munro, who has been credited with lending mythic proportions to lives of ordinary people from small rural towns like those in the Ontario countryside, has been compared to Ernest Hemingway in the realism, economy and lucidity of her style; to John Updike in her insights into the intricacies of social and sexual relationships; to Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty in her ability to create characters of eccentric individual, and to Marcel Proust in the completeness and verisimilitude with which she evokes the past

Although the sweet dream was cherished for a long time, the master story-teller, popularly known as "the Canadian Chekov," was never fully convinced that one day she would become the first from her country to bag the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature. But all doubts were removed when the Swedish Academy awarded the coveted honour to Alice Munro in 2013 for her brilliant short stories that portrayed human beings in precarious social, moral and psychological conditions. With her death recently, Canada has lost her first Nobel laureate for Literature and the world a master craftsman of short fiction who could accommodate the epic complexity of the novel in just a few pages.

Munro has been singularly adept in encapsulating life's varied experience, often traumatic, within the bristling geometry of the short story narrative. For her, awards have never been a distant dream, and she had, before the Nobel, won the Man Booker Prize in 2009, Governor General's Literary Award (1969) for Dance of the Happy Shades, Canadian Book Seller's Award in 1972 for Lives of Girls and Women, Canada-Australia Literary Prize (1977) and so on. Usually concerned with characters living in the small towns of southwestern Ontario, the stories of Munro present ordinary experiences in such a way that they appear extraordinary.

Considered one of Canada's major writers, Munro's work is characterized by a refusal to imbue events with moral overtones. Her stories offer no resolution, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions regarding the actions of her unpredictable protagonists. "Few people writing today," claimed the literary critic Beverley Slopén in Publishers Weekly, "can bring a character, a mood or a scene to life with economy. And Munro has an exhilarating ability to make the readers see the familiar with fresh insight and compassion".

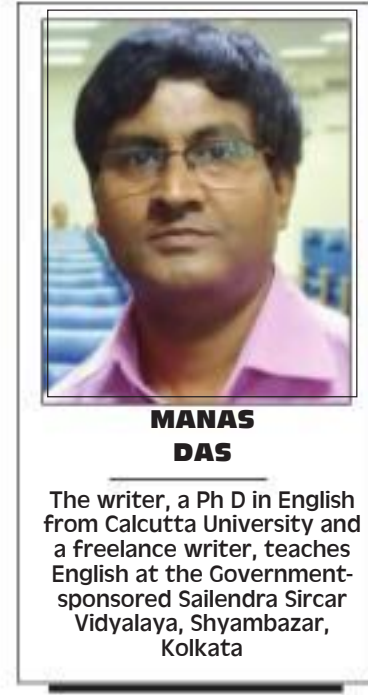
Munro, who has been credited with lending mythic proportions to lives of ordinary people from small rural towns like those in the Ontario countryside, has been compared to Ernest Hemingway in the realism, economy and lucidity of her style; to John Updike in her insights into the intricacies of social and sexual relationships; to Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty in her ability to create characters of eccentric individual, and to Marcel Proust in the completeness and verisimilitude with which she evokes the past. She is an intuitive writer, who is less likely to be concerned with problems of form than with clarity and veracity.

Chief among her virtues is her great honesty; her refusal to oversimplify or falsify human beings, emotions, or experience. One of her characters states: "How to keep oneself from lying I see as the main problem everywhere". Her awareness of this



problem is everywhere evident in her writing, certainly in the distinctive voices of her narrator-protagonists, who are scrupulously concerned with truth. Finally, her themes - memory, love, transience, death - are significant. To explore such themes within the limitations of the short-story form with subtlety and depth is Munro's achievement. One of Munro's recurring themes is "the pain of human contact ... the fascinating pain; the humiliating necessity". The phrase occurs in The Stone in the Field, and refers to the narrator's maiden aunts, who cringe from all human contact, but the emotional pain that human contact inevitably brings is a subject in all her stories. It is evident in the title story of her first collection, Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), in which an elderly, impoverished piano teacher, Miss Marsalles, has a "party" (her word for recital) for a dwindling number of her students and their mothers, an entertainment she can ill-afford. The elaborate but nearly inedible refreshments, the ludicrous gifts, and the tedium of the recital pieces emphasize the incongruity between Marsalles's serene pleasure in the festivities and the grim suffering of her unwilling but outwardly polite guests. The suffering intensifies with the arrival of her new pupils, a group of mentally disabled children, and when one disabled girl gives an accomplished performance of a sprightly piece called "The Dance of the Happy Shades", the snobbish mothers are greatly miffed as they believe that the idea of a mentally disabled girl learning to play the piano is "useless, out-of-place". The narrator however states: "It is the Dance of the Happy Shades that prevents us; it is the one communiqué from the other country where she lives. She is living in another country, out of touch with reality; she has escaped into "the freedom of a great unemotional happiness".

But this happiness eluded many of Munro's characters suffering from the inescapable pain



of human contact. In The Peace of Utrecht, the central character, Helen, makes a trip to see her sister in the small town, Jubilee. The recent death of their mother is on their minds, but they cannot speak of it. Maddy, the sister who stayed at home to look after their "Gothic Mother", has forbidden all such talk: "No exorcising here", she says. Yet exorcism is what Helen desperately needs as she struggles with the torment she feels about her sister's sacrifice, her mother's life, and her own previous self which this return home so vividly and strangely evokes. Recalling the love and pity denied this egocentric, petulant and incorrigible mother, Helen experiences raging guilt, shame and anger that she and her sister were forced into "parodies of love". Finally, Helen and her sister withdrew even the pretence of love, withdrew all emotion: "We took away from her our anger and impatience and disgust, took all emotion away from our dealings with her, as you might take away meat from a prisoner to weaken him, till he died". In an interview Munro has confessed that The Peace of Utrecht is her most autobiographical story and was difficult to write. Perhaps its emotional power derives from its closeness to her own experience, but it exhibits those qualities for which her writing has been praised: the effortless clarity of style, the psychological penetration of character, the evocation of time and place, the unflinching eye and ear which convey an impression of absolute authenticity - these are the hallmarks of Munro's finest fiction, and they are evident even in her earliest stories.

In some of her short stories, Munro has also plunged into sexual relationships, particularly in the feelings that women have about men. In Bardon Bus, the narrator, a woman writer spending time in Australia, meets an anthropologist (known as "X"), and begins a deliberately limited affair, asking only that it last out their short time in Australia.

Later, when both have returned to Canada, she is miserable, tortured by memory and need. "I can't continue to move my body along the streets unless I exist in his mind and in his eyes". Finally, she realizes her obsession is a threat to her sanity, and she decides to let go of the relationship and in doing so, she gets "a queer kind of pleasure". But this seeming resolution is subtly undercut by the conclusion of the story. The narrator's much younger friend, Kay, happens to mention her involvement with a fascinating new "friend" who turns out to be "X". The story ends there, but the pain (presumably) does not.

The female protagonist of Tell Me Yes or No is also sifting through the emotional trouble of an adulterous affair. The central insight in the story is the realization of how "women build their castles on foundations hardly strong enough to support a night's shelter ... how women deceive themselves, and uselessly suffer being exploitable because of some deep, but indefinable, and not final - flaw in themselves". In The Love of a Good Woman, Munro explores again the pain of human contact in its various guises. In the title novella, Enid, a middle-aged, practical nurse finds herself attending the dying Mrs. Quinn. Lonely, kind Enid strives to do good, resisting her dislike of the sick woman. As an intruder in a household that cannot function without her, she is unaware of her attraction to the husband, a former classmate, until his wife implicates him in the death of a local optometrist.

In the story Jakarta, Munro displays brilliant irony in the presentation of two young wives who argue over D.H. Lawrence's assertion that a woman's happiness lies in a man. Kath is a proper Canadian wife and mother, but Sonje, her pot-smoking, commune-dwelling friend, is an American. Over the years, conservative Kath breaks away from her stuffy marriage to become strong and self-reliant. Sonje, who has routinely accepted her husband's wish to switch sexual partners, remains faithful to him even after he disappears in Jakarta. Josephine Humphreys, writing in the *New York Times* Book Review, claims that "Munro's fiction is out to seize the mystery of existence within time the unique quality of a person's fate". A compulsive writer for much of her adult life, Munro viewed within her work the essence of her ability to transcend aging, and her desire to write has, as she stated in an interview, "something to do with the fight against death, the feeling that we lose everything everyday, and writing is a way of convincing yourself that you are doing something about it". Despite her characteristic concern for honesty and her determination to tell the truth, it seems in this passage that she may be wrong about one thing: it seems clear that Munro's writing is destined to last for a very long time.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Pitroda's remarks

SIR, What Sam Pitroda had said about the ethnography of the Indian population is not entirely wrong. The only thing that was wrong were the words used and the timing, which was during the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. Modi and the BJP pounced upon the remarks and made a mountain of a molehill for electoral advantage. It is a fact that humanity originated in Middle Africa and they migrated northwards and some branched towards Europe and the others towards Asia. So if you check the DNA patterns you will find some similarities between persons of black colour whom we call Negroes from Africa with us. Thus those with similar genes and dark in complexion among the Indian population may have stronger links with Africa. That people of the North East have Mongoloid links is common knowledge clearly established by their facial features and the fact that some of the tribes in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland trace their origins from Tibet and others from South West China which is

acknowledged by the local population. The same way the people of the Indian Western coast had strong trade links with the Arabs and intermingling happened with the indigenous population which is again accepted by the Bori Muslims in Dakshin Kannada, the Moplahs of North Malabar in Kerala and up to Bhatkal in North Ka-

mataka as also the Dawoodi Bohra community. In fact they are proud of this lineage. Thus Pitroda made a gaffe on the timing and the words of his statement but there is nothing to find fault with in the content. The problem is that the Congress relies on their ageing leaders whose use-by date has expired and who are better suited to be retired. Hence such gaffes.

Yours, etc., S Kamat,
Mysore, 20 May.

WHY BLAME ONLY AMERICA?

SIR, With reference to the editorial, "US apathy" published today, it would be trite to single out the US when it comes to the growing sense of apathy and disconnect in polity, per se. This is seen creeping inexorably into nations across the globe, as each replicates a Trump-Biden syndrome, spawned through relentless polarisation. Trump did not cause a democratic crisis of faith, he rode to power on it. Once in control, he and his ilk discovered their room for manoeuvre was expanded by the same disillusionment that helped them into office. They debased democratic norms and abused institutions to ensure subversion of democratic systems. Because the US has essentially a two-party architecture, its fissures were more visible and predictable. It could be the exact opposite in nations with a far more complex matrix of political entities, that helped keep the political brew on boil. While scandals and crises would shake voters' faith in the political system occasionally, the engineered schism and dysfunction in polity and the agenda-driven governance thereof, would prove far more corrosive and leave deeper scars. Universally, people feel that democracy is failing as the governments it produced were unable or unwilling to address their greater concerns. In such a phase of political asphyxiation, the disillusioned and the disaffected are too inspired to defend a system that has failed to champion their cause. Worse, they believe more than ever before, that ballots may no longer be the sole guarantee to true democracy.

A MEMBER OF THE

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ASIAN VOICES

Restoring 'glory days' of shipbuilding

Thus declared President Marcos, who cheered the entry into the Subic Freeport of South Korea's HD Hyundai Korea Shipbuilding and Offshore Engineering, a global leader in shipbuilding and heavy industries that expects to invest \$550 million over the next 10 years and generate around 10,000 new jobs over the next three to five years.

HD Hyundai, which will initially focus on offshore wind platforms, forged an agreement to lease the large dry dock at the Agila Subic shipyard run by US equity firm Cerberus Capital Management, which took over in 2022 a 350-hectare shipyard complex in the former US navy base that was abandoned in 2019 by bankrupt Hanjin Heavy Industries.

"With this initiative of Cerberus and HG Hyundai, we will have a fresh start and a strong foundation in realizing our vision to be among the largest and most consequential shipbuilders in the world," said Mr. Marcos, adding that the investment would "restore the glory days of shipbuilding to our shores."

It has to be emphasized, however, that even prior to HD Hyundai's entry into Subic, the Philippines already has a solid shipbuilding industry with 17 large and medium-sized shipyards and about 90 small shipyards across the country that together employ some 48,000 workers.

Indeed, since 2010, the Philippines has been ranked among the



world's five largest ship producers in terms of gross tonnage, with locally manufactured vessels sailing to such markets as Japan and Germany.

Tsuneishi Heavy Industries (Cebu) Inc., Austal Philippines Pty Ltd., and Keppel Philippines Marine Inc., local units of global leaders in the shipbuilding sector have also helped establish the Philippines' reputation as a reliable source of commercial marine vessels such as bulk carriers and container ships.

Mr. Marcos wants to leverage that stellar reputation, the country's strategic location near shipbuilding behemoths Korea, Japan, and China, its local expertise developed over decades, and a large pool of skilled workers to solidify the Philippines' ranking among the world's largest shipbuilders.

The President already took a step in the right direction when he signed an executive order approving the implementation of the updated Maritime Industry Development Plan 2028, which among others called for the improvement of the country's shipbuilding and repair industry and upskilling of the maritime workforce.

This skills upgrading is especially crucial to the growth and development of the shipbuilding sector, as the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) stressed in its 2017 policy brief on the sector. The DTI said the abundant, cost-competitive, and hard-working workforce often goes overseas - primarily to the shipyards in the Middle East and Singapore - to earn higher wages while the graduates of education and training programs geared toward shipbuilding often do not meet international standards.

This situation must not be allowed to continue if the Philippines were to stand a chance of making itself indispensable to the growth of the global shipbuilding industry where the country has already carved a niche and developed a competitive advantage.

THREATS AHEAD

SIR, Rising heat may be familiar news, but looking at it in a broad sense is like turning away from the larger threats that lie ahead. The World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) most recent data showed that the Earth's temperature has been above average during the last decade. The temperature is anticipated to rise further in 2024. This will have an impact on

the entire earth's weather cycle as well as the life cycle of humans throughout time, turning everything upside down.

As a result, some areas may get unseasonal rain, while others may experience extreme heat. The way the world is exploiting resources in the name of development, it is predicted that the global temperature will rise by one and a half degrees Celsius by 2050. Following this, the world's temperature may rise by two to four degrees Celsius during the following fifty years. The most concerning aspect is that, while the environment is changing, we humans are unable to modify our behavior and attitudes as quickly. Perhaps we humans are incapable of understanding that the weather does not respect the boundaries we set for it. Weather warnings apply to the entire planet, including everything that lives, grows, and thrives on it. As a result, adjustments in our behavior are required, in addition to the rhetoric of international leaders on environmental issues.

Yours, etc., Abhijit Roy,
Jamshedpur, 19 May.



The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

The *dera* factor

Parties vie to woo sects in Punjab, Haryana

RELIGIOUS sects or *deras* have become synonymous with vote banks in Punjab and Haryana over the past two decades or so. With both states set to vote in the Lok Sabha polls, politicians of all hues are making a customary beeline for these *deras* in a bid to improve the electoral prospects of their parties. Multi-cornered contests in Punjab and Haryana have made many candidates desperate to seek every influential *dera*'s support to turn the tables on their rivals. They have been doing it somewhat discreetly in recent years, ever since the Supreme Court ruled in January 2017 that any appeal for votes on the ground of 'religion, race, caste, community or language' amounted to a 'corrupt practice' under the Representation of People's Act. Incidentally, that was also the year in which Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, head of the Sirsa-based Dera Sacha Sauda, was convicted of rape and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

The Sirsa *dera* head used to issue a diktat to his followers to vote for a particular candidate or party. He did it most famously during the 2007 Punjab Assembly elections, when his sect threw its weight behind the Congress. Consequently, the grand old party made significant gains in Malwa, even though the Shiromani Akali Dal managed to win the elections and regain power. Such public announcements have become a thing of the past after Ram Rahim reportedly scrapped the political wing of the *dera*. Nevertheless, politicians still regard Dera Sacha Sauda as a force to reckon with.

Other major sects, such as Radha Soami Satsang Beas, Nurmahal Dera and Dera Sachkhand Ballan, are also being wooed, notwithstanding their claims of being apolitical. With the clout of *deras* cutting across religious and caste lines, even a subtle hint from their gurus is enough to convey to the followers what's to be done on polling day. And that's where the opportunity lies for various political parties, especially in closely fought battles.

Fatal Porsche crash

Try juveniles as adults for reckless driving

THE tragic Porsche accident in Pune, where a 17-year-old driving at 200 kmph collided with a motorcycle, killing two young engineers, has led to an unusually swift — and welcome — legal action. The minor's father, accused of wilful neglect, and the bar owner and staffers who served him alcohol have been arrested. This signals zero tolerance to reckless behaviour.

The Pune Police's decision to involve the Crime Branch highlights the seriousness of the matter. The case against the father as well as the bar owner and staffers underscores a broader responsibility to prevent such tragedies. Charging the father under the Juvenile Justice Act emphasises the need for parental accountability in curbing dangerous activities. However, the Juvenile Justice Board's decision to grant bail to the minor, imposing such lenient conditions as writing an essay on road safety and undergoing counselling, is just a slap on the wrist rather than a proportionate response to a crime that caused two fatalities. Incidentally, it also raises the question of the logic of having the right to vote or get married (for girls) at 18 years and of public drinking at 25 in certain states.

The recent accident in Patiala, where four students died in a high-speed car crash, is a pointer to the troubling trend of dangerous driving among youths. Such incidents stress the need for stricter enforcement of traffic laws and a review of legal frameworks for juvenile offenders. The Pune Police's appeal to try the minor as an adult is a crucial step in this direction. The judicial system must respond appropriately and set a precedent of severe consequences for such rash acts, regardless of the offender's age. It will restore public confidence and deter reckless driving on our roads. The victims and their families deserve nothing less.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, MAY 22, 1924

India's educational problems

AS a brilliant and masterly exposition of the sublime ideals of liberal education, it would be difficult to beat the inaugural speech delivered by the Viceroy (Lord Reading) while opening the Indian Universities Conference in Simla on Monday last. Occasions were not rare when His Excellency, in his enthusiasm, rose to heights that it is the privilege of very few to scale. After expressing his thanks to the delegates for responding to his Government's invitation to attend the Conference, (the first of its kind held in India), and expressing appreciation of the sense of public duty, of interests in the objects of the Conference and of keenness evinced by them to take part in any measure to advance the well-being of the universities, His Excellency referred to his having availed of every opportunity of visiting various universities of India. He stated that during these individual visits, he had been able to convey his high conception of the great mission of the universities' teaching and training and his personal conviction of the extreme importance of university work in India in its effect, both on the individual and the country as a whole. The Viceroy had to take great pains in explaining the necessity that had impelled his Government to call this Conference, to the objects of which, it must be admitted, the required amount of publicity has not been given. "It is true," he said, "that each university is self-contained. It has its own work to perform and the needs of its own centre and clientele to provide for to a large extent. Its destiny lies in its own hands and it is a master of its own fortunes and alone responsible for its own success or failure."

Hope of Naya Kashmir amid poll buzz

There must be a quick return to democratic governance through early Assembly elections

AMITABH MATTOO
FORMER VC, UNIVERSITY OF JAMMU

ELECTIONS in Jammu and Kashmir are much more than a democratic ritual. In the popular imagination, they have been powerful symbols — of faith and betrayal; resistance and accommodation; hope and disillusionment; confidence and uncertainty. But rarely has the Kashmir valley witnessed such a boisterous celebration of competitive democracy as it has in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. Robust rallies, roadshows throughout the length and breadth of the picturesque Valley and Kashmir's many brave, emotional, colourful and sometimes mercurial political leaders have coalesced to construct what may well be a watershed moment in the state-torn-UT's contemporary history.

This is the first parliamentary election after the abrogation of Article 370, and the ending of the 'special provision' as well as the downgrading of the state to a union territory have been key issues in the campaign. And yet somewhat paradoxically, in the fairness of the elections (conducted in an atmosphere relatively also free of fear) is the finest expression of the idea of India in Kashmir. It is a moment to build on and sustain if we want to truly create a *Naya Kashmir*, and for that the Assembly elections must be conducted with equal alacrity.

Democracy has had shaky roots in J&K. In the 1950s and the 1960s, stage-managed elections in Jammu were seen as a betrayal of the 'trust' of 1947. The 1977 elections, the fairest the erstwhile state had witnessed since Independence, became a leitmotif of faith and



HEARTENING: Baramulla has shown the way with a record turnout in the Lok Sabha elections. PH

accommodation. The 1987 elections, neither free nor fair, paved the way for decades of militancy. Confidence in the democratic process was restored to a considerable extent when for the first time the electorate was able to dislodge the then ruling party in 2002 during Prime Minister Vajpayee's tenure. But truly gone are the days when then PM Jawaharlal Nehru had to, in the 1950s, reportedly advise the then Wazir-e-Azam of the state, Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, to concede a few seats to his opponents, if only to make the election credible in the public perception.

Today, most of the voters of J&K genuinely believe that elections are free and fair and that they can make a difference. They are not under the illusion that elections can sort out the larger political issues, but they know that the quest for a "resolution of the Kashmir issue" cannot be allowed to hold them hostage to dysfunctional governance or an unelected government. These are voters who seek global standards of governance, world-class infrastructure and new opportunities of education and employment as well as the right to everyday dignity — without draconian

New Delhi has a real chance to move beyond history. It is time for the discourse to shift from 'being special' to 'being equal'

laws — and to ensure that they are not alienated from their land.

Look at J&K's chequered 'democratic' past. In August 1953, Sheikh Abdullah — the tallest leader of the state — was holidaying in Gulmarg when early one morning, Superintendent of Police Lakshman Das Thakur informed the J&K Prime Minister (as was the nomenclature then) that he had been dismissed and was being interned. "Who ordered this?" Sheikh is said to have roared, believing that his friend in Teen Murti House (PM Nehru) would never betray him. Thakur presented an order signed by the Sadr-i-Riyasat, Karan Singh, barely out of his teens, whose father, Maharajah Hari Singh, had been exiled to Mumbai. Sheikh took time to offer namaz before accepting that

the 'chit of the boy' he had appointed had just removed him from office 'undemocratically'. For 22 years, Sheikh stayed out of power, arguably the most popular leader until he accepted an accord with Indira Gandhi in 1975.

Of course, the contagion of not allowing democracy in J&K had infected Sheikh's National Conference (NC) as well, as he barely allowed any opposition to survive in the state. He made inflammatory speeches in RS Pura, flirted with American emissaries and let the tallest leader of the Jana Sangh, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, die in Srinagar on his watch under mysterious circumstances.

His successor, Bakshi, with Delhi's patronage, manipulated elections to the point that Pandit ji had to counsel him to allow at least some opposition to grow, even if only for cosmetic reasons.

In the post-Sheikh era, his son and political successor Farooq Abdullah was the recipient of New Delhi's blessings as well as the lack of faith in Indian democracy. In 1984, Abdul Ghani Lone — father of People's Conference leader Sajjad Lone — had to wake up Dr Abdullah from slumber to inform him that a large section of his loyal MLAs had defected and were in Raj

Bhawan with then Governor Jagmohan. Farooq was dismissed, and former Governor BK Nehru has revealed that the defection was arranged after large sums of money were moved by conduits of the Intelligence Bureau, including one well-known Congress leader/businessman, and paid off to the deviant MLAs.

In 1987, Kashmir's rigged Assembly election were fought by the NC and the Congress together. My father, a respectable Kashmiri Pandit, found that his vote had already been cast in the Amira Kadal constituency, where Maulvi Yusuf Shah of the Muslim United Front (now Syed Salahuddin of the Hizbul Mujahideen) was contesting against the NC's Ghulam Mohiuddin Shah.

But today, New Delhi has a real chance to move beyond history to create a new future. Most importantly, there must be a quick return to democratic governance through early Assembly elections. The last elections were held nearly a decade ago, and there has been no elected government in J&K for the past over five years. Although there have been elections to local bodies, they cannot be a substitute for a duly constituted Legislative Assembly.

Statehood must be restored to J&K as soon as possible: Home Minister Amit Shah had given an assurance in December last year that this would be done at an appropriate time. The appropriate time is now, so that any angst over the lost battle over Article 370 is overtaken by a sense of victory over regaining statehood.

Finally, it is time for the discourse to move from 'being special' to 'being equal'. Most residents and leaders of the UT would recognise that as an equal member of the Indian federal polity, they may enjoy greater freedom and rights than they did in a special state. After all, today, Tamil Nadu or West Bengal or Odisha is able to preserve its cultural identity, political space and economic wellbeing much better than J&K was able to do as a special state of the Union.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

There are ways to pursue political change. In a democracy, it's through the ballot box. — Richard Armitage

Much ado about the rat race

SHANKAR GOPALKRISHNAN

RIGHT from childhood, we are told to run fast, since we are in a rat race. Whether we are appearing in the Class X exams or climbing the corporate ladder, these are all mini-races within the bigger race. What makes it a rat race? There is an eloquent explanation: 'It is the streak of competitiveness to win at all costs that makes it a rat race.' It is aptly said: 'Even if you manage to win a rat race, you will still be a rat!'

The irony is, we have never seen rats run a race. Unlike humans, with their penchant for one-upmanship, rats are team players. They work in groups, busily nibbling away at every obstacle.

I have grown up observing rats. In Mumbai, our building had an abundance of rodents. These rats were rotund; they fed on food that was generously discarded from the kitchen window. Many attempts were made to cement the building floor, fill the rat-holes and drive the rodents away. But they were tenacious creatures. It didn't matter if the floor was made of concrete or granite. They still managed to tunnel their way in.

Thanks to the unending Metro construction, most Indian cities have been turned upside down. Can't we think of an out-of-the-box solution to build underground Metro lines, using rats? All we need is an army of rats, and a Pied Piper to streamline their activity. In no time, all the underground tunnels, snaking through the entire city, will be ready!

A couple of years before the Covid-19 pandemic, my workplace was plagued by a rat menace, especially at night. We never saw these rats during the day. One fine day, my colleague stepped on a piece of yellow foam lying outside the meeting room — but he couldn't move, for his foot was stuck, as though in Fevicol. He nearly fell down and tried to break the fall with his hands. Lo and behold, his palm got stuck on the 'yellow foam'! A colleague rushed to his side, stepped on the same foam... and now he too was stuck! It was like the *Yaksha Prashna* story in the Mahabharata. You tried to help someone and fell victim to the same problem.

The scene was strangely comical, but you couldn't laugh openly — after all, here were two colleagues flailing their hands and legs helplessly.

Eventually, we managed to separate them from the foam. The security guard was summoned. He informed us that the yellow foam, laced with glue, was meant to catch rats. The intent was clear — the rat would step on it and stay glued for life! Not a single rat fell for this trick. Herein lay yet another telling example of how humans make grandiose plans, build an elaborate trap but end up, like the proverbial silkworm, getting themselves entangled. As they say, 'the best-laid plans of men and mice often go awry'!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Leadership vacuum in Iran

Apropos of the editorial 'Iran after Raisi', the shocking death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash has left the country in a state of uncertainty. His untimely demise has created a leadership vacuum. The news, which comes days after India signed a 10-year deal to operate the Chabahar port, does not augur well for India-Iran ties. This is the second such jolt to Tehran after the assassination of top Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in early 2020. Iran has been on the receiving end of sanctions because of its bitter relations with the US. One can only hope that the turmoil in the region will not last long.

KIRTI WADHAWAN, KANPUR

Raisi's death a great loss

The death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a chopper crash is a great tragedy. Since West Asia has been reeling from unrest, there would be much speculation about the reason behind the accident. Conspiracy theories will be floated about some other country having a hand in the mishap. Fingers will be pointed at Israel, as tensions between the two nations have been simmering for quite some time now. Raisi was a leader with vast experience, one of the reasons why he was seen as a leading candidate to take over from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. His demise is a big loss for Iran.

DVG SANKARA RAO, VIZIANAGARAM (AP)

Turmoil in Iran's domestic politics

With reference to 'Iran after Raisi', there is no doubt that the accidental death of any head of state has significant consequences. In Iran, it is their Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who calls the shots. But President Raisi's death is bound to have a major impact on Iran's domestic politics, as he was seen as a leading candidate to succeed the 85-year-old Supreme Leader. Even if the Supreme Leader's son, Mojtaba Khamenei, is elevated to the post, his rule will come under much scrutiny. The world is carefully watching every step of the Ayatollah.

MONA SINGH, BY MAIL

Role of FSSAI under lens

With reference to 'Spice crisis', food adulteration is not unheard of in India. Companies

like Dabur, Zandu, Baidyanath, Nestle and Patanjali have all come under the scanner for adulteration. The ban on Indian spices imposed by Singapore, Hong Kong, the Maldives, Australia, and Nepal due to alleged contamination of ethylene oxide in products of popular brands MDH and Everest is a matter of embarrassment for India. It puts a big question mark on the functioning of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). Clearly, the statutory body has failed in its duty to ensure the wellbeing of consumers and needs to do some soul-searching. When Indian firms produce and export substandard or adulterated products, it gives a bad name to our country.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Hold those at fault accountable

Refer to the editorial 'Spice crisis'; it is time to monitor the role and functioning of the FSSAI and other regulatory authorities or statutory bodies in India. Why do these authorities only jump into action when a product manufactured by an Indian company is banned abroad for food adulteration or when a foodstuff fails to meet the standards? It shows that the bodies have little concern about the health of consumers in India. Those responsible for the lapse must be brought to book. Such negligence on the part of the authorities should not go unpunished.

KRISHAN BHATIA, HANSI

Down with affirmative action

Refer to the article 'Reservation policy held hostage to political rhetoric'; the concept of reservation was introduced under the false pretext of ensuring inclusive growth for the underprivileged. All individuals of a caste cannot be socially and economically underprivileged. Reservation has only hardened the social barriers in the country that would have otherwise ceased to exist. A reservation is not the solution. It is education and employment that ensure the development of a nation and the progress of its underprivileged communities. If India wants to move forward, all quotas for different communities in education and employment should be scrapped.

VIRENDER SINGH LATHER, KARNAL

Plug Haryana's skill gap to combat job crisis



BHUPINDER SINGH HOODA
FORMER CM, HARYANA

INDIA is facing a severe and widespread unemployment crisis, which is often described as a 'ticking bomb' of joblessness. Job creation must become the central focus of national political and policy discussions. The Congress has recognised the gravity of the situation and prioritised employment, social justice and inclusiveness in its election promises outlined in the *Nyay Patra*.

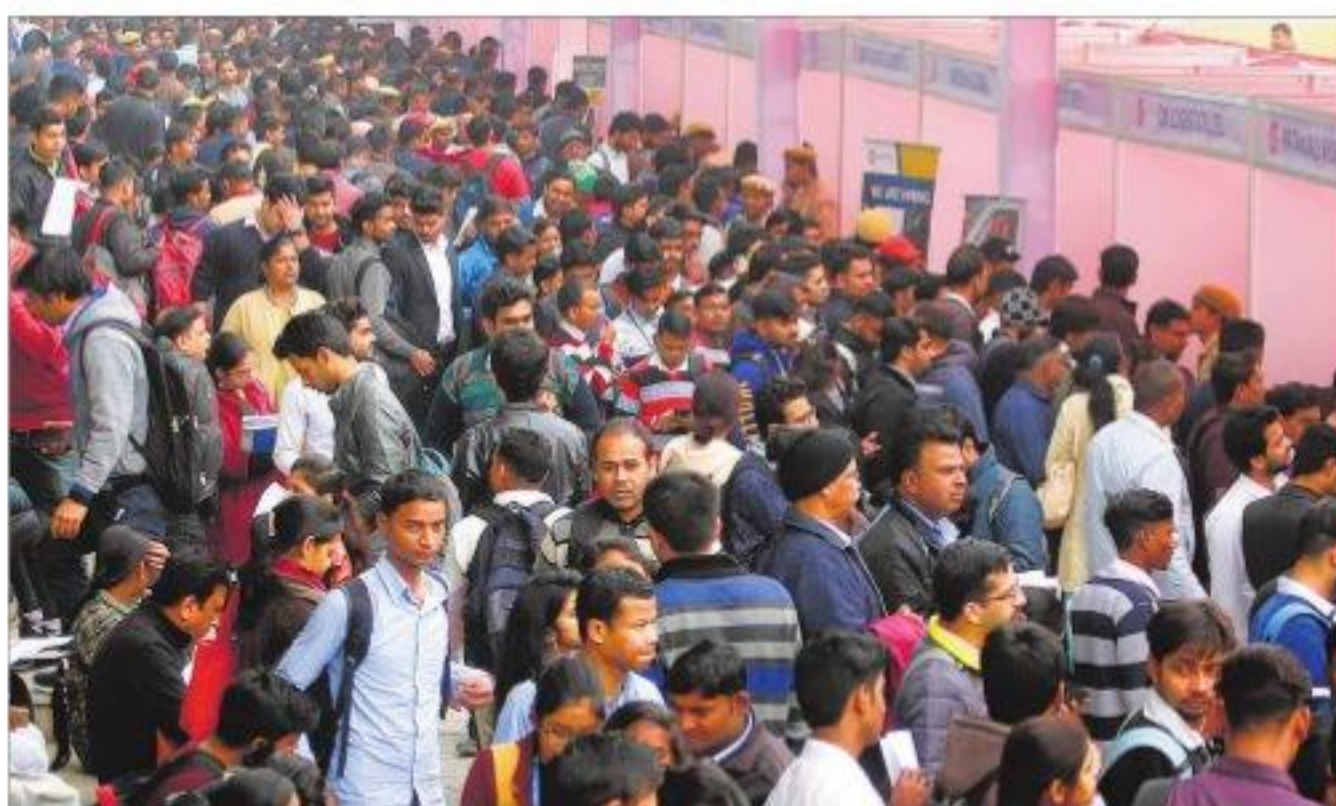
It is widely acknowledged that unemployment can be addressed through job opportunities, but the issue is complex and multifaceted, extending beyond mere joblessness. Consequently, finding a comprehensive solution to unemployment has been a long-standing challenge for successive governments. This necessitates an informed debate and brainstorming to understand the issue as a human problem rather than a political one. Additionally, current social, economic and technological factors must be taken into account to develop an effective strategy to combat this problem.

Rather than delving into the intricacies of statistics derived

from multiple surveys conducted by various agencies using different methodologies, we should strive to address this social issue with a more pragmatic and compassionate approach, rather than relying on purely academic or bureaucratic solutions.

Among the states, Haryana is worst affected by unemployment, with the rate approximately three times higher than the national average. This was exemplified by the fierce competition for three Group D posts in the District Court, Jind; thousands of highly qualified applicants, including those with BE/ME, MBA and other postgraduate degrees, vied for these posts. The indifferent attitude of the state government towards educated youth over the past nine years has exacerbated the dire situation.

Vacancies in government departments — over two lakh, including those of teachers and healthcare workers — were not filled. They were either put on hold or on sale. Frequent paper leaks, cancellation of examinations and massive irregularities in the selection process frustrated the youth of the state; they either started migrating to other countries, risking their lives for a living, or were drawn into the dark world of violence, crime, drugs, depression or suicide. Instead of facing this grave crisis with the utmost compassion, sincerity and priority, the government's policy response was myopic, populist, callous and



SOLUTION: The development of new smart cities can be a magnet for a large number of jobs due to the agglomeration effect and the availability of opportunities. FILE PHOTO

deceptive.

What added insult to injury for the unemployed youth was the formulation of the Deployment of Contractual Persons Policy, 2022. This policy is being implemented through a government-approved agency (digital labour exchange), Haryana Kaushal Rozgar Nigam Limited. Through this agency, highly qualified youth are being temporarily deployed for various job roles on low and fixed wages. They are even 'exported' to war-hit countries like Israel.

Haryana has the potential to create numerous jobs if a clear, consistent, comprehensive and credible multipronged policy is developed. If the Congress comes to power, our top priority will be to create a conducive environment for generating

employment opportunities.

In Haryana, the agriculture sector is the largest job provider, with over 50 per cent of the population engaged in agriculture and allied activities. Promoting food processing, agri-technological advancements, storage, agri-exports, agri-marketing, dairying and horticulture can create a significant number of jobs. Increasing MGNREGA rates and linking them with other initiatives will help create more productive and purposeful jobs in rural areas.

In 2019, the manufacturing sector was the second-largest employer after agriculture. However, as of 2023, the construction sector has taken its place, followed by the service sector, trade and hospitality, with manufacturing now in

the fourth place. Improving the ease of doing business — providing land at reasonable prices, skilled labour, adequate and affordable credit facilities — along with effective market and labour laws, and cheap and sufficient electricity supply will stimulate job creation in the manufacturing sector.

The government is the third largest employer. More than two lakh vacancies need to be filled in a time-bound manner. To effectively and efficiently deliver services to the people and keep pace with the increasing number of job seekers, more permanent jobs need to be created in the government, public undertakings and cooperative sectors.

The development of new smart cities can be a magnet for a large number of jobs due to the agglomeration effect and the availability of opportunities. It will also have significant developmental and societal consequences. A major push for education, health, nutrition and social security infrastructure can be achieved by creating quality and well-paid jobs for ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) personnel, anganwadi workers, mid-day meal providers and midwives.

The low participation of women in the labour force (25 per cent) represents a significant untapped potential for employment. This can be addressed by creating a supportive environment, implementing maternity and labour

laws, ensuring women's safety and providing them with accommodation and transportation facilities. The urban unemployment rate is 10.1 per cent, while rural joblessness is at 7.4 per cent. Therefore, a new policy similar to MGNREGA should be launched in cities and urban areas. Additionally, promoting remote work opportunities can expand the job market, especially for women and youth in rural areas.

Improving the employability of the workforce is crucial for taking advantage of the demographic dividend. This requires enhancing the quality of education, particularly foundational literacy and technical education. The ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) raises concerns over education infrastructure in Haryana, highlighting the need for improvement. Prolonged unemployment and a lack of skill upgrading can reduce a person's employability.

There is a significant skill gap in the state, leading to unemployment. Therefore, a skill development revolution is necessary for up-skilling, re-skilling and adopting innovative processes to meet the new job requirements. Establishing a knowledge hub in Haryana with international-level institutions of excellence in technology, research and innovation can help meet the modern job market requirements. It will take persistent and pragmatic policies and political will to overcome this crisis.

Haryana has the potential to create numerous jobs if a multipronged policy is developed.

Navy needs a capacity boost to become 'net security provider'



MANOJ JOSHI
DISTINGUISHED FELLOW, OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION, NEW DELHI

THIS is an uncommonly busy period for the Indian Navy. In recent months, its western fleet has taken a proactive posture in the northern Indian Ocean to guard the sea lanes against attacks by the Houthis and, more recently, the revived Somali piracy. As of March-April, the Navy had 10 warships in the Arabian Sea and two in the Red Sea; in an unprecedented move, it also deployed 11 of its 16 submarines. This is perhaps the most significant deployment of the Navy in recent decades. It is also using its P8I long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft to intensify its patrol of the seas.

At the same time, the eastern fleet was carrying out an important strategic mission. In early May, it sent a flotilla of three ships to the South China Sea, where they visited Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines. In May 2023, India and ASEAN held their first-ever mar-

itime exercise, though the Indian Navy has been involved in bilateral exercises with navies of several ASEAN nations.

In March, the Navy inaugurated and upgraded naval bases on the Minicoy islands as well as an important facility in Mauritius. The upgrading of a naval facility at Agatti and establishing INS Jatayu in Minicoy are clearly aimed at checking possible Chinese inroads in the Maldives. The new airstrip and jetty on Agalega island in Mauritius is part of a long-term plan for India's deployments in the Indian Ocean Region to counter Chinese presence there. Beijing, it has been pointed out, is the only country with an embassy in each of the six Indian Ocean island states — Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and the Comoros.

Last month, reports said that India is also upgrading its military infrastructure on the Andaman & Nicobar Islands that are adjacent to the Malacca Straits. Airfields there are getting longer runways, upgraded jetties and new roads are being built on the islands. The aim is to facilitate greater deployment warships, aircraft, missile batteries and troops there.

But the most active deployment of the Navy is related to the Houthis and



NAVAL PUSH: A prototype of indigenous midget submarine Arowana was launched last week. ANI

revived Somali piracy. Shipping to the western Indian ports is directly affected by turbulence in West Asia and already prices of containers between northern Europe and China have doubled. There are reports that the developments could affect Indian exports by as much as \$30 billion over the year if things remain bad.

At present, India is not part of the US-led security initiative called Operation Prosperity Guardian, which consists essentially of the Western alliance and was launched in mid-December. It is this alliance which is undertaking the attacks on

Houthi bases in Yemen.

Recently, India joined the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a 34-member grouping led by the US Central Command (CENTCOM) based in Bahrain and also posted a liaison officer to the CENTCOM. The CMF is not an alliance; it is flexible and does not exercise any political or military mandate.

New Delhi itself has no quarrel with the Houthis. But they are backed by Iran, a country with which India enjoys good relations. The recent Indian decision to manage the Chabahar port is an indicator that India is also looking at a broader horizon in relation

to the Eurasian and Indian Ocean components of its foreign and security policy.

India often boasts of its aim of becoming the 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean, but as of now, it needs a sharp boost in its capacity to become one. As it is, it faces a medium-term challenge from the Chinese PLA Navy, which has been active since the last decade in terms of sending submarines, intelligence-gathering and research vessels on regular patrols in the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Navy is the smallest of the three services and has the lowest share of the defence budget. While it is important to stress partnerships with like-minded countries in the region, for a military service there is no alternative to raw power. Unfortunately, in the past decade, the Navy has had to trim its sails. In 2019, it announced that it was reducing its target of acquiring 200 ships by 2027 to 175. The Navy's plans for a large aircraft carrier to follow on the Vikrant project have yet to get official approval.

Now, after much dithering, the government seems to be on the verge of taking a decision on the Rs 60,000-crore Project 75I submarine venture. Tenders of two companies, one having a Spanish partner and the other a German one, are being evaluat-

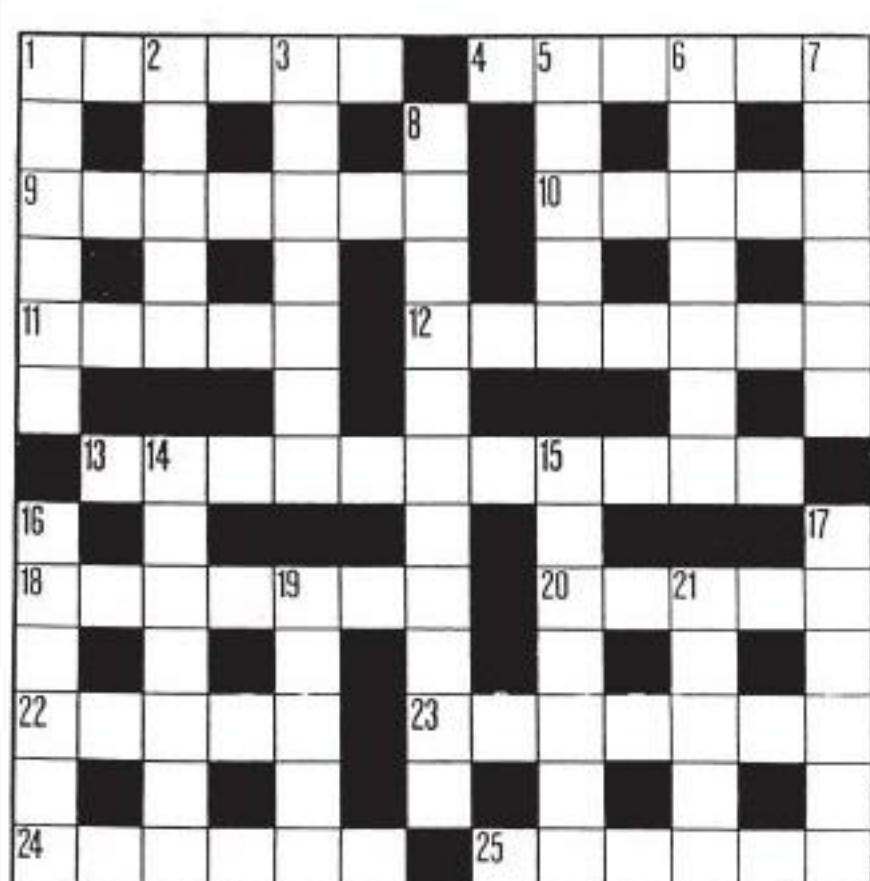
ed. A key technology that is being assessed is of Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) that enables conventional submarines to remain underwater for weeks. Under the Strategic Partnership Model, L&T is partnering with the Spanish company, Navantia, for the project, while Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd has teamed up with ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems.

A major reason for the urgency now is that the first of four AIP submarines built by China for Pakistan was commissioned in April this year. Pakistan already operated French AIP-equipped Agosta 90B submarines. In 2016, Islamabad signed a deal with China for the supply of four new AIP-equipped submarines and four more of this type will later be built in Karachi.

Eleven of India's 17 conventional submarines are decades old. It has two nuclear ballistic missile submarines, but these are dedicated to strategic deterrence and not related to the Navy. Besides Project 75I conventional submarines, India has been considering the idea of making nuclear-powered attack submarines, but the idea remains on the drawing board. Finding space for it in the current budget would be a daunting proposition.

India faces a medium-term challenge from the Chinese PLA Navy, which has been active in terms of sending vessels on regular patrols in the Indian Ocean.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- To lower in status (6)
 - Utter nonsense (6)
 - Accidentally divulge (3,4)
 - A Dutch glazed earthenware (5)
 - Inexperienced (5)
 - Final goal of Buddhism (7)
 - Relevant example (4,2,5)
 - Driving force (7)
 - Betting card-game (5)
 - Think fit (5)
 - Indefinitely many (7)
 - To lure (6)
 - A persistent resentment (6)
- DOWN**
- Downpour (6)
 - Go swimming (5)
 - Prevent from speaking (7)
 - Jockey (5)
 - Bad guy in story or play (7)
 - Deadly (6)
 - Easily decided (4-3-4)
 - Assign a post to (7)
 - In theory (2,5)
 - Set on fire (6)
 - Border (6)
 - Invigorating (5)
 - To massage (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Codicil, 2 Gorse, 8 Infinitesimal, 9 Force, 10 Look for, 11 Single, 12 Gache, 15 Heinous, 17 Catch, 19 Multitudinous, 20 Rayon, 21 Honesty.

Down: 1 Cliff, 2 Deferentially, 3 Congeal, 4 Little, 5 Gusto, 6 Ramifications, 7 Enlarge, 11 Schemer, 13 Auction, 14 As such, 16 Onion, 18 Husky.

SU DO KU

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

V HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

- MAY 22ND 2024, WEDNESDAY**
- Shaka Samvat 1946
 - Jyeshtha Shaka 1
 - Jyeshtha Parvishte 9
 - Hijari 1445
 - Shukla Paksha Tithi 14, up to 6:48 pm
 - Variyan Yoga up to 12:37 pm
 - Swati Nakshatra up to 7:47 am
 - Moon enters Scorpio sign 2:56 am

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	44	30
New Delhi	44	30
Amritsar	45	27
Bathinda	45	27
Jalandhar	45	25
Ludhiana	46	27
Bhiwani	46	33
Hisar	46	28
Sirsa	46	31
Dharamsala	37	23
Manali	27	12
Shimla	28	18
Srinagar	30	13
Jammu	43	25
Kargil	24	11
Leh	20	08
Dehradun	40	23
Mussoorie	27	15

TEMPERATURE IN °C

CONTRAPUNTO

Weakness of attitude becomes weakness of character

-ALBERT EINSTEIN

Courts On Poll Duty

That Calcutta HC had to intervene in poll matters EC should have handled is troubling

Calcutta HC is hearing today an appeal against its order on Monday restraining BJP from publishing ads it found had violated Model Code of Conduct (MCC) - Election Commission's manual for political parties that's in force from announcement of polls till results day. HC was sharp - it held EC had "grossly failed" to address violation of MCC. It was a rare observation, even troubling, that a constitutional court found reason to pull up a constitutional authority. Three takeaways.

Content & timing of ads | HC found the ads to be "slanderous" and "derogatory". One ad in Bengali appeared to use religion to target Trinamool. Another ad was published on May 12, a day before the fourth phase of polling in Bengal - MCC mandates a 48-hour silence period before poll days. These are routine violations that EC could have swiftly handled. Trinamool moved court alleging EC had not acted on its complaints. For EC's own good, the political party should not have felt the need to approach court. That it did demands institutional introspection within EC.

Courts on poll duty | Supreme Court has been on constant poll duty. Following the electoral bonds case, it has in its docket cases vital to EC's constitutional authority - appointments of ECs, EVM-VVPATs, on vacancies in legislatures, and of course, the Maharashtra cases including assigning of party symbols. Both public and political parties are turning to the courts frequently on matters jurisdictionally in EC's ambit. Courts have desisted; thrown out frivolous pleas, discarded irrelevant claims, patiently heard activists and campaigners - returning petitioners repeatedly to EC, whose remit is the conduct of free and fair elections, and ensuring a level-playing field.

Constitution matters | There cannot be a perception that EC is anything but a neutral arbiter. Calcutta HC referred to Article 226 of the Constitution to state the petition before it wasn't preventing "smooth process of the election". Article 226 provides the right to approach HCs (and SC under Article 32) to anyone whose fundamental right has been violated. HC also invoked Articles 14, 19 and 21 (equality, freedom of speech and liberty) to uphold the petitioners' plea. Central to the authority the Constitution vests in EC, is people's trust. To be universally perceived as a fair custodian of this trust is inarguably one of the most important institutional remits in India. In fiercely contested elections, EC must go the extra mile. It's the only safeguard against campaigning's tendency to descend to the lowest common denominator. Calcutta HC upheld both letter and spirit of MCC.



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THE MONK'S WAY

What makes Yogi Adityanath such a formidable poll factor for BJP in UP? Less crime is just one answer. His development rhetoric has worked. As has the projection of him as a good administrator

Shashank Chaturvedi, David N Gellner and Sanjay Kumar Pandey

Last week, addressing a rally in Barabanki, just outside Lucknow, Modi said Congress and SP need to learn from Yogi "where to run the bulldozers and where not".

One thing *garam* in an otherwise *thanda* 2024 Lok Sabha election is the demand for Yogi Adityanath to "do rallies", not only across UP but also across the country, from Gujarat to Karnataka, from Maharashtra to Bengal. Over the past six weeks, he has done nearly 150.

This is a huge shift since 2017, when Yogi became UP's CM, and top BJP leaders had to go around quashing whispers that his relations with the party were strained. There was the 2021 photo-op, with Modi strolling through Varanasi, his hand on Yogi's shoulder. Next year, Modi was said to have coined the "UP + Yogi = *upayogi* (useful)" slogan. This year, he has said he is "most blessed" to have his constituency in Yogi's state.

Back to the present, Modi's bulldozer comment is a riposte to Akhilesh's charge that Yogi is "just a Bulldozer Baba". Yogi and his supporters have been quick to own the label.

Hindu Mahasabha, a journey | Two distinct streams of Hindutva have clashed in India for decades: the Hindu Mahasabha, from which Yogi and his abbot forebears hail, and the somewhat less exclusively Hindu RSS, where the young Modi began his career. It was not until 1991, two decades after Modi joined RSS as a full-time worker, that Mahant Avaidyanath, one of the Mahasabha's key leaders, started working with BJP. Still, in 2014, when BJP formed the gov't in Delhi, Yogi was maintaining a distance from the party, retaining his own youth force, the Hindu Yuva Vahini, as a counterpart to RSS.

Cut to this election season. Even as nationally BJP has kept shifting its message, in UP the party's campaign has been steadfastly focused on Yogi's leadership, including its role in the Ram Mandir affair. As a party

worker explained, Yogi's campaign kicked off strategically in Mathura, where BJP put the onus on him to "charge" (that is, electrify or galvanise) the voters.

Law & order, trump card | Yogi has promised to "declare the state mafia-free" immediately after June 4, when the election results will be announced.

Draupadi's disrobing in Mahabharat has been his favourite allegory in deriding SP's Azam Khan, Atiq Ahmed and Akhilesh. When loot and corruption in UP was rife, he claims, they were all either active perpetrators, like Dushasan and Duryodhan, or closed their eyes to it, like the blind *kaka shri* King Dhritarashtra.

Yogi's winning strategy is the promise to make UP safe.

All this has been tilting voter attitudes in the state. In 2019, most

His promises seem to be working, with BJP voters giving a passionate endorsement: *Bulldozer Baba hamesha samasyaon ka samadhan dete hain* ('Bulldozer Baba always provides a solution to problems').

Fan base, diversified | There is a striking consensus not only among the poor and barely literate with whom he spoke across the state, but also among the better off, including educated women, that Yogi's govt offers better *prashasan* (administration) and security.

People everywhere enthuse, *Bahan betiyaan surakshit hain* ('our sisters and daughters are safe'), *Suraksha ki bhavna hai* ('there is a sense of security') and *Aap kabhi bhi raat mein nikal sakte hain* ('you can go out anytime in the night'). These phrases, taken straight out of Yogi's lexicon, are by now everyday cliches.

Development, in acronyms | Yogi's growing emphasis on development also seems to be paying off. UP's annual Global Investor Summit and the agreement to pay for sugarcane within 15 days seem to have mitigated the anti-incumbency discontent caused by rising inflation and unemployment.

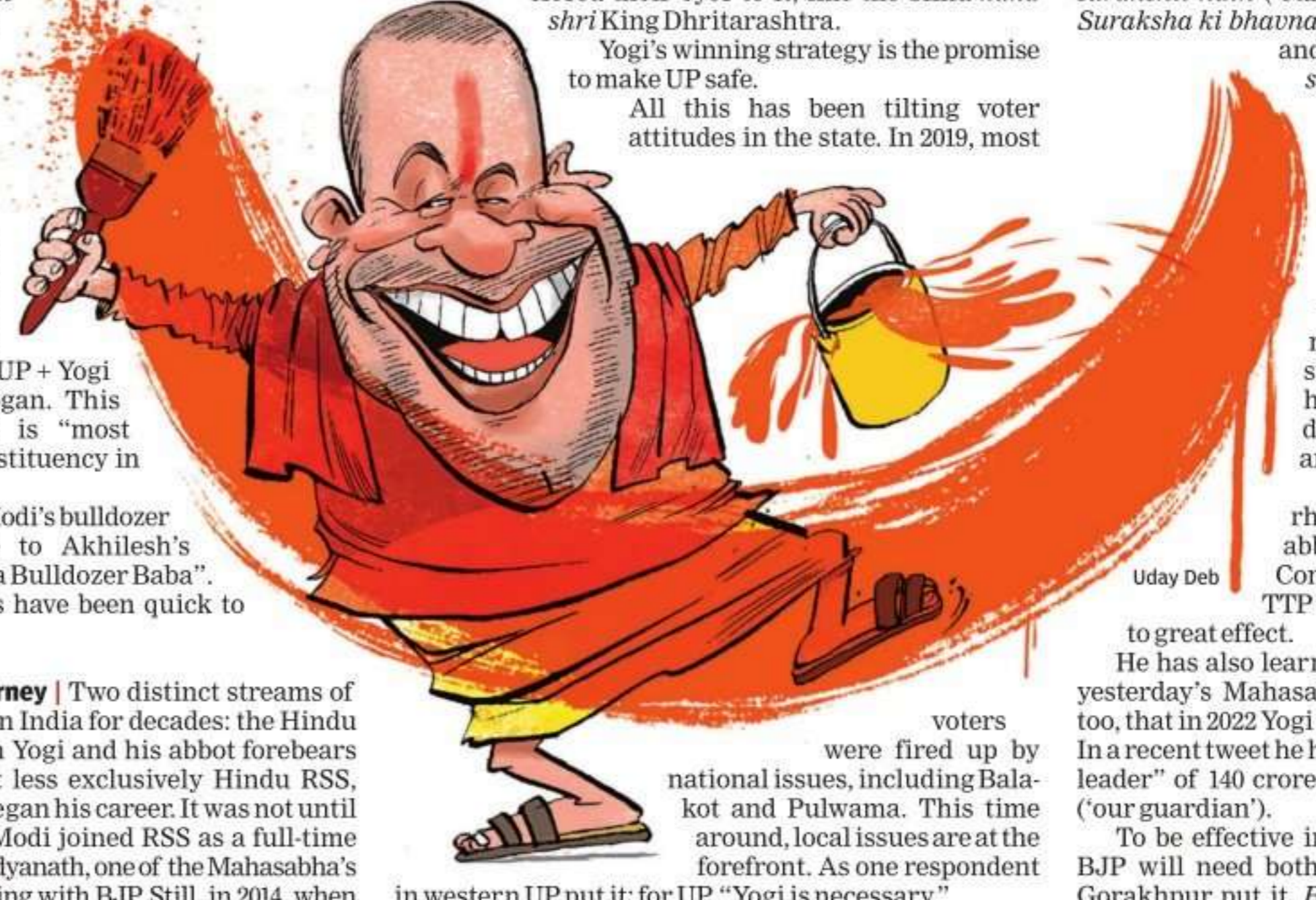
Yogi has learned development rhetoric from Modi, its master, using abbreviations like CCC (Culture, Connectivity and Commerce) and TTP (Talent, Tradition and Potentiality) to great effect.

He has also learned to walk the tightrope between yesterday's Mahasabha and today's Hindutva. Note, too, that in 2022 Yogi disbanded the Hindu Yuva Vahini. In a recent tweet he has written that Modi is the "tallest leader" of 140 crore Indians and *hamare abhivhavak* ('our guardian').

To be effective in UP, and perhaps nationally too, BJP will need both Modi and Yogi. As one man in Gorakhpur put it, *BJP ko ek mayan mein do talwaar rakhna seekhna hi padega* ('BJP will have to learn how to have two swords in one scabbard').

Chaturvedi is at Nirma University, Ahmedabad; Pandey is with JNU; and Gellner is with Oxford University

UP votes on May 25 (14 seats) in the sixth of its 7-phase polls



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Vote for a change

Kashmiris have sought to use the ballot box to seek change from the status quo

The voter turnout in the Srinagar and Baramulla constituencies in the Kashmir valley – Anantnag-Rajouri is to vote on May 25 after the Election Commission of India postponed the election – is well below the national average. While Srinagar registered only 38.5%, preliminary figures from Baramulla indicate a turnout of 59.1%. The national average for the first four phases was 66.95% and 61.61% in the fifth phase, according to early trends. Yet, these numbers in the Valley are salubrious compared to the past – 13% in Srinagar and 34.6% in Baramulla in 2019. Baramulla registered its highest turnout since 1984 (61.1% participation). In the last six years, the elected Assembly was dissolved, the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir bifurcated into two Union Territories, the special status of the province abrogated by the BJP-led Union government, and the Valley subjected to months of Internet shutdowns. Scores of politicians were also arrested. Kashmir still remains India's most securitised region with recurring militant violence. While local body elections have been held since then, the general election is the first major poll with significant contestation involving the Valley's mainstream polity.

Should the increase in turnout be read as a significant reduction in the alienation of the Kashmiri people? The answer is not unambiguous. A substantive section of the voters who turned out have sought a change in the status quo. The limitations on political activity in the Valley since 2018 have constrained citizens who have had little recourse to airing their grievances due to the absence of legislative representation in the Assembly. Thus, livelihood concerns have not been sufficiently addressed, and the greater electoral participation now reflects the need for representation of the electorate's voices. Union Home Minister Amit Shah has stated that the higher polling in these two constituencies is the "greatest testament to rightness" of abrogating the special status that was enshrined in Article 370 – a statement devoid of reason. A truer reflection of the support for the abrogation would have been a favourable mandate for parties endorsing the move, but the BJP did not even field candidates in the Valley. It is clear that it saw the writing on the wall in terms of how it was perceived in the region. Mr. Shah and the BJP should not misinterpret the reasons for the increase in voter participation. The voices in the Valley have given way to some using the ballot box as a medium to get the region out of its political morass. The Indian state must listen and make amends.

End the punishment

Assange should be set free, and not extradited to the U.S.

Julian Assange, founder of whistle-blower website WikiLeaks, has won a legal reprieve in the U.K., with permission to appeal against an extradition order that would see him transferred to the U.S. to face trial for allegedly leaking military secrets. The ruling came after the High Court ruled in March that the U.S. government would be given three weeks to assure that Mr. Assange – an Australian national – would, during trial, be allowed to rely on the First Amendment of the U.S. constitution that protects freedom of speech; that he would not be "prejudiced at trial" for being a foreign national in a U.S. court; and that the death penalty would not be applied in his case. Although his legal team did not contest the assurance provided by Washington that it was an "unambiguous executive promise" that the death penalty would be avoided in his case, the U.K. judges appeared to accept their argument of prejudice towards his nationality in the context of his right to free speech, especially after "a U.S. prosecutor had said the first amendment may not apply to foreigners when it came to national security issues". Mr. Assange will now have a few months to prepare his appeal.

Several facts stand out in the case of Mr. Assange, which entered the global spotlight since April 2010, when WikiLeaks published leaked videos from a U.S. helicopter in Baghdad showing an airstrike that killed civilians. The organisation then published secret military documents on the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and confidential cables of U.S. diplomatic missions. The key consideration regarding U.S. charges against Mr. Assange for allegedly violating the Espionage Act, brought against him in 2019 by the administration of former President Donald Trump, is that Mr. Assange has spent seven years holed up in the Ecuadorian Embassy and then a further five years in the U.K.'s Belmarsh Prison – a lengthy incarceration considering that Chelsea Manning, the erstwhile U.S. military analyst and whistle-blower who transmitted the confidential information from U.S. government servers to WikiLeaks, was sentenced to 35 years in prison in 2013, and then that sentence was commuted by former U.S. President Barack Obama in 2017. While Mr. Assange's critics, including notably the U.S. government, point out that he did not redact names in his mega-scale exposé, thus allowing Washington to argue that the revelations placed individuals at "risk of serious harm, torture or even death", the publication of the documents raised serious questions regarding human rights violations, for example in the targeting of civilians during war. In this sense Mr. Assange and WikiLeaks performed a public service akin to what journalism of conscience does. And considering that he has been punished enough already, he should be allowed to fly home.

The fifth phase of India's general election is over and the electoral rhetoric of both the major parties, i.e., the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Indian National Congress, have conspicuously side-lined one of the most critical issues of our times – climate change. This omission is particularly stark against the backdrop of global environmental crises and the pressing demands for sustainable development.

Recent events, such as environmental activist Sonam Wangchuk's outcry over ecological degradation in Ladakh – underscoring the urgency of integrating robust climate action into national policy frameworks – shows us how critical climate mitigation and adaptation has become and its urgent need to become political, especially for electoral politics. Despite Mr. Wangchuk's calls for environmental security in the region, which resonated widely among the people of Ladakh, and then, subsequently, on social media, the response from the Modi government has been muted. This lack of response is symptomatic of a larger political reluctance to engage with environmental issues as central electoral themes.

A calculated omission

The reluctance of both the BJP and Congress to foreground climate change in their electoral platforms is not just a matter of oversight but a calculated omission. Integrating serious climate action into their political agendas would entail acknowledging and addressing the trade-offs between rapid industrial growth and environmental sustainability. Such acknowledgment could alienate powerful industrial constituencies and disrupt the economic status quo, which heavily relies on fossil fuels and high-emission industries.

This strategic avoidance plays out in the manifestos, where climate policies, if mentioned, are vague and lack commitment to specific, measurable actions. For instance, the Congress party's manifesto has a chapter, 'Environment Protection and Climate Change Authority' and proposes a 'Green New Deal Investment Programme' without clear directives or commitments to specific reductions in carbon emissions. Similarly, the BJP's manifesto praises past initiatives but fails to propose forward-looking strategies that align with the global scientific consensus, which calls for immediate and drastic action to mitigate climate change impacts.

The absence of detailed climate action plans in



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these manifestos reflects a broader trend in Indian politics where short-term economic gains are often prioritised over long-term environmental sustainability. That said, we must remember India's vulnerability to climate impacts, including rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and severe air pollution, which pose significant threats to its population and economy. Moreover, the silence on climate change in electoral discussions sends a disheartening message to educated, middle-class voters, who are increasingly aware of and concerned about global environmental issues. This demographic, capable of influencing policy through public opinion and voting power, I believe, seeks more than just token mentions of sustainability. They demand actionable plans that ensure that India not only meets its international commitments under agreements such as the Paris Agreement but also adopts a leadership role in global climate advocacy.

Why, then, is there such a glaring gap between the needs of the electorate and the political offerings? Part of the reason lies in the perceived political cost of ambitious climate policies. Comprehensive climate strategies may require tough decisions, such as phasing out coal, increasing taxes or prices on carbon emissions, and enforcing stringent environmental regulations – measures that could be unpopular in the short run despite their long-term benefits.

What we have now

Currently, the National Action Plan on Climate Change serves as the overarching guiding body for India's climate policy efforts that are spread across several policy documents, sector-specific strategies, and laws. In 2023, some very important policy documents and laws covering the energy sector emerged, which included the National Electricity Plan 2023, the National Green Hydrogen Mission and the Energy Conservation (Amendment) Act, 2022. These documents and laws play a crucial role in shaping the energy landscape. That said, one must note that the Indian leadership has shown no commitments in phasing out coal. These policies, however, are top-down in nature; these are being made by the top brass, based on international trends and immediate requirements. India, as a nation, is still lacking a considerable number of citizens who demand corrective policies to ensure climate policies and actions, as a bottom-up approach.

The Climate Action Tracker (developed by Climate Analytics, an independent global climate science and policy institute with an office in Berlin) gives India an overall rating of "Highly

Integrating serious climate action into political agendas could alienate powerful industrial constituencies and disrupt the economic status quo

Spotlighting pre-eclampsia, ensuring safe motherhood

It has been three decades since this writer had a haunting conversation with a friend, and the words still echo: "Isn't it a miracle to give birth to a physically normal, neurologically intact baby?" Those words ignited a profound realisation – one that underscores the critical importance of perinatal care in safeguarding both mother and newborn.

The journey towards safe motherhood and safe birth must confront the stark reality that congenital anomalies and neurological challenges in newborns are more prevalent than we care to acknowledge. While not much can be done for congenital anomalies, the neurological deficit could stem from inadequate antenatal and perinatal care – a sobering truth that demands our attention.

A collective responsibility

The future of our babies and our nation rests in the hands of stakeholders across perinatal care – from obstetricians and radiologists to fetal medicine specialists, neonatologists, and more. Even frontline workers such as Accredited Social Health Activist and Anganwadi workers play pivotal roles in ensuring proper antenatal care, underscoring the collective responsibility we bear.

The adage, "Life begins before birth", holds profound significance, reminding us that what we gather antenatally affects us until our final breath. Prematurity, low birth weight, growth restriction, and pre-eclampsia consequent to hypertensive disorders of pregnancy (HDP), are among the preventable conditions that contribute to maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality on a global scale. There are also long-term complications of HDP on the health of a mother and the baby. They are susceptible to adulthood hypertension, metabolic syndrome, heart



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disease, dyslipidemia, and stroke, adding significantly to the economic burden of the health-care system. Emerging evidence suggests that pre-eclampsia is associated with a four-fold increase in the risk of heart failure and a two-fold increase in the risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, and cardiovascular mortality for the mother.

A focus on postnatal cardiovascular assessment after delivery would go a long way to improve the cardiovascular and cerebrovascular health of the woman. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that post-partum maternal cardiovascular health after pre-eclampsia is a largely neglected area of research.

The data

In India, that accounts for nearly a quarter of the world's adverse pregnancy outcomes, addressing these health concerns is not just a moral imperative but also an economic necessity. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) statistics speak volumes: perinatal mortality rates stand at 32 for 1,000 pregnancies, neonatal mortality rates at 25 for 1,000 live births, and hypertensive disorders in pregnancy remain a leading cause of maternal death.

As we commemorate May as "PE Prevention Month" (World PE Day is on May 22), let us prioritise proactive measures for safe motherhood and birth. Pre-eclampsia is a hypertensive disorder of pregnancy leading to multiorgan dysfunction in the mother. Besides high blood pressure, usually commencing after 20 weeks of gestation, these mothers could present with swelling of the face, hands, and feet, severe headaches, changes in vision, upper abdominal pain, and difficulty in breathing. Implementing screening for conditions such as pre-eclampsia and fetal growth restriction in the

first trimester, along with managing high-risk pregnancies according to established protocols, is paramount. Since pre-eclampsia is a systemic disorder, clinical criteria alone are inadequate to predict adverse outcomes. Therefore, combined screening by maternal history, demographics, colour doppler ultrasound, mean arterial pressure, placental biomarkers, and timely pharmacological intervention for the high-risk cohort in the first trimester, play a crucial role in identifying and managing these high-risk pregnancies. The second and third-trimester screening for pre-eclampsia are useful for surveillance, early identification of pre-eclampsia, and establishing time of delivery. Comprehensive care throughout all trimesters, with colour Doppler ultrasound as the cornerstone, is essential to optimise maternal and fetal outcomes.

In contrast to the complex web of climate bodies in India, we have a silver lining that should mark the beginning of climate jurisprudence in our country: *M.K. Ranjitsinh and Others vs Union of India*, where in March 2024, the Supreme Court of India ruled that the people of India have the right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change by drawing upon Article 21 and Article 14 of the Indian Constitution. This opens up many government sector bodies working on climate policies and action to much-needed legal scrutiny and makes them answerable to citizens.

The challenge

So, what now? The challenge for India, therefore, is to bridge this gap between electoral politics and climate policy. It requires a shift in political calculations, where long-term environmental and social gains are valued over immediate economic benefits. And, the media and civil society have pivotal roles in this transformation. By consistently highlighting the inadequacies in the current political discourse on climate change, they can drive a narrative that places environmental sustainability at the heart of India's development agenda.

The 2024 general election presents a critical opportunity for Indian voters, especially the informed and increasing middle class, to demand that their leaders take a more proactive and committed stance on climate change. This means not only voting with an eye towards policies that promise immediate benefits but also supporting those that promise sustainable growth and environmental security. The electorate must push for a paradigm shift in how climate policy is integrated into the broader national development strategies, ensuring that the progress made today does not come at the expense of tomorrow's security.

As India stands at this electoral crossroads, the choices made will resonate far beyond the immediate political cycle, influencing the global fight against climate change and the future of sustainable development worldwide.

There needs to be greater awareness of this serious hypertensive disorder of pregnancy

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fifty years ago

The Railway workers' strike – on the grievances of working conditions, diminishing wages, soaring prices and meagre pay hike based on the Third Pay Commission – was a remarkable display of working-class unity (Opinion page, "Revisiting the Railway strike of 1974", May 21). At that time I was a senior draughtsman in the Chief Engineer's Office at the Southern Railways headquarters at Central. Striking workers threatened us, asking us not to attend office. But the administration warned of

strict disciplinary action if there was absenteeism. Afraid, only a handful of us – there were a total of 80 staff – attended office. We had police protection, evident at the entrance on the day the strike began. In the afternoon, a group of striking workers came inside the office asking us to leave and cooperate with them. They said, "If you don't leave, you will be pushed out." We immediately went into the officer's room and lodged a complaint. But a sentence that still rings in my ears is, "You all, first safeguard yourself."

After this was said, we did not attend office till the strike was called off after 20 days, and unconditionally. The period of absence was, however, treated as loss of pay – which was subsequently revoked when the Janata government came to power.

D. Sethuraman,
Chennai

'Mehta toss rule'

I write this letter as a sports aerodynamics consultant. As we approach the end of the regular IPL season, all the teams in contention are vying for the first two spots (seed 1 and seed 2), and for

good reason, since they get "two bites at the cherry"! However, what is the advantage of finishing first (as opposed to second)? Under the current IPL rules, none whatsoever. And, for that matter, there is no advantage in finishing third as opposed to fourth. In almost every other sport, seeding matters when it comes to the playoffs. Should that not be the case in the IPL as well, and, if so, how can it be achieved? In most other sports, the advantage for the higher seed is by gaining "home field advantage". However, the venues for the playoffs

are predetermined in the IPL, so that cannot be applied. So, how can the team with the higher seed be rewarded? I suggest the "Mehta Toss Rule"! The team with the higher seed is automatically granted the coin toss win. This can be applied all through the playoffs (including the final) whereby the team with the higher seed is awarded the coin toss win. There is so much discussion regarding the toss before every IPL match, and for good reason. Depending on the pitch/ground conditions and weather forecasts, each team decides what their

preference would be if they won the toss and this can sometimes affect the outcome of the match. So, this coin toss win would serve as a well-deserved advantage for the team with the higher seed. With the IPL playoffs starting next week, it will be really interesting to follow the role (if any) of the coin toss in the outcome of a given match. While too late for this year, I urge the IPL management to seriously consider the "Mehta Toss Rule" for future IPL tournaments.

Rabindra Mehta,
Mountain View, California, U.S.

The risks of Russia's nuclear posturing

The war between Russia and Ukraine has entered its second year and there is no end in sight. Earlier this month, in a concerning escalation, Russia announced that it plans to hold drills simulating the use of tactical nuclear weapons along the border with Ukraine. Earlier in March, Russia had said that it would station nuclear weapons in Belarus. Such nuclear posturing in the middle of a war is worrying.

Russia cited statements by leaders from countries which are aiding Ukraine in the war as the reason for upping the nuclear ante. It was referring to French President Emmanuel Macron's statement that he would potentially deploy troops to Ukraine and British Foreign Secretary David Cameron's remark that Ukraine will be allowed to use British long-range weapons to strike targets inside Russia.

Shift in understanding

However, Russia's plans appear to be attempts at brinkmanship and coercion rather than responses to an actual existential threat. Russia's claims that Mr. Macron and Mr. Cameron's comments constitute an existential threat requiring nuclear preparedness are a stretch at best. Neither France nor the U.K. has made moves that genuinely threaten Russia's survival which would then call for Moscow's justification for its action.

On the surface, Russia's sabre-rattling may seem like a predictable move to deter further intervention by Ukraine and its allies. After all, threatening the first use of nuclear weapons for deterrence, that is, to prevent the start or escalation of conflict, is often a tactic used by nuclear powers like North Korea which face threats at their borders from larger adversaries. However, in the latest crisis, Russia is mulling lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. If this became an accepted norm, it could have huge consequences.



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For decades after the Cold War, the logic of nuclear deterrence has been based on certain inviolable understandings. Most important among these is that any nuclear use would inevitably result in destruction in both the countries fighting the war. This principle of deterrence is known as mutually assured destruction. In addition, a country resorted to the nuclear option only in case of an existential threat by an adversary. In the case of Russia and Ukraine, the war is largely destabilising on conventional levels and does not directly jeopardise Russia's own existence; yet, Russia has shown its willingness to exercise its nuclear option. Moreover, the Russian nuclear doctrine codified nuclear first use only in the most extreme case of threat to its survival. The fact that these long-held nuclear red lines are being stretched and redrawn over the course of a war represents worrying shifts in the core understanding of nuclear deterrence.

Dangerous precedent

By making explicit nuclear threats at lower levels of conflict, Russia is on a dangerous path. If nuclear powers routinely threaten to use nuclear weapons as a coercive tactic when pushed into a corner during a conventional conflict, it may encourage other states to follow suit. This may lead to smaller nuclear-armed nations wondering whether openly brandishing their nuclear might will be enough to undermine the resolve of stronger conventional military opponents. Countries like Iran and North Korea may feel emboldened to cross the nuclear weapons threshold, confident that flaunting their nuclear deterrent will make adversaries back down out of fear of escalation.

Thus, while the odds of any tactical nuclear strike by Russia remain low at present, Moscow's nuclear signalling sets a dangerous precedent. Nuclear weapons may no longer be weapons of last resort. The clear distinction

between nuclear and conventional warfare is gradually being undermined in this war.

There are other dangerous precedents being set too. Russia's move threatens to undermine already lacklustre and admittedly halfhearted efforts towards non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and disarmament. The ongoing war has exposed the vulnerability of non-nuclear states to aggression from states with nuclear weapons. Russia's move could potentially motivate other states to pursue nuclear weapons to deter threats. Ukraine's decision in the Budapest Memorandum to give up its nuclear arsenal in the 1990s, in exchange for security assurances from Russia, the U.K., and the U.S., now appears ill-advised. Iran's recent statement regarding revisiting its nuclear doctrine if there are existential threats from Israel is a case in point. While Iran has maintained that it does not intend to develop nuclear weapons, the prospect of Iran shifting its policy in response to perceived existential threats from Israel undermines non-proliferation efforts. Such a move may discourage other smaller nations like North Korea from voluntarily letting go of their nuclear capabilities or pursuing disarmament, fearing a similar fate of nuclear aggression.

The unfolding dynamics have created a new nuclear flash point. By raising the risk by lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, Russia has changed the understanding of how nuclear deterrence works. Simultaneously, its actions illustrate how nuclear weapons provide asymmetric advantages in case of conventional warfare. This has thus increased proliferation anxieties for smaller states across the world, especially in regions where there are long-standing tensions between states. If the cloud of nuclear war floats above the battlefield, war could take precedence over deterrence and proliferation over disarmament leading to further nuclear instability.

A worrying prospect for the Congress

The party has faced a daunting task this election

STATE OF PLAY

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As the BJP has made intense efforts to gain a foothold in Kerala's bipolar political landscape, the Opposition Congress has faced a daunting task this time. The Lok Sabha election results will probably help the party leadership better understand and navigate the challenge.

A week ago, Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) president K. Sudhakaran, who had temporarily handed over charge to senior leader M.M. Hassan following his candidature from the Kannur Lok Sabha constituency, assumed his role once again after fighting aggressively for it. Mr. Sudhakaran probably sensed that the Congress central leadership may replace him if the party does not perform well. But even if the party does well, his reinstatement is not guaranteed, considering the reshuffles within the party after every other election.

Two senior Congress leaders, Rahul Gandhi and AICC general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal, contested the elections from Kerala. A second win for Mr. Gandhi may seem assured in Wayanad, but his opponents included the feisty CPI leader Annie Raja and BJP State president K. Surendran. Thus, there is a likelihood of a reduced victory margin for him from the 4.31 lakh in the previous election. Mr. Gandhi also entered the race in Rae Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh.

If Mr. Venugopal wins Alappuzha, a constituency he represented from 2009 to 2019, he will wrest the lone seat won by the CPI(M) in 2019. Howev-

er, the margin of victory will also be closely observed. BJP State vice president Shobha Surendran's entry in the contest for the Alappuzha Lok Sabha seat altered the election dynamics in the constituency. The BJP nominated her to ensure that Mr. Venugopal, who ranks second in the party after AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge, does not win easily.

Some high-profile Congress candidates are fighting from constituencies with three-way contests. The Congress chose former KPCC president and sitting MP of Vadakara, K. Muraliedharan, to fight from Thrissur to take on actor-politician Suresh Gopi of the BJP, who secured almost one-third of the total votes polled in 2019. If Mr. Muraliedharan loses, it will lead the Congress central leadership to believe that his sister, Padmaja Venugopal, who dramatically joined the BJP before the elections, is more influential in Thrissur, which is perceived to have been their late father K. Karunakaran's fiefdom, even though she herself has not won any electoral battles.

Nonetheless, some of his supporters already portray his candidature as a form of martyrdom, given his decision to heed the party leadership's request to take on Mr. Gopi. When all the sitting Congress MPs were re-nominated, the Thrissur MP, T.N. Prathapan, was supplanted.

A fourth consecutive victory for Congress Working Committee member Shashi Tharoor from Thiruvananthapuram would further solidify his stature in Kerala politics and also elevate his status nationally. On the contrary, a defeat would deal a severe blow to his political career in Kerala, and potentially force him to withdraw from the capital city's political arena. His critics within the Congress may then highlight his contentious style of functioning and tendency to antagonise senior party leaders.

Benny Behanan is seeking re-election from the Chalakkudy constituency. This is where the fledgling Twenty20, a political party backed by a corporate group, has put up a candidate. If Mr. Behanan loses, the Congress will have to face the challenge of accommodating the aspirations of the Christian middle-class population, which is dominant in the constituency and shown an inclination towards the Twenty20's brand of politics.

The decision of the Congress to nominate Shafi Parambil, its legislator from Palakkad, to contest from Vadakara was made with two objectives. The first was to retain the seat after Mr. Muraliedharan was shifted to Thrissur. The second was because the party did not have a single Muslim candidate and finally chose him to contest from a sensitive seat. Whether this was the right move remains to be seen.

There is already talk of several disgruntled Congress leaders preparing to leave the party and of the BJP aggressively pursuing its agenda to poach them. This trend will become more pronounced if the INDIA bloc fails to dislodge the BJP-led government at the Centre.

The changing rules on onion export could impact election results

In Maharashtra, the impact of the Centre's flips-flops on onion export policy may be felt in at least 12 parliamentary constituencies

DATA POINT

Yamuna Devi A. Anjana Javan & Maria Sylvia

In India, the rise in the price of onions has reportedly been a factor that influenced the outcomes of some elections in the past. This time, it is not the price of onions which has the potential to have an electoral impact but the export policy of the Centre.

In December 2023, the Centre imposed a ban on the export of onions to stop surging local prices. Chart 1 shows the average retail price for 1kg of onions in Mumbai and the quantum of onions (in tonnes) that arrived in the city's markets, month-wise. Onion arrivals slumped in November-December 2023, leading to a demand-supply mismatch. This resulted in a surge in onion prices to over ₹60 per kg, and led to the export ban. Many farmers in the onion-growing districts of Maharashtra, especially Nashik, protested on the streets, blocked a national highway at three spots, and disrupted auctions in wholesale markets.

On April 25, 2024, in a surprise move, the Centre partially relaxed the indefinite ban on onion exports and allowed "immediate" export of 2,000 tonnes of white onions, mostly grown in Gujarat. The State went to the polls 12 days later. This decision was criticised by the Opposition leaders and the onion farmers of Maharashtra.

On April 27, the Centre allowed the export of more than 99,000 tonnes of onions, mainly sourced from Maharashtra, to six neighbouring countries. On May 4, the Centre lifted the ban on onion exports. It also imposed a minimum export price of \$550 per tonne and an export duty of 40%. The onion-growing districts of Maharashtra voted on May 13 and May 20.

These continuous flip-flops have not gone down well with the onion farmers of Maharashtra, suggest reports. On May 15, more

than 50 farmers were detained in different police stations in Nashik, ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the city. They had planned a protest along with the Opposition against the decisions regarding onion exports. Onion farmers and traders, especially in Nashik, have been up in arms for months now and have shown their anger by suspending onion auctions and going on a strike.

It is understandable why Nashik in particular is worried about the changing export policy, as the district is responsible for about 90% of onions exported from India (Chart 2). Given the circumstances, it will be interesting to see whether this will have an electoral impact in the 12 parliamentary constituencies, including the Dindori and Nashik seats in the Nashik district, which fall in the 'onion belt' of Maharashtra. The other seats are Shirdi, Ahmednagar, Dhule, Nandurbar, Jalgaon, Raver, Shirur, Baramati, Maval, and Pune.

Past election results in these seats show that the voters increasingly supported the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP's vote share increased from 25% in 2009 to 33% in 2014 to 36% in 2019. The Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and the Shiv Sena also have significant vote shares in the region ranging from about 15% to 27%, but their vote shares have stagnated in the last few years. The NCP and the Shiv Sena have both split into two parties each. While the NCP led by Ajit Pawar and the Shiv Sena led by Eknath Shinde support the the National Democratic Alliance, the NCP led by Sharad Pawar and the Shiv Sena led by Uddhav Thackeray support the INDIA bloc. In Nashik, the two factions of the Shiv Sena are in a direct fight in 2024. In Dindori, Sharad Pawar's NCP is fighting against the BJP.

While the Congress' vote share is relatively low in these seats, it has increased across elections. The past vote share and seat share in these constituencies is shown in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Are some parties in an (onion) soup?

The data for the charts are sourced from Lok Dhaba, the Commerce Ministry and the National Horticulture Board



Chart 1: Average retail price for per kilogramme of onion in Mumbai and the arrivals of onions in tonnes in the city's markets (month-wise)

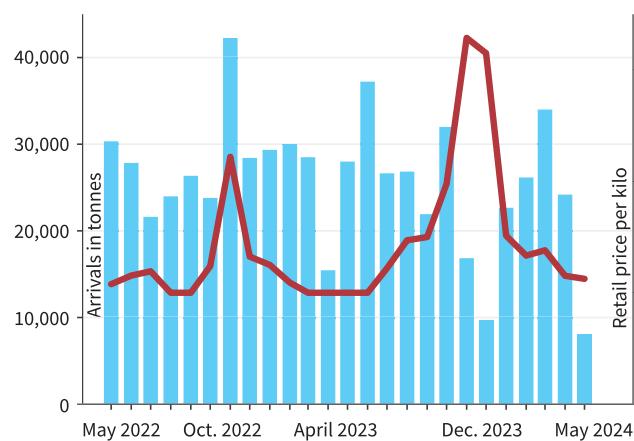


Chart 2: The chart shows the top onion-exporting districts in India and their share in onion exports

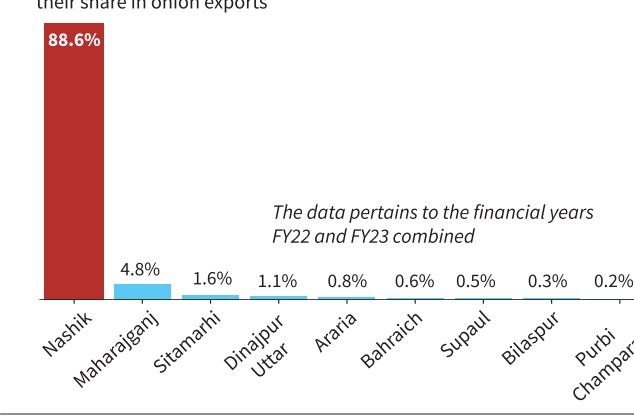


Table 3: The table shows the party-wise vote share split in the onion belt constituencies in last three LS polls

Party	2009	2014	2019
BJP	24.7%	33.1%	36.0%
NCP#	27.5%	21.1%	22.7%
SHS#	15.8%	17.7%	16.7%
INC	9.3%	11.8%	13.7%
VBA*	-	-	4.8%
IND*	6.4%	2.5%	2.9%
NOTA	-	0.9%	0.8%
CPM	1.2%	0.7%	0.8%
BSP	3.0%	1.7%	0.6%

Table 4: The table shows the seats secured in the onion belt constituencies in the last three Lok Sabha elections

Party	2009	2014	2019
SHS	3	4	3
NCP	2	1	2
INC	2	-	-
BJP	5	7	7

* Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi
Independents
The NCP and the Shiv Sena have split into two parties each

The authors are interning with The Hindu Data Team

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 22, 1974

Canada suspends nuclear aid to India

Ottawa, May 23: Canada has announced the suspension of all nuclear aid to India as result of last week's atomic test that made India the world's sixth nuclear power.

Foreign Secretary Mitchell Sharp said the Canadian Government was suspending all shipments of nuclear equipment and material and ending all exchanges with India on nuclear technology.

Mr. Sharp told a news conference yesterday after a Cabinet meeting that the suspension of shipments would continue at least until Canada and India discussed the implications of the nuclear test, and until future relations between the two nations were reviewed. Canada wanted to know the source of the plutonium used in the explosion. The plutonium did not originate from Canadian fuel but possibly was produced in the reactor Canada supplied to India under a 1956 agreement.

Mr. Sharp said the Canadian Government also might stop shipments of other industrial commodities. However, there would be no interruption of food and agricultural aid to India.

He said Canada was "seriously concerned" with how India intended to use its nuclear capacity as far back as 1971 when Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau expressed his concern to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi - AP.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 22, 1924

Financial crisis in U.S.A.

London, May 21: A serious financial problem has been created in the United States by the Congress enacting despite the President's veto, the Soldiers' Bonus Bill whereby 3,500,000 ex-soldiers will receive bonuses in cash or insurance policies estimated at a minimum total cost of £456,000,000. It is feared that this may handicap American business and prevent the recovery of foreign markets. Wider results are anticipated by some French newspapers which are of the opinion that the passage of the Bill removes the possibility of interlarded settlement for some time and compromises the labours of the Experts as Americans will energetically press their debtors in order to find the necessary funds.



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Humanity's law

Gaza conflict underscores that what we need is a shared moral compass, not catastrophic power politics



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT (ICC) prosecutor has thrown down the gauntlet by seeking arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant and three Hamas leaders, including Yahya Sinwar. A bench of the ICC may still deny the warrants, but the prosecutor's request is backed by the unanimous opinion of a panel of five leading lights of international law. There is a resounding power to this group's claim that "the law we apply is humanity's law, not the law of any given side."

There is good reason to be cynical of the ICC. It has been accused of selective attention. Many of its rulings go unenforced, even by its own member states. Three of the five permanent members of the Security Council are not members of the ICC. International law has almost always been subject to Great Power exceptionalism. In this case, none of the Great Powers, including China, India and the United States, are signatories to the ICC. Its broader legitimacy has always been under question: Even signatories worry that it was a tool to exercise power over small nations and petty dictators. There has always been the real worry that the juridification of deeply political conflicts can often be counterproductive. The fear of prosecution might entrench the parties in their determination to fight, and close the room for compromise. Although, in this case, the British prosecutor Karim Khan has presented what seems like a *prima facie* cogent case for considering the warrants, the ICC could still take a legal route out, exploiting ambiguities in the law over jurisdiction.

The ICC prosecutor seeking arrest warrants is significant precisely because it operates against this background of well-warranted scepticism. It has potentially created a high-stakes situation. First, the seeking of an arrest warrant against Netanyahu is a blow to Israel's reputation. Israel will, understandably, chafe at being put in the same category as Hamas. Israel has the right to self-defence. But it has been obvious that Israel's military operations in Gaza are a humanitarian catastrophe, if not genocide, as Aryeh Neier has recently argued in *The New York Review of Books*. Israel will doubtless deny

this accusation. It is arguing, a little incredulously, that the ratio of civilian to combatant deaths in this war is lower than for most wars in the 20th century. The warrant does not take a stand on the sources of this conflict. It does accuse Israel of deliberately starving civilians, and both Israel and Hamas of violating the laws of armed conflict.

Second, it is not an insignificant fact that an arrest warrant is being sought against an Israeli Prime Minister, a key ally of the United States. This is not just international law against the weak or as an instrument of liberal powers against authoritarians. The US has publicly condemned the ruling, and several prominent senators have, in turn, threatened ICC officials with sanctions. That the United States is tearing up the "liberal international order" is old news. But ignoring the ICC is one thing; having your political class threatening it is a new form of intimidation of international institutions, all the more ironic in light of the fact that the same ICC's ruling against Putin was welcomed.

While the warrant does not go into the root causes of the conflict, it is a powerful statement on behalf of moral limits that have to be recognised in the pursuit of political ends. Both sides will chafe at the equivalence: Israel for being equated with Hamas; Hamas for not recognising the enormous disparity of power that currently characterises the relationship between Israel and Palestinians. We need a Palestinian cause that is not reliant on and tethered to the barbarism of Hamas; and a defence of Israel that does not give it licence to such extraordinary violence or such a wholesale denial of the right of Palestinians.

It is precisely this reaction that makes seeking the arrest warrant more relevant. ICC member states are not only obliged to execute its warrants, they are potentially also obliged to defend the ICC against intimidation. This will put the US' allies in a bind. Third, ICC is different from the International Court of Justice in that in ICC the prosecutions are brought against individual parties. While the warrant does not go into the root causes of the conflict, it is a powerful statement on behalf of moral limits that have to be recognised in the pursuit of political ends. Both sides will chafe at the equivalence: Israel for being equated with Hamas; Hamas for not recognising the enormous disparity of power that currently characterises the relationship between Israel and Palestinians. We need a Palestinian cause that is not reliant on and tethered to the barbarism of Hamas; and a defence of Israel that does not give it licence to such extraordinary violence or such a wholesale denial of the right of Palestinians. Ideally, you would want such a warrant to have domestic reverberations. For Israel to recognise that, it needs to radically change its strategy; and for Palestinians, to acknowledge that Hamas cannot be their

face and future. It gives international opinion (all law, including constitutional law, is ultimately effective only if opinion backs it) a mobilising focus.

On the other hand, it could entrench both parties' positions to the point where even the smallest sliver of compromise on humanitarian aid or releasing hostages becomes impossible. It is astonishing that almost no power that has actual leverage in the region — from the US to the assorted Arab States from Saudi Arabia to the UAE — has shown a minimal willingness to act to stop the carnage. In this context, it is more than likely that the debate over the ICC warrants will simply exacerbate global nihilism on the rule of law. But, at least, the ICC will have done us the service of showing that almost all states have morally no place to hide. The international order is beyond even the redeeming comforts of organised hypocrisy.

In the campus protests going on in the US, most students seem open to reasonable discussions. But there is, in many sections, an odd discomfort with the language of resistance that had Gandhi and Mandela at its centre. Imagine a pro-Palestinian encampment that had a shrine to the Israeli hostages at the centre of its iconography. Or, the powerful letters calling attention to anti-Semitism equally drawing attention to the atrocities in Gaza.

But such gestures are passé. Without denying historical specificities or even at the risk of false equivalences, it has to be said, there were common moral restraints underlying both groups: Don't target people for being who they are; every group is entitled to a life of safety and dignity. The moral intuitions were shared but the empathetic gesture of what existential threats might feel like to the other side was missing. It is a tragedy that Hamas and Israel and all the great powers will unite in their condemnation of the ICC, rather than take seriously the claim that what we need in a world drifting towards catastrophic power politics is "humanity's law, not the law of any given side."

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

TAKE THE CUE

Impressive voter turnout in J&K sends an important signal. Assembly polls must be held at the earliest

IN JANUARY, HOME Minister Amit Shah, addressing a function for Jammu and Kashmir Administrative Service Officers, said terrorist incidents were down by 66 per cent in the erstwhile state since the abrogation of Article 370. And that civilian deaths were down by 81 per cent, and by 48 per cent for security forces. Two months later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed his first gathering in Kashmir since August 2015, where he spoke of the rise of tourism and connected the gains in "naya Kashmir" with the end of special status. He reiterated the Centre's reasoning that the end of special status was meant to ensure that the people of J&K and Ladakh have the same rights as citizens in the rest of India. That promise, though, continues to fall short in a key aspect: The Union Territory last had an elected government in 2018, and citizens have been denied in Kashmir what their counterparts have in the rest of the country. Now, given the heartening voter turnout in the Lok Sabha elections in Baramulla and Srinagar, it is time to bridge this gap — sooner rather than later.

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv Kumar has said, "The highly successful conduct of polls with impressive turnout in Srinagar and Baramulla gives the Election Commission the confidence to hold assembly polls in J&K the earliest." The turnout in Baramulla at 59 per cent is the highest since 1984. In Srinagar, where elections were held in the fourth phase, a similar story unfolded: The turnout was at a three-decade high of 36 per cent, and up from around 14 per cent in 2019. Many areas in both constituencies have faced insurgency, violence and targeted killings for decades. That so many people showed up at the polling booth, despite the killing of a former sarpanch and two tourists just days earlier, is an indication of how much they want to exercise their franchise. The long lines at voting booths bear testimony to a desire to express themselves politically and use the vote — not the boycott of the vote — as their instrument to do so. This faith must be acknowledged and rewarded.

With the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act of 2019, Parliament exercised its power under Article 3 of the Constitution, not to create a new state but to take away statehood. Now, with the CEC declaring the EC's readiness to hold assembly elections, and given the Centre's own figures on the reduction in violence, it is important to hold polls as soon as possible. This must be a priority for the next government in Delhi, and could be the first step to restoration of statehood.

REIGNITING THE SPARK

Screening of restored 1976 classic Manthan at Cannes shows enduring appeal of well-told stories

FOLLOWING ITS RESTORATION to 4K clarity by the Film Heritage Foundation, the 1976 film *Manthan*, directed by Shyam Benegal, was screened in the Classics section of the ongoing Cannes International Film Festival. The nearly 50-year-old film made a splash, even as Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light* is in the running for the Palme d'Or, the first Indian film in 30 years to be in the festival's main competition. The presence of these two films — made 48 years apart — at one of the most prestigious platforms for cinema presents the opportunity to reflect on the direction that Indian cinema has taken in the intervening years.

Made during one of the most creatively disruptive periods in Indian film history, when filmmakers such as Mani Kaul, Girish Kasaravalli, John Abraham, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Govind Nihalani were experimenting with story and form, *Manthan* was remarkable for its idealism and clarity of vision. It was produced through crowdfunding by 5,00,000 farmers of Gujarat, as the opening credits proudly state, becoming an example of cinema's ability to empower those at the margins. A fictionalised account of India's dairy cooperative movement, the film dwelt on hierarchies of caste and gender, becoming a timeless commentary on the difficult but valuable work of deepening democracy.

Has the promise of those exciting years, when the parallel cinema movement explored a range of visions and concerns, been fulfilled? It is often lamented that in the larger story of the Indian film industry, commerce has outweighed art far too often. Such a dismal view has some basis, given the near total disappearance of the parallel movement and the surge of "big budget" films, especially in Hindi cinema, over the last decade or so. Yet, the fact that films like Kapadia's continue to be made and that smaller films, like *Manjummel Boys* by Chidambaram, captivate audiences across the country, shows that the spark may be lit again, even if it takes a different form.



MANJU KAPUR

I AM SITTING in my study staring at my copy of Alice Munro's *New Selected Stories*, a collection of some of her "finest work" from her last five published volumes, (a somewhat arbitrary decision — who decides this anyway?) put together on the occasion of her winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. I have just heard of her death. The first reaction I usually have on hearing of a writer's demise — one who has mattered to me — is that a voice has gone, that unique and peculiar stream of words has stopped forever. This is how it was with Javier Marias, Paul Auster, Martin Amis, all so recently deceased.

With Alice Munro, the feeling is more intimate. Her worlds could be my worlds. Not literally, but in the way in which she wrote about them. Her subject was the daily life of men, women and children, their thoughts and feelings as they go through childhood, school, college, marriage, old age and death, in a movement both swift and slow. Swift because so much was encompassed in 30-40-50 pages, while her attention to detail slowed down the narrative as she described incidents that illustrated whole lives.

I flip through the *New Selected Stories* to remind me of how this writer once spoke to me. I reread the first story, *The Love of a Good Woman*, reprinted from her 1998 eponymous volume. This is the work of a writer

THE WRITER OF SMALL THINGS

With her quietly beautiful prose, Alice Munro made the ordinary extraordinary

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whose craft is honed to perfection. It's not showy, it does not call attention to itself, it's a clear prism between the author and the reader. In the words of James Joyce — a writer whom Munro resembles not at all — "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."

"The Love of a Good Woman", like all of Munro's writing, is rich in detail — of houses, smells, people's faces, their bodies, the hair on their bodies, of the food, the way eggs crinkle around the edges when they are fried. Each one says something about the person, the place. Gradually she opens up a world, so fully imagined, that it seems this is not a short story we are reading, but the history of a community.

To return to the fried eggs mentioned earlier; they stayed in my mind, and for good reason. A whole world is contained in them. A boy, maybe 10, is frying the eggs, none of his friends know how good he is in the kitchen. His mother watches him, she is unable to do much, and he is much better at frying than she is. They are both tense, the father can arrive any time, drunk or savage, lose his temper, and throw the eggs and all on the floor. Or he can ask the boy to make him eggs the way he likes them, "hard as shoe leather" (a reflection of the man) while at the same

time needing him about his skills: "He would make some fellow a dandy wife." Tension and violence hover in the kitchen.

Munro treats her men as delicately and realistically as her women. *The Bear Came Over the Mountain* is about a man whose wife has dementia. This story illustrates the ease and brilliance with which she spans time. From that past to this, from that state of love, emotion, attraction, sex, fidelity, infidelity, to this. The number of pages (35) in which this is done is deceptive, for the shifts in time and perspective give the stories a depth that is the height of economic artistry — that one usually associates with novels.

It doesn't matter where or when she sets her stories — what matters is that she can say of a character, "She was insulted, by her own mind" (*The Love of a Good Woman*) is a sentence that leaps out at you. It can reflect you, or anybody you know.

Looking at *New Selected Stories*, I am revisited by an old desire. I want to write like Alice Munro. But then I realise that the whole point of Alice Munro is to teach a person to write as themselves. It seems a simple lesson — but hard to follow as you try to polish your own writing style in a way that is true to yourself and to what you have to say.

Manju Kapur is the author, most recently of, *The Gallery*



MAY 22, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

CONG SHOCK DEFEAT

THE CONGRESS (I) fared poorly in the assembly by-elections spread over a dozen states when it suffered shock defeats in many of its traditional strongholds. The party had bagged just seven of the 19 seats declared so far. The BJP secured three, the DMK two, while the Congress (J), Rashtriya Sanjay Manch, Lok Dal, AIADMK, Telugu Desam, and Forward Bloc and Jharkhand party secured one seat each.

BHIWANDI VIOLENCE

THE SYMBOL OF the Shiv Sena, the political

party in Bombay founded 20-odd years ago by Bal Thackeray to safeguard the interests of Maharashtrians, is a roaring tiger. The roar has returned with a vengeance. Almost 90 people were killed in just four days. Twenty of them — according to some accounts 27 — were burnt alive in one horrific outrage at the powerloom town of Bhiwandi. Bhiwandi has a population of around 2.9 lakh, many of whom are Muslims and refugees from Pakistan.

ZIA ON INDIA-PAK

PAKISTAN PRESIDENT ZIAUL Haq appreciated the progress being made at the office level talks between India and Pakistan on bi-

lateral matters and welcomed the parallel advance in many areas to build a positive relationship. Gen Zia told the two officials to continue their dialogue to bring about a complete agreement on the drafts of a friendship treaty and a no-war pact being discussed by them.

REDDY RESIGNS

THE ANDHRA PRADESH Congress-I committee president, Y S Rajasekhara Reddy, has resigned following the party's defeat in the Bandar assembly by-election. He sent his resignation to Mrs Indira Gandhi immediately after the poll result was announced.

11 THE IDEAS PAGE

A time for para diplomacy

SAD's proposals on engaging Pakistan bring to the fore the idea of 'sub-state diplomacy' for promoting national interest



IN ITS MANIFESTO issued last week, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) promised to get back Kartarpur Sahib, the final resting place of Guru Nanak, less than five kilometres across the Pakistan border. This might sound as rash as the BJP leaders' promise to bring Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) into India's fold. No, the SAD is promising to work with the Centre to negotiate an "exchange of territory" with Pakistan, in return for Kartarpur Sahib.

Sceptics would be quick to dismiss these ideas: Changing the territorial status quo along the Radcliffe Line in Punjab or winning back PoK, either peacefully or through the use, of force might not be impossible but it is quite hard. Reopening the territorial settlement in the Punjab will be a nightmare few would want to think of; getting PoK out of the grip of a nuclear-armed Pakistan will be a bigger challenge.

More practical than reworking the territorial disposition of the Punjab boundary or erasing the Line of Control in Kashmir is changing the nature of these frontiers that have long been zones of military confrontation and not commercial cooperation. That is why the push for cross-border trade with Pakistan is important. The SAD also demands reopening the Attari and Hussainiwala borders with Pakistan for trade and tourism to usher in economic prosperity.

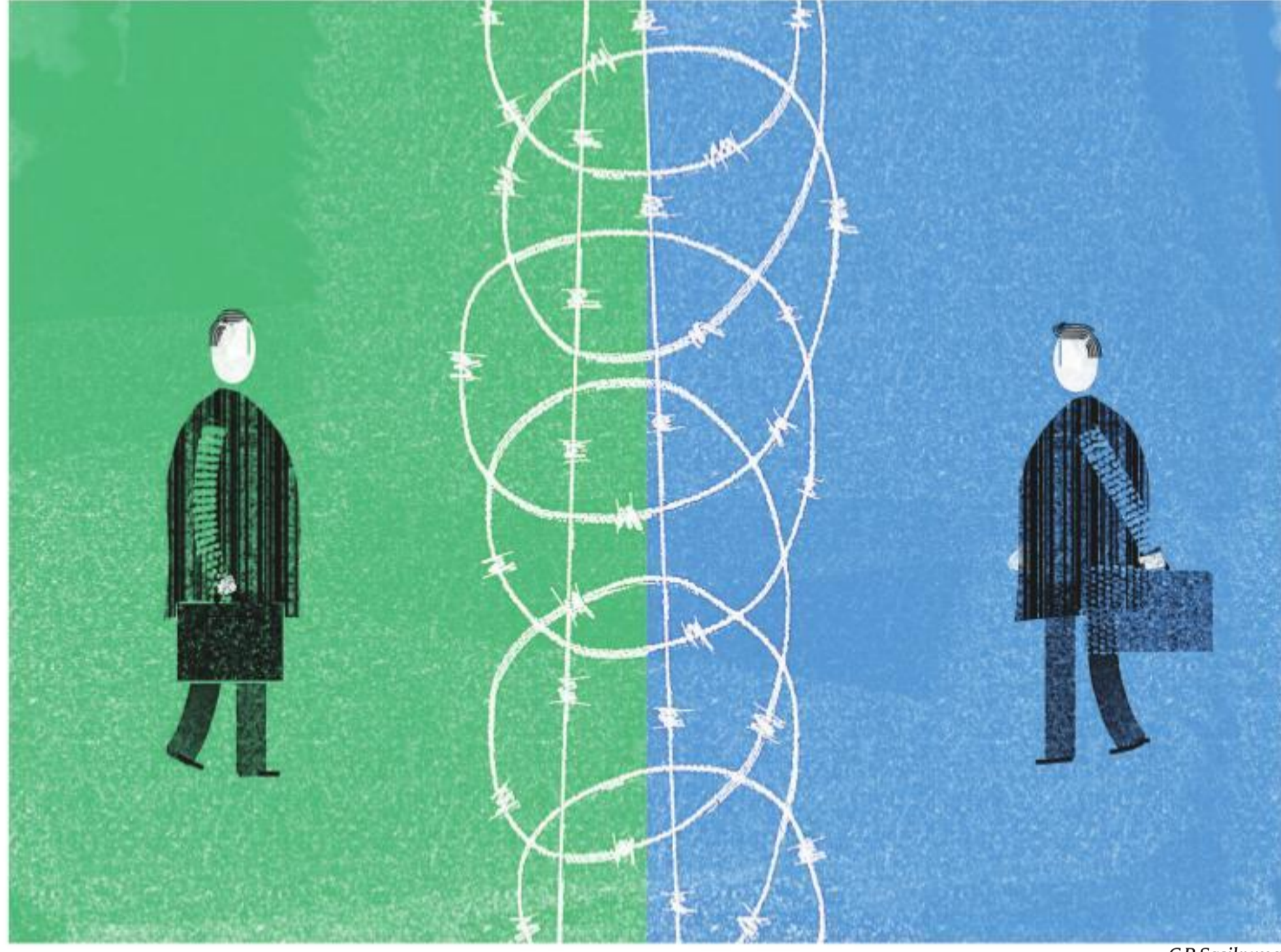
The problem here is not with India but with Pakistan.

Over the last few decades, the Pakistan Army made it clear that it has no interest in economic cooperation with India until the Kashmir question is sorted out to its satisfaction. On the trade front, Pakistan has never given the MFN status to India. Delhi, which gave that status to Pakistan, withdrew it in February 2019 after the terror attack in Pulwama. When India ended the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019, Pakistan suspended all trade ties. For a moment in February 2021, when the two security establishments negotiated a ceasefire agreement, Pakistan signalled interest in resuming trade ties; but there was too much opposition and then Prime Minister Imran Khan shelved the move.

More recently, the government of Pakistan led by Shehbaz Sharif highlighted the demand from the Pakistani business community to reopen trade ties with India. While businessmen across the border were making a sensible commercial case for resuming trade, Pakistan's establishment is not sure if this can be done because there is so much other baggage that overwhelms common sense on Islamabad's ties with Delhi.

The next government in Delhi will, of course, have a chance to take a fresh look at bilateral ties and pick up the threads of engagement from February 2021, when an incremental process of restoring reasonable ties was apparently discussed between the two sides. The new government in Delhi could also look at an interesting proposal from the SAD — the call to make the entire Punjab border into a "special economic zone". The SAD wants to work with Delhi to bring small and medium enterprises into this zone.

It will be interesting to imagine what such



CR Sasikumar

a zone could do for India-Pakistan relations when there is freer trade and economic cooperation across the Punjab border. Imagine also Pakistan setting up a similar free zone on its side of the border and the possibilities for integrated development.

Are we now getting ahead of ourselves? Perhaps, but unexpected positive developments do occur between India and Pakistan. Few had expected that the two countries would translate the long-standing idea of the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor between the two Punjab states into a reality during 2018-19. The idea of a transborder economic zone is not entirely outlandish. It was discussed often in the context of developing economic cooperation across the Pak-Afghan border; it did not go far amidst the turbulence in the bilateral relationship. It is unlikely to get much traction now amidst the deepening conflict between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistan army. However, the idea of trans-border economic zones has considerable traction in South East Asia. Elsewhere in Asia, China has actively encouraged its frontier provinces to embark on cross-border collaboration with neighbouring countries.

The ideas put forward by the SAD, in essence, reflect the interests of a people who have paid a high price for the partition of the Punjab. The SAD's proposals on engaging Pakistan bring to the fore the idea of "para diplomacy" or "sub-state diplomacy" in promoting national interests. This involves formal interactions between entities below the federal level — provincial and local governments — in pursuit of shared national goals.

The conduct of para diplomacy is not in opposition to the national governments, which have a monopoly over the engagement with other sovereigns. Federal governments are quite nervous about sharing, let alone ceding, authority to engage across borders, especially when there is a danger of cross-border criminal and terror networks casting a shadow over the process. Para diplomacy, conducted in tandem with the central gov-

ernment, can often produce openings that can't be generated between the congealed positions of the national governments.

India and Pakistan in their on-again, off-again peace process over the last quarter of a century have occasionally encouraged sub-state diplomacy in Punjab. There were occasions when the chief ministers of east and west Punjab met to explore mutually beneficial cooperation. However, those fledgling initiatives could not survive the intensity of the conflict at the national level.

Not all Indian border states have been as keen on cross-border cooperation as Punjab. The context on each border is different with unique burdens of history and different degrees of political difficulty. West Bengal, under Mamata Banerjee, for example, had, in fact, complicated Delhi's engagement with Dhaka. The Tamil parties in Chennai have often exercised their veto over Delhi's ties with Colombo.

A weak UPA government (2004-14) had to often walk back from productive initiatives with the neighbours because of resistance from its coalition partners in the states. A strong NDA government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi began with the talk of "cooperative federalism" but is locked in a conflict with non-BJP governments in the frontier provinces that prevents productive collaboration on neighbourhood policy.

The next government, irrespective of its political colour, must return to reconsidering para diplomacy as a valuable tool of India's statecraft. To succeed, India's neighbourhood policy must work with the interests of the people in the border provinces. This, in turn, demands the construction of a consensus between the centre and the regional parties in the border provinces on developing a productive relationship with the neighbours.

The pattern tells us three things. First, the writer is contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express and visiting professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

Who tells her story?

'Aattam' frames a woman's loneliness after she complains of sexual harassment



CAN A WOMAN tell the unvarnished truth about what happened to her? This is the central question at the heart of Anand Ekarshi's *Aattam* (The Play), the 2023 Malayalam film that was recently adjudged the best film at the 47th edition of the Kerala Film Critics Awards.

The film takes its structure from the iconic *Twelve Angry Men* (1954), a teleplay that has inspired multiple films since, including the Hindi film *Ek Ruka Hua Faisla* (1986). A bunch of men weigh in on what appears at first to be a matter of outright criminality, and must decide the fate of the accused. However, what makes the creative twist in *Aattam* particularly successful is that it has freed the "judgement" from legal institutional frameworks and moved it into a creative workplace. The "case" in question is sexual harassment. Anjali (Zarin Shihab), the lone female member of a small drama company, has been molested and the other members must decide whether or not her alleged abuser should continue working with them.

Like "jurors", the troupe's actors are ordinary citizens (the husband of a civil servant, a plumber, a chef). The troupe has tasted a small degree of success after film actor Hari (Kalabhavan Shajohn) joined it. The crime occurs on a night when Hari's friends

offer the troupe a night's free staycation at a resort. Like many real-life victims, Anjali initially doesn't want to complain. When she tells a colleague Vinay (Vinay Forrt), with whom she is romantically involved, the narrative quickly slips out of her control. The group is ridden with jealousy, aspiration, thwarted rage, debt, and besides, they are all men. They make the right noises but have no grasp of what it means to be molested by someone with whom you share space, eat, laugh, make common cause. What makes things more difficult is that Anjali is not the perfect victim — an untouched (therefore untouchable) teetotaler. Like many young women, she has been misled into thinking that she has the same rights and freedoms as her male colleagues.

It is significant that this story has emerged from Kerala, a state where women enjoy unprecedented levels of education but where sexual harassment remains rampant. The state has also witnessed multiple cases of sexual harassment and rape, involving actors such as Unni Mukundan. The film has evidently been inspired by the MeToo movement but, wisely, Ekarshi chose not to set the story in the glamorous, high-stakes world of movies or politics. In turning the lens on a small, struggling theatre group comprised of

freelancers with day jobs (and therefore no prospect of a formal sexual complaints committee), he allows us to view the crisis with much less cynicism.

Few Indian films have contended with workplace harassment. Most dramas focus on rape and on women being gaslit and re-traumatised in the courtroom. *Inkaar* (2013), co-directed by Sudhir Mishra and Jay Dev Banerjee, explicitly dealt with an accusation of sexual harassment. That film, too, was modelled on courtroom dramas to the extent that a formal complaint was lodged by the victim and an impartial female "judge" invited to take a decision. While it adopted a he says/she says approach, *Inkaar*'s plot slyly suggests that nothing is quite what it seems on the surface. Ajay Bahl's *Section 375: Marzi Ya Zabardasti* (2019) also takes a similar approach. Filmmaker Rohan (Rahul Bhat) is falsely implicated after he ends an "affair" with a costume assistant. The film's title stresses the potential for misuse of Section 375 with its provision that a man in a position of power over a woman is deemed guilty if she testifies to a sexual encounter against her will and consent. Conveniently, the film glosses over the obvious lack of will and consent even as it offers clear visual testimony. Rohan admits to inappropriate advances, de-

spite his colleague's reluctance; he even threatens to fire her if she refuses sex. Where does the question of *marzi* (will) arise? Yet, by falsifying the rape case, the makers of *Section 375* appear to be arguing that such complaints by women are not to be taken at their word.

In marked contrast to these Hindi films, *Aattam* reveals the complexity of group dynamics (we may interpret them as "industry" dynamics too) when colleagues must act to disempower a powerful man. The power imbalance is obvious and while all the drama company members want to be seen as good and moral actors, they are sharply aware of Hari's economic and cultural power. It could have been a very different story if Anjali had gone straight to the police, or made a public accusation. Instead, the film focuses on a woman's experience of complaining and confronting the possibility that her colleagues and mentors are not on her side. A final question thrown up by *Aattam* appears to be: How do women respond to toothless and/or compromised processes of judgement? While justice is another matter, the film does offer an alternative by way of taking control of one's own story.

Zaidi is a writer and filmmaker

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Mr Assange has now languished in Belmarsh prison for more than five years... The legal process grinds on. But the performative staging of a trial that will imperil crucial democratic freedoms should not be allowed to go ahead."

— THE GUARDIAN

After the collapse of a hoarding

In Ghatkopar, the state failed the citizens and broke the trust that city dwellers put in the material elements of public life



IT'S NOT FOR lack of visibility that a 120 ft x 120 ft billboard in Mumbai's Ghatkopar area escaped the eye of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). It was a billboard, after all, and its very job was to announce its presence and promote the brands that rented it. During the storm on May 13, the billboard collapsed and claimed 16 lives. Following the incident, the director of the media company that owned the billboard was arrested and the Chief Minister ordered a structural audit for hoardings. I argue that in the aftermath, we should hold the state accountable and reflect on the enforcement of urban development norms in our cities.

Let us first understand the relevance of safety audits and urban development norms in everyday life. When we interact with the city and its infrastructure, we trust the state with our lives. We travel in trains at high speeds on rails that are built by the state, we walk under high-tension power lines that are maintained by the state, and we walk besides advertisement hoardings that are regulated by the state. A city's infrastructure is, therefore, the physical interface between the citizen and the state. It is in sidewalks, bridges, and power lines that we experience the state in its most physical form. The quality of our infrastructure forms the core of the quality of our lives, and our safety is the function of its maintenance. Whether we are safe from a giant hoarding while standing at the petrol pump beside it, depends on how much human lives matter to the state. Audits and regulations, therefore, safeguard us from the dangers of infrastructural collapse.

The actions of the state since the tragic collapse of the hoarding follow a pattern that is typical of infrastructural "accidents" across the country. A dangerous piece of infrastructure remains unnoticed by the development authority for a long time. Before tragedy hits, a few concerned citizens or activists raise the issue. The complaints go unnoticed and any action is delayed. Then, tragedy hits, claiming several lives and igniting public outrage. The state conducts rescue operations and law enforcement launches a "manhunt" to nab the private contractor involved. Meanwhile, audits are ordered, and the development authority suddenly notices and fixes other violations in the city's infrastructure. With the private firm becoming the sole criminal in the tragedy, the state slowly disappears in the background with no accountability for the allocation of contracts, or the enforcement of regulations. In the 2016 flyover collapse in Kolkata, the construction company IVRCL was held solely responsible; in the Morbi Bridge collapse of 2022, the Ovea group; and in the case of the Ghatkopar hoarding collapse, it's Ego Media Pvt. Ltd.

The pattern tells us three things. First,

that the state does not value human lives enough to ensure that public infrastructure is safe. Reports have shown that the Ghatkopar hoarding had a weak and shallow foundation, that the Government Railway Police (GRP) had granted permission for a hoarding in 2021, and that the BMC had issued three notices to the agency over the past year but no action was taken. The state acted in complete neglect of the people of Mumbai, ignored a giant hoarding three times larger than the permitted size, and only ordered structural audits after 16 people died.

Second, that the state does not assume accountability in private partnerships and blames the private players alone. Most development and maintenance work of public infrastructure follows the public private partnership (PPP) model whereby private agencies are engaged to develop and maintain civic infrastructure as the state lacks human resources and the capacity to do so. The officials of the state, therefore, play the role of the people's representatives in PPP projects and their job is to ensure that safety protocols are followed by the private agency. To put it simply, while private firms indeed share responsibility for infrastructure tragedies, the buck stops with the state. Since the tragic collapse of the Ghatkopar flyover, the government has conveniently used the director of Ego Media Pvt Ltd. as a symbol of their swift punitive action but we are yet to see any state officials being held accountable for criminal neglect.

Third, the pattern tells us that the enforcement of urban development norms is selective and does not ensure citizen safety, let alone promote citizen welfare. Across its history, the BMC, like other municipal corporations of the country, has used laws like the Mumbai Municipal Corporation Act to remove street vendors from public spaces. Such Acts have also been used in a targeted manner against minorities and dissidents as shown in Amnesty International's February 2024 report. Mumbai saw its own instances of "bulldozer action" in Mira Road, Mohammed Ali Road and Govandi earlier this year. On the other hand, in the case of the giant illegal hoarding in Ghatkopar, all norms and laws were ignored. More importantly, while the law has been mobilised in the case of street vendors and structures that did not pose any threat to citizens' lives, it was ignored by the same municipal body in the case of the Ghatkopar hoarding that claimed 16 lives.

A giant hoarding abutting a prominent road in one of India's biggest metropolises governed by the richest municipality couldn't have gone unnoticed. The tragic collapse of the hoarding and the events thereafter show us the precarity of human life in Indian cities. The incident is a typical case of criminal neglect and the state's refusal of accountability. In Ghatkopar, the state failed the citizens and broke the trust that city dwellers put in the material elements of public life.

The writer is an architect and a graduate scholar of South Asia at the University of Oxford

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

IRAN'S POWER TUSSE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Recasting the battle within' (IE, May 21). The death of President Raisi is a significant setback for the Iranian regime, impacting both internal stability and diplomacy. The incident highlights the inherent risks faced by political leaders and underscores the vulnerability of Iran's leadership structure in times of crisis. The regime now faces the daunting task of appointing a successor who can maintain stability and continue the policies set by Raisi. This transition period could lead to internal power struggles as various factions within the government vie for influence.

SS Paul, Nadia

AAP'S FAILINGS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Maliwal moment' (IE, May 21). Aam Aadmi Party seems to have strayed from its mission of eradicating corruption and transparent governance. Many prominent leaders left the fold as the party deviated from its core values and ethical politics. Violent behaviour with Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal allegedly by the CM's PA is unacceptable. AAP should keep its house in order by maintaining transparency and accountability. The allegations that CCTV footage and other electronic details are being destroyed, also point to the covering up of the crime. The incident should be thoroughly investigated.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

FACTS & REVELATIONS

THIS REFERS TO the report, '11 PM speeches: From Cong, vikas, 4 castes to quota for minorities' (IE, May 21). This is an interesting analysis of PM Narendra Modi's speeches in different phases of elections in terms of the number and nature of issues he raised. The top slot went to Congress. This is an acknowledgement of the fact that contrary to the PM's claim of this being a Gandhi family party, the Congress party remains a force and challenge to reckon with. It seems Congress-mukt Bharat will remain a pipe dream. The BJP's unfounded allegations that the Congress will give away SC, ST, OBC quotas to Muslims inadvertently exposed its underbelly in terms of refusal of caste census and silence on raising SC/ST/OBC quota beyond 50 per cent.

L.R Murmu, New Delhi

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'After Raisi' (IE, May 21). The sudden death of Iran's President, Ebrahim Raisi has sent shockwaves across West Asia. Raisi, a conservative cleric, rose to power in 2021 after eight years of rule by President Hassan Rouhani. Rouhani's promise of change and prosperity didn't materialise as the then US President, Donald Trump, scrapped the nuclear deal in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Iran. The death of the President couldn't have come at a worse time for Iran. It is already struggling to stabilise an economy marred by US sanctions. Given the geopolitical tensions, Raisi's death could also fuel conspiracy theories. So Iran must get to the bottom of the crash.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali