

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Health insurance

Removal of age cap welcome, but job only half done

In an effort to make the healthcare ecosystem more inclusive and accessible, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) has done away with the age limit of 65 years for persons buying health insurance policies. In a recent gazette notification, the insurance regulator has directed insurers to ensure that they offer health insurance products catering to all age groups. They have also been restrained from rejecting claims based on pre-existing conditions. The insurers cannot refuse to issue policies to persons with severe medical conditions like cancer, heart or renal failure and AIDS.

These guidelines are expected to make the elderly better prepared to withstand the shock of unforeseen medical expenses. This is significant in a country whose count of senior citizens is estimated to exceed 20 per cent of the total population by 2050, according to the UN Population Fund. Improved life expectancy, particularly of women, is another key factor that has a bearing on health insurance.

However, there is a dire need to make the insurance products consumer-friendly. Potential customers are often put off by the jargon and the complexities. Trust deficit triggered by the fine print makes them reluctant to buy policies; even when they take the plunge, the policyholders are plagued by doubts and uncertainty. Misinformation or inadequate information about the benefits and risks makes them vulnerable to harassment. Transparency and a hassle-free claim settlement are no less important to win the confidence of customers. At the same time, a stronger mechanism is needed to effectively deal with unscrupulous elements. According to a Deloitte survey (2023), about 60 per cent of Indian insurance companies are witnessing a rapid increase in fraud, especially in the life and health insurance domains. Strict monitoring is needed to curb malpractices such as making false claims, inflating charges for services rendered and billing for medically unnecessary services.

Maldivian elections

Muizzu's win lends weight to his pro-China stance

THE results of the parliamentary elections in the Maldives are making waves in the Indian Ocean Region. At stake, in particular, are India's strategic interests amid China's aggressive outreach to smaller nations. The resounding victory of President Mohamed Muizzu's People's National Congress has implications for the Maldives' international alliances, notably with China. The shift towards China aligns with Muizzu's anti-India rhetoric and his administration's endeavours to bolster economic cooperation with Beijing, exemplified by major infrastructure projects awarded to Chinese companies. The decisive win grants Muizzu the political leverage to advance the pro-China agenda that he has been pursuing ever since he was elected President last year.

His tough stance is at variance with his predecessor Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's leaning towards India. The poll outcome will make it harder for New Delhi to improve its relations with the Maldives. The diverging paths of Male and New Delhi were apparent in January this year, when Muizzu opposed Indian troops' presence in the Maldives.

India's response to these developments has been nuanced, balancing diplomatic engagement with strategic caution. While External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has emphasised the enduring significance of historical ties and geographical proximity between the two nations, New Delhi has also taken measures to recalibrate its relationship by safeguarding its interests. The imposition of restrictions on the export of essential commodities to the Maldives is reflective of India's awareness of the geopolitical dynamics. Spoiling relations with India could prove detrimental to the Maldives' economic progress as the tiny nation risks overdependence on China. Fostering constructive neighbourly engagement is crucial for sustaining regional stability and security.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 23, 1924

Mr Zimand's testimony

IF there was one man in India at the time of the Jaito incident whose testimony in regard to it was of the greatest possible value, that man was Mr Zimand, the American journalist who accompanied the Jatha to Jaito. The reason is obvious. Here was an absolutely independent and impartial man, who was singularly free from bias, who had accompanied the Jatha only for the purpose of finding out the truth, and who had absolutely no interest either in suppressing or perverting it. It was their consciousness of this fact that made so many newspaper representatives try to obtain from Zimand a statement on the subject on the very morrow of the occurrence, but all such attempts failed, because Zimand had definitely made up his mind not to take part in any newspaper controversy while he was in India. Even the Mahatma does not appear to have succeeded in eliciting a full statement from Zimand when the latter saw him at Juhu shortly before his departure. The secret which had been so well kept during Zimand's stay in India was revealed to public which had almost ceased to expect it on the eve of his departure. And it is just as well that Zimand thus parted with his secret. His statement is clearly of such a kind that without it, the knowledge of the public as to this most sensational incident would have remained incomplete and the serious divergence between the official and unofficial versions would have had absolutely no chance of being settled. It is just the weight that was needed to turn the scale definitely and decisively in favour of one side and against the other.

N-shadow over Iran-Israel conflict

There are enough hawks on both sides to suggest extreme actions



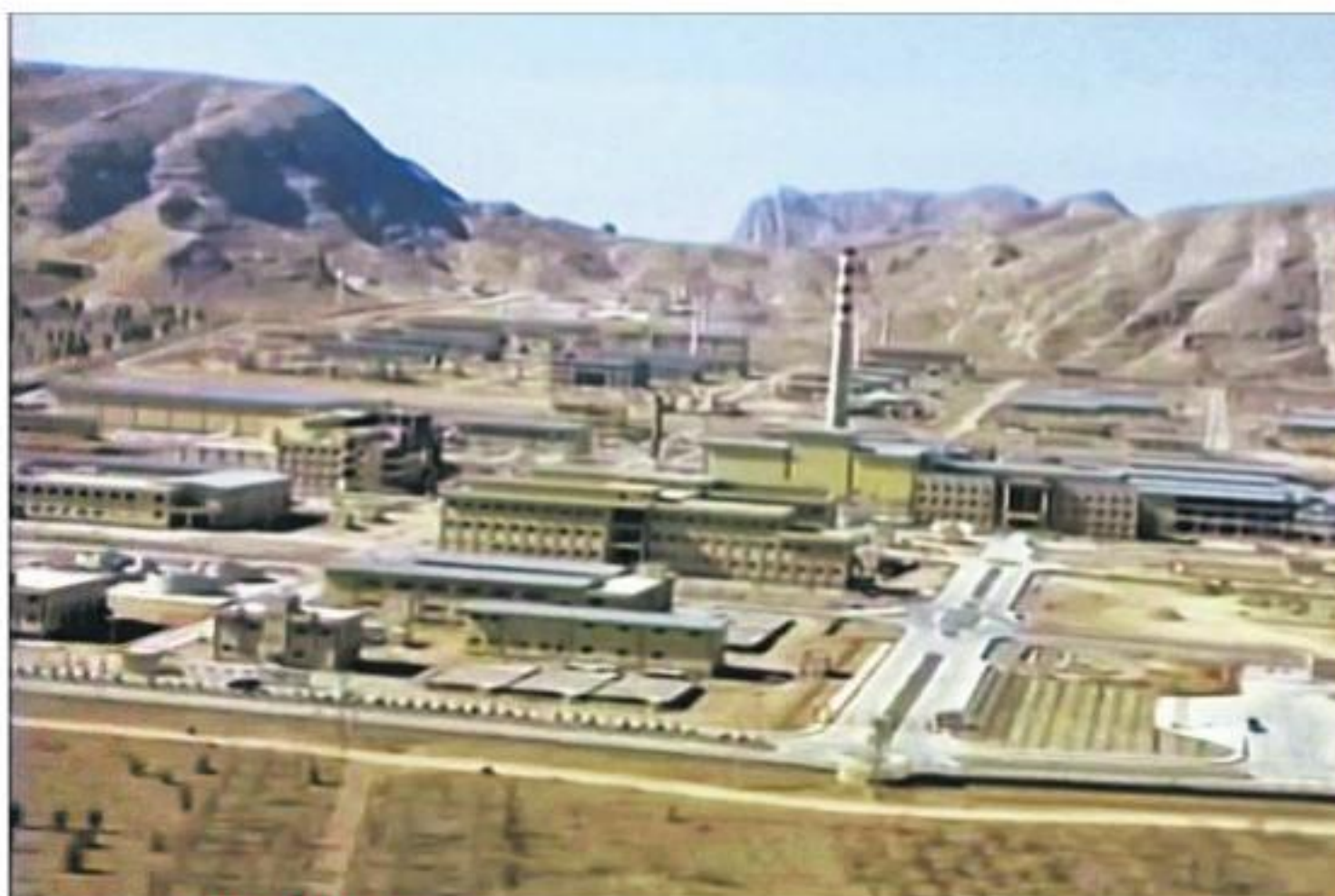
MANOJ JOSHI
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WITH the US, Israel and Iran maintaining silence over Israel's supposedly symbolic counter-strike on Iran, it is difficult to figure out just what exactly is happening.

We can interpret some of the actions by the targets chosen. In their massive drone-missile strike of April 13, the Iranians focused on a number of Israeli airbases, principally Nevatim and Ramona. Whether they did cause damage is another matter, but what is significant about these bases is that are adjacent to the Israeli nuclear reactor and facilities at Dimona. Reportedly, on Friday, the Israelis struck at the Khatam airbase outside Isfahan, which houses some of Iran's nuclear facilities.

Neither side deliberately targeted the nuclear facilities themselves, but there was clear messaging. Two pieces of rocket debris that were found in Iraq suggest that Israel used precision-guided missiles for the strike.

There are some lessons we draw from the two strikes. Israel (with some help from allies) demonstrated an astonishing ability to defend itself and emerge unscathed against waves of drones, cruise and ballistic missiles. On the other hand, the message it sent out to Iran with its limited strike was that it had the ability to penetrate the Iranian airspace easily and strike at targets deep in the country. By landing the first and last blows, Israel reiterated



IN THE SPOTLIGHT: An aerial view of an Iranian nuclear facility in Isfahan. REUTERS

its escalation dominance.

For now, the escalatory spiral seems to have been controlled, but the direct attacks the two sides have carried out on each other's territory are not a good augury for the future. No doubt both sides will now revert to their earlier shadow war in the region. Both have the incentive to do so — Tel Aviv would not want to be distracted from its war against Hamas in Gaza, and as for Tehran, it realises that its archaic air force and air defence system make it hugely vulnerable in any prolonged war with Israel or the US.

Clearly, Washington was able to incentivise Tel Aviv to limit its strike. First and foremost was the importance of its continuing support, underscored now with talk of a new \$1-billion aid package. Second, showing Israel the advantage of shaping a larger regional coalition — Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE and possibly Egypt — against Tehran.

The manifest weaknesses carry the risk of pushing Iran over the nuclear threshold. As is well known, Israel already possess-

The message Israel sent out to Iran with its limited strike was that it had the ability to penetrate the Iranian airspace easily and strike at targets deep in the country.

es anywhere up to 90 nuclear weapons. There is a credible report that with the help of South Africa, it also conducted a clandestine atmospheric nuclear weapon test in September 1979. It has also developed the Jericho long-range missile capable of delivering them. Like India, Israel has refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear weapon state.

Israel also has a clear-cut policy that it will not allow its West Asian neighbours to develop such weapons. This has led to Israeli strikes on Iraqi and Syrian facilities that were suspected of being used to develop nuclear weapons as well. An Israeli-US operation introduced the Stuxnet malware that badly damaged Iranian centrifuges in 2010, and Tel Aviv has also conducted a number of assassinations of Iranian scientists who were believed to be working on Iran's nuclear weapon programme. But it lacks the heft to militarily neutralise the widely dispersed Iranian N-programme.

Iran is a signatory to the NPT and its programme was subject to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). It claimed that it was developing enrichment capacity for use to fuel power reactors, but evidence indicated that it had other intentions. Iran came under US and EU sanctions and eventually the two helped craft a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, which put severe constraints on

the Iranian programme and brought it under IAEA supervision. The aim of the deal was not so much to ban nuclear activity as to ensure that the world would get enough time, perhaps a year's advanced notice, if the Iranians broke out of the deal to produce highly enriched uranium for a bomb.

In 2018, then President Trump withdrew the US from the deal; following the assassination of Gen Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, Tehran declared that it would no longer abide by it. Iran has developed a number of facilities for its programme, principally an above-ground enrichment plant and an underground one at Natanz and one buried deep in a mountain at Fordow, near Qom.

Reports say that Iran is enriching uranium to 60 per cent purity and has enough material, if it were to enrich it further to 90 per cent, for two nuclear weapons. So, according to the IAEA's reckoning, its breakout time is now close to zero. There are, of course, other issues, such as the weapon assembly comprising explosives and firing circuits, which would yield a small enough device to be contained in a missile. Iran has been conducting clandestine work on these for decades and even now there could be some secret facilities that are not known to the West.

The Chinese and the Russians were part of the JCPOA; what their attitude would be now is not clear. Clandestine help from either of the two cannot be ruled out, given their poor ties with the US and the West.

There is every possibility that having broken the taboo of not directly attacking each other, the Iran-Israel conflict could ratchet up to the nuclear stage the next time around. There are enough hawks on both sides to suggest extreme actions and apocalyptic messianism, which is woven into the culture of the region.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We have a legal and moral obligation to rid our world of nuclear tests and nuclear weapons. — Ban Ki-moon

Balle balle in Delaware

CHARANJEET SINGH MINHAS

CULTURES are as powerful as free-flowing rivers. No wonder Guru Gobind Singh chose the festival of Baisakhi (or Vaisakhi) to establish the Khalsa Panth. Also, who can resist the appeal of music? This may be the reason why Guru Nanak made it an integral part of *kirtan*.

Festivals and music inspire individuals and communities to break free from the shackles of race, religion, caste, class and age. They have the extraordinary power to unify people.

I have been living in Delaware, US President Joe Biden's home state, for the past 25 years. Often referred to as the 'First State', it lived up to its nickname during the Baisakhi celebrations on April 14. The 'First Team' of the 'First State', consisting of state legislators, made history by performing bhangra.

The composition of the team embodied the spirit of Baisakhi: solidarity, inclusivity and equity. One of its members was in her twenties, while three others were in their sixties. Diversity was evident in the representation of people from Hispanic, Asian, African-American and Caucasian backgrounds.

Like the functioning of a country, a state or society, a team's performance depends on each participant's ability to coordinate and interact with others.

I observed the team members and their incredible coach over the past several months. They braved rain and snow to attend practice sessions, sometimes coming straight from work to the dance studio and using the restrooms to change.

One day, one of them arrived on an empty stomach because of her hectic day at the Legislative Hall in Dover. She was tired and hungry, and her blood sugar level was low, but she still drove 40 miles to reach the studio. The senator stopped at a fast-food joint opposite the studio to grab a bite before swaying, swerving and jumping.

Bhangra is an energetic, demanding dance that can impact all parts of the performer's body, especially the legs and knees. The Delaware Senate Majority Leader attended all training sessions wearing knee braces and foot pads. Due to his position of responsibility in Dover, he went back and forth between the dance floor and the table with his phone to fulfil his obligations.

Another team member brought her one-year-old son to the practice sessions, while someone aspiring to be Delaware's next Lieutenant Governor managed to spare time during the campaign season. One fellow had sunburnt feet but still attended practice, while another had recently undergone an ankle surgery. He performed on stage even though he was scheduled to have a surgery on the other ankle as well.

And how did all the hard work pay off? Their outstanding performance brought the large crowd to its feet for a standing ovation. Now who wouldn't say *balle balle* to that!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Strengthen public healthcare

With reference to the article 'Congress, BJP manifestos a damp squib for the health sector'; it rightly lays bare the neglect of healthcare by political parties in India. The focus should be on strengthening public healthcare rather than taking the health insurance route because insurance schemes are being used by the government as a medium to hand over public funds to the private sector. There is no concrete evidence on the effectiveness of public health insurance schemes, and the track record of insurance schemes in the past decade has revealed increased fraudulent implementation, over-investigation, over-prescription, over-diagnosis and irrational treatment.

VITULL K GUPTA, BATHINDA

Insurance cover for the old

With reference to the news report, 'IRDAI does away with age cap, those above 65 can now buy new health cover'; the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) has offered adequate protection from healthcare expenses to senior citizens and super-senior citizens by removing the age limit of 65 for individuals buying health insurance policies. Insurers have also been mandated to offer health policies to persons with pre-existing medical conditions. Persons above 60 years are more vulnerable to age-related diseases but have limited sources of income.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Can't replace Constitution

Refer to the news report 'Hemant Soren held for refusing to quit INDIA: Congress at bloc's unity show'; during the rally organised by Opposition parties at Ranchi, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said: "The Modi-Shah government will scrap the Constitution if it returns. Democracy will end." His fear is unfounded. During the Emergency, the Congress government tried to drastically change the Constitution through the 42nd amendment, but the same was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in *Minerva Mills vs Union of India*. In that case, the court propounded the 'basic structure doc-

trine'. The SC ruled that the power of Parliament to amend the Constitution was limited. Parliament cannot exercise this limited power to grant itself unfettered powers.

VINAY KUMAR MALHOTRA, AMBALA CANTT

Hope for democracy

The Election Commission's decision to hold repolling at 11 polling stations in Manipur is not just a routine move; it is a beacon of hope for democracy in a state marred by violence and electoral malpractices. The people of Manipur have bravely defied threats and violence to exercise their democratic right, only to be met with chaos and manipulation. As the world's largest democracy, India must set an example of integrity and fairness. All eyes are on Manipur — the authorities must conduct the elections with transparency and accountability.

GAGANPREET SINGH, MOHALI

UGC's encouraging steps

The University Grants Commission (UGC) is making every effort for higher enrolment of scholars in PhD courses. The recent changes introduced by the UGC are welcome. A lot of Indian scholars rush to foreign universities to grab quality stipend for research with easy admission there. Earlier, it was difficult to pursue PhD from government-approved colleges. After the easing of norms, we are hopeful that more and more Indian researchers will get enrolled in PhD studies. Such encouraging efforts will surely bring positive changes in the Indian academic system.

KIRTI WADHAWAN, KANPUR

Religious bodies must be taxed

Regarding the editorial 'Yoga fee taxable'; the apex court's verdict has been aptly endorsed. Financial transactions involving religious or political institutions should be subject to taxation. This measure would promote equity and accountability in the domain of service taxation. Considering the vast, untaxed funds collected by these institutions, they are often alleged to be misused for political gains.

BALVINDER, CHANDIGARH



WORDLY WISE
 THAT GOVERNMENT IS THE STRONGEST OF WHICH
 EVERY MAN FEELS HIMSELF A PART.
 — THOMAS JEFFERSON

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

The cost of health

Capping costs in private sector is important but
 healthcare can't do without adequate state investment



SANJAY NAGRAL

IT'S A SCARY EXPERIENCE that you have certainly heard of. A sudden health crisis results in hospitalisation. Several tests, drugs and procedures later, the patient and family are facing crises on two fronts — the illness and humongous costs. After discussing the patient's condition with an anxious family member, there is another inevitable gloomy interaction: "Doctor, we have exhausted our resources. Can you do something about the bill?" Out-of-pocket costs and impoverishment due to illness are among our gravest societal tragedies. Resentment towards costs is a big factor in the growing hostility, including violence, against healthcare workers.

This is why, when the Supreme Court recently spoke strongly on this issue it resonated with many. The Bench was hearing a PIL by an NGO praying for direction to determine charges in hospitals across the country in terms of Rule 9 of the Clinical Establishment Act. The Court threatened to impose the Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS) rates on all hospitals as an interim measure. It gave the state six weeks to act. Is it possible for the top court to intervene effectively where governments have failed? What exactly is it wading into?

If there is one policy which should be prioritised by a nation that genuinely cares for its citizens, it's the elimination of money as a precondition to relieve suffering in an illness. What comes closest to this aspiration is a publicly funded health system which gives timely, effective and free care, irrespective of social class. Countries with universal healthcare ensure that no one pays at the point of care. Funding comes from taxes. Thus, the rich subsidise the health of the poor and everyone uses the same facility. So, if you are knocked down on the road or suffer a heart attack, needing instant lifesaving care, whether you live or die is not determined by money or social status.

Following Independence, India's professed policy was to attain universal health care. However, deliberately or through benign neglect, the state underfunded public facilities, making space for an alternative to emerge. The elite, desiring healthcare designed for their needs, started building big hospitals. Some started as charity, but most soon realised that

healthcare is lucrative. They were also unwittingly bailing out the state by establishing high-end curative services which had been ignored in the preoccupation with primary care. This process took a big leap after liberalisation when for-profit hospital chains funded by investors and global capital entered the fray. Private hospitals provided efficient, sanitised and high-tech care compared to public hospitals. The middle class shifted to them. The poor also soon began to prefer private care. India now has the distinction of having the largest private healthcare sector in the world. But that's only part of the story.

There are other characteristics crucial to understanding private healthcare in India. First, a universal truth: Healthcare does not follow market rules. It involves unpredictability, distress and relies on empathy. That's why even dominant market economies insulated healthcare. Secondly, healthcare in India is one of the least regulated. Anyone can start a hospital anywhere, promote irrational treatment and thrive without accountability. Finally, it is characterised by a deep co-option of medical professionals. Doctors' own hospitals and income are linked to profits. Hospitalisation, prescriptions, tests and procedures, even if unnecessary, are rewarded. There can be no more dangerous conflict of interest for citizens seeking care. Thus, ordinary Indians are caught in a pincer of costly, excessive care in the private sector and crowded, slow, suboptimal care in state facilities.

The situation became embarrassing for political parties. What could they do? The task of reinvigorating the public sector seemed difficult and too long for quick electoral dividends. The next best policy was to buy care from the private sector through mass insurance schemes for the poor. The early starters were Aarogya in Andhra Pradesh and Rajiv Gandhi Jeevandeyee Arogya Yojana in Maharashtra. Its current national version, the ambitious flagship AB-PMJAY, covers almost half of the population. But for such schemes to be viable, the health sector had to play by some rules and costs had to be rationalised. The growing private health insurance sector also demanded regulation. The Clinical Establishment Act was introduced in 2010

partly as a response to these needs. It seeks to bring a semblance of order by registering all health establishments, setting minimum standards and even rationalising costs by setting ranges. Predictably, it met with resistance. Many state governments have not yet implemented it or done so half-heartedly.

It is naive to think that private healthcare will agree to cost control out of a notion of social responsibility if business is booming anyway. Even during Covid, irrational charging was rampant. It is argued that forcing the private sector is unfair when it is the government's job to provide healthcare. Whilst this may seem in intuitive its disingenuous because governments subsidise private healthcare in more ways than one. Besides training of health care workers in state institutions, this also includes several infrastructural concessions. In a sense, private health is subsidised by public money.

Previous efforts to control private sector costs have largely failed. The Supreme Court's intervention is potentially powerful but it is entering tricky territory. Any effective intervention will face resistance not only from industry, but also influential doctors, many of whom are entrepreneurs. If the Court wishes to promote affordable healthcare, capping costs could be a small step. But no nation has improved substantively in health equity without adequate state investment. And India's state share in health funding continues to be one of the lowest in the world. Can the court address this fundamental issue?

Our nation is in the process of choosing the next government. Manifestos of all parties have made token commitments to healthcare. One would have thought that with Covid in recent memory, the state of healthcare would occupy centre-stage. But politics seems busy with personalities, identity and emotive issues. With the poor internalising suboptimal healthcare as their destiny and the middle class no longer having a stake, activists seek legal remedies to what should be a political battle. Milords, the burden on you is immense, if not unfair.

Nagral is a Mumbai-based surgeon who writes on health policy and ethics

No, PRIME MINISTER

From 'beauty of diversity' to ghuspaitiye, zyada bachche, mangalsutra — this plunge doesn't rally voters, it divides them

A HEATED ELECTION campaign is on, but all is certainly not fair in electoral war. At a rally in Rajasthan's Banswara, Prime Minister Narendra Modi framed politics as a zero-sum game and communities as adversaries. He bracketed the Muslim minority with "ghuspaitiye (infiltrators)", resorted to prejudiced stereotyping, "jinke zyada bachche hain (those who have more children)", and (mis)used the emotive symbolism of the "mangalsutra" to paint a spectre in which the majority would be deprived of their "mehnat ki kamai" or hard-earned money. This is divisive speech and does grave disservice to his high office. The PM was countering former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's remarks in 2006 on the marginalised, including minorities, having the "first claim on resources". But this was not just an attack on Manmohan Singh or Congress, which, the PM also said, was driven by "Urban Naxal ki soch (thinking)" (a coinage that has often come in handy for the ruling establishment to label difference and dissent as subversive). What the PM said constituted a lowering of the political debate in a way that also goes against his own efforts to send out a more expansive and encompassing message that addresses everyone as a stakeholder in democracy and celebrates rather than berates India's diversity. After the first phase of polling, he urged people to step out and vote "for anyone" because it is important to secure the future of the country. "Bharat ek bahuratra vasundhara hai," he said in an interview to ANI just days ago, celebrating the beauty of its diversity. And, on Monday, a day after Banswara, in Aligarh, the PM reached out to Pasmanda Muslims talking of his government's interventions on triple talaq and the Haj quota.

Of course, there can be legitimate political and electoral debate about the linking of welfare and identity. It is also true that PM Modi's own political pitch has insistently underlined the fact that his government's welfare schemes are caste and community blind, that they do not discriminate between beneficiaries. From free rations to Ayushman Bharat, from Ujjwala to PM-Kisan, the benefits touch all, including the Muslim minority substantially, given the socio-economic indicators of the community. But by painting an entire community into a corner and framing it as an adversary, the PM does not widen or deepen the debate — he shrinks and narrows its possibilities.

PM Modi has much to talk about, as he pitches for a third term. Large audiences at home, and abroad, listen to him carefully. Whoever wins or loses the ongoing election, he has made a place for himself as a leader and prime minister who has been able to straddle and rise above several fault lines in India's multi-layered polity. A speech like the one he made Sunday is a disturbing and unfortunate step back from that trajectory. And, dispiriting for the 18-year-old Indian (whatever her faith) who will vote this summer for the first time in her life.

POLITICS OF THE DAY

India must take changes in politics in Maldives in stride. Delhi must continue to engage with Male despite its anti-India stance

THERE WAS MUCH at stake for Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu in the country's parliamentary elections. First, it was a test of his popularity: Muizzu beat his predecessor Mohamed Solih in the competitive second-round poll in September last year. Muizzu has also faced some dissension from within the ruling alliance and party, especially from supporters of former President Abdulla Yameen, who was under house arrest on corruption charges. In addition, the fact that Muizzu's People's National Congress (PNC) did not have a majority in the Majles (or parliament) meant that the Opposition had considerable room to scupper the executive's plans. The ruling party's comprehensive win in the parliamentary elections, then — the PNC has won 70 of 93 seats and its allies three more — has given it the "super majority" and political capital it desired moving forward.

There is little doubt that their anti-India stance is one of the pillars of the politics of Muizzu and the PNC. Muizzu had campaigned for the presidency on an "India Out" theme and in office, his government has asked for the minuscule number of Indian troops in the country to be withdrawn. He has scrapped the 2019 agreement under which India could carry out hydrographic surveys in Maldivian waters. Muizzu has also drawn Male closer to Beijing, including through his maiden visit soon after being elected president. China has received contracts for infrastructure projects. However, it is important to remember that the Maldives Majlis election is a domestic issue. It was fought on issues of corruption, the economy, housing, employment and shifting political alliances. The acquittal of Yameen, for example, likely helped firm up the ruling coalition.

The Indian government has done well not to overreact and to treat the attempts to distance Male from Delhi with soft hands. It hasn't over reacted to provocative statements from members of Muizzu's party in the recent past. A neighbour's domestic politics are its own affair and as the preeminent regional power, India must take the churns in Maldivian polity in stride. If "India Out" is Muizzu's calling card today, Solih was criticised often by his detractors for his perceived "India First" policy. Delhi must, of course, draw red lines on matters that undermine its security and core interests. Just 70 nautical miles from the Indian coast, the Maldives is and will be an important part of India's Neighbourhood First policy and the government's SAGAR initiative. No matter the government of the day in Male, it must continue to engage with the country. That is the surest way of making bilateral ties "politics proof" in the long run.

THE FIGHTER

Vinesh Phogat didn't flinch in her fight against Brij Bhushan Singh. Her toughness will be on display at Paris Olympics

VINESH PHOGAT DIDN'T allow her far-from-ideal preparation to come in the way of her bagging the quota for the Paris Olympics later this year. While her opponents had been sweating it out in training arenas around the world, Vinesh was on the streets fighting a different battle. She was the face of the protest over the removal of BJP MP and former wrestling chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, who stands accused of sexually harassing six wrestlers. Remaining steadfast in the face of threats and slander, sleeping on footpaths to keep the flame of protest burning, Vinesh now gets one more shot at her dream — an Olympic medal.

Receiving scarcely any support from the rest of the sporting community, she took the case to the courts, demanding safety, dignity and respect for wrestlers, even as Brij Bhushan's men continued to loom over the federation and make life difficult for her. Proving her sporting credentials meant regaining mat sharpness and readying herself in the trimmest weight categories while staying mentally sturdy. She endured health risks from starving and dehydration, faced blackouts and dipping blood pressure in the middle of a bout, and underwent two knee surgeries and lonely rehabs to fight on the mat. An injury would crop up at the worst moments, followed by surgery. She had to start from scratch with sceptics giving her no chance to return to peak power.

Vinesh was also painted as a villain who took others' competition spots. At the event where she secured the quota, she was still fighting to get her coach and physios accredited. But Vinesh has made it clear that she remains undeterred about pursuing her Olympic dream. Cornered, the fearless wrestler took on the politically powerful Brij Bhushan. Imagine what a tough competitor she will be at the Paris Olympics.



SURANJALI TANDON

TAX TREATIES ARE integral to cross-border investment relations as they define the treatment of incomes that arise in one country accruing to a resident of another country. Their design is also a reflection of the underlying power equation. Developing countries often negotiate treaties that cede greater taxing rights in the hope of higher investments. Whether it is legitimate for third countries to avail of such benefits by routing investments through the preferential jurisdiction has been discussed widely. In the *Union of India v Azadi Bachao*, the Court was of the view that treaty shopping is a necessary evil for a developing economy. Two decades on, the norm and legal frameworks have changed dramatically.

The Base Erosion and Profit Shifting programme was to end the use of low-tax jurisdictions for tax avoidance. Since then the OECD — tasked with the redesign of international tax laws to push forward such reform — has developed a set of best practices. Among these was the multilateral instrument (MLI) that allowed countries the option to select tax treaties and provisions therein that would be amended suitably and swiftly. The instrument received wide support.

One of the key reforms it initiated was the inclusion of a provision for prevention of treaty abuse as a minimum standard and an amendment of the preamble to the treaties. The latter is to prevent non-taxation or reduced taxation through tax evasion, including treaty-shopping arrangements that provide benefits to residents of other jurisdictions and

PAYING THEIR FAIR SHARE

Amendments to India-Mauritius treaty aim to plug tax loopholes

anti-abuse rules that will enable tax administrations to deny treaty benefits in certain circumstances. In more than 1,100 treaties signed by countries, a broad anti-avoidance rule or principal purpose test (PPT) has been opted for. India is among the signatories to the MLI and in line with its position, the recent amendment to the India-Mauritius treaty signals the keenness to plug the well-known loophole.

The amending protocol to the India-Mauritius treaty may ensure that treaty benefits, which include lower withholding rates, will not be granted where it can be reasonably concluded that obtaining the benefit is one of the principal purposes of the transaction. The language ensures that the tax administration can probe based on intent. This has been a particularly thorny issue with respect to financial flows from Mauritius. It is often suggested that taxpayers from other jurisdictions route their investments through Mauritius.

The question often posed before courts is whether the tax residence certificate is enough to grant the benefit. Legal changes were necessary to examine the purpose of a transaction. It is expected that the amendments to the treaty allow the authorities to move beyond the residency certificate and assess the principal purpose of an arrangement. Given that 16 per cent of FDI inflows in 2021-22 were from Mauritius, the reform will impact the composition of flows, as was observed after the amendments in 2017 when capital gains became taxable at source.

Indian tax law too includes a general anti-

avoidance rule that was introduced in 2017 to ensure that the spirit of the law is respected. To allay fears that it would lead to overreach by the tax department, a series of backstops including a panel-based approach to trigger GAAR was operationalised. The rarity of its invocation suggests that the authorities have been reasonable. Thus, for treaty matters now, the concern may be if a similarly restrained approach may be adopted. This is particularly important since the principal purpose test (PPT) in the treaty expands the situations to which the anti-avoidance rule is applicable in treaty-related transactions. Moreover, when the amendments to the Mauritius treaty and GAAR were introduced, the investments made prior to 2017 were grandfathered. There is doubt if that is also true for the PPT.

International tax law is turning a new page as treaties with serious revenue implications are being reformed. There is also growing support for the global minimum tax that includes a proposal on the subject to tax rule (STTR). STTR is a treaty-based rule that ensures a top-up tax on low-taxed intra-group transactions that are subject to corporate tax rates below the minimum of 9 per cent. These changes could further impact the current practices of using treaties to avail benefits. As India changes its tax treaties, this amendment is proof that the BEPS programme has indeed shifted the direction of policy to ensure investment decisions are not all about tax.

The writer is associate professor, NIPFP

APRIL 23, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

VIOLENCE IN PUNJAB

THREE PERSONS WERE shot dead by terrorists, a man was beaten to death by some persons in the Golden Temple complex and 32 passengers of a bus were looted near Mukerian in Hoshiarpur district in the last 24 hours in Punjab. According to reports, a state transport bus from Patiala to Jammu was stopped by four armed persons.

UK-LIBYA STANDOFF

BRITAIN IS BREAKING off diplomatic relations with Libya immediately and expelling all Libyan diplomats who are now inside the

besieged Libyan Embassy in London. The decision was announced by Home Secretary Leon Brittan after six days of intense negotiations between the two countries failed to break the deadlock at the embassy where about 30 to 40 Libyan diplomats and others have been under police siege following the killing of a British policewoman by gunfire allegedly from inside the embassy.

TALKS WITH MILITANTS

THE CONGRESS (I) high command has started consulting partymen from Punjab to find an early solution to the Punjab problem and restore popular rule in the state.

Both the central government and the Akali circles now feel that there is a possibility of an early settlement if the terrorists would not create more complications for the Akali leadership.

HIGH SEA ENCOUNTER

THIRTEEN TAMIL "TERRORISTS" and "terrorist recruits" were killed when a naval patrol opened fire on a boatload of youths within the surveillance zone set up along Sri Lanka's northern coast, an official release said. It said the naval patrol opened fire when the boat carrying the "terrorists" refused to stop even after being intercepted.



11 THE IDEAS PAGE

Climate's new normal

Each generation's understanding and acceptance of their environmental conditions are constantly being lowered. It is an unacceptable inheritance to pass on



BIJAL VACHHARAJANI

WHENEVER WE RUN out of things to say, it's customary to turn towards the weather to rescue us.

"So hot."
"Too stuffy."
"Look, it's raining cats and dogs."
Idioms and anecdotes roll off our tongues, and suddenly we find ourselves in terra firma in awkward social situations.

But now, the weather is awkward — a roller coaster of the climate crisis and our actions. We constantly seem to be vying to break the hottest-year record annually, so much so that even the Guinness World Records might not be able to keep up with this extraordinary feat.

Warmest January on record already. Warmest 2023 since "global records began in 1880" (NASA), 2024 seems to be all set to beat this unenviable record. Delayed snow in the Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh regions. India emerged as a top contender for climate hotspot in a study conducted by researchers from the Indian Institute of Technology and the University of Augsburg, Germany. Yet again, we are witnessing a tsunami of heat waves that the IMD has warned about. Hottest days. Increased daytime temperatures. And worse, rising death tolls, with so many Indians not having the means or the access to adapt to soaring temperatures.

That is the planet we are all set to bequeath to the next generation. We pass on many things to our children — property, genes, traits, et al. But we are also the generation that passes on a climate-changed planet.

What would our last will and testament look like? To me, it's one that offers them an inheritance of a better climate future. Because a clean future is a right. One that the Supreme Court of India recognised in March — a distinct right "to be free from the adverse effects of climate change".

While working on the picture book *We Hope: Children on Climate Change* (Pratham Books), my (former) colleague Smit Zaveri and I combed through hundreds of forms and letters written by children living in different habitats of India. From Agumbe, a place that was once known as the Cherrapunji of the south for its abundant rainfall, 15-year-old Sathvik wrote, "There is a lake near my house which has water only during the monsoon. The rest of the time it is dry due to the heat." Thirteen-year-old Dilip Mashya from Dahanu noted, "Our village used to look like a forest. Now it does not look like a forest."

Every entry was a cause for heartbreak. Like when 15-year-old Atharva Raut from Mumbai wrote, "My lungs are tired" and Mehran Shafi from Jammu and Kashmir, all of 12, said, "I feel upset about my future on this planet, because children have to face it the most and I am also feeling sorry for the Earth."



C R Sasikumar

Burning fossil fuels has made us all pyromaniacs, culpable in our individual and collective way, but especially to the next generation.

As we read, a pattern began to emerge. We realised that while the concepts of climate change might not always be coherent to students, they were keen observers of the weather around them, ticking off "more rain", "more hot", "flooding", "water shortage", "animal extinction", "pollution" and "change in the time that flowers bloom".

What made my heart sink was that, increasingly, as research underscores across the world, their relationship with nature has degenerated into something that's either transactional — as the provider of food, air, water etc — or is anxiety-ridden. In the section where the children wrote letters to Dear Earth, most were apologetic about human action and promised to do better. That's not the sort of burden that homework-grappling children should have to deal with. Algebra's scary enough.

In 2023, UNICEF estimated that "76 per cent of children in South Asia are exposed to extreme high temperatures where 83 or more days in a year exceed 35°C." That's 460 million children under the age of 18. And that, "3 in 4 children in South Asia are already exposed to extreme high temperatures compared to only 1 in 3 children (32 per cent) globally." Additionally, each unprecedented weather event is embedded with trauma and stress. Our children are one of the most vulnerable to the climate crisis.

Their present is already at stake, it's a sad fact that we're already getting to witness the adverse effects of climate change. As grown-ups, we remember our weather heritage from when we were children. The MRF Rain Day predicting ads. The snowfall-time holidays. The changing of the seasons, heralding festivities, seasonal foods, and wardrobe planning.

But each generation's understanding and

That is the planet we are all set to bequeath to the next generation. We pass on many things to our children, property, genes, traits, et al. But we are also the generation that passes on a climate-changed planet. What would our last will and testament look like? To me, it's one that offers them an inheritance of a better climate future. Because a clean future is a right. One that the Supreme Court of India recognised in March — a distinct right 'to be free from the adverse effects of climate change'.

acceptance of their environmental conditions are constantly being lowered — a phenomenon called Shifting Baseline Syndrome. That means a child in Delhi comes to consider the soaring AQIs as a regular part of winter, the donning of smog masks as much a ritual as the airing of woollens and the eating of gajak and other winter foods. Or, a student in Assam or Chennai expects frequent school disruptions because of flooding. And walking further and further for water in Maharashtra is part of a daily routine for some. In Bengaluru, children squint at purple skies heavy with smog when looking for stars. Little wonder that I continuously have classroom interactions where children sensorially describe their city with negative connotations — suffocating like a grave, a polluted chamber that's claustrophobic, too loud with horns and people complaining, it reeks of cement, smoke, and garbage.

This is a new normal. An unacceptable one.

Last year, when I spoke to a group of middle graders in Ahmedabad, I asked them which passage from my book, *A Cloud Called Bhura* (Talking Cub) in which a group of tweens go on a climate quest against a brown cloud of pollution, I should read from. They had already read the book, so they began to offer suggestions. The overwhelming one was from the chapter, "When it Rains, It Pours", where the protagonists find themselves wading through a flash flood. As I finished, there was an outpouring from the children sharing their experiences of the floods that year. Sometimes, as the grown-ups in the room, what they expect us to do is listen. So, I did.

Like, listen to 10-year-old Bethany from Dimapur, for instance, who wrote, "I will try to protect you, Earth, from this changing weather." Let us.

The Bengaluru-based writer is a children's author, editor and climate worrier

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Mr Macron will step down in 2027, after serving two terms as president, and the future of the centrist political movement he founded appears increasingly unclear. Progressives need to find a way to make common cause, and through doing so, a way to win." — THE GUARDIAN

Myth of the caged parrot

Investigative agencies are functioning according to due procedures. They are not working at the behest of the government



GOURAV VALLABH

IN INDIAN POLITICS, accusations often fly thick and fast, shaping public discourse and perceptions. One particularly persistent allegation levelled against the ruling party is the notion that individuals associated with it are granted immunity from legal scrutiny, insinuating that joining the party is a means to exoneration. However, such claims are baseless and threaten the integrity of India's legal system and democratic principles. This article aims to contest these allegations by highlighting the robustness of India's legal framework and providing factual evidence regarding the operations of investigative agencies like the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED).

The CBI, often under scrutiny for alleged political bias, operates within a framework of independence and impartiality. According to official data, a small fraction of the agency's workload pertains to political figures. Over the last 11 years, out of 10,622 preliminary inquiries and regular cases, only a handful have involved politicians. This statistic, representing approximately 1/1.5 per cent of the total cases, undermines the claim of a politically motivated modus operandi.

Moreover, many high-profile cases involving politicians were not self-initiated but were entrusted to the CBI by constitutional courts. The agency operates within the constraints of international cooperation, judicial stays, and the technical nature of evidence, which may extend investigations over prolonged periods. This reality highlights the agency's dedication to diligence rather than political motivations.

Similarly, the ED, tasked with combating economic crimes, operates with a commitment to upholding the law. Despite accusations of selective or politically driven investigations, official data paints a different picture. Out of almost 6,260 Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) cases, only 149 pertain to politicians, representing a mere 2.3 per cent. Notably, investigations into these cases have led to the identification and attachment of proceeds of crime worth over Rs 27,000 crore.

Investigations by the ED also extend to high-profile bureaucrats, resulting in the identification and attachment of proceeds worth over Rs 16,000 crore. These figures underscore the agency's dedication to impartiality and effectiveness in combating economic offences, irrespective of political affiliations.

The data provided by both the CBI and the ED debunks the myth of political bias in the working of these investigative agencies. These agencies operate within the framework of the law and are guided by the principles of impartiality and accountability. Accusations of political interference not only undermine the credibility of these agencies but also cast aspersions on the integrity of India's legal system.

Critics of the judiciary, a pillar of democracy, have also been unfair. Such criticisms,

regardless of the intentions behind them, do not align with the aspiration to propel India towards greater prosperity and well-being. The judiciary — given its role to safeguard the rule of law and uphold justice — is fundamental to our democratic fabric. While constructive criticism is essential for progress, unwarranted attacks on the judiciary undermine its independence and integrity. Those truly committed to India's advancement recognise the importance of respecting the judiciary, ensuring that justice prevails for all and the nation's sovereignty remains unshaken.

Questioning the nation's sovereignty in pursuit of narrow political agendas is not only irresponsible but also detrimental to the unity and integrity of the nation. India's sovereignty is sacrosanct, safeguarded by the collective will of its citizens and enshrined in the Constitution. To dispute this sovereignty in pursuit of partisan gains is a disservice to the democratic principles on which the nation stands.

Individuals' decisions to join political parties stem from a variety of factors, distinct from any pending criminal cases they may have. Ideological alignment, aspirations for change and disillusionment with current political affiliations often serve as primary motivators. While legal matters can influence public perception and political viability, they rarely serve as the sole determinant for joining or leaving a party. People's political choices are nuanced and multifaceted, shaped by personal values, socioeconomic considerations and perceptions of party integrity and effectiveness. Therefore, attributing party affiliations solely to pending criminal cases overlooks the intricate interplay of individual motivations and the broader sociopolitical landscape.

One such example of an individual changing political parties due to a perceived lack of vision and direction in their former political party, and not because of any criminal case, is this writer. He was attracted to the party to which he was formerly affiliated because of its purported ideals and promises for societal progress. However, as time passed, this writer grew increasingly disillusioned with the party's leadership and its inability to articulate a coherent vision for the future. This transition was driven solely by his desire to align with a political platform that offered clearer direction and better-reflected values and aspirations. This example underscores the importance of visionary leadership and ideological inclinations in shaping political affiliations, distinct from any legal considerations.

Allegations against the ruling party and investigative agencies must be evaluated on facts and evidence. The data provided by the CBI and the ED paints a picture of agencies dedicated to upholding the law, irrespective of political affiliations. Accusations of political bias undermine the integrity of India's legal system and democratic principles and pose a threat to the fabric of democracy. All stakeholders must uphold the sanctity of India's democratic institutions and work towards the common good of the nation, without succumbing to divisive rhetoric or political opportunism.

The writer is professor of finance, Xavier School of Management, Jamshedpur. He joined BJP from Congress in the first week of April

A legacy to remember

What the modern, developed Tamil Nadu of today owes to K Kamaraj



R G CHANDRAMOGAN

KUMARASWAMI KAMARAJ SERVED as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu — Madras State, as it was then called — for nine-and-a-half years, from April 13, 1954 to October 2, 1963. That the date of his demitting office and passing away (on October 2, 1975) coincided with Gandhi Jayanti perhaps encapsulates the personality of this man who truly "served" as CM of the state.

Kamaraj had no "parivar", apart from his widowed mother Sivagami Ammal, who continued to stay in their hometown of Virudhunagar even after he became CM. An oft-told story recounts him visiting her and seeing a pipeline with a tap installed at their modest home by overenthusiastic officials. Sivagami Ammal, like most others in Virudhunagar, used to collect water in a pot from a *theru kuzhai* or street pipe. A furious Kamaraj ordered the disconnection of the line. The municipality's job was to provide public, not private, water connections — and Kamaraj was clear that his family wasn't entitled to any special privilege.

Another story is of him going to Courtallam and deciding to bathe in the famous waterfalls there. Kamaraj went with two constables and an inspector, who had already cleared all other visitors out of the place. Noticing the large number of people being forced to stand outside, Kamaraj asked the inspector to allow them in and attend to his work at the police station. The idea of having the Courtallam Falls all to himself and making others wait till he had had enough was repugnant to him.

But Kamaraj embodied not just personal integrity and simplicity in public life. What

also stood out were his common sense and concern for people's welfare, amply reflected in his governance approach.

Once, he was given a file to select five candidates for admission to the government medical colleges under a special CM quota. He returned the file within a couple of hours to the then-chief secretary's astonishment. When the latter asked him how he had chosen the five names so fast, Kamaraj replied that he initially looked for the parents' signatures in the applications. He then selected the first five candidates only from the applications that had thumb impressions instead of signatures — knowing that these applicants represented the first generation to receive education and were, therefore, deserving of admission.

On another occasion, a file was presented to him, seeking budget approval for a foreign tour by officials to "study" town planning in the US. Kamaraj's response was that the officials concerned should first go to Madurai. He wanted them to study how that city was built during the 13th and 14th centuries by the great Pandyan kings, with the Meenakshi Temple at the centre and all the streets radiating from it. For him, the temple town offered more valuable lessons than New York or Chicago.

Kamaraj ran a tight administration to ensure that public money was well spent. There were just eight ministers, including himself, in each of his three terms. They were all people of impeccable integrity and competence. Kamaraj barely had Rs 200 at the end of his life. K Kakkai, who held the Agriculture and Works portfolios under him, lived in a rented house, travelled only by bus and died in the

veranda of a government hospital in Madurai where he was admitted.

Kamaraj's Cabinet also included the likes of R Venkataraman, C Subramaniam and M Bhaktavatsalam. Venkataraman went on to be President of India, Subramaniam the Union Food and Agriculture Minister (without whom the country would not have had a Green Revolution) and Bhaktavatsalam the CM who succeeded Kamaraj.

Subramaniam was, incidentally, a protégé of Kamaraj's arch rival C Rajagopalachari. But that didn't stop Kamaraj from inducting Subramaniam as Finance Minister in his Cabinet.

There is another incident that points to him putting the interests of TN above everything else. Once when a central team came to survey potential sites for establishing a boiler plant of Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd (BHEL), its members weren't happy with the places shown to them by local officials. They wanted a location that had enough water, was near a railway line and not far from a city, where the families of employees could live. The team had practically decided to leave when Kamaraj suggested a place — Thiruverumbur, on the outskirts of Tiruchirappalli — that fulfilled all the requirements. The BHEL factory complex finally came up there. Kamaraj could well have insisted that the prestigious project come up in Virudhunagar or Madurai!

It wasn't BHEL alone. A host of other public sector undertakings — the Integral Coach Factory at Perambur, Heavy Vehicles Factory at Avadi, Neyveli Lignite Corporation, Hindustan Photo Films at Ooty and even IIT Madras — were founded during his tenure.

The industrial estates of Guindy, Ambattur and Tiruvottiyur near Chennai — where TVS, MRF, TI Cycles, Ashok Leyland, Enfield India and other big private corporations set up plants — were started or conceived when he was CM. Kamaraj couldn't have had a better Minister of Industries than Venkataraman and a Finance Minister like Subramaniam. It was teamwork at its best.

The Kamaraj rule also saw 13 major irrigation dam projects being built — including Lower Bhavani, Vaigai, Parambikulam, Krishnagiri and Sathanur. No less were the investments in the social sectors. During his time, TN's literacy rate rose from just about 7 per cent to 37 per cent. The nationwide mid-day meal scheme for schoolchildren was introduced first in TN by Kamaraj's government in 1960. He, in turn, got the idea from his own Nadar community, which had initiated such a programme to boost enrollment at its Kshatriya Vidhyasala school in Virudhunagar.

As irony would have it, Kamaraj and Bhaktavatsalam both lost the 1967 Madras State Assembly elections from their respective Virudhunagar and Sriperumbudur constituencies. Subramaniam also suffered defeat from his Gobichettipalayam Lok Sabha seat.

But the deeds of great men are remembered even after their time. The foundations of what TN is today were laid by Kamaraj, Venkataraman and Subramaniam. And they cannot be forgotten.

The writer is chairman of the Chennai-based Hatsun Agro Product Ltd

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EDUCATE AND ENROL

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The cost of voter apathy' (IE, April 22). India has a significant number of young voters but less than half are on electoral lists. Factors such as voter apathy and administrative challenges are contributors to low enrollment rates. To remedy this, sustained enrollment efforts throughout the year, particularly targeting transient populations, are necessary. Political education and awareness campaigns that focus on raising awareness and facilitating voter enrollment have shown promising results.

Dattatray S Giri, Thane

A DELICATE BALANCE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Cures, care, competition' (IE, April 22). The patents of "novel" medicines have been plagiarised over the years not because of a lack of innovation but because of the lax laws governing patents around the world. While the new laws in India protect intellectual property, they do so at the expense of patients and public health. The challenge for the policymakers here is carefully striking a balance between promoting innovation and ensuring equitable access to affordable medicines.

Anirudh Singh, Bangalore

NETANYAHU MUST GO

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Arabia & Persia matter' (IE, April 22). For a Palestinian state to exist, a continuous geographical connection between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is necessary. The October 7 attack has almost ruled out this possibility as Israel can ill afford to trust any outside agency for its future security. For a meaningful forward movement, the right-wing Netanyahu government must go. The theocratic power structure in Tehran must also be replaced by a more moderate entity.

Shubhada H, via email

IMMORAL VS ILLEGAL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Playing to anxieties' (IE, April 20). The court emphasised that under Hindu law, an illicit live-in relationship while one's spouse is alive contradicts legal provisions. In another important case, *SKhushboo vs Kanniammal & Anr*, SC observed "Though the concept of live-in relationship is considered immoral by the society, it is not illegal in the eyes of the law". By seeking to curb the freedom of the individual, a few BJP-led governments imperil the larger freedoms of constitutional democracy.

SS Paul, Nadia

Block TikTok? Open Internet Wobbles?

Video-hosting service's defence may be valid

The US has moved a step closer to banning TikTok, or having its Chinese parent ByteDance forced to sell its holding in the social media app. The House of Representatives vote in favour of the ban-or-divest bill draws on three theoretical risks that TikTok has attempted to counteract since 2020, when the Trump administration issued an executive order flagging them. One, TikTok collects an unusual amount of data, including the user's location, device and interactions. This has been dismissed by research that establishes TikTok's data collection is in line with that of Instagram and YouTube. Two, TikTok may be forced by Chinese law requiring companies such as ByteDance to help in intelligence-gathering. The video-hosting service is run by a limited liability company based in the US and Singapore, and 60% of its shareholding is with institutional investors. It also hosts data about American citizens on servers in the US. Three, TikTok's algorithms can be used as a censorship tool. There is again little evidence that freedom of expression on TikTok is compromised more than on social media platforms owned by US companies.

Which allows TikTok to contemplate challenging the bill — it's likely to pass in the Senate and receive Joe Biden's approval — as unconstitutional once it becomes a law. The argument TikTok's lawyers would most likely make is weighing vague 'threats' to US national security against the freedom of expression of its 170 million US users. The entire process — from threat perception to legislation to judicial review — can involve the better part of five years. That could be time well spent to allow due process.

In contrast, GoI banned TikTok in 2020 citing national security risks. At that point, TikTok had 120 million users in this country. India shares its threat perception about TikTok and due process with the US. It also accords similar stature to free speech. However, India's territorial border with China — something not shared by the US — may provide some justification to its summary action four years ago.

EC, Mind Their Poll Double Entendres

Surrogate advertising has businesses subtly promoting products that are proscribed by showcasing other goods using the brand's name, logo and essence. Consumers subliminally know what the businesses are really selling — say, alcoholic beverages — even as they register the 'literal' promotion of products, say, soda water; whose advertising is kosher. Such surrogate tactics have been cropping up of late in the election arena. West Bengal's leader of opposition, for instance, at a campaign rally last Saturday, told the gathered crowd in Bengali, 'Early next week, there'll be such a bomb dropped that Trinamool will be totally knocked off balance.' Now, one can read 'bomb' figuratively — perhaps as a very disruptive voting pattern. But in violence-wracked Bengal, 'bomb' can be read very literally by those who choose to.

Similarly, the prime minister reminded voters at a rally in Rajasthan how a former Congress PM had, in 2006, stated that Muslims have the 'first claim on [the country's] resources', and that Congress now plans to redistribute India's resources 'to those who have more children, to infiltrators'. Manmohan Singh had, indeed, stated that his government planned 'to devise innovative plans to ensure that minorities, particularly the Muslim minority, are empowered to share equitably in the fruits of development. They must have the first claims on resources.' But decontextualised messaging has turned an old affirmative action plan into a surrogate call for something else.

Perhaps EC should pay more heed to how such double entendres could be dangerously (mis)interpreted in a charged poll atmosphere. And rein in such rhetoric.

JUST IN JEST
Comparing max temperatures is the new competitive sport in het-up India

Who's Hot, Hotter, Hottest Among Us?

In the spirit of competitive India, where everyone measures everyone else to find their own measure, heat has entered the stakes. Cities are contesting against each other to simultaneously whine about 'unbearable' temperatures and gloat about their ability to bear the heat. Not everyone has made it to the Big Boy Celsius stakes, though. New Delhi remains under 40°C so far — likely to hit that mark only this coming weekend — so, Delhiites have no right to brag/complain. A western disturbance bringing rain has knocked out Maharashtra, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh and even Rajasthan from qualifying yet. It's the eastern front that is showing current talent with heatwave conditions over Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal providing residents proper fodder for conversation, complaint and bragging/whining rights.

As of now, maximum temperatures forecast for this coming Sunday in the following cities: an underachieving 39°C for Delhi and Ranchi, an also-ran 37°C for Mumbai and Bengaluru, an interesting 41°C and 42°C for Bhubaneswar and Kolkata respectively, and an impressive 44°C for Patna. Of course, with lower precipitation and wind, places can feel a whole lotta hotter. But the bottomline: India's not only talking weather, but it's turned it into a competitive sport between citizens that's far more interesting than the ongoing pollzzz.

STATE OF PLAY Conflicts are being 'managed' to draw new lines of hostile engagement

Pushing the Envelopes Hard



Pranab Dhal Samanta

Israel's strike on an Iranian consulate in Damascus, Syria, was escalatory in many respects. But what stood out was Tel Aviv risking Israeli embassy compounds across the world being turned into 'legitimate revenge targets'. Israel did so, perhaps keeping in sight its principal aim of permanently changing facts on the ground in Gaza.

Elsewhere, Russia is pushing Europe hard with the Ukraine question. For Moscow, conquest, despite reversals, is very much on. It's pushing political boundaries vis-à-vis Western powers to assert a 'new normal'. This has forced big shifts in defence expenditure patterns of otherwise prosperous Nato-protected nations. Into its third year now, with mounting casualties and long periods of stalemate, the war has not been easy on Russia. But Vladimir Putin still persists under the shadow of a nuclear umbrella.

In East Asia, China has its own game of 'truth or dare' going on. It has chosen to weaponise its economic clout, built on a network of economic dependencies, to intimidate its near-neighbourhood. Beijing has deployed military assets across Taiwan and the Philippines, constantly intruding into their airspace and disputed waters. It has opened multiple fronts, including against India, and has adopted an aggressive posture that's forced many East Asian countries — much like in Europe — to reconfigure their defence policies and ramp up capabilities.

Together, these three zones have emerged as points of global tumult. They are driving up military expenditures to the extent that defence companies are finding it dif-



Chaos framed: 'The Battle of San Romano' (c. 1456), Paolo Uccello

icult to meet orders. Ukraine is faced with a massive shortage of 155 mm artillery shells. It also wants Germany's Taurus missile system, but has had to settle for the US Patriot as of now.

It's, therefore, not surprising that Joe Biden put significant political capital in pushing through a \$85 bn package through Congress last week. Of this, \$60 bn is for Ukraine, about \$26 bn for Israel and humanitarian aid to Gaza, while close to \$8 bn for Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific.

As a result, chances of any conflict escalating beyond the current normal are quite high. And this risk has grown over the past couple of years, largely because countries have exploited a strategic space that has opened up where a kinetic military option can be explored for achieving a political objective without actually risking consequences of a full-scale war.

The risk of consequences

Together, these three zones are driving up military expenditures to the extent that defence companies are finding it difficult to meet orders

is important. With UNSC largely redundant, most conflicts are not being approached from the perspective of finding a solution, like an accord or agreement that will hold the peace and open new pathways towards peace.

Instead, the best that's being achieved is problem management. Take the West Asia crisis. The US spoke with key stakeholders after the Damascus attack. Iran conveyed that it had to respond. However, it did so in a way that showed capability but that wasn't escalatory. In this process, yet another 'normal' has come about, each one breaching lines previously drawn.

At the same time, no particular situation in these zones has so far escalated beyond the manageable despite provocation. A key reason for this is probably the nature of economic interaction among countries. If there's any deterrence — other than nuclear — it's that of economic interdependence. No state regime would want to risk an economic downfall, especially after the pandemic.

So, countries in West Asia know that any big increase in oil prices, or threats to shipping lanes, will eventually impact all economies. That was also the realisation with Russian crude and other commodities from the Ukraine-Russia theatre.

This 'economic' issue is more serious with China, which is using these dependencies to further its strategic goals. Here, derisking is the preferred strategy, as global powers look at alternate supply chains. Interestingly, even international markets have started to factor in geopolitical shocks in a manner that there's no sudden volatility in response to a big attack or military aggression.

That said, more broadly, this is still an interim stage, as long as countries are able to adjust to and accept certain acts of aggression. But, with time, the boundaries are being pushed. And at which point this will ignite a bigger conflict is anybody's guess.

India felt this pressure with China. As the military build-up on its northern borders increased, so did the chances of a clash. Eventually, Galwan happened. Hamas, too, calculated on a certain Israeli re-

Most conflicts are not being approached from the perspective of finding a solution. At best, it's problem management

sponse that would lead to a negotiation of release of prisoners in exchange for Israeli hostages. It didn't work. Israel decided on a disproportionate response that puts a question mark on Gaza's future.

Russia, too, planned on a short war. But it underestimated the fightback at Hostomel Airport (12 miles from Kyiv) in the initial days of the Ukraine war. It failed to build an airbridge for its troops and has since committed itself to a protracted war.

As these points of tumult escalate, irrelevance of UNSC and the tangential impact on conflicts in Africa, South America and other parts of the world paints a grim picture. Livelihood and economic logic are factors on which new conversations will now have to move faster. Otherwise, matters could spiral out of control sooner than expected.

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Hanuman's Potential

ULLHAS PAGEY

Hanuman is the divine embodiment of unwavering devotion, strength and humility. Foremost among his virtues is unwavering devotion, a boundless torrent cascading from the depths of his soul. His allegiance unto Bhagwan Ram stands as a testament to the might of devotion, kindled by the fervour of love and faith. His darling leap across the ocean to the shores of Lanka is a display of devotion's boundless potential.

Hanuman's sense of duty and selflessness are exemplified by his relentless quest to serve Ram, regardless of the obstacles he faces. When asked to fetch sacred herbs to treat Lakshman's wounds, he hoisted the entire mountain aloft, eschewing all vainglory and ostentation. Thus, he imparts unto us the sacred mandate to discharge our duties selflessly, without any desire for personal aggrandisement. However, Hanuman's leap across the ocean to Lanka serves as a powerful reminder that our greatest strengths often lie hidden beneath the surface, to be unearthed through self-discovery and introspection.

With steadfast resolve, he surmounts himself wholeheartedly unto the service of Ram. Amid the trials and tribulations, his devotion remained unblemished, a testament to indomitable spirit. In essence, Hanumanji emerges as an epitome of devotion, humility, selflessness and determination. As we commune with the wisdom emanating from his sacred essence, let us remember that energy, self-help is life, and contraction, shrinking, decay is death.

April 23 is Hanuman Jayanti

Chat Room

Healthy Steps for Healthy Seniors

Appropos the news report, 'IRDAI Abolishes Age Bar on Health Cover Policies' (Apr 22), IRDAI removing the age bar, of 65 years, on new health insurance purchases from April 1, 2024, is welcome. This includes all medical conditions such as cancer, heart or renal failure, and AIDS. In addition, one suggests charging annual premium as per the income group: low, mid and high amount, for the poor, middle class and the rich, respectively. Also, the insurance should fully cover all medical charges, such as surgery, medication for all diseases, room rent, etc. Medicines, if not free, should be highly subsidised.

P V SRINIVAS SREELEKHA
Secunderabad

Fast-Moving, But Anti-Consumer

This refers to 'Increased Scrutiny, Red Flags Bigger Risks for FMCG Cos' by Kiran Somvanshi (Apr 22). Till now, consumer activism was literally non-existent, but the advent of social media and influencers has led to detailed FMCG analyses under a strict lens. The regulatory bodies have so far been apathetic to misleading claims, harmful ingredients and declining quality parameters. The advertising spree did the trick for sales growth and consumer preference for the brand. This is a wake-up call for both the industry and GoI to develop a consumer-oriented approach for better health and safety.

RAJARAO KUMAR
Bengaluru

Their Hearth Is Our Earth

Appropos 'Earth's Call' by Vir Singh (Speaking Tree, Apr 22), nature is not a mere chance collection of events but an orderly affair. The planets move regularly in their orbits, seeds grow regularly into trees, and the seasons succeed each other in order. Nature is said to be Jada, inert and insentient. Every flower that wafts fragrance, every fruit that attracts us, every breeze that blows, every river that flows, speaks of God. The vast ocean with its powerful waves, the mighty Himalayas with its glaciers, the lofty trees with its branches, the cool spring in the hills and dales, speak of His omnipotence.

BELLUR S DATTATRI
Bengaluru

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

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

In campaigns, politicians debate, Their quarrels, they loudly inflame. With each jab and jest, They aim to impress, But it's often just empty prate!

Climate Change: Workers at Risk

A large majority of workers worldwide are facing a cocktail of health hazards linked to climate change, according to a report by ILO, which warned that existing regulations were not equipped to offer adequate protection. In 2020 — the last year for which statistics are available — 2.4 billion workers, or more than 70% of the global workforce, were estimated to be exposed to excessive heat at some point. A quick look at overall numbers...

Climate change and impact on workers

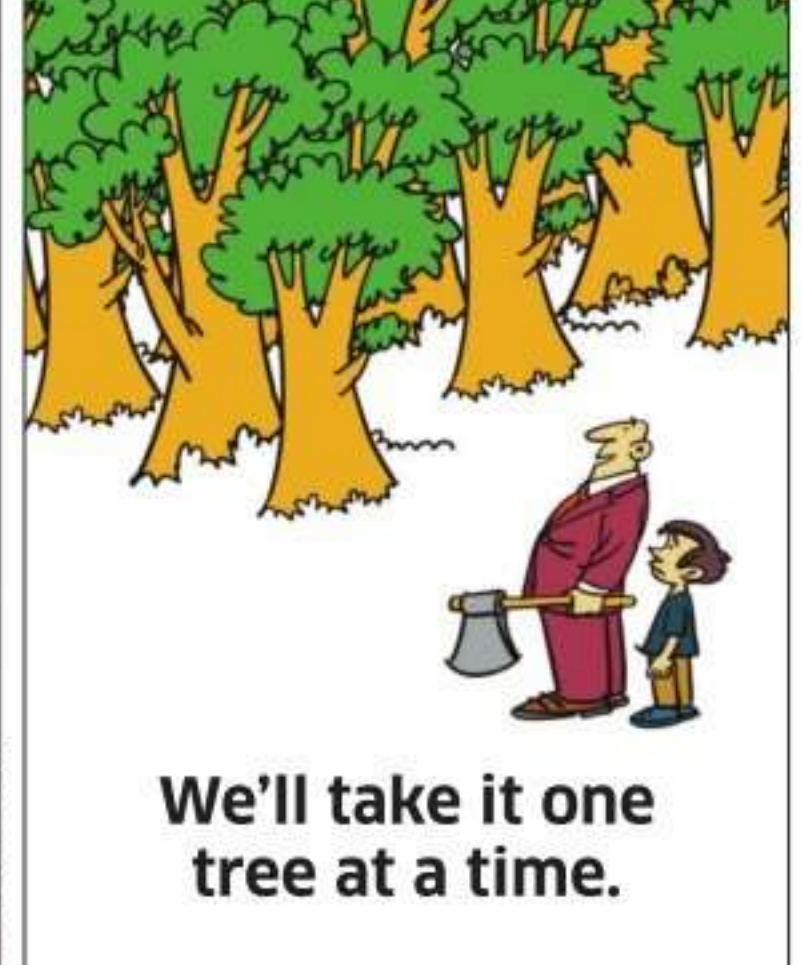
Global burden of occupational exposures	Deaths
Excessive heat (2020) 2.41 b	18,970*
Ultraviolet radiation 1.6 b	18,960**
Extreme weather events n/a	2.06 m*
Workplace air pollution 1.6 b	860,000**
Vector-borne diseases n/a	15,170
Agrochemicals 873 m*	300,000*

*Outdoor workers; n/a - Limited data; **Due to weather, climate and water hazards (not just occupational exposures) from 1970 to 2019 (WHO 2021); **work-related; *Due to non-melanoma skin cancer alone; *Agri workers; **Annually due to pesticide poisoning

Source: ILO, AFP

Bell Curves

■ R Prasad



We'll take it one tree at a time.

Systemising the Game



Arvind Gupta

The recently announced AI advisory by MeitY aimed at untested AI platforms has started a debate and led to clarificatory statements. Regulating AI is a complex issue, as is the case with most of new-age sectors. But whether it's RBI's view on the fintech industry earlier this year, or MeitY's perspective on the online gaming industry last year, self-regulatory organisations (SROs) appear to be the solution. RBI stated that to ensure sustainable growth of the fintech sector, an SRO that will work closely with the industry under the overarching principle-based regulation prescribed by RBI is the right answer. Thereby, SRO will be in a position to have a better sense of how tech is evolving, and will be able to keep RBI apprised while ensuring that consumers are well protected.

For the online gaming industry, GoI taking the helm of the gaming sector last year, and then proposing self-regulatory bodies (SRBs), was significant. It also aimed to settle the entire discord on 'Gaming or gambling?' 'Skill or chance?' debate. Understanding of the difference between skill and chance has often met minimal enthusiasm. But the myriad challenges the sector is grappling with necessitate prompt resolution.

Considering these challenges, a clear and comprehensive regulatory framework is essential. By addressing the nuances of 'skill vs chance', and establishing clear guidelines for taxation and regulation, policymakers can create an environment conducive to innovation, investment and responsible gaming practices.

Looking at global examples, the need for a collaborative, regulatory approach becomes evident. The Pan-European Game In-

formation (PEGI) system, developed by Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE), and supported by European Commission, is a beacon of successful collaboration between industry and policymakers. There are also multiple examples where guideline recommendations and evaluations in countries like Britain and Belgium have resulted in formulation of a robust regulatory framework. These frameworks have evolved over time to keep up with the changing environment, and to ensure that while consumer protection is at the core, it doesn't stifle innovation.

Comparisons between nations like South Korea and the US often oversimplify the intricate complexities inherent in regulating online gaming. In South Korea, gaming enjoys widespread popularity and is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of society. This is reflected in the government's approach to regulation, which focuses on fostering a healthy gaming culture, while addressing concerns related to addiction and excessive gaming.

Also, South Korea's strong e-sports scene and supportive infrastructure have propelled it to the forefront of the global gaming industry. Its regulatory framework is relatively dynamic and responsive to technological advancements, allowing for greater flexibility in adapting to evolving gaming trends. In the US, mobile gaming has become deeply ingrained, with nearly 50% of the population engaging in gaming activities on mobile devices. This widespread adoption of mobile gaming reflects a shift — in entertainment preferences, technological advances and diversity in demographics. This is

characterised by a wide variety of thriving gaming genres contributing to the dynamism of gaming culture.

These countries' success stems from tailoring regulations to suit their unique cultural, legal and societal contexts. India must adopt a similar approach, considering its own cultural nuances, legal landscape and societal norms, rather than simply replicating frameworks from elsewhere.

India's online gaming sector needs a paradigm shift towards effective regulation. Nuanced governance required to distinguish between games of skill and chance becomes imperative, empowering consumers to make informed and responsible choices. Recent scams like the Mahadev betting app and Skyward Aviator Quest controversies emphasise the urgency of a regulatory framework that safeguards consumer interests.

A self-regulatory model, fortified by AI-driven processes, emerges as a beacon in these turbulent waters. This approach, promoting transparency, accountability and differentiation of skill-based games, not only shields consumers from illicit activities but also fosters an environment conducive to growth of the gaming sector. Genuine skill-based players are duly rewarded, and innovation aligns with global standards of responsible gaming.

Department of revenue's recent revelation, disclosing a staggering rise of 400% in GST collections from online gaming to an average of ₹1,200 cr a month since the new regime kicked in from Oct 1, 2023, underscores a significant win between GoI and online gaming companies. This substantial increase not only reflects the sector's growth but also highlights the potential for further collaboration and mutual benefit.

Collaborative efforts, transparency and adaptive governance are not just virtues but necessities. Through these endeavours, the Indian gaming sector can not only weather the storm but also emerge fortified, solidifying its standing on the global stage.

The writer is head, Digital India Foundation



Take control

Opinion

TUESDAY, APRIL 23, 2024



ECONOMY AMBITION

Union railways & IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw

“India has emerged as a manufacturing major and is shaping itself towards export-driven growth with the country on course to being the third-largest economy”

Beyond the temple

The 2024 polls shouldn't be reduced to an open season for the use of religion in campaigning

Speaking to his colleagues in the government last month before the election campaigns got off the ground, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked them to exercise restraint in their speeches so that the main focus of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) election campaign remains on the core issue of development. This was a statesman-like advice from the prime minister of the world's largest democracy. However, the extreme heat and dust of politics, perhaps, made him forget that he is also supposed to walk his own talk. The use of religion in election speeches is not new in India, and neither is it new for Modi or the BJP or for that matter any other political party. The Ram Temple has been a poll plank for decades and its construction a culmination of a long-drawn political project by the Sangh parivar. Though it goes against the convention that religion should not be mixed with politics during election speeches, it is no surprise that the BJP is milking the mandir to attract voters.

But what's more worrying is that the showmanship has now moved much beyond the temple. On Sunday, in an undisguised resort to sectarian polarisation after the first round of polling, Modi alleged the Congress's poll manifesto had pledged to "survey" and "attach" citizens' properties and distribute them disproportionately among Muslims, "who have more children". In an election rally at Banswara in Rajasthan, Modi alleged that even the "mangal-sutras" of "mothers and sisters" would be confiscated and distributed among "Musalmaanon" (Muslims). Referring to a 2006 speech by his predecessor Manmohan Singh, Modi said the Congress government at that time wanted Muslims to have the first right over the country's resources. "Should your hard-earned money be given to infiltrators?" Modi asked to resounding applause from the crowd. His latest comments seemed a sharper attempt at polarisation than during the 2017 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, when he said that if a "kabristan" (graveyard) was built, a "shamshan" (cremation ground) must be built too.

The speech followed another one last week — this time in Udhampur — where Modi compared some opposition leaders with Mughals for hurting the sentiments of the majority community by eating non-vegetarian food during Navratri. This was in reference to a video showing some opposition leaders having mutton during the month of Saawan. Modi also likened the Congress's manifesto to that of the Muslim League's agenda before Independence. The problem with such speeches is that the rank and file gets encouraged with what their supreme leader says or does, vitiating the political atmosphere further.

In any case, speeches, interviews, campaign hoardings and social media are full of religious issues, either linked to temples, personal laws, dietary habits or historical narratives that reek of religious appeal. That doesn't speak well of the Election Commission of India (ECI) which seems to be either sleeping on the job or drowning itself in a sea of technicalities on what constitutes the use/abuse of religion in campaigning. So the less said about the ECI, the better. The relevant point here is that the BJP, which is supremely confident of crossing 400 seats this time and has a reasonably good record on development work, does not need to do such shrill campaigning that further alienates 14% of India's population and makes them feel targeted. The biggest political show on earth should not be reduced to an open season for the use of religion in election campaigning.

Climate change is only cooling growth

IMAGINE YOU WERE running for king of the world on a platform of slashing economic growth by 20% forever. You'd be lucky to get your own family to vote for you. And yet humanity insists on running the global economy on fossil fuels that are doing exactly that sort of damage. The good news is that we still have time to vote them out before they do even more.

The amount of planetary heating already in the pipeline as a result of a century of pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere will make global income 19% lower by 2049 than it would have been without global warming, suggests a new study from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. This income loss will be driven mainly by rising temperatures, according to the researchers, which will affect agriculture, public health, productivity and more.

This will cost \$38 trillion in lost income every year by mid-century, compared with the \$6 trillion of investment the researchers estimate will be needed each year to meet the Paris climate accord's goal of limiting warming to 2 degrees Celsius during that time. If we fail to mitigate heating by transitioning to renewable energy sources, then the economic damage will rise to more like 60% of global income by 2100.

"It feels starker than ever that the costs of doing nothing are far higher than the costs of doing something," co-author Maximilian Kotz said in an interview.

The study's damage estimates are much higher than those of previous efforts, a result Kotz chalks up to his group's methodology, which he described as "conservative". Regardless, the direction of travel is clear and consistent.

"Degrowth" is the concept of slowing economic output to stop despoiling the environment. What fossil fuels are doing to the world isn't quite degrowth: Most economies will keep expanding as the climate changes, driven partly by those same fossil fuels. They just won't be as healthy as they would've been without global warming.

Fossil-fuel companies and people who want to keep cashing their political-donation checks insist economies can't thrive without the dirty stuff. This is especially true in the developing world, they often argue, which is coming late to a party that started long ago in the US and other developed countries. To play catch-up, the thinking goes, these lower-income countries will need to burn fuels that have traditionally been cheap and abundant.

Exxon Mobil Corp., for example, has gone from denying that climate change exists to insisting that countries shouldn't risk "energy poverty" by rushing too quickly into renewables. It has argued people won't accept the "degradation in global standard of living" that it says achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 would require.

Of course, Exxon and its peers are talking their book. They're banking on future demand from developing nations. But nothing drives demand for fossil fuels quite like economic growth. And as the Potsdam study notes, the impacts of climate change will fall most heavily on lower-income countries, sapping their income by more than 30% in extreme cases. Their energy demand should follow suit.

Perhaps this effect will limit energy demand and carbon emissions in developing nations, preventing even more global heating. But this would be a weak silver lining to the stark and persistent injustice of the climate change that is already happening: Countries that contributed the least to the problem suffer the most. Developing nations from Afghanistan to Indonesia were hit with deadly flooding just last week. Miserable droughts that are already routine in parts of Africa have been made 100 times more likely by the 1.2C of warming we've experienced so far, according to the nonprofit group World Weather Attribution.

This all sounds like bad news, and it is. It adds to the genre of grim climate headlines loaded with disaster and scary numbers.

But the good news buried in the Potsdam report is that we still have the power to avoid far worse human suffering and economic destruction in the decades to come. Limiting warming to 2C (or even lower, if we can manage it) will make us not only safer and healthier but richer.

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TECHPROOF EXPRESS

THE SIGNIFICANT CUTS IN HEADCOUNT NUMBERS SIGNAL CHALLENGES OF LARGE FIRMS

Turning tide in IT services

WE ARE WITNESSING the culmination of another disappointing quarter for Indian IT services firms. Traditionally dominating the lower end of the IT market, these firms have consistently proven naysayers wrong. However, the tide seems to be turning. Notably, Infosys, TCS, and Wipro have announced a significant reduction in their headcount numbers, clearly indicating their challenges.

Equity analysts have been mauling the large firms in their reports on their recently issued earnings, which have been dismal. Some have had a decline in four out of the last five quarters on a constant currency basis. Some smaller firms have had marginally better luck, given that their print could be better. This may be due to the lingering feeling that smaller firms are nimbler and can better reposition themselves for newer business.

The providers are trying to hold out investors' hopes on "big deal wins". These are being touted as saviours. Every company says its focus on such big deal wins is paramount. However, the figures are all in total contract value (TCV). Having negotiated some of the most significant watershed deals worldwide and the initial ones that came to India, I know what TCV means and what it does not.

TCV is only a part of the story. What is unsaid is often more critical, as it often is when firms practise "economy with the truth" while reporting their financial results. TCV only represents the potential value over time. First off, what is the tenure of these deals? Knowing this will give us a clear indicator of these deals' annual contract value (or ACV) — a far better indicator of revenue sustainability than TCV

announcements. In addition, all large deals today come with a "productivity" component, which is a cost-saving that service providers promise to their clients on every large deal. This component is either paid upfront — which is bad for the service provider's margin — or delivered through a steady decline in the number of people associated with the deal — which means that headcount falls on each deal (as do revenues) in the later years of the agreement.

Then there are deal "renegotiations", which means that the client reopened a deal that was inked some time ago, demanding more significant cost savings. This has proved to be true in at least one major service provider's case — it reports that one of its large financial services clients has renegotiated, leading to a 15% reduction in revenues from that client and a consequent hit to that company's bottom line.

Equity analysts have seen through some of this. Here is a take from JM Financial in August 2023: "Shorter-term discretionary projects continue to be phased out/scaled down. Newer

deals (of the efficiency types) are ramping slowly in comparison. In effect, clients are releasing more resources than deploying, resulting in net reduction in billed headcount." (shorturl.at/ImoQS)

The headcount reduction should have been apparent. During the pandemic, customers saw an unprecedented rise in "remote" IT work as being offshoreable to India at a lower cost. Almost all Indian IT service providers jumped at the chance for more business during the pandemic and poached each other's people, sometimes at twice the existing salary. I warned then that this was unsustainable and that we would inevitably see Indian firms needing to rid themselves of this bulge. Here is JM Financial again on this same topic: "A lot of that 'excess' IT spend was to cater to the immediate demand during a pandemic. We might now be witnessing the unwinding of those spend/projects, precipitated by a tighter economic environment. If true, this hypothesis implies that the 'old normal' incremental revenues could be potentially offset by unwinding

equally large excess IT spend over the next few quarters." According to one CFO of an IT major: "Our attrition has also come down significantly. That is the reason for net headcount reduction." No kidding. Here's how I would have said that: Our people are not flying to the door since there are no more double salary packages outside, so we need to show them the door instead.

This is even more striking since the IT majors have been hiring new engineering graduates at more or less the same packages they were doling out two decades ago. The oversupply of engineers has meant that there has been no need to adjust for inflation over the years, which means dismal salaries being paid to engineering graduates. Last year, one major even had the nerve to reduce the promised annual package from ₹6.5 lakh to ₹3.5 lakh for the youngsters it had already hired. Another went from hiring 50,000 fresh graduates last year to zero this year.

The sort of short-sighted view of jumping on an immediate opportunity with no thought for the future was a gamble that worked well once in the past: the Y2K boom in the late 1990s that some of the largest Indian IT majors today jumped on when they were much smaller. By a lucky happenstance, the first dot-com bust meant that large amounts of fiber optic network capability that had remained dark due to the bust could be 'lit', allowing for the sustained offshoring of work from the West to India. That lucky happenstance allowed for the re-absorption of all their "body shop" staff after the Y2K phenomenon.

Today, with Gen AI and the availability of other "no code/low code" platforms, that re-absorption is far from ensured. Hold on for a rough ride.

The sort of short-sighted view of jumping on an immediate opportunity with no thought for the future was a gamble that worked well once in the past: the Y2K boom in the late 1990s

Regulatory structure all too powerful



VISHWAPRASAD ALVA

Managing director, Skanray Technologies

Most sectors have more than a hundred bodies empowered to summon, block, or stop business. There's not one for hand-holding and support

IN OUR EAGERNESS to root out corruption and drive compliance, have we over-empowered the hundreds of regulatory and tax agencies in the country? Shouldn't we be backing it up with an equally powerful and quick grievance redressal and justice system to avoid excesses and misuse?

In the past, even if the corruption levels were higher, the honest managed to survive without fear. In this new regulatory regime, the corrupt have their old infrastructure intact, but the law-abiding common man and industry suffer due to the sweeping powers held by the banks, and tax and regulatory agencies. The pressure of achieving high targets, and shortage of trained and competent staff may be the reason. The tribunals and judicial system, as always, take years to deliver justice.

Most sectors have more than a hundred state, central and local regulatory bodies that are empowered to summon, block, or stop business. There's not one for hand-holding and support.

Covid-19 has resulted in some manufacturing jobs moving to India for its low and semi-skilled labour and its captive market. High-skill talent will continue to migrate out of the country if we don't act decisively and immediately.

Being non-corrupt is a great virtue, but accessibility, humility, domain expertise, and freedom of expression are equally important. Corruption in the central leadership and top bureaucracy

has reduced, but we are seeing a steep increase in opportunities and incidents of corruption at the lower levels.

People are constantly bombarded with messages, mails, notices, summons, and warnings from various government bodies. Either the artificial intelligence algorithms deployed are not refined or the officers do not have the time to study a matter in detail before issuing notices. It is the individual or the industry who should prove themselves innocent. All are guilty unless they are proven innocent.

More than 90% of our own 600 small- and medium-scale vendors are eager to sell their businesses because they can't handle the harassment and notices from the tax and regulatory bodies. Small shops, traders, and medium, small and micro enterprises could succumb to the pressures and collapse in the near future.

Startup India and other initiatives that encourage start-ups and private enterprise will struggle to take off in this scenario. Start-ups are plagued by an unfair, opaque, and rigged government procurement process. We need to measure and publish data of the start-ups that have reached break-even, instead of the number of start-ups registered in the

Registrar of Companies. Core R&D, manufacturing, and product start-ups are an indicator of the nation's progress, not just fintech, services and e-commerce companies. The draconian angel tax, goods and services tax, tax regime, and penalties need to be reviewed before investments in core product manufacturing and tech start-ups dries up.

Large corporates who depend on economies of scale and automation will enter all areas of retail, manufacturing, and service, causing a shortage of labour in the semi-skilled and unskilled segment, and unemployment in the core R&D and science segments. We will see more job-seekers than entrepreneurs. A potentially huge pool of employed people who paid taxes in their prime with no adequate social security, health cover, or quality of life in their old age will create a new set of challenges. The highest-taxed nations have strong public health care. We are heavily taxed with no rights or cover for the taxpayers.

Much of the destruction in history has been caused by powerful leaders with good intentions. They were clean, godly, selfless, and nationalistic, but surrounded by a coterie and lost touch with reality.

We have a Prime Minister and a

The angel tax, GST, tax regime, and penalties need to be reviewed before investments in manufacturing and tech start-ups dries up

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Democracy 'of, by and for money'

The article "An exclusive crorepati club" (April 22) is timely and worth pondering over. Democracy as 'of the people, by the people, for the people' is redefined as 'of money, by money and for money'. The rich used to select their chosen candidates and spend on them, who in turn promoted their sponsors' cause. Now, they are contesting directly

and getting elected; it will be wishful thinking to expect 88% crorepati MPs to discuss issues concerning the unprivileged. Except for the Left, every party selects candidates based on caste and cash. In this exchange of cash for votes the traces of democracy are missing. A powerful peoples' movement is necessary in order to restore democracy, where money will not make laws but people will. —AG Rajmohan, Anantapur

Dollar dichotomy

Apropos of "Are the days of dollar love ending?" (April 22), US economic strength dimmed in 1971 when deficits from its WWII funding and on welfare led President Richard Nixon to drop the gold standard. Yet the dollar remained the world's reserve currency by default. The US is not the epitome of international financial security that it was. It has a debt much larger than its GDP. It persistently runs

fiscal and trade deficits. Its foreign currency reserves just covers two weeks of imports. Should the US fail to resolve its future debt problems, currencies other than the dollar might emerge. Large-scale withdrawal from dollar assets and dollar invoicing could end up with no single, dominant currency to serve as an anchor of the global monetary regime. —R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

•Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



OPINION

The
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OUR TAKE

A pro-Beijing vote in Malé

President Muizzu's anti-India stance will have economic and strategic costs

The resounding victory for President Mohamed Muizzu's ruling coalition in the parliamentary polls is likely to further complicate India's relations with the Maldives at a time of increased contestation between New Delhi and Beijing across the Indian Ocean. Muizzu pitched the election as a referendum on his pro-China, anti-India policies that have roiled Malé's relations with New Delhi since he came to power last year. The main Opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) argued for course correction, pointing to history, geography and legacy, and campaigned against the obvious pro-China tilt. It is telling that the MDP's message didn't resonate with voters and it won less than a dozen seats in the 93-member Parliament. The results reflect the popular backing for Muizzu, with members of the ruling alliance securing an absolute majority with close to 70 seats.

As a free nation, the Maldives has a right to pick its friends, but in the long-run, its preference to privilege China and Turkey over India has implications for the region. The Indian Ocean is a highly contested region now, and China's interest in the Maldives is driven by factors such as its geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean and Beijing's desire to up the pressure on New Delhi amid the standoff on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) by stitching up partnerships within the neighbourhood. A foothold in the Maldives will allow China to give impetus to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through access to maritime routes and enhance its naval presence in regional waters. Muizzu has already taken steps to replace India with Turkey and China in crucial areas such as food security and security cooperation. These are also countries eyeing the Indian Ocean in an attempt to assert their claims in what they believe is a post-US-led western order.

The Maldives would do well to factor in the economic and strategic costs of its pivot. Such moves won't endear it to the US and its allies, which have indicated that India is their preferred partner to counter China's aggressive behaviour across the Indo-Pacific. Malé can also learn from recent history, which provides evidence about the perils of China's dependency and reliance on financial assistance that comes with opaque terms. India has little to do at this moment but to let the Maldives sort out its priorities while continuing to emphasise its "Neighbourhood First" policy that comes with no strings attached, while restating that it respects the strategic autonomy of countries in the region.

Direct tax rally is a welcome trend

Final direct tax collections for financial year 2023-24 (FY24) have ended up higher than not just Budget Estimates (BE) but also the Revised Estimates (RE). The surge in direct taxes is primarily driven by a better-than-expected performance on the personal income tax (PIT) front. FY24 is the first time when PIT collections will be larger than corporate taxes. What is one to make of the ongoing bull run in direct taxes, especially in PIT?

A more informed analysis will have to wait for all tax numbers to be released by the ministry of finance. However, some broad points can be made based on the reported provisional numbers and the RE and BE figures for FY24 and FY25, which were published in the vote-on-account presented on February 1 this year. Three things stand out. FY24 and FY25 are the only two years barring the pandemic year of FY21 when PIT collections have been higher than corporate tax. The strength in PIT collections continues despite the weak momentum of overall consumption expenditure. The share of direct tax collections has once again edged past that of indirect taxes in the Centre's gross tax revenue.

What do these things mean for the macro economy and policy at large? A growing share of direct taxes in overall tax collections and rising contribution of high-earning individuals in income taxes — data published with a lag shows that incomes at the bottom of the pyramid have not been increasing at the same rate — will make India's overall tax burden more progressive. But can they make it grow significantly faster? This is where one needs to ask whether the corporate tax rate reduction announced in 2019 has had the desired impact of boosting private investments. If not, then what can be done about it? This ought to be an important area for fiscal policy going forward.

Swinging between two secular fronts

Pragmatism has defined Kerala's electoral choices in state and parliamentary elections

Kerala's assembly elections of 1977 were groundbreaking in many ways. Held a week before the lifting of the Emergency, the elections, for the first time, brought an incumbent political front to power for a second consecutive term. The beneficiary was the Congress-led United Front, which included the Communist Party of India (CPI), Indira Gandhi's arch-loyalist, K Karunakaran, became the new chief minister after his dubious record as the state's repressive home minister during the Emergency. The election saw many stalwarts of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M), including KR Gouri Amma and VS Achuthanandan, biting the dust and even EMS Namboodiripad, managing only to scrape through. The result provoked eminent Malayalam litterateur Paul Zacharia, then living in Delhi, to deride Malayalis as frogs in the well, notwithstanding their tall claims about literacy and political wisdom, for failing to rise with the poor and illiterate of North India who ended Indira Gandhi's authoritarian rule.

Kerala's electoral behaviour has often been unique. In 1957, it elected the first non-Congress government, barely a decade after Independence. That the victor was the CPI, banned

until six years previously for calling for the armed revolution against the newly born independent India's first government, was even more stunning. The tiny state's Left turn also made global headlines as one of the world's earliest instances of the Communists coming to power through the ballot box. Some western observers even called Kerala the "Yenan of India" after the Chinese province's capital where the Red Army first established its base. Some saw the southern state as the new laboratory for Communism's tryst with parliamentary democracy as they were the days of the Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev's dramatic exposure of

election. Many have found this highly competitive political race an excellent advantage to the state as no party could take the voter for granted or abuse power much. There have been only two exceptions to this 67-year-long pattern. The rival fronts shared even the exceptions equally. If the ruling United Front (UDF's former avatar) came to power back-to-back in 1977, it was the LDF's turn in 2021.

The cyclical pattern continued even after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged, posing itself as the alternative to Kerala's "political Tweedledee and the Tweedledum". However, the Malayali largely ignored the saffron party, which won its only assembly seat in history in 2016 but lost it in the next election. Even after the Hindutva juggernaut drove into the South, the BJP never won a single Lok Sabha seat in Kerala.

Another unique Malayali voting behaviour is their conflicting preferences for the legislature and Parliament. The see-saw game between the two rival fronts witnessed in the assembly elections vanishes in the Lok Sabha polls. In the 11 elections since 1980, when the two fronts came into being, the UDF won more Lok Sabha seats eight times and the LDF only twice — in 1980 and 2004. Once (1996), the fronts shared the spoils equally, taking 10 each.

However, dual voting did not happen when elections were held simultaneously (only twice) in the assembly and Lok Sabha. The LDF romped



MG
Radhakrishnan

However, Malayalis have never been blind loyalists of any party, including the Communists. They voted them out of power and brought them back when they chose. Kerala is the only state that has shifted electoral loyalty from one political front to another with near regularity. If it elected the Left Democratic Front (LDF) led by the CPI(M) in one election, it rooted for the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) in the next. Whoever won, the margins were razor-thin in almost every assembly



Malayalis have never been blind loyalists of any party

home in the assembly and Lok Sabha in the first instance (1980), and the UDF in 1991. But, the dominant pattern was visible even when elections to the assembly and Lok Sabha were held close to each other. While the UDF swept 19 of the 20 Lok Sabha seats in 2019, the incumbent LDF grabbed an unprecedented consecutive term, winning 99 of the 140 seats in the assembly two years later.

To many observers, this "dialectics" owes to the Malayali's sense of pragmatism overtaking ideology. From 1957 to 1967, the Left enjoyed the upper hand even in the Lok Sabha elections. In the country's first general election of 1951-52, the CPI emerged as the main Opposition party in Parliament, and the redoubtable Communist AK Gopalan was respectfully treated as the Opposition leader (there was no such formal post in Parliament till 1969) by former Prime Minister (PM) Nehru. Many even dreamt during those days of the red flag soon flying over the Red Fort ("Lal kile mein Lal Nishan"). However, the CPI split in 1964, with one faction allying with the Congress and the newly formed CPI(M) joining the Opposition. Consequently, the Left's votes and

seats were also split in the later elections, and the hope of the red star rising began to fade. This appears to have made Malayali voters introspect why they should vote for the Left, which stood no chance of coming to power at the Centre. From 1971, the Congress has outscored the CPI (M) in 10 of the 13 general elections until 2019.

India's politics changed dramatically by the second decade of the 21st century. The Congress has been out of power since 2014. The 2019 UDF landslide owed much to hopes of a Congress recovery and Rahul Gandhi's candidature from Kerala when he was projected as the potential PM. However, nationally, the Congress could only marginally improve its worst-ever performance of 2014. Its chances in 2024 also do not appear too bright sans big surprises. Will the Malayali's realism trump ideology again to favour the current national favourites — the BJP — when they vote this Friday? Unlikely, since it may not be as smooth as a shift from one secular party to another. At least, just as yet.

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SIMPLY ECONOMICS

Pramit Bhattacharya



Why the Swatantra Party could not be resurrected

There are several differences in the election manifestos of India's two largest parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress. The two national parties have very different agendas when it comes to socio-cultural issues, civil liberties, and minority rights. But when it comes to economics, there is very little to differentiate the two. Both parties claim to represent the poor and the middle class. Both promise handouts for key demographic groups.

When it comes to economic policy choices, the world's largest democracy has a limited menu. Ahead of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, some commentators argued that the Narendra Modi-led BJP will embrace liberal economic policies, shrink the Indian State, and bring about much-delayed "factor market reforms" (those relating to deregulating land and labour). If Rahul Gandhi epitomised the Amartya Sen school of thought, Modi epitomised the Jagdish Bhagwati school of thought, they argued. The reality has been different. As a previous column ("The aftermath of the Sen-Bhagwati debate", July 11, 2022) pointed out, the Modi-led regime has been far more assiduous in following Sen's prescriptions than in following Bhagwati's.

The only time Indian voters were offered a real economic alternative was in the early years of the Republic when Chakravarti Rajagopalachari walked out of the Congress to form the Swatantra Party. Backed by erstwhile maharajas and a new breed of entrepreneurs in the West and South, Swatantra promised "economic freedom" for the masses. Established in 1959, it became the single largest Opposition party in the 1967 elections. Its fall was quicker. Rajagopalachari died in 1972, and his party was dissolved two years later.

Swatantra's ally, the Jana Sangh (BJP's predecessor party) could have adopted its ideological plank. The Sangh had joined hands with Swatantra to cobble together state-level coalitions in the 1960s. The two parties were united in their disdain for Nehruvian planning and viewed the Communists as their primary ideological opponents. One section of the Sangh, led by Balraj Madhok, indeed wanted the party to take a Rightward turn. But he was overruled by the dominant faction led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Vajpayee wanted his party to avoid the tag of an economic Right-wing force that championed the cause of landlords and maharajas, according to a new Vajpayee biography authored by Abhishek Choudhary. In a desperately poor country, it wasn't pragmatic to be identified with the rich.

BACKED BY ERSTWHILE MAHARAJAS AND A NEW BREED OF ENTREPRENEURS IN THE WEST AND SOUTH, SWATANTRA PARTY PROMISED "ECONOMIC FREEDOM" FOR THE MASSES

Despite India's economic progress since then, the wealthy are easily outnumbered by the poor and the vulnerable. The BJP's promise of free foodgrains for an overwhelming majority of households is an acknowledgement of this reality. In such a country, voters will always be attracted to a party that offers more — or better-implemented — welfare schemes. Even in Delhi, a prosperous city with a large middle-class population, a new party offering an "improved" welfare model was able to outsmart the two national parties.

There is another important reason why we haven't seen a new avatar of the Swatantra Party yet. The Swatantra Party was home to wealthy patrons who felt excluded from mainstream politics and wanted to have their own political platform. Today, plutocrats are able to find their place in mainstream politics quite easily. The rising cost of elections has made political parties heavily dependent on moneybags. All parties must court poor voters in the day, and solicit rich funders at night. A party's electoral success depends on how well it manages this fundamental contradiction.

Ambitious and politically savvy businessmen have enough avenues today to acquire political heft and use that heft to safeguard their financial interests. According to a 2023 report by Marcellus Investment Managers, a handful of "octopi" business families tend to account for most of the wealth in every town or district of the country. Members of such families often use their political connections to win new contracts and regulatory approvals, spreading their tentacles over the local economy. Gradually, a mini-conglomerate gets built, with multiple lines of businesses, and multiple political patrons to safeguard its interests. While there isn't enough data to back Marcellus' hypothesis, their conclusions seem plausible. Visit any small town, and you are likely to hear about local "octopi" families with multiple business interests.

While a modern-day Swatantra Party may be unviable, some of its ideas do resonate with India's increasingly vocal middle class (statistically speaking, the top deciles of India's income distribution). Many of them are beneficiaries of economic liberalisation and some have gained from the stock market boom of the past decade. They have little patience for excessive State spending, even if they may have benefited from State support in the past. They will tolerate pro-poor policies as long as their own fortunes are protected. No major party can ignore this growing segment of centre-Right voters.

The BJP's emphasis on fiscal stability in its manifesto is aimed at this constituency. The Congress too is unwilling to alienate this constituency. The Grand Old Party had suggested earlier that it would dismantle the New Pension Scheme and revert to the fiscally onerous Old Pension Scheme for government employees. But it has avoided such a promise in its manifesto, fearing that it may be accused of being fiscally reckless. The political cost of fiscal indiscipline is higher than before.

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RISHI SUNAK } BRITISH PRIME MINISTER

No ifs, no buts, these flights are going to Rwanda... We are ready. Plans are in place. And these flights will go come what may

Announcing that the first flight carrying illegal migrants to Rwanda will take off in 10-12 weeks



Congress manifesto's focus is on inequality

The Congress party's 2024 Nyay Patra manifesto has listened to the troubles of tens of thousands of citizens across society and offered concrete solutions to our biggest problems — unemployment, high prices, the crushing of civil liberties and the corrosion of India's public institutions. The Congress manifesto paints a vision of a just and vibrant India in which constitutional commitments of freedom and equality can be realised. However, others are trying to paint a darker picture. Some columnists, including in these pages (Monika Halan, "Questions to the Congress on wealth redistribution", April 16, 2024), have begun a scare-mongering campaign, portraying a moderate and progressive manifesto as some form of radical redistribution. On Sunday, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi turned it into a dog whistle against the party.

The fact is the Congress manifesto does not use the word "redistribution" anywhere. Nor did Rahul Gandhi promise to redistribute the nation's wealth in Hyderabad on April 6, 2024. What he said, as he has been repeatedly saying, is that representation of Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) and minorities is suboptimal in vital decision-making. Their presence in the bureaucracy and other public institutions, in the media and in business, seems to be at stark odds with their population.

Reservation benefits also need to be distributed equitably to sub-groups within the reserved categories. What can be done to aid social mobility, the natural concern of any democracy that strives for social stability? The Congress party — and indeed the next INDIA government — will address this gap by carrying out a Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) that includes data on income and asset ownership. This picture will be filled out with data from a financial and institutional survey which will be periodically updated so that we can move to an evidence-based conversation about the representation of disadvantaged groups.

The Modi government's opposition to an SECC is itself two-faced. On August 31, 2018, then home minister Rajnath Singh even announced that the 2021 census would count the number of OBCs, but the government failed to act. The Census questionnaire does not have any column that records OBC identity. The Modi government never released the caste data collected by the 2011 SECC but has freely

used its social and economic data covering 25 crore households for welfare schemes. For someone who has described himself as "sabse bada OBC", PM Modi's aversion to having an actual sense of OBC numbers is puzzling.

Any attempt to portray the economic proposals of the Congress as extreme flies in the face of history. Even when it had an outright majority, the Congress party has been inclusive and incrementalist. The party that ended zamindari in the 1950s worked with landed farmers to bring about a Green Revolution in the 1960s. The party that promoted financial inclusion by nationalising banks in the 1960s also carried out liberalisation, gradually in the 1980s and decisively in the 1990s. This is a party that responds to the needs of all our people, not one beholden to narrow interest groups or ideological boxes. When it appeared that the benefits of growth were not being widely dispersed, the Congress party built a social safety net in the form of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the National Food Security Act. When a crisis hit in the form of Covid-19, the PM who had criticised these programmes found himself relying on them to save India.

Leading global economists, including Thomas Piketty, have shown how India under the current government is more unequal than it was under the British Raj ("Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj"). The share of national income earned by India's top 1% is at its highest historical levels and is also among the highest globally. Even in this situation, the Congress manifesto takes a measured approach. We have sought to generate accurate census data, including caste, that can take us to a fact-based discourse and policymaking on social and economic disparities. For the better-off sections of society, we have promised a stable Direct Taxes Code, lower taxes on MSMEs, simplification of GST and tax relief for shopkeepers and small retailers who are facing competition from online businesses.

This is far from being an agenda of class warfare or radical redistribution. It is an attempt to have a reasonable conversation about equality and inclusion, one that is informed by facts and listens to the whole range of voices in our society.

Amitabh Dubey is a member of the Congress party's manifesto committee. The views expressed are personal



OUR VIEW



THEIR VIEW

Our housing policy framework needs a comprehensive rethink

Reforms must take migration into account, enlarge urban supply and make use of rental vouchers



VIDYA MAHAMBARE
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Economy's relevance to polls: A two-way street?

As India's FM indicated, the economy matters as a welfare enabler, above all. While politics has settled this point, how politics itself could shape our economic destiny is open to contest

Asked in an interview last week with *Hindustan Times* how relevant the current economy—and how people felt about it—was to India's Lok Sabha polls, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman replied, "It's very relevant because, probably for the first time, people have seen issues pertaining to their economic well-being being taken up and implemented. The word 'beneficiary,' *laabharthi*, is everywhere in the country." The FM went on to cite instances of how people had benefited from various central schemes, such as for housing, cooking gas, piped water, toilets and loans for tiny businesses. "The economy matters to the common man." Asked about inflation as a factor, she said it was within the central bank's tolerance band, outlined a set of measures taken by the government to contain food prices, and raised a rhetorical question on the bank's policy stance to play down price tags as a worry. To observers who lay store by an old American line, "It's the economy, stupid," the Indian FM's answer might sound unsatisfying. If so, the local context would urge a rethink.

From a political perspective, data on economic growth and its drivers is far less salient than what it achieves by way of budget expansion for the upliftment of multitudes in need of government aid. We have more than 800 million Indians on our rolls as beneficiaries of free food handouts. Whatever the poverty line, this number suggests that welfare help needs to cover a majority of Indians. Since the needy are so numerous, a dashboard of macro variables tracked by investors would fail to reflect what matters to most voters. Before the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, rightist critics of Indian policy

spoke of "premature welfarism" as a drag on our economy's emergence. Modi's slogan of "Minimum government, maximum governance" was taken to presage minimal intervention in a market economy, a capitalist turn away from public grants and do-gooder outlays. The roll-out and enlargement of various schemes by the Modi administration did surprise analysts who were expecting a break from the socialist template put in place by Congress rule, but it was a call of judgement in sync with an imperative of politics: The benefits of progress must palpably be delivered to the electorate. The classic constraint on this approach is the inflationary pressure that fiscal excesses can result in. However, a central bank mandate for price stability issued in 2016 by the Centre was designed—at least partly—to stem voter discontent on this front.

That economic performance pales in front of the BJP's saffron ideology as a vote-puller is another argument often made. The party's confidence in victory, though, might not have been the same without its welfare emphasis. Fiscally speaking, this looks like the default setting to govern a country of so many have-nots. What's left contestable is the role that inequality plays in our economy and the well-being of citizens. India's demographic profile is a portrait of disparity. A flatter pyramid would let India emerge as a larger market, reducing the risk of an economic plateau caused by uneven avenues for upward mobility, but we have not been able to find a path that flattens the pyramid without flattening growth. Welfare packages, while vital to this aim, might not suffice. Do social conditions need to be supportive? If so, politics and economics may be inextricably linked not just from one election to the next, but also in determining the prosperity we eventually attain.

Cities occupy 3% of India's land and contribute about 60% to the economy, as per a 2019 UN report. In recognition of the need for affordable and quality housing, the government launched the PM Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U) in June 2015 to provide housing for all by December 2024. Around 8.2 million of nearly 11.7 million houses approved under the scheme have been completed, as per the PMAY website, as of 7 April. In contrast, 25 million houses of the 29.5 million target under the scheme's rural version, PMAY-Gramin, had been completed by November 2023. Not only is the urban version's completion rate lower, many houses constructed under it remain unoccupied.

Why explains the difference? Let us see why there appears to be low urban demand for public housing, despite the high cost of private housing in our cities. The Standing Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs noted in 2022 that many houses under PMAY-U are not in "liveable condition," pointing to missing windows and doors, and illegal occupation by "anti-social elements." In the same year, a Comptroller and Auditor General report noted several issues related to the selection of beneficiaries under PMAY-U. In Karnataka, for example, some beneficiaries got multiple benefits while ineligible people got allotments.

Given weak purchase demand for public housing, the Centre launched a scheme under which PMAY-U houses are repaired and converted into affordable rental housing complexes for urban migrants/poor. However, this faced low demand too. What may be the reasons?

First, a housing subsidy in rural areas is used to build homes on land owned by families in their native places. The location of a residence is not decided by the government, but by individuals. Urban public housing can't offer such choice.

Second, rural homes under the scheme are standalone units, not apartment complexes as with most urban housing. In complexes, public space maintenance and shared-resource use are often subject to the 'tragedy of commons.' Public resources tend to get misused and suffer from poor upkeep.

Third, people may not prefer to live in neighbourhoods that do not suit their aspirations of upward mobility. Evidence from the US shows that moving to a better neighbourhood improves schooling and labour market outcomes.

Fourth, migrants from other states often stay together and form a small local community, since assimilation in the larger urban community takes time. That may discourage migrants from other states from applying for public housing rental apartments. Migrants may also find it difficult to deal with local public officials, especially in their early days, given language and cultural barriers. It is also unclear if there is proper dissemination of information on the rental housing available, the process of applying for it, and so on.

Can public policy take a new approach so that our rental housing markets work more efficiently? Without this, the expansion of Indian cities would become unsustainable.

The 2015 National Urban Rental Housing Policy mentions the provision of a fund to set up a rental voucher scheme and a pilot project in selected cities. The vouchers were meant to partially offset the cost of private housing

rent incurred by the urban poor and migrants. Several countries have successfully used a housing voucher policy to help families move to locations that best meet their needs.

Little information about the Indian pilot of the rent-voucher scheme is available in the public domain. One concern may be that rents in our cities are so high that even after a rent subsidy, private housing remains largely unaffordable to the urban poor.

If that were the case, then the reason for rental housing being out of reach would be a shortfall in its supply. The supply of urban housing can be increased via two measures that the government has duly acknowledged. First, a stockpile of private accommodation can be unlocked that remains locked up because of unfavourable terms for house owners under rental laws. Second, regulations can be eased that control and thereby slow the construction of new homes in big cities.

Another issue that policymakers should discuss is whether a push for home ownership under the PMAY-Gramin lowers the incentive for labour mobility. If a family has a village home, it would make sense for the family to stay there, as it is unlikely to find rental tenants, rather than incurring a high urban rent by moving to a city. Families splitting up because of one member's migration is not welfare-enhancing either. Since the jobs on offer are in urban and semi-urban areas, it may be worthwhile to reconsider the policy of creating housing stock in rural India and instead offer monetary support for urban housing rents.

Successfully implementing an urban rent voucher scheme, or any other such policy for urban housing, is easier said than done. But then, most major reforms are always cumbersome and met with opposition. If India is to become a prosperous nation, our cities would be at its core. It is therefore imperative to rethink the country's urban public housing policy once national elections are over.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

We should measure welfare's success by how many people leave welfare, not by how many are added.

RONALD REAGAN

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

Beneficiaries and benefactors: The twain need to meet

AJIT RANADE



is a Pune-based economist.

In the award-winning movie *Oppenheimer*, the director of the atomic bomb project is repeatedly questioned about his communist sympathies and loyalty to his country. In one telling line, he says, "I am a New Deal supporter, not a communist." He was referring to the massive welfare expansion and public-works projects undertaken by then president Franklin D. Roosevelt's government that eventually made it possible for America to come out of the Great Depression. Apart from massive support for industrial recovery, it launched the social security system to provide protection for the unemployed, youth, farmers and the elderly. This was a radical shift for an otherwise conservative America. The affluent scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer has no qualms supporting such welfare spending. The New Deal had support from all strata of American society, who did not see it as robbing Peter to pay Paul. It was the richer, tax-paying class that not only supported welfare spending, but also saw themselves as indirect beneficia-

ries. What is the overlap between welfare beneficiaries and those who fund programmes in India? Let us examine.

India's economic trajectory over the past 10 years has been distinctly welfarist. The idea of a universal basic income (UBI) became big news as it was prominently discussed in a chapter of the *Economic Survey* of 2016-17. The then chief economic advisor, Arvind Subramanian, wrote: "[UBI] is a radical and compelling paradigm shift in thinking about both social justice and a productive economy. It could be to the twenty-first century what civil and political rights were to the twentieth." The proposed scheme had three major themes: universality, unconditionality and agency. Having agency meant that there was no constraint on how the income was to be spent by the recipient. This is in contrast to voucher-based approaches, where recipients are supposed to use welfare vouchers only on designated goods and services. UBI has not yet been rolled out formally, but might happen soon. Pilot projects were tried in 2011-12 with some success. At present, we see welfare spending by way of free foodgrains for 800 million-plus people, and other nearly 450 direct benefit programmes that reach an estimated 900 million, of which PM-Kisan, meant for farmers,

alone covers 100 million people. These are direct cash transfers and mostly unconditional. The total of all such welfare spending could be in excess of 5% of GDP. It is possible that there may be duplication or redundancy in some schemes, or more efficiency can be attained with the same budget. Improvements could be made by reorienting other subsidy schemes. For instance, why not make fertilizer pricing market-oriented (currently it sells at a steep 75% discount to the cost) and transfer direct cash to poor farmers, who are the intended beneficiaries? This will incentivize producers and bring more investment into a sector that still sees massive imports. However, shifting to direct benefit transfers (DBTs) for fertilizer is easier said than done, since the land tiller is not the same as the land owner. And how to distinguish between rich and small farmers? The PM-Kisan scheme makes no such distinction. And conditionality in any case goes against the spirit of a UBI.

This column is neither about the efficacy of welfare spending nor what we can afford fiscally. Both are valid issues and can be examined separately. Here, we look at an aspect that was also highlighted in the *Economic Survey* of 2016-17. It pointed out that India has only 7 taxpayers for every 100 voters, and that ranks us No. 13 out of 18 of our democratic G20 peers.

We can afford greater welfare and even a UBI but the tax burden should be borne by a larger base

In a remarkable chart shown of taxpayers versus voters, India ranks 45 out of 51 countries. Countries like Norway, Sweden and Canada have nearly 100 taxpayers for every 100 voters. The Netherlands and Australia have close to 80. The US, Oppenheimer's country, has 60. But India is an outlier. Of course, this refers to income-tax payers. And it is common knowledge that consumption tax in the form of goods and services tax is paid by almost everybody. The GST, being an indirect tax, is regressive and also too high. Not surprisingly, there is hardly any talk of reforming income tax this election season. Direct taxpayers constitute a tiny minority and are electorally

irrelevant. Are they proud and supportive of India's welfarism the same way as Oppenheimer? We don't know. For most voters, party manifestos promise more welfare (if not more freebies). There is no use pointing out the increase in tax filers every year. Since the exemption threshold is so high, a person pays more than zero income-tax only after earning more than ₹7 lakh, which is nearly 4 times India's per capita income. On this metric too, India is an outlier—it provides too high an exemption threshold. The flip side of this is that the effective tax rate goes from zero to the maximum incremental rate of above 42% very rapidly. The graded tax slabs of 10%, 20% and 30% should be spread over taxable income from say ₹5 lakh to ₹50 lakh. But that is not the case, and the government stands to lose big if it raises the threshold for the high marginal tax rate of 30% plus surcharge.

The original sin was making income up to ₹7 lakh tax free, which it is politically impossible to turn back. We can afford welfarism and even UBI, but not on the back of regressive and distorting indirect taxes and non-sharable cesses. It should be based on direct taxes. And there should be a greater overlap between beneficiaries and benefactors. Only then we can merge political democracy with fiscal democracy.



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Palestinian statehood should be an urgent goal for today's world

It has never been more important for Israel to defuse the visceral anger of Palestinians in territories under its occupation



GARETH EVANS
is a former foreign minister of Australia and the author of 'The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All'

It is time for Israel to recognize the force of the rapidly growing international movement to recognize Palestinian statehood, not as the final outcome of a political settlement, but as a path to achieving it. Were Israel to get serious again about pursuing a two-state solution, it would not be rewarding Hamas, but benefiting itself.

The awful reality, as the horrendous attacks of 7 October 2023 made clear, is that without a political solution that satisfies legitimate Palestinian aspirations, Israel will never be free of the spectre of terrorism.

My decades of experience with conflict prevention and resolution, including years of talking to all sides in the Middle East, have drummed home the truth that despair can all too easily turn into rage, and then into indefensible outrage. By the same token, the threat of violence diminishes rapidly during those periods of genuine hope for a just and dignified settlement.

To understand the roots of 7 October is not to justify the slaughter of innocents, then or ever. Israel is undoubtedly entitled to respond with all the force that international law allows. But for Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government—and those who blindly support it—to remain in denial about those roots, and to offer no political way forward, is simply to invite more of the same. This is especially true now that so many ordinary decent Palestinians have been displaced, traumatized and angered by the disproportionate savagery of the Israeli response.

As I have argued elsewhere, the moral, legal and political case for recognizing Palestinian statehood has always been strong. Some 140 United Nations member states—albeit nearly all of them from the Global South—have already done so. The Gaza war has now lent the issue new relevance and urgency. More and more countries see Israel's intransigence as not only perpetuating Palestinian misery but also guaranteeing its own.

Australia, in a pathbreaking speech by Foreign Minister Penny Wong on 9 April, became the latest of a host of formerly cautious countries—including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain, Norway and even the US—to make clear that it is actively considering early recognition of Palestinian statehood. True, the timing is an issue. With UN votes on full membership for Palestine expected at the Security Council and in the General Assembly this month, the US and some others may not yet be willing to issue formal declarations. Still, the direction of travel is clear and momentum is building.

Many argue, nonetheless, that recognition of Palestinian statehood is an empty, quixotic gesture. Practically, a two-state solution now looks unattainable, owing to the territorial fragmenta-



tion created by Israel's increasingly unrestrained West Bank settlement-building programme. And Israeli hostility to a two-state solution, and Palestinian support for its own one-state solution, have both grown steadily and likely become more entrenched since 7 October.

All true enough, but the dream of a two-state solution must be kept alive, not only because it remains overwhelmingly the preferred policy internationally, but also because it is so obviously in Israel's own long-term interest.

As many commentators over the years have pointed out, Israel potentially can be a Jewish state, a democratic state and a state occupying the whole of historical Judea and Samaria. But it cannot be all three at the same time. (This was a favourite line of my old boss, Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, in offering tough love to the Jewish community here.)

The argument for recognizing Palestinian statehood is that doing so is vital to restore a balance that has tipped overwhelmingly in favour of Israel. No peace negotiation can succeed if the parties at the table are completely mismatched. For the foreseeable future, the best—and possibly the only—way to counter the current mismatch is to show that Palestine has legitimacy not only in the Islamic world and the Global South, but globally as well, including in traditional pillars of the Global North, like the UK, Australia and other US allies and partners.

While it is not necessary for a state to be recognized as such to have a government in effective control of its entire territory, the issue is made more complicated by governance problems on the Palestinian side. The Palestinian Authority is a gerontocracy in desperate need of reform, and Hamas has dealt itself out of any international acceptance with its military wing's terror excesses.

Constructing a viable pan-Palestinian government—preferably with the support of key regional players—will certainly be a long haul. I am among those who have long believed that the imprisoned Palestinian activist Marwan Barghouti, popular in both Gaza and the West Bank, could be the Mandela-like unifier that Palestinians desperately need. But for precisely that reason, persuading Israel to release him will be a Herculean task, at least as long as Netanyahu remains in power.

Regardless of whether the two-state solution proves to have any life left in it, conferring Palestine the extra legitimacy, leverage, and bargaining power inherent in recognized statehood would help achieve for both sides a future that is better than the awful *status quo*.

If it does still have life, as we must all hope, Palestinian leverage will be crucial in producing just and sustainable solutions to the outstanding issues, including those concerning boundaries, credible security guarantees for both sides, the protection of holy sites, and the fraught question of refugee rights.

But even if the only remaining option is to negotiate a new, democratic, non-apartheid single state (in which Palestinians enjoy fully equal rights alongside Israel's Jewish population), giving Palestinians more legitimacy and heft at the bargaining table serves the goal of securing a sustainable peace.

At a time of dramatically heightened tension with Iran, and all the renewed sense of insecurity that comes with it, it has never been more important for Israel to defuse the visceral anger of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Most of the rest of the world is now telling Israel that the best way to start is to accept the force of Palestinians' claim to statehood. If Israelis really want a more secure future, it's time for them to listen. ©2024/PROJECT SYNDICATE

What Biden could learn from Modi: Prioritize price stability

Inflation control may be a bigger vote winner than leaders think



MIHIR SHARMA
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Modi's inflation-targeting RBI mandate has been a case of good politics too

India's general elections kicked off on Friday with voting in 102 of the country's 543 constituencies. The outcome is not really in doubt. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has maintained, if not increased, his favourability ratings since he last won re-election in 2019. Such enduring popularity, in an age when most democratically elected leaders are struggling, can appear mystifying.

The standard argument doesn't explain Modi's success. While India's economy might be posting impressive growth numbers, employment and wages haven't kept up. Government data shows that, for the past decade, Indians' average monthly real earnings have either declined or remained stagnant. Almost half the workforce is still paid below the official minimum wage. This implies that too few Indians have benefited from policies for economic reasons alone to account for his popularity. In fact, while Modi's Hindu nationalist rhetoric is wildly popular, especially in India's north, his economic management may indeed be what's keeping him in power. And the lessons from that success could usefully be studied by leaders elsewhere.

Modi's biggest macroeconomic priority hasn't been to juice growth or wages. Instead, he has focused on controlling inflation. Even though his government has not been too keen on independent regulators or institutional reforms, it did push through legislation early on that set an inflation target for the Reserve Bank of India, whose six-member monetary policy committee has since been left mostly on its own to manage rates, in spite of occasional grumbles from New Delhi. Meanwhile, the government has deployed a mix of macro- and microeconomic levers to keep prices from spiralling out of control, including during supply disruptions brought on by the covid pandemic. Federal budgets have sought to shrink the deficit. Fuel taxes are high but have also largely insulated users from inflationary swings in energy prices.

The government insists that trade with Russia after it invaded Ukraine also keeps energy costs down. Even India's attempts at industrial policy have been on the cheap: Elon Musk appears to have been lured to the country by the promise of lower tariffs on Tesla's cars, not government handouts.

Not all of the government's anti-inflation efforts have been sensible or responsible. The export of agricultural goods, for example, is frequently shut down at the first sign of higher domestic prices, causing chaos for fragile food supply chains across the developing world. Unpredictable trade

policy is a reason that a promise to double farmers' incomes couldn't be met. Yet, this underscores a will to prioritize stable prices over employment and household income growth. In this, Modi seems to have learned from his predecessors' mistakes. Previous governments failed to manage prices and faced widespread popular discontent as a result. Even if their record on growth and wages was better, inflation higher than Indians expected weakened support for past administrations.

For politicians seeking office, it may still be "the economy, stupid," but how we think about the interplay between the economy and voting patterns needs to change. The instability of inflation pretty clearly seems to alienate voters from their government far more than a stagnant economy and high unemployment.

US economists such as Paul Krugman have argued that Biden has delivered a "good economy" that isn't being recognized because of "negative vibes," fuelled by right-wing media. And it is also true that the US continues to see robust job growth: Bidenomics prioritizes full employment over deficit reduction or price-reducing free trade.

Biden's campaign may discover, however, that's not necessarily what makes most voters happy. Lavish government spending and near-shoring efforts have kept US prices high and unpredictable—the true source of the mysterious 'vibes' that threaten Biden's re-election. While real incomes may have increased, Americans seem to care even more about nominal prices. That's illogical—but who says voters are rational?

Politicians in the West don't seem to have worked this out. In Europe, leaders faced with restive populations are doubling down on spending packages and industrial subsidies. Meanwhile, polls ahead of this summer's elections to the European Parliament suggest that rising prices are what really concern voters. Mainstream parties may face a debacle in Europe and Biden might lose. Meanwhile Modi, despite sky-high youth unemployment and declining real wages, is being rewarded for keeping prices predictable. The lesson of India's polls should reverberate well beyond its borders: Elections are won through price stability, not subsidies. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

Nuclear clouds have begun to threaten the world again

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN



is chairman, InKlude Labs. Read Narayan's Mint columns at www.livemint.com/visiblehand

Suddenly, a mushroom cloud of nuclear risk is upon the world. It is 80 years since the Manhattan project and the US's deployment of two nuclear bombs in Japan. That horrific event marked the end of World War II. World War III could quite plausibly start with a tactical nuclear strike or a mistake. A nuclear war scenario has not really threatened the world for the last eight decades, except briefly during the Cuban Missile Crisis of the early 1960s. A global nuclear deterrent has held the line until now, even as nine countries have become declared nuclear powers with a stockpile of some 13,000 weapons and a dizzying array of delivery methods.

Beginning in 2022 with the Ukraine war, followed last year by hostilities erupting in West Asia, opposing sides have been trying to poke each other's eyes out, resulting in a general blindness to the unimaginable consequences of a nuclear war. The proximate cause of the so-far-conventional escalation in West Asia was Israel's attack on an Iranian

diplomatic compound in Syria that killed several people, including two Iranian Quds Force Generals. Until then, Iran was waging a covert war through proxies such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and Israel was striking back at those militia groups. With Israel's attack on a diplomatic facility in Syria, Iran's retaliation with directly targeted missiles and drones, and then what may have been a small Israeli strike on targets in the Iranian city of Isfahan on Friday, Israel and Iran are already in a form of unstated war. Israel had obliterated the Damascus facility with an airstrike, whereas Iran responded with a barrage of 130 drones, 30 cruise missiles and 110 ballistic missiles. Both these countries are widely believed to be nuclear powers, even if they have not declared themselves to be so.

An awkward coalition of Arab countries like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE helped the US, France and UK defend Israel against the aerial barrage from Iran. Beyond supplying munitions and materiel, this has already drawn this uneasy coalition into direct combat. Several countries, including Jordan, are against Israel's war in Gaza, but extended support to mitigate the impact on Israel so that Tel Aviv did not feel the need to respond forcefully. The 'fog of war' is only going to escalate if, for instance, direct Isra-

eli action in Iranian territory causes damage that Tehran decides it must hit back for. The escalation up to this point has been the result of a strategic misjudgement by Israel in attacking a diplomatic facility. Prima facie, it appears that Israel's action was in breach of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. Even though Iran's use of proxies has been abetting war for quite some time, in this instance, it appears that its direct response was both telegraphed and calibrated with an intention to mitigate further escalation.

We are now poised at a knife's edge (a quaint metaphor in a nuclear age). While Israel's strike in Isfahan was limited, the US, UK and other Western powers are said to be readying a new round of sanctions. Beyond this, if Israel uses covert and other quiet methods of response, or exercises strategic restraint, the immediate nuclear threat may well pass. A senior Revolutionary Guard Commander has already said that Iran could review its "nuclear doctrine" if Israel

responds in a damaging way. Iran's actions could then take the form of an attack on Israel's nuclear facilities and/or include a tactical nuclear strike. After that, all hell could break loose.

In the Ukrainian theatre of war, President Vladimir Putin of Russia threatens a tactical nuclear strike every time he has some war stress. A revanchist Russia's attempt to integrate its 'Little Rus' already appears a failure and more aid from the US is coming Kyiv's way. A desperate Putin may resort to tactical nuclear weapons to realize his Tsarist ambitions. The US and China have an outsized role to play in de-escalating the nuclear risk in both locations. The US has responsibility with its ally Israel, and China has a similar one with Russia and Iran. What both superpowers need to come to grips with is that an escalation in conventional war from here on risks a nuclear mistake that may be beyond their control.

For India, self-absorbed with its massive multi-phase election, nuclear war seems to

be a far-off concern. And yet, India has no choice but to plan for a variety of scenarios where its diplomatic positions and 'no first use' nuclear doctrine might be tested.

India has begun to establish a broad air-defence system. Five S-400 air defence systems were acquired from Russia at a cost of nearly ₹39,000 crore in 2018. This system comes with a mix of missiles and radar defences that lets it knock down threats at various heights and ranges. Other weapons in India's arsenal include the SpyDer, an Israeli short and medium range system (one critical component of Israel's own Iron Dome defence), as well as the Indian made MRSAM system. India has also put in place the Akashite system, which is an automated control-and-reporting system for all air defences. While India has made significant progress in air defence capabilities, it is an enormous challenge to protect such a large area with a 'dome' equivalent comprehensive system. This should be an area of focus in an increasingly belligerent world that appears to be on a nuclear hair-trigger.

P.S.: "I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones," said Albert Einstein in a chilling forecast of what might lie ahead.

Two theatres of war with geopolitical dimensions spell a danger unseen since the 1960s

The Statesman

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Aid Victory

In the face of geopolitical turmoil and escalating threats, the passage of a \$95 billion aid package by the US House of Representatives stands as a beacon of hope and solidarity for the country's allies in distress. With Ukraine teetering on the brink of a perilous military imbalance and Israel grappling with regional tensions, this comprehensive aid initiative represents a critical lifeline in a sea of uncertainty. At the heart of this legislative triumph lies a tale of bipartisan cooperation and decisive leadership. Despite the challenges posed by internal divisions and political brinkmanship, lawmakers united in a shared commitment to safeguarding global security and upholding democratic values. In a display of adept stewardship, the Republican speaker of the House, faced with daunting odds and internal dissent, rose to the occasion, guiding the aid package through the tumultuous waters of congressional debate. Central to this landmark legislation is its multifaceted approach to addressing the diverse needs of key allies. With Ukraine facing an existential threat from Russian aggression, the allocation of \$61 billion in aid represents a strategic investment in bolstering its defense capabilities and fortifying its resilience against external pressures. From replenishing ammunition supplies to procuring advanced weapons systems, the aid package promises to provide tangible support to Ukrainian forces in their struggle with Russia. Equally significant is the provision of \$26 billion in support for Israel, a steadfast ally in a volatile region plagued by conflict and instability. As tensions simmer on multiple fronts, from Gaza to the Golan Heights, the replenishment of missile defense systems and the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Gaza signal a firm commitment to Israel's security and well-being. Amidst the complexities of the Israel-Hamas conflict, this aid package offers a glimmer of hope to Tel Aviv.

Beyond the immediate imperatives of crisis response, the aid package underscores a broader commitment to advancing US strategic interests and countering emerging threats. With a dedicated focus on the Indo-Pacific region, including provisions for submarine infrastructure and support for regional allies such as Taiwan, the legislation reflects a nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics of great power competition. By bolstering regional deterrence capabilities and fostering closer partnerships, the United States seeks to maintain a position of strength and influence in an increasingly contested strategic environment. As the aid package moves forward for Senate approval and eventual enactment, its passage heralds a new chapter in US foreign policy - one defined by proactive engagement, determined leadership, and a commitment to the defence of allies.

In an era of geopolitical flux and uncertainty, the unity of purpose demonstrated in an election year by lawmakers sends a powerful message of resolve and solidarity to allies and adversaries alike. With the stakes higher than ever and the challenges mounting, the passage of this aid package serves as a testament to the strength and resilience of strategic alliances.

Indo-Pacific Tensions

The recent assembly of naval officials from around the globe in China's Qingdao, hosted by the Chinese Navy, is an emblematic event that reveals the intricacies of diplomacy and power in the contested waters of the South China Sea. This symposium, held amid growing military tensions and strategic manoeuvres, is both a platform for dialogue and a tableau of the broader geopolitical challenges facing the Indo-Pacific region. The timing of this gathering is particularly significant. As tensions simmer over territorial claims and maritime rights in the South China Sea, the world watches how major powers, especially China and the United States, navigate these troubled waters. The inclusion of discussions on the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea - an agreement designed to prevent maritime incidents - is a nod to the necessity of maintaining communication and protocols to avoid escalation. Yet, such measures seem almost quaint against the backdrop of advancing military technologies, such as drones, which are not yet adequately covered by existing agreements. Moreover, the concurrent US-Philippines military drills, which for the first time extend beyond Philippine territorial waters, underscore a shift toward more robust military postures in the region. These exercises, expanding in scope and scale, signal a clear message about the US' commitment to its allies and its readiness to counter perceived threats. This escalation of military preparedness reflects a broader trend of nations in the region bolstering their defences in response to perceived encroachments and hostilities, particularly from China.

China's ambitions to build a "world-class" military by 2027 and to potentially field the world's largest ocean-going fleet by 2035 are pivotal elements in this geopolitical puzzle. Such ambitions are not merely about enhancing national pride or securing maritime routes but are integral to Beijing's vision of its role on the world stage. As China continues to assert its claims, not only in the South China Sea but also in its rivalry with Japan in the East China Sea, the implications for regional stability are profound. The presence of officials from countries like Japan, Australia, and India, all of whom have vested interests and on-going disputes with China, adds layers of complexity to the dialogue in Qingdao. These countries, while seeking to mitigate risks of open conflict, also need to assert their own strategic interests and sovereignty claims. What becomes clear from this symposium is that while diplomatic engagements such as these are crucial, they are not panaceas. The deep-seated mistrust and strategic competition that define current relations, particularly between China and its neighbours, as well as between China and the United States, will not be easily alleviated by discussions alone. As such, while we should welcome efforts to foster dialogue and cooperation, we must also be realistic about the limitations of these gatherings. True progress in regional security will require not just agreements on paper but also a fundamental respect for international norms.

Jordanian Duplicity

Beyond all posturing and purported concern for the Palestinians, the Jordanians have had the most accommodative, thawing, and non-confrontationist equation with the Israelis in the last three-four decades. With the invisible but sure hand of their mutual ally i.e., USA (also the strongest ally for both countries), the publicly posited differences against Israel are quietly handled away from the media glare. The fact that Jordan was amongst the foremost Arab nations to join the 'War on Terror' and subsequently in taking on the religious extremist organisations like Al Qaida, ISIL and other offshoots adds a lot more commonality between Amman and Tel Aviv



There is a raging meme-fest in the Arab world about the Jordanian King Abdullah II. One of the most caustic meme images is of the Arab King wearing an Israeli Military uniform. It is particularly damaging for the Hashemite King Abdullah, who is considered the 41st direct descendant of the Holy Prophet. But King Abdullah's recent and unprecedented act of authorizing the shooting down of Iranian drones that were targeting Israel has puzzled, shocked, and riled average emotions on the Arab street.

As it is, most Arabs had been disillusioned at the meek, platitudinous and pusillanimous reaction of their leaders as Israel has gone about pulverizing the Gaza Strip (killing over 30,000 Palestinians) - but for an Arab leader to shoot down Iranian missiles that were aimed at Israel (not even at Jordan) tantamount to defending Israel, even as Tel Aviv has been relentless with its attacks on the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

The Arab monarchies have been widely discredited and are unpopular with their own masses for their excesses, illiberality, and duplicitous anchorages.

In 2021, the infamous Pandora Papers revealed a disturbing amount of the Jordanian King's stashed wealth through offshore entities and dodgy Swiss accounts, but as always, the news led to a combination of suppression, deflection and contextualisation to remain unanswerable.

However, this recent act of being seen to be aiding Israel (at the cost of fellow-Arab Palestinian interests) is bound to worsen perceptions about the Jordanian Royal Family even further.

The Jordanian citizenry is smarting under the latest betrayal of its leader while commenting, for example, "Jordan following the money as usual". Even though the Iranians are not particularly popular, shooting down Iranian drones to help Israel is altogether different.

The Jordanians have had a

complicated and inconsistent history with all three principal parties in the recent conflict i.e., Iranians, Palestinians, and Israelis.

Almost always, the Jordanians have seemingly forsaken morality, commitments and even purported official positions at the altar of short-term gratification, unsavoury side-deals, and regime-protection instincts.

Even though Jordan had fought four wars with Israel (all ostensibly for Palestine) in its short history, it had also signed the peace treaty with Israel in 1994 and was amongst the first Arab countries to open reciprocal embassies. However, even prior to the official normalisation, clandestine 'back-channels' between Amman and Tel Aviv were thriving. Historically, many Arabs have dissed the dubious commitment of Jordanians towards Palestinians after Jordan annexed the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Old City) in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War only to lose these areas in the 1967 Six-Day War.

More importantly, the Jordanians had done precious little to create the Palestinian state when they had occupied the old Palestinian swathes, other than annexing the same, and then humiliatingly losing them in another 18 years or so. If the Israelis denied the Palestine state with forced occupation since 1948, the Jordanians in the interim till 1967 did no better.

More importantly, even though there are an estimated three million Palestinians out of a total population of 12 million in Jordan, the relations internally are testy.

The fact that King Abdullah's wife, Queen Rania, is also a Palestinian does not help fray nerves within. But perhaps the most wounded emotion (till the recent 'support' to Israel) was

the unforgettable memory of "Black September" 1970-71. Then Jordanian King Hussein (the current King's father) had responded to louds calls by Palestinians to overthrow the Hashemite monarchy with brutal counter attacks to drive out Palestinian fedayeen (and an estimated 5000 were killed).

King Hussein had stated that the Palestinians in Jordan had become the foremost security risk. The memories of the assassination of his grandfather, King Abdullah I, at the hands of a disgruntled Palestinian in 1951 would certainly have played a role. Years later, when Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994 - many Palestinians perceived it to be a 'sell-out', and more recently with the virtual impracticality of a 'two-state' solution, the Jordanians did not want the Palestinians' predicament to be at their expense.

Beyond all posturing and purported concern for the Palestinians, the Jordanians have had the most accommodative, thawing, and non-confrontationist equation with the Israelis in the last three-four decades.

With the invisible but sure hand of their mutual ally i.e., USA (also the strongest ally for both countries), the publicly posited differences against Israel are quietly handled away from the media glare.

The fact that Jordan was amongst the foremost Arab nations to join the 'War on Terror' and subsequently in taking on the religious extremist organisations like Al Qaida, ISIL and other offshoots adds a lot more commonality between Amman and Tel Aviv.

Relations between Jordan and Iran are given to natural sectarian differences (Sunni-Shia respectively) and post the

Iranian Revolution in 1979, Jordan supported Saddam Hussein in the decade long Iran-Iraq War. Later Iran despised Jordan for its proximity to its staunch enemies like the US and Saudi Arabia, and the fact that Jordan had normalised relations with Israel.

Later Jordan was pitted on the exact opposite side to Tehran in the Syrian Civil War where Iran was supporting co-sectarian Bassad-al-Assad's Syrian forces. In 2004, King Abdullah coined the term 'Shia Crescent' (with the crescent shape landscape beginning in Iran, moving to Iraq, and thence to Syria and Lebanon).

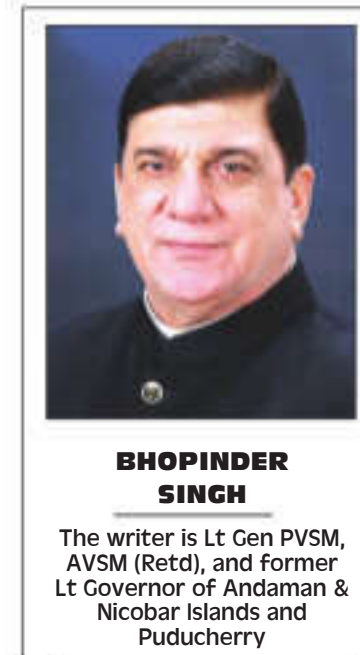
It envisaged a post-Saddam Iraq now controlled by Shiite powers, running up Syrian swathes controlled by Alawite (Shia-offshoot) Bassad-al-Assad's forces and completion of the dreaded arc with Shia Hezbollah ruling the roost in Lebanon. Clearly, King Hussein spewed more venom and concern at Iran than he did practically against Israel.

In a way, the Jordanian King Abdullah's action of downing Iranian drones only confirmed the worst kept secret in the region where Arabs have had more fear of the Iranians than they did of the Israelis, the actual oppressors of Palestinians.

The tight rope could also be owing to the cash-strapped situation in Jordan which survives on a \$1.5 billion annual US aid package. It will be mindful of the danger of the same getting withdrawn should it adopt a belligerent stand against Israel.

So, while a balancing act of keeping the US and the Israelis on the right side is understandable given their socio-economic and monarchical predicament, to shoot down Iranian drones that were targeting Israel is simply another level of brazen obsequiousness.

The worms are coming out of the woodwork. The hypocrisy of the Arabs in general and of Jordanians in particular towards the Palestinian cause is getting exposed.



BHOPINDER SINGH
The writer is Lt Gen PVSM, AVSM (Retd), and former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Vitiated polls

SIR, I refer to "Will AI tip the scales in this election?" by Kalyani Shankar, published today.

"Avatars are addressing voters by name, in whichever of India's many languages they speak. Experts see potential for misuse in a country already rife with disinformation", says a recent article in the New York Times. The purveying of realistic fake videos, often called deepfakes, with elections ongoing is already happening. They are changing many aspects of our media.

This technology allows a bunch of people sitting in their offices or in some obscure town to deploy deepfake videos that can sway voter sentiment in any poll-bound constituency thousands of miles away. Some people will believe the fakes. Other people - celebrities and politicians - will be caught doing and

saying things on camera that embarrass them but will then claim that the video/audio is fake. Few people will know what's real, and by the time the video/audio is authenticated or shown to be a fake, the damage is done.

All political parties are aware of how common these deepfake videos are but not much is being done to stop or ban them.

If no action is taken to curb them, the biggest election ever in the world's largest democracy may well set the ground for large-scale use of AI/deepfakes for elections.

Yours, etc., H N Ramakrishna, Bengaluru, 21 April.

MY SPACE

SIR, It was a pleasure to see a rash of letters under the "Letters to the editor" column today, even though mine did not make it to the

hallowed space. Usually, just one or two letters at best are featured here. H.G. Wells had said - No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft. Nevertheless, a letter that makes it past the finish line, even if brutally edited, is a writer's trophy. It gives one the joy of taking possession of a plot of land in a particularly posh colony.

I request you therefore, to satisfy the fond hopes and aspirations of more than just one hopeful person each day. I for one go to page six even before I read the headlines. Because that's where I hope to find "my plot of land".

Yours, etc., Avinash Godbole, Dewas, 21 April.

CONGRESS FAILS

SIR, I refer to your editorial "Opposition space", published today. I fully subscribe to your view that the future of India's democratic health relies significantly on resurgence of an effective opposition. But the Congress has

READING BOOKS

SIR, World Book Day is celebrated every year on 23 April. But nowadays we are more interested in reading on electronic gadgets rather than reading physical books. It's not only harmful to our health but also has a great negative impact on society.

A few decades ago students were eager to wait for summer vacations to read their favourite story books, comics and magazines. But now they are busy with their electronic gadgets in their leisure time. They are deprived of the fragrance of pages of new books which would mesmerise us. On 23 April, we should take a vow to revive our book reading habits.

Yours, etc., Sourav Malik, Chandandaha, South 24 Parganas, 21 April.

failed to rejuvenate itself.

Even after losing many state assemblies to the BJP, the party failed to introspect. Secondly, it failed to lead the INDIA front in the required manner. Now the party is fighting fewer seats. It takes on its allies like the TMC in Bengal and the Communists in Kerala.

The party also failed to act as a strong opposition entity. Freebies got some votes for it in Kar-

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

Korean won worries

The South Korean currency's sharp drop Tuesday triggered a flurry of warnings and statements from financial authorities, which helped stabilize the won to some extent in the following two sessions. But vigilant monitoring is in order as volatility may not fade out soon. It was a resounding red flag that the Korean won weakened to hit the psychologically important 1,400 won per dollar during an intraday trading Tuesday, affected by the sales of more assets by foreign investors here, the escalating Middle East conflict, the outlook that the US Federal Reserve would keep the restrictive monetary policy longer than expected.

Authorities were duly alarmed as the Korean currency hit the alarming 1,400 won level before ending down at 1,394.5 won per dollar Tuesday, the weakest level in 17 months. The Korean won had touched the 1,400 won level only three times until Tuesday: during the global rate hike trend led by the US Fed in 2022, the global financial crisis in 2007-08 and the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98. Although the Korean currency regained its value Wednesday to close at 1,386.8 won and further recovered Thursday to end at 1,372.9 won, experts warn about the overall weakening of the local currency in the coming months - a negative outlook for Korea's government officials already struggling with rising consumer prices and high energy prices. But there were some positive developments aimed at countering the continued slide of the Korean currency. On Wednesday in

The Korea Herald

Washington, the finance chiefs of South Korea, the US and Japan addressed the sharp depreciation of the Korean won and Japanese yen during their first trilateral talks. Korea's Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Japan's Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki issued a joint statement: "We will also continue to consult closely on foreign exchange market developments in line with our existing G20 commitments while acknowledging serious concerns of Japan and the Republic of Korea about the recent sharp depreciation of the Japanese yen and the Korean won."

The strong signal from the three countries helped calm the jittery sentiment of financial market players, a much-needed move to bring back stability to the volatile foreign exchange markets in Seoul and Tokyo. One day before the trilateral talk, Choi and Suzuki met on the sidelines of the G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors Meeting in Washington and expressed their intention to "take appropriate actions against excessive moment," sharing their concerns about the recent depreciation of their currencies against the US dollar.

In addition to the two verbal interventions, the Bank of Korea Gov. Rhee Chang-yong, who was also in Washington to attend the IMF International Conference, gave his helping hand Tuesday by saying that the Korean won is "slightly off the level that is acceptable by the market fundamentals." Rhee added the central bank has resources and tools to soften the volatility of the Korean currency against the US dollar.

Rhee's Tuesday comment came a day after he said the sharp depreciation of the Korean currency is "excessive" and the central bank is ready to take steps to stabilize the foreign exchange market in an interview with CNBC. But it is too early to stop worrying about the Korean currency. Major currencies are weakening against the US dollar amid the heightened geopolitical risks in the Middle East and other negative factors, but the Korean won is suffering a particularly drastic decline in value compared with other Asian currencies.

nataka and Telangana because of anti-incumbency.

At the national level, the scenario is quite different. You can't win votes by offering freebies. Jobs for youth and high inflation are the people's concerns.

The party must reform and see if it can take on the mighty BJP in 2029.

Yours, etc., Sravana Ramachandran, Chennai, 22 April.

**A thought for today**

What chess teaches you is that you must sit there calmly and think about whether it's really a good idea, and whether there are other, better ideas

STANLEY KUBRICK

What's The Real Issue?

Distribution of growth benefits post-reforms is uneven, across the board

Ideally, a high-tempo argument between BJP and opposition on distribution of state resources and wealth inequality should have been grounded in the larger question of structural issues often hidden by economic growth figures. But, what we have instead is polarising campaign rhetoric about Muslims. Modi gave a speech in Banswara, Rajasthan, on Sunday. Congress has gone to EC against it. BJP said Modi called spade a spade. Congress and others also point to the party's 2024 manifesto and the 2006 Manmohan Singh speech, which Modi referred to. The argument from the other side is that Congress's manifesto does talk of wealth inequality but doesn't anywhere refer to wealth being redistributed to anyone, Muslims or otherwise; that Singh's speech referred to many groups that need special policy attention, SC/STs, OBCs, women, children, minorities including Muslims; and that Singh hadn't said only Muslims have the first claim on resources.

In one part of his Monday campaign speech in Aligarh, Modi seemed to have come back to a more familiar BJP line – that the likes of Congress and SP practise “appeasement politics” vis a vis Muslims while his party works for “uplift” of the community. And BJP strategists now are also pointing to a Rahul Gandhi campaign speech that talked about a “wealth survey”. In that speech, Rahul had said post a census on caste and minority numbers, wealth, jobs, welfare will be distributed per every group's share in population. Politics, on all sides, is about taking your opponent's words and spinning those to your advantage.

The larger point is India doesn't need rhetoric from any party on resource distribution that gets embroiled in identity politics. Once such links are made, politics around it can acquire a life of its own, far removed from real issues. What is the real issue? Benefits of India's brisk growth, for a long time, have been unevenly distributed. This is true across regions and communities, irrespective of who's in office where and when. The process was pretty much coterminous with reforms, happening under Congress and BJP govts. Not enough industrial jobs were created. GOI's current emphasis on PLI factories is good but not adequate given the scale of the problem. So, the shift from farm to factories on a scale required didn't happen, and isn't happening. That's why every political party is out to promise so many welfare schemes. Netas know all of this – they just don't talk about it.

How Gukesh Checkmated Critics

Is it his skill? Or stamina? Is it his composure, that amazing ability to bounce back from losses? Here's how the 17-year-old Grandmaster won the right to challenge the world champ

Devangshu Datta



One statistic highlights the magnitude of Dommaraju Gukesh's achievement in winning the Candidates Chess tournament in Toronto yesterday. This victory gives him the right to challenge world champion Ding Liren for the title.

Only 17 men are acknowledged classical world champions, with Wilhelm Steinitz winning the first ever title match in 1886. The youngest, Garry Kasparov, was 22 when he beat Anatoly Karpov in 1985. A few others – Mikhail Tal, Magnus Carlsen and Karpov – scaled this peak before they turned 25.

Gukesh is only 17. In predictions before Toronto, he was counted out by his 'senior colleagues', world champions Viswanathan Anand and Magnus Carlsen. Both cited lack of experience as the hurdle. Asked for advice, Anand told him to take each game as it comes, and Carlsen says he told Gukesh, “Just don't do anything crazy. Let your opponents do the crazy things!”

It was always clear Gukesh had extraordinary talent. He became a Grandmaster at barely 12-plus. But the Candidates features eight of the world's cream in a gruelling double-round format. Apart from skill, the winner needs excellent preparation, high physical stamina, and composure to weather the inevitable ups and downs. Most commentators believed the latter comes with experience alone. It was up to Gukesh to prove them wrong.

Gukesh has excellent preparation, courtesy his own hard work and that of his second, Grzegorz Gajewski, a Polish Grandmaster who has also worked with Anand. He had the advice and encouragement of Anand, who works with him at Westbridge Anand Chess Academy (WACA). He has super stamina, thanks in part to his youth, and to his love of tennis – he plays at least three sets a day, seven days a week, when in Chennai.

Gukesh also has a regular meditation and yoga practice, which may help with composure. He has always been good at bouncing back from losses. But at the half-way stage in Toronto, most people counted him out.

He had just suffered a traumatic loss to Alireza Firouzja. Gukesh had a totally winning position but blundered catastrophically and got checkmated when both players had mere seconds left on their clocks. This is roughly the equivalent of losing a cricket match, after going into the last over six wickets in hand, needing to score one run to win. Losing is one thing – but losing in this fashion can lead to weeks of insomnia and flashbacks, completely destroying focus.

Amazingly, Gukesh won the very next game, outplaying compatriot Vidit Gujrathi. Going into the last three rounds his composure was severely tested, as tension mounted. In Round 12, Gukesh took serious risks playing an unusual opening to confuse Nijat Abasov. It worked. He won.

In Round 13, he took his revenge on Firouzja, winning a mind-bogglingly complex battle where he had to defend – with perfect accuracy – for a while before switching to a well-timed counter-attack.

That made Gukesh the sole leader going into the last round, with three players – Hikaru Nakamura, Fabiano Caruana and Ian Nepomniachtch – just behind. It put a target on his back. Gukesh was playing Nakamura while Caruana played Nepo. Depending on the permutations of outcomes, any of the four could come through and there was a high chance of a tiebreak.

In the last round, Gukesh cold-bloodedly drew a favourable position against

Nakamura, while Caruana-Nepo slugged it out in a 109-move epic draw. Had that game been decisive, Gukesh would have to play a tiebreak versus the winner.

Taking the draw was a pragmatic decision. Gukesh couldn't see a risk-free path to a win, and he decided to save his energy instead of doing something “crazy” as Carlsen put it. Caruana was winning against Nepo but couldn't take it away, and that made Gukesh the youngest ever challenger without the added tension of a tiebreak.

Apart from his talent and composure, Gukesh has several things going for him as he prepares for the match against Ding Liren. WACA gives him a stable base for preparation, and the invaluable guidance of a multiple world champion. He also has significant financial resources now, thanks to WACA and All India Chess Federation (AICF). So he can work on specifics with high-quality Grandmaster coaches and access high-end silicon resources too.

This is a much more comfortable situation than his parents could have envisaged. Seven years ago, his parents Rajinikanth and Padmakumari had to make some hard decisions. The doctor-couple had stable careers and their 10-year-old son was obviously bright enough to pursue a normal middle-class path to success.

Pursuing success at chess instead would entail pulling back from a conventional educational career. It would also require a big war chest to support his travel, coaching and other expenses – more than the couple could afford, even if they scrimped and saved. Their friends and medical colleagues put together a WhatsApp group, and committed to crowd-funding part of Gukesh's expenses.

A couple of days after he became a Grandmaster at the Delhi Open, the 12-year-old Gukesh told me he knew the sacrifices his parents were making. He said he would ensure those sacrifices would not go in vain. He has kept that commitment.

The writer is a chess columnist and internationally rated chess player



Male Gets Aggro

Muizzu's majority may be a challenge for New Delhi. But selling out to China won't help Maldives

Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu's People's National Congress securing a two-thirds majority in the archipelago nation's parliament may further complicate New Delhi-Male ties. Muizzu has made no secret about his anti-India and pro-China stance since he assumed office last year. With the legislature solidly in his pocket, there's little to stop him from tilting fully towards Beijing. However, this won't be the first time Maldives has tried to play off India and China.

Chequered past | India has been first-responder for Maldives by dint of geography. From Operation Cactus in 1988 to the 2014 Maldives water crisis, New Delhi has promptly aided Male when requested. However, former Maldivian president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom started the game of leveraging China over India in the 1990s in response to Maldives' growing democratic movement. This provided an entry-point for Beijing.

Growing Chinese presence | Having gained access to infra projects in Maldives, in subsequent years China would slowly expand its footprint. Even during perceived pro-India president Mohamed Nasheed's tenure, a Sino-Maldivian agreement on Chinese supply of military hardware and training had surfaced. The pro-China momentum was further consolidated under the presidencies of Mohammed Waheed and Abdullah Yameen.

Divided polity | Maldivian politics today is split down the middle between those who favour better ties with India and those who seek greater Chinese assistance. True, much of this may be political posturing as Muizzu's 'India Out' campaign suggests. But Male is walking a dangerous line.

Strategic landmines | It's one thing for Muizzu to order Indian troops engaged in rescue and rehabilitation missions out, quite another to allow a Chinese spy ship to dock in Maldives as happened in Feb. China wants to strategically encircle India. Male shouldn't play along. Becoming a Chinese vassal will eventually undermine Maldivian sovereignty. Or ensnare it in debt trap. Look at Cambodia and Sri Lanka for examples. Is Muizzu selling out to Beijing?

Moustachioed doodles

A woman goes snooping into bro code

Shinie Antony



What do men talk about when no woman is around, I will never know. While Jane Austen rarely wrote dialogues between men, Dorothy L Sayers said she simply assumed that men, when alone with each other, would talk like *people*. Still, one wonders, only when idle and the phone is charging, over what hot topics do boys bond behind our back? Cricket, war, home renovations, what's for tea?

After some shallow and spurious research owing to a lack of spies, women concluded that men talk to other men...about facial hair. The fact that women can grow moustaches too has somehow never been an icebreaker between members of the opposite sex, but between men growing one is part of the bro code. It is the first battle a man ever fights, right there on his own face, in that narrow strip of land between nose and upper lip.

If a moustache seems important to a man, like it has been sitting there on his face for years, a woman will preliminarily exhibit a carefully controlled interest in it. This is what she is thinking: Once I have a ring on my finger it goes the fuzzi. For a man whose entire macho confidence lies in his tache, to suddenly shave it off and expose the pale, weak skin underneath is a day of defeat; for the woman it is a proclamation of love. Many women with clean-shaven partners confess to wondering how it would be to kiss someone moustachioed – and vice versa. This has caused at least 22% of all infidelities, according to unreliable data.

From wispy pencil-thin to bushy takeovers, moustaches are handlebar, soup strainer, horseshoe, chevron, and also foreign-sounding like Dallas, Fu Manchu and Kuchi-Hige. Moustache month renames November as Movember; there's an annual moustache competition in Rajasthan. Salvador Dali, Charlie Chaplin, Hitler, Freddie Mercury – can you imagine them without their trademark moustache?

What looks like a rash on someone's face can be the start of a full harvest of hair or remain just that forever – a rash. Some rock it, some don't. Indian men are caught between the global chikna movement and their 'mooch nahi toh kuch nahi' heritage. A receding hairline can pretend to be a really broad forehead only so long, and one day must give up combers and confess to the onset of balding. Which is when moustaches and beards manfully step in.

No, Cloud Seeding Didn't Drown Dubai

A warming Arabian Sea means cities around it, Dubai to Mumbai, are vulnerable to extreme weather. But what's more extreme is that govts and companies are trying to fix the weather using tech

Chandra Bhushan



The unprecedented flood in Dubai on April 19 has ignited much-needed discussion on weather modification and geo-engineering. Theories on what caused the extreme rainfall include cloud seeding, global warming and poor drainage systems. So, what did cause the rain?

It wasn't cloud seeding | Cloud seeding's an old weather-modification tech that induces rainfall by spraying chemicals such as silver iodide and common salt into clouds to make nuclei, around which the cloud's moisture can condense, and form droplets. When sufficient droplets coalesce, they become heavy and fall as rain. It's crucial to understand that cloud seeding cannot create rain from a clear sky – it needs clouds with sufficient moisture. Therefore, cloud seeding is generally used where clouds form, but it doesn't rain. Similarly, cloud seeding cannot create more rain than what is already in the cloud.

The storm system that caused flooding in Dubai was too big to be influenced by six or seven cloud-seeding aeroplanes that UAE's weather body NCM flew, days prior. This weather system had massive amounts of moisture and affected thousands of square kilometres, causing heavy rainfall over UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Oman's Mahda got more rain than Dubai, and suffered maximum loss of life as well.

It wasn't unexpected either. NCM had warned about “unsettled weather conditions” and advised people to work from home. In a nutshell, such an intense downpour over such a vast area cannot happen through cloud seeding. Even if there had been cloud seeding, it would have only marginally affected the intensity of rainfall.

But a warming planet | Weather reports clearly show the downpour was caused by a combination of a low-pressure weather system over the region, and an anticyclone over Arabian Sea. The anticyclone pushed a massive amount of moisture into the area, which

caused heavy rain. But tell-tale signs of global warming are replete in this episode.

Arabian Sea is warming at one of the fastest rates. Its surface temperature has increased by 1.2°C to 1.4°C in the last four decades. Surface warming has increased the evaporation rate, increasing water vapour in the atmosphere. Simultaneously, a warmer atmosphere, again due to global warming, can hold more moisture, and dump it as extreme rainfall. This is the precise mechanism through which extreme rainfall and cyclones have increased over Arabian Peninsula and western India.

Dubai was hit by extreme rainfall in Feb too. In fact, an equally ferocious storm lashed Dubai on March 8, 2016. The trend is evident – cities around Arabian Sea, including Mumbai, will increasingly be hit by extreme rainfall and cyclones, as global warming intensifies. A warming planet will spare none, not even the wealthiest sheikhdom.

'Flixing' weather is a tricky slope | The chatter on cloud seeding, thought misinformed, shows the public's apprehension about such tech. Now is when to discuss them more vigorously, because such tech are becoming real and big, and can potentially harm the planet and cause conflict between countries.

Weather modification is being carried out worldwide without any international oversight.

Take cloud seeding, used in over 50 countries, including large-scale application in US, China and UAE. China plans to bring 5.5m sq km, an area equivalent to 1.5 Indias, under a weather modification programme by 2025. What will be its impact on neighbouring countries, and global climate?

Geo-engineering tech is developing rapidly. Solar radiation modification – a group of technologies to deliberately reflect sunlight into space to cool the planet – is being seriously explored as a solution to climate crisis. It includes injecting sulphur droplets into stratosphere, spraying salty water into clouds over oceans, and scattering glass over polar ice to reflect sunlight into space. Some scientists are adding nutrients to the ocean to stimulate phytoplankton growth, to suck atmospheric CO₂. Private companies, too, have entered this business. A Silicon Valley-backed start-up launched nearly

50 sulphur-filled balloons from Mexico into stratosphere to reflect sunlight. This company now plans to sell “cooling credits” for such launches.

Plus, there's no oversight | All these tech advances are being developed and tested without domestic or international regulations. International conventions (London Convention on Prevention of Marine Pollution, Convention on Biological Diversity and Vienna Convention on Protection of Ozone Layer) prohibit geo-engineering. But these have been ignored. A few nations' attempts at UN's Environment Assembly to regulate or ban geo-engineering also failed.

But this ostrich-like attitude won't solve the problem. At least 20 countries and many more corporations have the financial muscle to send planes into stratosphere and spray sulphur particles. Who will stop them? A multilateral framework to govern geo-engineering and large-scale weather modifications is the need of the hour; something that merits open and transparent discussion with the public.

The writer is an environmentalist



Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



If anyone or anything, a person or a book, can contribute to free us from the resentments towards others or the bitterness towards life which poison feelings, thoughts, and health, the person has rendered us a great service...the book has proved its worth.

Paul Brunton

Only Self-Transformation Can Lead To Ram Rajya

Brahma Kumari Shivani

Is Ram Rajya merely an aspiration? Can we create a nation reflective of these ideals? We alone can manifest the world we envision. Sanskar parivartan se sansar parivartan – only self-transformation leads to world transformation.

The world once witnessed the period of Ram Rajya, Swarnim Bharat, Golden Age. It was said to be an era where every soul was an embodiment of divinity, purity, perfection, prosperity, and righteousness. This is in stark contrast to today's pain, vices, illnesses and sorrow. The present era can be termed as 'Ravan Rajya', Iron Age where ten heads of Ravan characterise our ten vices: lust, anger, greed, attachment, ego, jealousy, hatred, deceit, stubbornness and laziness.

The fact that time is cyclic gives us hope and an assurance that Ram Rajya

will be a reality one day. Every night is followed by morning, every winter is followed by spring, likewise, every Kaliyug is followed by Satyug.

In Satyug, our soul power remains at its highest. So, we naturally identify ourselves as souls who use the body to come into action. In this era our innate purity radiates as peace, love and happiness. Since contentment is the crowning quality and personality of every soul, there are no desires in golden age Bharat.

In Kaliyug, our soul power diminishes, as a result we forget our true identity and believe the self to be the body, role and relationship. We, therefore, look for love, peace and happiness outside, and this causes stress, fear, anger and worry. Our never-ending desires do not let the soul experience contentment or bliss.

How can we make this paradigm shift from Kaliyug to Satyug? It's basically by shifting from ego consciousness to soul consciousness. Ego means 'attachment to a wrong image of myself'. In ego consciousness, we identify ourselves to be a body. So, we prioritise perfection of the body and try to give it happiness through what we touch, watch, listen, speak or eat.

Truth is that we are souls. We take care of the body as its trustees and lead a lifestyle that keeps it healthy.

In ego consciousness we consider ourselves as roles and see others also as roles. Hence, we constantly feel either inferior or superior to someone, resulting in intolerance or aggression. In soul consciousness we perceive everyone as equals. We remain aware that 'I am a pure soul interacting with another pure soul. We are just playing different roles.'



THE SPEAKING TREE