



OUR VIEW



RBI surplus: Largesse in need of an explanation

A brief statement on the main sources of the ₹2.1-trillion-plus surplus that the central bank will transfer to the government's coffers would have gone a long way to quell speculation

There's a bonanza awaiting the next government even before it is sworn in: A record surplus transferred by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to the Union government from its operations in 2023-24. At just above ₹2.1 trillion, the surplus (note, not dividend, since RBI is not a commercial entity) is the highest-ever payout by the central bank, and more than double the previous year's ₹86,416 crore. This is good news. Especially since the transfer has been done after beefing up RBI's contingency risk buffer (CRB) to the upper end of the band (5.5-6.5% of its balance sheet) suggested by the 2019 Bimal Jalan committee. This panel, tasked with setting out an 'economic capital framework' for the central bank, had laid down clear guidelines on how RBI's surplus should be apportioned between transfers to its reserves and to its owner, the government.

To the extent that the latest transfer is in line with the Jalan panel's recommendations, this should ordinarily be reason to cheer. Except that there is a fine line between a central bank's surplus and that of a corporate entity. It is important to keep this in mind for any analysis of RBI's numbers. The very use of terms such as 'surplus' rather than 'profit' and 'income and expenditure' instead of 'profit and loss' (for a statement) in the context of the central bank, in contrast with commercial banks, reflects this difference. It is precisely for this reason that we must not rest content with only the headline number, but look for factors that contributed to the sharp rise in RBI's surplus. Unfortunately, we are up against a blank wall on this. RBI's Wednesday press release on the 608th meeting of its central board that

approved the ₹2.1 trillion plus transfer to the Centre's coffers has no details beyond this terse statement: "As the economy remains robust and resilient, the Board has decided to increase the CRB to 6.50 per cent for FY 2023-24. The Board thereafter approved the transfer of ₹2,10,874 crore as surplus to the Central Government for the accounting year 2023-24." Presumably, the rest is for us to guess. At least until the central bank's annual report and financial statements with detailed 'notes to the accounts' are published. In the interim, we have a host of reasons being advanced to explain the dramatic leap. But nothing concrete to go by.

The best we can do is assume the bulk of RBI's surplus came from where it did the previous year: Income from foreign sources as well as domestic sources, mainly on account of a drop in net outgo of interest under its Liquidity Adjustment Facility—which includes its marginal standing and standing deposit windows—due to lower surplus liquidity, and interest income on loans to Central and state governments. But this is not enough. What RBI earns and spends has macro-economic ramifications, as its operations are—or should be—carried out entirely in pursuit of monetary stability and economic growth, as per its mandate, and not profits. If its 'super-normal' surplus is mainly from large foreign currency holdings or transactions driven by a profit motive, as some have hinted, it would need to disclose the nature of these dealings. Were they speculative? Clearly, a big no-no for any central bank. A brief statement explaining its largesse, a windfall for the Centre, would have gone a long way to quell speculation over it. Hopefully, RBI will act on our suggestion next year.

MY VIEW | TECH WHISPERS

A week is all it took for us to see leaps in AI technology evolution

This field saw a flurry of action at OpenAI and Google as their models race to become more like us



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Vladimir Lenin is cited as having said, "There are decades where nothing happens. And then there are weeks, where decades happen." The previous week was one such in the world of AI, even by the standards set by OpenAI's 2022 launch of ChatGPT. It started with a bang on Monday, 13 May, when OpenAI unveiled its new flagship product GPT-4o. Tuesday was Google's turn, with 121 mentions of AI over 110 minutes at its I/O conference. The same day, Ilya Sutskever, OpenAI's co-founder and chief scientist who had raised safety warning flags, left the company. The ripples created by each can have a profound impact on AI's future.

Let's start with the GPT-4o announcement, for which OpenAI built effortless multimodality into its existing flagship product. The model has its expected share of gee-whizz features: fluid simultaneous translation, an ability to detect human emotion beyond just voice and an enhanced ability to write code, among others. Quickly, people started discovering even more impressive use cases, like two GPT-4o AI's talking to each other, personalized step-by-step trigonometry tutoring, and helping a sightless man hail a cab in London.

Many people had expected a new GPT-5 or GPT 4.5 model, but to me, this is bigger. The reason is simple. Gartner made an insightful statement on GenAI, saying that "It is not a technology or a

trend. It is a profound shift in the way humans and machines interact." Bill Gates followed it up with, "AI is the new UI." User interface, that is.

With GPT-4o and others, with its text interface and lagged voice interface, you could sense you are talking to a machine. With GPT-4o, if you didn't know it is an AI bot, you would believe it's a human you are conversing with, seeing the same things you see, feeling the same emotions you feel and also cracking the same jokes your friends do. With GPT-4o, the Sound Turing Test has been passed. The model has moved beyond voice to sound.

The next day, Google picked up the gauntlet OpenAI had thrown. It made a plethora of impressive announcements, though a lot were prototypes. Ask Photos allows intuitive search through Google Photos. It announced a more powerful and advanced version of its LLM Gemini, an intriguing AI agent that can return products you have shopped, and another that alerts you right away to scam phone calls. Project Astra impressed onlookers with its ability to recognize code and cities, and even say where you have forgotten your glasses. It displayed better text-to-image, text-to-music and text-to-video conversions done by its AI tools.

The subtlety: Basically, there is no

QUICK READ

OpenAI's GPT-4o kicked off a wonder week with a demo of how human-like it is, while Google took up the gauntlet with Gemini and Project Astra. The future of AI now looks different.

The departure from OpenAI of Ilya Sutskever and other safety-focused researchers, however, signals its open pursuit of capitalist goals after it moved away from its original orientation.

Google product which is not going to be baptized with AI. Google Search, with 2 billion plus users and 6 million searches a minute, gets a GenAI makeover. Gmail with 1.8 billion users gets a strong dose of Vitamin AI. YouTube's 1.8 billion users can have AI-generated text summaries of the nearly 4 billion videos that the site hosts. Another 4 billion Android users get AI on tap. The list goes on.

Ironically, however, it seems that Google is following the Microsoft playbook here. Microsoft famously had an EEE strategy of 'Embrace, Extend and Extinguish': First it created a product using open standards, then created a proprietary extension which quickly gained dominance through its brute distribution and ownership of the PC market, and it finally used this extension to swamp the market and extinguish its competitor. Latest example: MS 365 has 345 million users, 320 million of them get Teams free; rival Slack languishes at 39 million.

So, OpenAI the plucky innovator can launch eye-popping products galore like ChatGPT, Sora and GPT-4o, but what it lacks is distribution reach. The ChatGPT needle is stuck at 100 million plus. Impressive, but small potatoes compared to Google's sway over the internet with billions of users everywhere. Thus, Google does not need to out-innovate OpenAI. It just needs to out-distribute it, and that is precisely what its I/O huddle demonstrated.

While all this was exciting, the canary in the coal-mine could be Ilya's exit from OpenAI. With him went other prominent researchers, and the super-alignment team that was responsible for building safe artificial general intelligence (AGI) has been disbanded. This signals OpenAI's transition from an idealistic research lab to a capitalist entity driven by shareholder returns. This is where OpenAI and Google are similar. When it started, Google flaunted its "Don't be evil" motto. But over the years, that got a quiet burial in the graveyard of capitalism.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The idea that machines can't do things humans can is a pure myth.

MARVIN MINSKY

GUEST VIEW

Marital rape is antithetical to equality and autonomy

SHARAD SHARMA



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On 1 May 2024, the Madhya Pradesh high court in *Manish Sahu vs State of Madhya Pradesh* held that "any sexual intercourse or sexual act by the husband with his wife not below the age of 15 years is not a rape, then under these circumstances, absence of consent of wife for unnatural act loses its importance."

This ruling has reignited the debate on criminalization of marital rape in India. As per Exception 2 of Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (which defines the offence of rape), sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the latter not being under 15 years of age, is not rape. The age was raised to 18 for this exception by a decision of the Supreme Court in *Independent Thought vs Union of India* (2017). In other words, the law gives immunity to husbands from the offence of rape in non-consensual sexual acts with their wives. Countries like the UK, US, Australia and South Africa have criminalized marital rape. However, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, which will

replace the Indian Penal Code (IPC) from July, hasn't addressed the issue of marital rape, thereby allowing it to remain legal.

In 2021, the Chhattisgarh high court in *Dilip Pandey & others vs State of Chhattisgarh* observed that "sexual intercourse or any sexual act with wife by the husband would not constitute an offence of rape, even if it was by force or against her wish."

On the contrary, the Gujarat high court in *Nimeshbhai Bharatbhai Desai vs State of Gujarat* (2018) observed that "a woman is no longer the chattel [that] antiquated practices labelled her to be. A husband who has sexual intercourse with his wife is not merely using a property, he is fulfilling a marital consortium with a fellow human being with dignity equal to that he accords himself. He cannot be permitted to violate this dignity by coercing her to engage in a sexual act without her full and free consent."

Exception 2 of the IPC's Section 375, based on the archaic notion that men have control over women's bodies, presupposes that a woman has provided irrevocable consent to her husband for sexual activity. In doing so, it disregards the individual agency of women, which is inconsistent with the constitutional guarantee of right to life and non-discrimination based on gender. A mar-

ital union does not take away a woman's right over her body.

In 2022, a two-judge bench of the Delhi high court in *RIT Foundation vs Union of India* missed an opportunity to protect the rights of married women. The court delivered a split verdict on the constitutionality of India's marital-rape exception.

While striking down the provision, Justice Rajiv Shaktiher observed that "modern-day marriage is a relationship of equals." He asserted, "The woman by entering into matrimony does not subordinate or subordinate herself to her spouse or give irrevocable consent to sexual intercourse in all circumstances. Consensual sex is at the heart of a healthy and joyful marital relationship. Non-consensual sex in marriage is an antithesis of what matrimony stands for in modern times i.e., the relationship of equals. The right to withdraw consent at any given point in time forms the core of the woman's right to life and

liberty, which encompasses her right to protect her physical and mental being."

Justice C. Hari Shankar, however, while upholding the constitutionality of the marital-rape exception, held that the court is neither empowered to prescribe punishment nor create a new offence. Essentially, Justice Shankar shifted the onus to the legislature.

The Justice Verma panel, constituted in 2012 to suggest reforms in rape and sexual assault laws, had recommended the deletion of the marital rape exception. It was of the view that the relationship between the victim and the accused is irrelevant and consent in sexual acts should not be presumed in a marriage. The recommendations were not accepted by Parliament.

In 2018, Member of Parliament Shashi Tharoor introduced a private bill, 'The Women's Sexual, Reproductive and Menstrual Rights Bill,' which aimed to criminalize marital rape. However, the bill lapsed. The Union govern-

ment has shown reluctance in criminalizing marital rape, saying that it would destabilize the institution of marriage. The idea of marriage in today's world is changing, with the focus now on equality and individual rights. The gendered lens through which it was seen is fast being abandoned. Clearly, the institution can be protected while also upholding the bodily autonomy of married women.

The Supreme Court's observations in *X vs The Principal Secretary, Health and Family Welfare Department, Government of NCT of Delhi* (2022) have helped highlight the flaw in the IPC's marital-rape exception. The court disregarded the view that "only strangers are guilty of gender-based violence" and acknowledged that "intimate partner violence is a reality and can take the form of rape." Importantly, it held that rape includes marital rape for the purpose of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971.

A constitutional challenge to the marital-rape exception is pending before the Supreme Court. We await the day when women do not suffer discrimination because of their marital status. We must ask ourselves whether we want a rights-based society whose laws apply equally to all, or a country that upholds outmoded patriarchal norms.



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

India insured by 2047: Insurers need profitability to achieve this

The insurance regulator must help the industry craft a business model that offers enough returns to meet lofty growth goals



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In synchrony with the broader national intent of India becoming a developed nation, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDA) has embraced the laudable goal of "India Insured by 2047." The objective is to ensure that "every citizen has appropriate life, health and property cover and every enterprise is supported by an appropriate solution" and to make India's insurance sector "globally competitive," as elaborated in a press release. Enthusiasm within the IRDA is palpable. Coordinated attempts are afoot to usher in regulatory changes and push insurance companies to reach out wider, especially to the rural uninsured, and diversify their product baskets to make insurance more accessible, affordable and relatable.

Meeting such ambitious aspirations would warrant building capacity, elevating competencies and ushering in creativity.

The government think-tank Niti Aayog projects India's GDP at about \$30 trillion in 2047. The global average premium (on both life and non-life policies) as a proportion of GDP, a measure of the concept's penetration, is 6.8%. This would translate into an Indian insurance industry worth \$2.04 trillion in annual premium payments in 2047. If we attain the penetration level of South Korea (11.1%) or Taiwan (11.4%), the market's size would be larger. India's insurance penetration was at 4.1% in 2023 and the industry was placed at \$92 billion. To reach \$2.04 trillion in 23 years would require a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 14.2%.

Can it be achieved? Near stagnant penetration even after this sector's liberalization more than two decades ago does not inspire confidence.

The edifice of the insurance industry stands on three pillars: Insurance companies, distribution networks and the regulatory framework. For premium income to multiply, all three must perform well. Insurers are the prime movers. Currently, India has 67 insurance companies, 24 offering life covers, 26 providing non-life coverage, five specialized in health insurance and 12 offering services of reinsurance (including branches of foreign companies). In the US, in contrast, there were 2,456 insurers in 2022, while China (with 3.9% penetration) had 237 and the UK, 402.

If the size of India's industry is to grow 22 times in the next 23 years, the current capacity would be wholly inadequate. Given advances in technology, productivity enhancement tools and growth in our GDP per capita, our capacity would need a 10-fold increase. There are few applications for insurance licences that await IRDA approval and foreign players like New York Life, Aegon, etc., have either exited the market or are trying to exit. Indian promoters are not very enthusiastic either.

It is essential to understand and assess the causes for low enthusiasm among both Indian and foreign



aspirants; as our insurance industry holds immense potential, this should not be the case.

A broad analysis of the balance sheets of insurance companies shows that it usually takes more than a decade for a life-insurance company to be profitable; non-life and health insurers face more uncertain profitability. The 'combined cost ratio' of insurance companies, except a few honourable exceptions, is more than 100%.

The Nifty, a barometer of India's equity market, has delivered an annual return (the index's CAGR, i.e.) of 17.6% in the last five years, 11.8% in 15 years and 28.4% in one year. Returns-on-equity north of 15% are being notched up by well-managed companies in other sectors. Relative to the Nifty and Bank Nifty, star private insurers HDFC Life, ICICI Pru Life and SBI Life have delivered significantly negative returns in the last 18 months.

Indian or foreign, any entrepreneur, company or individual is prompted to invest by the expected rate of return. If higher returns can be garnered by directly investing in the Indian equity market or another line of business, the narrative that draws investors to invest in the country's insurance industry needs to be more compelling.

The causes of the insurance industry's low profitability, *inter alia*, seem to be: One, a race to the

bottom in pricing, particularly in the case of non-life coverage, including health and pure life term policies; and two, high customer acquisition costs. Large policy distributors like banks and non-bank financial companies have gained in profitability while inflicting long-lasting pain on the balance sheets of insurers. The regulator has been liberal and amended regulations to prevent sideways compensation payments to distributors. An

acceptable level of total management expenses, inclusive of acquisition costs, has been specified. Unfortunately, even that is being breached often. Yet, in a liberalized market, it is neither desirable nor appropriate to control and marshal pricing. The tariff-heavy environment was dismantled for that very reason.

Insurers have a hierarchical organization design with three-four layers, must bear inelastic fixed costs and have a muddled revenue model that seems to have outlived its utility in the contemporary setting. For this industry to improve profitability,

Re-engineering the insurance model is a matter of urgency and a delay would make it harder to enhance the industry's capacity and achieve IRDA's stated dream of universal coverage by 2047.

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For the insurance sector to attract more investor interest and expand coverage, its returns need to be impressive, but insurers need to fix what looks like a muddled business model.

Re-engineering the insurance model is a matter of urgency and a delay would make it harder to enhance the industry's capacity and achieve IRDA's stated dream of universal coverage by 2047.

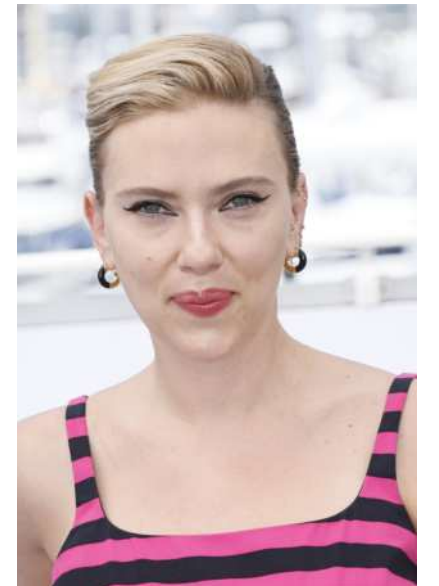
attract investors and fulfil the IRDA's ambitions, this model needs to be re-engineered. Ignoring or delaying this will make capacity enhancement elusive and the distant dream of 2047 harder to realize. The sector needs urgent attention. The regulator must seize the moment and propose alternatives in consultation with industry leaders.

Scarlett Johansson vs OpenAI comes down to human rights

She's reminding the firm it's dealing with a woman, not a chatbot



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OpenAI is accused of stealing the actor's voice as if her consent is irrelevant

When OpenAI demoed its new artificial intelligence assistant Sky last week, the company's engineers made sure to showcase the attributes that they thought made it seem uncannily life-like.

The female-sounding voice they conversed with was ego-stroking ("Wow, that's quite the outfit you've got on!"); accommodating and subservient ("How can I brighten your day today?"); flirty and giggly ("Oh, stop it, you're making me blush!"). The company had even added a feature that allowed users to interrupt the model ("You can just butt in whenever you want," noted one of the presenters).

If this is OpenAI's idea of how an actual human woman should behave, it's no wonder the company thought it could get away with using a voice that sounded alarmingly close to that of actress Scarlett Johansson—without her permission.

In a statement released Monday, Johansson said that OpenAI CEO Sam Altman had twice tried to hire her to voice this latest version of ChatGPT. The first time she said 'no'; the second time, she didn't even have time to respond before the company released the demo.

"I was shocked, angered and in disbelief that Mr. Altman would pursue a voice that sounded so eerily similar to mine," Johansson wrote.

Johansson got herself a lawyer, and OpenAI has since taken down the Sky voice. The company said it "was never intended to resemble" Johansson's, but Altman had already shown his hand. On the day the demo was released, he tweeted "her," the title of a movie in which Johansson voices an intelligent chatbot. And during the event, one of the engineers asked ChatGPT to tell a bedtime story about love and robots (weird, but okay), which is pretty much the plot of the film.

It seems that even chatbots can't escape gender bias. OpenAI's Sky is just the latest example in a long history of female-voiced assistants—including Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri and Microsoft's Cortana. They reliably and politely put together shopping lists, set alarms to make sure you get where you need to be on time, make your phone calls, and even entertain your children. They're doing the kind of labour we expect women to take on both at work and at home, all while teaching the next generation that this is what women do.

Altman treated Johansson as he would his AI assistant, assuming she would happily do his bidding without pushback. He sorely miscalculated; Johansson, one of

the world's highest paid actresses, is not going to put together anyone's shopping list. Her anger and willingness to fight for what she's owed is refreshingly at odds with the kind of stereotypes that OpenAI and its brethren perpetuate.

It's not the first time Johansson has taken on a company that has defied her. In 2021, she sued Walt Disney Company, alleging that the company had breached her *Black Widow* contract by releasing the action movie on its streaming platform while it still played in theatres. Johansson, who was supposed to get a cut of box office ticket sales, argued that the move deprived her of potential earnings. She took legal action after the company basically ignored her, reportedly failing to respond to her initial offer or return calls and emails from her team.

Disney and Johansson settled, but not before the entertainment giant put out a statement saying that the suit was "especially sad and distressing in its callous disregard for the horrific and prolonged global effects" of the pandemic.

Altman too tried to shame Johansson, telling her that hearing her voice would "help consumers feel comfortable" with AI. Both Disney and OpenAI ignored her and made the case that she should buck up and be a team player—it's hard to imagine them giving the same treatment to one of Hollywood's leading men (to say nothing of the companies' own "for the greater good" bona fides).

Johansson now has a track record of fighting for what's rightfully hers, and her willingness to do it so publicly and unapologetically is helping check a powerful tech company in a way those with less money and agency cannot. It's a move that puts Johansson in the same camp as Taylor Swift, who withheld her music from Apple and Spotify when she felt that their terms hurt artists, especially those who had not reached her level of stardom.

In trying to humanize its artificial intelligence chatbots, OpenAI [may have] made the mistake of dehumanizing a woman by stealing her voice—and an even bigger error in crossing one who could actually do something about it. Johansson is reminding this tech company of what it looks like to deal with a powerful woman, not a deferential chatbot. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Get real on promoter power in controlled companies

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Often, I am asked by promoters why they are being asked to explain everything to shareholders, despite owning a majority of the company's equity and having built it from scratch to scale. I have worked most of my professional life with Indian promoters, and I find that their ability to take investment decisions on a long-term view of a business or industry cycle is unparalleled. But then, does that give them a licence to run their entities, even after listing, like personal fiefdoms? Isn't it time for the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) to regulate firms with high promoter stakes a little differently?

What's the role of a company's promoter? Is this person expected to work primarily for the benefit of other shareholders? Just as I am often posed this question, I am sure other advisors are also asked: How do promoters protect their own interests too?

In India, promoters retaining large stakes go back to historical trust deficits between

them and governmental authorities. As businesses were often portrayed in negative terms in socialist times, capitalists sought to protect their interests by maintaining substantial ownership, often obscured through friends and trusts holding larger stakes than reflected in official records. This helped secure companies from takeover attempts and keep disruptive dissent at bay.

Compounding this scenario is the evolution of corporate governance rules in India, at least in the decades since economic liberalization, largely influenced by industrialists who chaired regulatory advice panels set up by regulators. Consequently, there exists palpable reluctance within industry to subject itself to more scrutiny. This resistance is evident in the reluctance to separate the roles of chairperson and CEO, a move viewed as diluting the authority and influence traditionally wielded by promoters.

While promoters will want to safeguard their autonomy and control, regulators must balance it with minority-shareholder rights. Sebi could contemplate a regulatory threshold similar to that of the US. A company whose promoter has more than half its voting power and is listed on the NYSE or Nasdaq may invoke a 'controlled company'

exemption to avoid meeting some standards, including the need for its board to have a majority of independent directors. Now, 'independent director' appointments in India rarely happen without the approval of promoters; in fact, they are often hand-picked. Rather than maintaining a pretence on this norm, why not have a realistic carve-out for firms with large promoter stakes?

The audit committee reports its findings to the board, which may have a view of its own; it can even overrule the audit panel in proportion to ownership stakes. This is why some of the ideas that are floating around, such as endowing independent directors with controlling powers even when external investors hold less than 20%, need to be rejected. We must not weaken the foundational principles of corporate ownership or disrupt the basic governance structure. By granting disproportionate control to independent directors,

aimed at enhancing shareholder democracy and participation. We could mandate minimum thresholds for minority representation on boards to grant minority owners a voice in key decisions. Moreover, implementing proxy-access provisions would enable minority shareholders to nominate candidates for board positions directly, providing them with a more active role in shaping corporate governance practices.

We must not, however, deviate from the fundamental tenet of voting rights accorded

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Promoters often ask why they are being asked to explain everything to shareholders despite owning a majority of the company's equity and having built it from scratch to scale.

While minority shareholder rights must be protected, US-like regulatory carve-outs for promoter controlled firms could minimize false compliance and enhance financial scrutiny.

the governance framework would risk marginalizing the interests of external investors who may hold significant equity but lack the weight to influence corporate decisions. Such an imbalance would undermine the democratic principles of corporate governance, where shareholder rights should be aligned with their ownership stakes to ensure that decision-making processes are fair and transparent.

To address this challenge, regulators should revisit the criteria for appointing independent directors and ensure that their roles are clearly defined and aligned with the principles of shareholder democracy. For equitable governance, we need safeguards to prevent concentration of power among independent directors and also need to promote greater shareholder participation in the selection process.

It wouldn't surprise me if regulators and executive search firms still have a list of 250 independent director candidates who are already on multiple boards and in demand for their ability to 'balance' the interests of promoters and other shareholders. Sebi too should aim for a value-enhancing balance between investor protection and the autonomy of promoters with large stakes.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

EC stirs a bit

The poll panel's latest directive to parties for a honest fight is a classic case of too little, too late

With the Lok Sabha elections approaching the final phases, the Election Commission (EC) has issued a stern directive to the Congress and the BJP against creating false narratives and making communal utterances. Interestingly, this directive comes after five of the seven poll phases are over. Also, the timing and impact of this intervention raise critical questions: Is the EC's directive aimed more at ensuring a free and fair election or at salvaging its image which has taken a dip? Though it is an independent, autonomous constitutional body, several events have raised doubts about its impartiality and functioning. There have been accusations of Government interference, from influencing the timing of elections to being lenient towards the BJP while being overly strict with the Opposition. Savour this: Since 2019, three Opposition parties registered 27 complaints against PM Modi but the EC took no action. A scrutiny of these complaints and the EC's response shows the poll body's 'reluctance' to act against the Prime Minister. The Congress has accused the panel of being "super, super cautious" regarding complaints against Modi, following the EC's request to the BJP to respond to the allegations of Modi's divisive speech in Rajasthan. The EC also asked the Congress to address the BJP's complaints against Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi. The EC's letters mark the first such action against a Prime Minister. But will any real action ever be taken?



According to the poll panel, approximately 425 major complaints, excluding those related to canvassing or requiring clarification, have been filed by various parties and candidates. Action has been taken or the matter resolved in 400 of these cases. Interestingly, in most cases, the punishment was so mild that it did not matter much; like abstaining from campaigning for two days, and so on. Now, with only two phases of polling left, the directive is not likely to achieve much since the electoral narrative has already been set, with party rhetoric having saturated media channels and influenced public opinion. The late issuance of this warning suggests only an attempt to curb last-minute escalations in divisive rhetoric. By waiting until the tail end of the election cycle, the EC has allowed political parties ample time to embed their narratives into the electorate's psyche, with an extra long rope for the ruling party. Besides, for such a warning to be effective, it needs to be backed by the possibility of tangible consequences. While the directive emphasises the need for a respectful and fact-based campaign, it lacks clear punitive measures for violations. Political parties might calculate that the benefits of inflammatory and polarising rhetoric outweigh the potential repercussions. To ensure future elections are fairer and more respectful of democratic principles, the EC should adopt a more proactive stance involving faster interventions and stricter penalties for violations. It can draw inspiration from its own history when TN Seshan first empowered the institution.

PICTALK



Devotees at Har Ki Pauri on the occasion of Buddha Purnima, in Haridwar

Child development as a fundamental right



APARAJITA SHARMA

In the pursuit of a more equitable society, the universalisation of early childhood development should be recognised as a fundamental right, not a gratuitous freebie

That early childhood development (ECD) should be treated as a fundamental right rather than a gratuitous freebie is paramount for fostering an equitable society. The 2024 general elections offer a significant opportunity to advocate for the universalisation of ECD from birth to 18 years. Ensuring access to quality early education and care is crucial for the holistic development of children and the broader advancement of society.

ECD as a Fundamental Right India's commitment to social welfare is enshrined in its Constitution. The Directive Principles of State Policy mandate the Government to secure adequate means of livelihood, equitable distribution of resources and special protection for children and vulnerable sections. Early childhood is a critical period for cognitive, emotional and social development. The National ECCE Policy 2013 underscores the importance of providing quality health, nutrition, early learning and protection for children under six. Recognising ECCE as a justiciable entitlement under the RTE Act would ensure that all children receive the foundational support necessary for their development.

Challenges in Providing ECD After 13 years of implementation of the RTE Act 2009, only 25.5 per cent of schools across the country are RTE compliant. 8.4 lakh teacher positions are vacant and there is a constant shift towards contractual teachers. 19 per cent of schools in India are estimated to have teacher vacancies and one school in seven is run by a single teacher. While the quality of education cannot be ensured without professionally qualified and motivated teachers, 44 per cent of all teachers across the country work without job contracts, many fail to receive social security benefits and all are pressured with non-academic work which is estimated to account for 20-25 per cent of teachers' working hours. The average expenditure is 8,997 per annum for pre-primary, 9,913 for secondary and 13,845 for higher secondary. Costs are significantly higher in



urban areas and private unaided educational institutions. Despite the recognised importance of ECD, significant challenges remain. As of recent surveys, only 38 per cent of children aged 3-6 years are enrolled in preschool education in Government Anganwadi centres. Additionally, the issues regarding 0-3-year-old children remain at the bottom of the pyramid of rights and entitlements in the country. Issues such as being underweight, stunting and anaemia among children highlight the need for comprehensive early childhood programs that address both educational and nutritional needs.

As of 2018-19, the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) had 30.1 per cent of Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) positions and 27.7 per cent of Supervisor positions vacant across the country. About 6.9 per cent of sanctioned positions for Anganwadi workers (AWWs) and 7.6 per cent of sanctioned positions for Anganwadi helpers (AWHs) were also vacant. This is a grave concern for achieving universalisation of childcare services in the country as well as improved governance at the project level. Despite the mention of establishing creches for promoting women workers and childcare services for their children vide several legislations,^[6] the

number of creches came down to a drastic 3400 creches with only 84000 beneficiaries by 2023. The promise of creche for promoting women workers is a welcome in political parties' agendas, however without universalisation and adequate public provisioning of childcare services they may again leave behind the most marginalised children and serve only a selected few.

A public manifesto collated by four national-level networks working for children's rights spotlights the need for reiterating the constitutional provision to ensure rights, entitlements and the overall well-being of children. The manifesto calls for extending the Right to Education (RTE) Act to cover children from birth to 18 years, aligning with the internationally recognised definition of childhood.

The manifesto further calls for drafting, implementing and enforcing a national regulatory framework for private schools and ECCE centres to combat the increasing commercialisation and privatisation of education. This framework should regulate fees, ensure compliance with quality norms and address social segregation. The Government must take immediate steps to ensure that all private schools adhere to the conditions under which recognition is granted and that no unrecognised schools are allowed to operate.

The State must be held accountable for its enforcement to guarantee that all children receive quality education. Strengthening School Management Committees (SMCs) and community participation in education is vital for the successful execution of educational policies. Additionally, it is critical to strengthen the Anganwadi system. Critical positions such as AWWs and AWHs must never be left vacant. The capacities of Anganwadi centres and workers should also be enhanced.

Way Ahead Investing in ECD has significant long-term benefits. Studies indicate that quality early childhood programs yield a high return on investment, contributing to better health, education and economic outcomes. Children who receive adequate early care and education are more likely to succeed in school, secure better jobs and contribute positively to society. Therefore, ECD should be recognised as a fundamental right, not a discretionary freebie. Its universalisation must be backed by adequate funding and robust policies, to ensure equitable access to marginalised children. There is a clear roadmap for achieving this goal.

(The writer is a member of Alliance for Right to ECD; views are personal)



THE DIRECTIVE PRINCIPLES OF STATE POLICY MANDATE THE GOVERNMENT TO SECURE ADEQUATE MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD, EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES AND SPECIAL PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN AND VULNERABLE SECTIONS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BUDGET CLIMBDOWN CONCERN

Madam — Apropos the news story "Do not withdraw capital support for oil PSUs," published on 23 May, this is my response. As a regular newspaper reader, the Government's recent decision to halve the equity infusion for three major public sector oil companies—Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL)—is concerning. Initially, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a substantial Rs 30,000 crore for these companies to aid their transition to green energy and achieve net-zero emissions. However, this amount was slashed to Rs 15,000 crore, with no clear explanation provided.

Despite impressive profit margins, companies in the capital-intensive energy sector require substantial investments to transition to green energy. Past Government directives led to financial losses and predictable policy support is crucial to offset these losses and ensure their contribution to India's green energy transition and economic stability.

Khirabdi Tanya | Noida

ELECTION BATTLE IN THE LAST LAP

Madam — Apropos the news story "Epic election battle enters decisive phase," published on 23 May, this is my response. With only ten days left in India's intense two-month election season, the focus sharpens on Uttar Pradesh, a critical battleground for the ruling BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath have been tirelessly campaigning, emphasising law and order and cultural nationalism. Meanwhile, opposition leaders, notably Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge, strive to break the BJP's dominance.

Despite Modi's polarising campaign, Yogi's steadfast leadership and achievements, including the Ram temple at Ayodhya, galvanise the BJP's base. The outcome in Uttar Pradesh, with its pivotal 80 seats, will significantly influence the national result. Both

Israel honours Indian caregivers



Apropos the news story "Israel honours Kerala caregivers," published on 22 May, this is my response. The celebration of Israel's National Day in India underscored the deep bonds between the two nations, especially in light of recent tragic events. Naor Gilon, Israel's Ambassador to India, expressed profound gratitude for India's unwavering support since the Hamas attacks on October 7. This solidarity reflects

the extraordinary relationship between Indians and Jews. Gilon honoured two brave Keralaites, Meera and Sabitha, who risked their lives to save an elderly couple during the attack and paid tribute to Romi, a young Israeli child of Indian descent, for her bravery amidst the tragedy.

The event, graced by Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra, highlighted the resilience and resolve of the Israeli people despite the pain inflicted by terrorism. Kwatra emphasised India's zero-tolerance stance on terrorism, aligning with Israel's fight against such threats. The national anthems of both countries played, symbolising unity, while a special message from President Isaac Herzog of Israel reinforced the call for the release of the 128 hostages. The Christian Alliance and Action for Social Action in Kerala also voiced strong support for Israel, praying for the hostages' safe return.

Jitu Majumdar | Kolkata

Modi and Yogi's efforts will be crucial in determining the BJP's success, potentially solidifying their path to victory on June 4.

Preeti Bajaj | Chandigarh

RAISI'S OPPRESSIVE REGIME

Madam — Apropos the editorial "Iran at Crossroads," published on May 22, this is my response. The late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, a hardliner, has long been regarded as a prospective successor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He frequently criticised America and Israel and was on Washington's tight blacklist for serious human rights breaches. He was very vocal about growing Iran's nuclear power, despite US sanctions. Raisi held various key posts before becoming President of Iran in 2021 and many scandals have surrounded him. Specifically, he was accused of forcefully suppressing movements and opponents. Raisi was one of the Iranian politicians at whose behest two of the harshest acts of repression took place. Iran enacted regulations regulating women's dress and behaviour after Raisi

was elected president. Iran's hijab law has tightened. In September 2022, Iran witnessed significant protests after Mahsa Amini's death in custody for violating dress laws, marking the largest unrest since the 1979 Revolution. The demonstrations resulted in numerous casualties. Ebrahim Raisi, known for his harsh stance on exiled opposition and human rights groups, was linked to the mass killings of Marxists and leftists in 1988 while serving as Tehran's Revolutionary Court deputy prosecutor. Amnesty International reported the existence of 'Death Committees' in Iran, comprising religious judges, prosecutors and intelligence officers. These committees arbitrarily sentenced thousands of inmates to death. Amnesty reports that these committees have sentenced over 5,000 people to death. It was only after the mass hanging of 1988 that Raisi was called 'The Butcher of Tehran.'

Ahijit Roy | Jamshedpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Summer can be fun and learning for students

By engaging in innovative and educational activities, children can make the most of their summer break, ensuring both physical and intellectual growth

School students look forward to the arrival of summer vacations with a great deal of excitement. That period is also one of the happiest phases of a student's life. It also becomes imperative that parents recognise the worth of their children's time at this point. They start to worry about how they will ever let their child utilise his time wisely during those days. On the contrary, children are full of energy and anticipation in those months. However, it becomes troublesome for working parents if their kids are younger and highly energetic. Their daily scheduled activities go wild, making it harder for parents to engage their children in meaningful activities.



ing activities. Summer Vacation Courses The hot Indian summer can be the toughest time to endure for some people, especially kids. They can suffer severely if they stay unprepared to beat the heat. Parents should be cautious about the meals their children eat during these hot days so that no additional stress is placed on their digestive systems. In order to avoid digestive and dehydration issues, parents can add watermelon, curd, cucumber, coconut water and seasonal vegetables to their children's meal plans. Children must begin learning about the contemporary technological environment in which they live. Therefore, parents can engage their kids with engaging and innovative learning products. Trends are as follows: AI and ML course for kids: There are various courses online to introduce children

with futuristic skillset like Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning. Any career option kids would choose, this skillset will be must. Students should opt for courses which consist of Python Coding, Generative-AI prompt writing and Industry Projects like Website & App Building. Kids and parents should not get afraid of new technologies rather take these as an opportunity to outsmart in the future job market. Learning AI tools will upgrade the performance quality of culturally active students also. Learning AI-ML will prepare the students for upcoming innovation and robotics related competitions too. The best outcome will be grabbing an online internship. It will help the kids become more confident for the future. Summer specialised Innovation Based Online Experiments: Students and Parents should look for online innovation based experiments or projects which will not only provide a project kit but also consist of live sessions to understand the science and technology of the project. Students should be able to represent the projects in

schools too. Some attractive projects could be Laser Home Security System, Rain Water Detection and automatic cloth retrieval machine, Automatic Smart Roof, Parking Occupancy Indicator, Smart Blind Stick etc. Apart from the ones mentioned above, there are many other innovative activities which can be explored by the parents to increase their children's confidence and interest during summer holidays. Moreover, learning is an endless process. School kids need to gain knowledge about new things every day that are useful for their career and educational growth. Some of the most important knowledge for kids during the vacation will be sustainability, space technology, Electric Vehicle technology, Autonomous Car technology, Flying Taxi system and drone technology etc. Thus, during the next summer vacation, students may simply PLAY. LEARN. EAT. REPEAT by contemplating these mentioned methods of utilising perfect and productive holidays.

(The writer is advisor innovatos and director at YuviPep; views are personal)



AJITH KUMAR NS

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Poll bugle

The decision by British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to call a national election for July 4 is a bold and risky manoeuvre, given the precarious position of his Conservative Party. With the Conservatives trailing significantly behind Labour in polls, Mr Sunak's move is akin to rolling the dice in a high-stakes game, hoping that a recent uptick in economic indicators will sway voters back to his side. Mr Sunak's announcement, delivered in a quintessentially British downpour, was charged with the urgency and resolve of a leader under siege. He emphasised the achievements of his government, particularly pointing to falling inflation and a surge in economic growth. These economic gains are pivotal to his argument that the Conservatives are the only party capable of steering Britain through its current challenges.

However, this narrative might not be enough to overcome the widespread disillusionment with a party that has been in power for 14 years. Labour, under the leadership of Mr Keir Starmer, has capitalised on the Conservative Party's perceived failures, promising a fresh start and a return to stability. Mr Starmer's message of "change" resonates with many voters who feel left behind by years of economic and political turbulence. His centrist approach seeks to attract a broad base of support, contrasting sharply with the more fragmented and contentious image of the Conservative Party. Mr Sunak's decision to go to the polls early can be seen as a strategic calculation that the current economic environment, while still fraught with difficulties, is as favourable as it is likely to get. By calling an election now, he may be attempting to pre-empt economic deterioration in the second half of the year – elections were due at the year-end – and capitalise on any positive momentum. However, this strategy is fraught with risks. The economic improvements touted by the Prime Minister, such as falling inflation and increased GDP growth, are modest and fragile. Moreover, the government's controversial plan to deport illegal asylum seekers to Rwanda could face legal challenges, adding another layer of uncertainty.

For Labour, the challenge is to maintain their substantial lead in the polls while addressing the undecided voters who could swing the election. Mr Starmer's focus on economic stability and political renewal is designed to reassure a public weary of instability. Yet, the scale of Labour's task should not be underestimated. The party needs a record swing to secure a parliamentary majority, a daunting prospect in the unpredictable landscape of British politics. Both parties face an electorate that has endured significant hardships over the past decade. The global financial crisis, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the recent surge in energy and food prices have taken a toll on the UK economy and the public's trust in political leaders. Middle-income Britons find themselves poorer than their counterparts in Germany and France, highlighting the stark economic challenges ahead. Mr Sunak's gamble on an early election reflects the high-stakes nature of contemporary British politics.

Haryana votes

As Haryana gears up for its turn to vote during the sixth phase of the Lok Sabha elections on May 25, the political landscape is more uncertain than ever. The state, with its 10 constituencies, is witnessing a turbulent phase marked by shifts in political alliances, caste dynamics, and socio-economic discontent. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which secured a landslide victory winning all 10 seats in 2019, faces an uphill battle to retain its dominance amid growing challenges. The BJP's success in the previous election was buoyed by a wave of nationalist fervour following the Pulwama attack and subsequent Balakot airstrikes. However, factors that once played in their favour seem less potent today. Haryana has seen significant political reshuffling, most notably the replacement of Manohar Lal Khattar with Nayab Saini as Chief Minister and the dissolution of the BJP-JJP alliance. These changes reflect deeper uncertainties within the state's political fabric. A crucial element in this election is the caste dynamics, particularly the mobilisation of the Jat community. Jats, who constitute around 24 per cent of Haryana's electorate, traditionally influence the state's political outcomes. Historically inclined towards the BJP, the community has shown signs of shifting allegiance, largely due to dissatisfaction with the farm laws and the Agniveer recruitment scheme. The discontent among Jats is further compounded by the recent protests led by farmers and women wrestlers, who have found a sympathetic ear in Congress leader Bhupender Hooda.

The BJP is now trying to consolidate support among non-Jat communities, such as Brahmins, Yadavs, Baniyas, and Punjabis. By appointing Mr Saini, an OBC leader, as Chief Minister, the BJP hopes to secure backing from other backward classes. This strategy indicates the party's recognition of the need to broaden its appeal amid waning support from Jats. Both the BJP and Congress have significantly overhauled their candidate lists, reflecting the evolving electoral calculus. The BJP has replaced six of its MPs, and Congress has introduced new faces for eight of the nine seats it is contesting. This highlights both parties' attempts to address changing voter sentiments and regional dynamics. Key contests in Rohtak, Hisar, and Sirsa will serve as bellwethers for the state's political future.

In Rohtak, the battle between Deepender Hooda of Congress and BJP's Arvind Sharma is a crucial test of the Hooda family's influence. Hisar presents a fascinating scenario with three members of the Chautala clan vying for dominance from different parties, making it a microcosm of Haryana's complex political rivalries. Sirsa, with former Congress leader Ashok Tanwar now representing the BJP against Kumari Selja of Congress, underscores the shifting allegiances and intra-party challenges within the SC community. As voters head to the polls, the interplay of caste dynamics, leadership changes, and socio-economic issues will shape the state's future. The BJP's ability to navigate these complexities and the Congress's efforts to reclaim lost ground will determine the verdict.

Nazrul at 125

Nazrul's letter makes it absolutely clear that he did not believe in the idea of Islamic literature at all. In fact, what he says about the impossibility of creating literature out of scriptures of any religion becomes immensely significant in the context of what today we call the problem of literary nomenclature. In the last thirty years, the creation of literary nomenclature has been heavily mediated by identity politics. These genres, by and large, have received huge academic and intellectual support. But the creation of these categories has been contested by some who argue that literature categorised on the basis of communitarian identity is divisive and detrimental to the health of the state and society

Kazi Nazrul Islam turns 125 today. He is not an old man though – rather pretty young, as his poems and songs even today look fresh, full of the robust radicalism and passionate love that characterise youth. In Bengal, even today his poems are read and songs are sung with great vigour and passion.

But unfortunately, unlike Tagore, he is not considered an intellectual. Masses love him and the intellectuals mourn his loss of memory at an early age and never refer to him either in writings or in addas while debating fervently on socio-political-cultural issues. If the situation is this in Bengal, one can easily imagine how Nazrul is received today outside Bengal. The tag of the 'Rebel Poet' has imprisoned him in a cocoon which he does not deserve.

How many of us really know that Nazrul has three books of short stories, three novels, thirty-six plays and four collections of essays? Like Tagore, he also wrote innumerable letters to his friends, newspapers and public forums. His essays and letters, especially, need to be read with serious contemplation to understand present-day India better. One of his letters, in this context, deserves special mention. This long letter was published in a monthly magazine *Saugat* in the Bengali year 1334 (corresponding to 1927).

The letter was written by Nazrul as a response to another letter and as a form of self-defense. The letter to which Nazrul was responding was, however, not published in *Saugat* but in another magazine called *Nauroz* in the Autumn of 1334. It was written by one Ibrahim Khan, who was then the principal of Government Saadat College, Karatia, Tangail and known for a few plays that he had written.

What was the content of that letter? Ibrahim Khan was full of praise and admiration for Nazrul but, at the same time, he expressed some of his grievances against Nazrul and also advised him about his future literary career. Why was Ibrahim Khan unhappy about Nazrul? Arunkumar Basu, in his 'Nazrul Jiboni', writes, "Though Nazrul was immensely popular amongst the Bengali readers, both among the Hindus and the Muslims, a section of Muslim population was for long demanding the complete erasure of Hindu references in his works as also his love for the Hindus. Some even wanted to see Nazrul as the harbinger of Islamic Renaissance and to make him the best propagator for that cause."

Ibrahim Khan wrote about both these issues. He wrote, "Your place should be in Islamic Literature – Bengali Muslims are looking up to you to see how you re-establish the life force of Islam through your writings..."



Islam is the most neglected, most tarnished, most criticized and most misrepresented theme in Bengali literature." He urged Nazrul to write Islamic Literature as it would boost up the spirit of the Muslims, eliminate disrespect for Islam from the hearts of the non-Muslims and contribute to strengthen Hindu-Muslim unity. He also advised Nazrul not to criticize Islam but the superstitions that are not a part of Islam but are strongly believed in by the Muslim masses. What was Nazrul's response to this plea of Ibrahim Khan? He wrote: "Many Muslim literateurs might raise questions about the meaning of our term 'Islamic Literature.'

What do you mean by this? Does it mean literature written by the Muslims or literature with an Islamic orientation? True literature must be for members of all religions. But it, of course, must have an outer form. You can write poetry about the truth of Islam but not about Islamic scriptures. Why only Islam – I do not believe that literature could be written about the scriptures of any religion."

Nazrul did not stop by saying this only. He further maintained, "Bengali Literature, if not the daughter of Sanskrit literature, is its foster child. That is why Hindu way of thinking is an integral part of it. If that is removed from Bengali literature, Bengali language will lose half of its force. Nobody can dare to think of removing Greek myths from British literature. Bengali literature is for both the Hindus and the Muslims. It is unjust for a Muslim to get annoyed if s/he

finds the names of Hindu Gods and Goddesses in Bengali Literature. It is equally wrong for the Hindus to frown at those musalmani words found in their literature which are most frequently used in the daily lives of the Muslims."

Nazrul's letter makes it absolutely clear that he did not believe in the idea of Islamic literature at all. In fact, what he says about the impossibility of creating literature out of scriptures of any religion becomes immensely significant in the context of what today we call the problem of literary nomenclature. In the last thirty years, the creation of literary nomenclature has been heavily mediated by identity politics. We have seen the birth and growth of literary genres such as Black American Literature, Dalit Literature, Transgender Literature and so on and so forth.

These genres, by and large, have received huge academic and intellectual support. But the creation of these categories has been contested by some who argue that literature categorised on the basis of communitarian identity is divisive and detrimental to the health of the state and society.

One can cite a ready example of this opposition. The establishment of Dalit Sahitya Academy in West Bengal, which is the first of its kind in the country, created much hue and cry four years back.

So many of the eminent savarna Bengali writers opposed this move of the West Bengal government arguing that Bengali literature is ultimately Ben-

gali literature and should not have a sub-category of Dalit literature within it.

Had Nazrul been alive today, what would have been his response to the foundation of the first Dalit Sahitya Academy of the country? We can presume that someone who devoted his entire life to the cause of the poor and the oppressed would have definitely given support to this move. His disapproval of Islamic literature should not be taken as suggestive of his dismissal of identity politics and resultant literature.

He dismissed Islamic literature mainly for two reasons. He believed that the responsibility of a modern literateur is not to celebrate scriptures through his/her creation which is primarily art and not devotional propaganda. In fact, Nazrul's devotional songs and poems written both for the Hindus and the Muslims do not have propagandist value – they are spiritual and not religious.

Nazrul was also fully aware that any move to put literature glorifying Islam under the rubric of Islamic literature, instead of fostering unity between the Hindus and the Muslims (as was suggested by Ibrahim Khan), might create a breach between the two communities and facilitate the British policy of divide and rule.

Interestingly, Indian universities that offer courses related to identity politics do not teach courses like Hindu literature, Christian literature or Islamic literature. In doing this, Indian academics seem to have followed the footsteps of Nazrul. They have encouraged teaching of Dalit literature or women's writings but not of literature categorised on the basis of religious identity. In fact, one of the reasons for the proliferation of literature resulting from identity politics has been the urgent need to protect the rights of the minorities and to create a world based on equity. Due to their pan-global presence, religions like Christianity or Hinduism or Islam are sometimes the religion of the minority and sometimes of the majority. Any indiscreet move to create literary genres based on religious identity, thus, could be more retrogressive than progressive and might boost up inequity instead of equity, causing serious damage to the minorities.

So, by rejecting Ibrahim Khan's proposal for producing Islamic literature, Nazrul proved that he was fully aware of the dangers of fanning religious fanaticism through literature. But, when will we understand that Nazrul was not only a poet but also a thinker, an intellectual who contributed a lot towards the development of secularism both as an attitude and an ideology in the Indian sub-continent?



ANGSHUMAN KAR
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Lord, give them good sense

SIR, This refers to the news item "Sambit Patra apologises for Jagannath comments, to fast for 3 days" (*The Statesman*, May 22). Being a devotee of Lord Jagannath, I wonder why the Election Commission has not issued a suo motu notice to Mr Patra.

Who allowed a politician to call Lord Jagannath a devotee of Prime Minister Narendra Modi? This is possible because the wave of dirty politics and the arrogant stance based on the philosophy of "Ji Huzur" has prompted Mr Patra to do so.

Mr Patra apologised for his unforgivable comments after massive backlash from every corner.

In consonance with Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik, I strongly condemn Mr Patra's statement and appeal to the BJP to keep Lord Jagannath above any political discourse.

We who are worshippers of Lord Jagannath and who believe that all religions should be sanctified, pray to Lord Jagannath, "O

Lord, give sumati to these pretentious persons."

Yours, etc., Indrani Guha, Kolkata, 22 May.

FORGOTTEN WARRIORS

SIR, I would like to thank *The Statesman* for publishing the article, "Silchar, 19 May 1961: When Indians braved bullets for 'Bangla Bhasha'" (Evolve) in today's edition. It is imperative that the present generation get to know about the sacrifice and sufferings of Bengalis of Assam in 1960-61 when they fought against BP Chalia's Congress government in the state to establish the right of Bangla as the second official language of Assam in Barak Valley.

I must compliment the writer who has presented a detailed and thorough analysis of the situation and events during that period.

I did not know that the age-old tension between Bangla-speaking and Assamese-speaking people in Assam was fuelled by an article written by Rabindra-

nath Tagore, who had mentioned that Assamese and Oriya were just different versions of Bangla and that in Orissa and Assam, the language that must be promoted is Bangla.

The ignorance to acknowledge the deaths of nine people on 19 May 1961 by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in his speech the very same day in Assam is also shocking. I must also thank you for having the names of each and every person "who fell to the bullets of the military of their own country only to protect the dignity of the Bangla language".

It is indeed a shame that the sacrifice of the Silchar language warriors is not recognised with importance in West Bengal.

Yours, etc., Anupam Neogi, Kolkata, 19 May.

BEYOND GANDHIS

SIR, As we are entering the last leg of General Election 2024, the victory of NDA and BJP in particular is looking imminent. But this portrays the deep void in the opposition space. Congress, though having a potent national foot-

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The more things change

Federalism in Nepal is alive and kicking. Eight-and-a-half years after the new constitution institutionalised a three-tier federal state, the provinces, the second tier, neither have police forces of their own nor can they employ their own civil servants. Whenever there is a change of government in Kathmandu, or even a change in coalition partners for that matter, the provincial governments too are invariably rocked. Oh, and when folks in other provinces face some problem, they have to troop all the way to Kathmandu for redress.

Sugarcane farmers have repeatedly made the long march from various districts in the Tarai-Madhesh in order to demand a decent price for their produce. The same is the case with the 22-member Chure and Forest Conservation Campaign team that is currently marching from Bhardaha of Saptari district to Kathmandu. Their goal is to garner the national government's attention on the destruction of the Chure region, a string of low hills stretching from Mechi in the east to Mahakali in the west.

Natural water sources originating at the foothills of Chure have been drying up in the past few years, and the first layer of underground water has been severely depleted in much of the Tarai. The campaigners started the long march on April 28 in to exert pressure on authorities concerned about the unchecked deforestation and hazardous extraction of sand and stones in the Chure region, resulting in an acute water crisis.

The campaigners have a 12-point charter of demands, including strong action against forest officers who work hand in glove with smugglers, control of illegal extraction of river-bed materials from the rivers and streams in the Chure region, declaration of Madhesh as a dry zone, and concrete plans to control forest fires.

Last year, the campaign had undertaken a similar march to Kathmandu demanding control of the pollution of the Sirsiya river that flows through Birgunj, a major business hub in Madhesh Province. The Sirsiya river has become highly polluted due to the toxic industrial waste generated by several factories on the Parsa-Bara industrial corridor. The campaigners had met many high-ranking government officers and ministers in Kathmandu. But nothing happened.

The country's most eco-sensitive region is being devastated by illegal deforestation and sand-mining and millions of people are having to scrounge for water. Yet the authorities, both at the federal and provincial levels, seem unbothered.

One big reason the old unitary state was replaced by a federal setup was so that the fruits of development could trickle down to the lowest rungs of the society, and the voices of people at the grassroots could be heard and addressed without delay.

Yet what we see is that the same criminal-political nexus that benefited the most from the old structure continues to dominate the federal state as well. In many cases, the illegal miners and deforesters active in the Chure region would have funded the election campaigns of (current) federal and provincial lawmakers, getting in return the licence to do pretty much as they please. People at the grassroots meanwhile have to beg with the authorities just to drink some clean water. Apparently, the more things change in Nepal, which has long been under the sway of a corrupt elite, the more they stay the same.

UNBREAKABLE BOND

SIR, Ruskin Bond celebrated his 90th birthday recently with aplomb. "Age is just a number" – this well-worn cliché may well apply to Bond who, at the age of ninety, has four books lined up for his 90th birthday week.

This Indian writer of British descent has delighted readers of all age groups with his keen observations and vivid description of nature in all its forms and manifestations. He has so many masterpieces under his belt that it is difficult, nay impossible, to pick the "best of Ruskin Bond" from his collection of novels, novellas and short stories.

Judging by his joie de vivre and never-say-die attitude towards writing, it can be safely said that words will continue to flow from his pen just like Tennyson's brook that flows on forever.

Ruskin Bond has established such a strong emotional bond with his readers that they yearn for more from his forever young mind and agile pen.

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

print, is likely to shrink further and could be relegated to a historic low (in seats). Will such an electoral outcome push Congressman to look beyond the Gandhi family?

To have a vibrant opposition is the life blood of every functional democracy. I sincerely hope the third win for BJP will force the

opposition to introspect on their strategy and look beyond one family to decide their political positioning. The Opposition must reconnect with the populace and choose their political path accordingly to stay relevant and competitive.

Yours, etc., Avijit Ghatak, Durgapur, 21 May.

Medal winners at the Louvre

BASAB DASGUPTA

With only weeks to go before the 2024 Olympics in Paris, I was reminiscing about my working days for a French company earlier in this century; I was based in the US but had to frequently go to Paris. Of course, I have seen all the usual tourist attractions there including the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe and Notre Dame, but as an artist I can say that a visit to Paris is worth it just to see the Louvre.



was considered inappropriate.

Initially, I was also sceptical about the wisdom of this decision but now love the pyramid. There was a practical consideration for erecting a separate entry structure. From the entrance, the visitors descend downwards to a platform with extensive networks of walkways to entrances of various sections of the museum; this was a much better plan to control the traffic flow from the point of view of architectural strength of the buildings. The transparent nature of the pyramid does not block anything from the overall external view of the building. The contrast in styles adds novelty.

If watching items at the Louvre Museum was an event at the Olympics ala a beauty pageant and I was the judge asked to pick three exhibits to be the medal winners, what would I do? Let me retrace the footsteps around the Louvre in my head from fond memories of the day I spent at the museum during one of my visits.

A striking aspect of the museum even before entering is the unique pyramid shaped entry structure in the front yard. It was commissioned in 1981 by then French president Francois Mitterrand and construction was completed in 1987. The architect was Chinese-American I. M. Pei, who has also designed many other famous buildings around the world.

The pyramid caused a storm of controversy at the beginning. The main objection was that the contemporary glass and steel look simply did not blend with classical Renaissance-style French architecture. Some were also unhappy that a Chinese person, who had no appreciation for French culture was awarded the job. The fact that the pyramid symbolizes death

So much so that after returning to the US, I bought a replica of the

statue and placed it at the top of my

stairway to relieve that moment every day. The sad thing about the statue is that its head as well as two arms are missing. I wondered every day about how the complete statue looked like. Finally, I decided to do a painting of the statue where I added her head and two arms and turned her into an angel. I placed the painting right behind the statue in my home.

Yes, this statue certainly deserves a medal, perhaps the bronze medal.

My next memorable stop at the museum was the site of the Venus de Milo (VDM) statue. I have been obsessed with VDM since my childhood. I had an art tutor who taught me to do pencil sketches and assigned me to sketch several Greco-Roman figures. My two favourite ones were VDM and the "Discus Thrower". My love affair with VDM continues even today. I love her curves, her pose, her clothes hanging low exposing her navel and lower abdomen but still covering her private parts; yet she looks so innocent.

The statue is displayed prominently at the Louvre. It is situated at the end of a long hallway so that one can keep looking at it while walking towards it. One can walk around the

statue and look at it from every angle.

Salvador Dali was also obsessed with the VDM statue and did a painting based on the sculpture which is on display at the Dali Museum in Saint Petersburg in Florida. The VDM statue will make it to my medal stand as the silver medal winner.

The Louvre is, of course, almost synonymous with the Mona Lisa. Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci is the most famous, most visited, most written about, most sought about and financially the most valued artwork in the world. The model is reportedly a woman named Lisa Gherardini and "Mona" is a version of "Madam". However, I must admit that the Mona Lisa exhibit was almost anticlimactic. The room is always crowded. The size of the painting was relatively small, certainly smaller than I expected, and it was displayed very blandly on a large wall.

There was a queue cordoned off with ropes. I slowly inched forward like everyone else until I arrived at the very front of the line right across from the painting. I stood there for a long time with my eyes fixated on the eyes of Mona Lisa; I was trying to gauge if there was a subtle smile on her face.

There was an American family

behind me: husband, wife and two small kids. There was enough space between me and the rope that they could have walked past me, but I suppose they were waiting to be on my spot which was the closest to the painting. After a while, they got a little impatient and the wife commented to the husband, "What is the matter with this man? Will he just stand there for the rest of the afternoon?"

They obviously thought that I did not understand English. I controlled my urge to say what I was thinking: "I will stand here as long as I please. This is not a drive-through lane in your fast-food joint". I do not remember how long I stood there and what the family behind me ended up doing. The queuing system has reportedly been changed in 2019 so that no one can stand longer than 30 seconds in front of the painting.

I stood there because I felt hypnotized by Mona Lisa. There are dozens of paintings of faces of beautiful women in museums throughout Europe; there is even "Portrait of a Woman" by Leonardo himself at the Louvre, but there is something magical about this painting. I cannot explain it.

I agree with thousands of other art critics; Mona Lisa wins the gold medal. There are hundreds of other exhibits – both paintings and sculptures. Honourable mentions go to Michelangelo's slave statues, "Psyche Revived by the Kiss of Cupid", "Mercury", "Lamassus" and the painting, "Liberty leading the people" which inspired the "Statue of Liberty". One can spend the whole day just walking around the majestic hallways.

I will not attend the Paris Olympics but would love to go back to the Louvre and continue strolling through the exhibit halls.

(The writer, a physicist who worked in industry and academia, is a Bengali settled in America.)

100 YEARS AGO OCCASIONAL NOTE

The annual reports of the Committee of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, summarizing as they do all the activities of the Chamber during the year, have a definite historical as well as commercial value. Partly because of the manner in which the various topics are handled, each successive volume can be studied with profit and pleasure, and a collection of such volumes contains within a short space more interesting and valuable matter than can be found in double the number of official administration reports. Humour, too, may be found in the publications of the Bengal Chamber. For instance, in how many successive annual reports has the following sentence occurred? "The question of the re-construction of the Howrah Bridge which was referred to in the last annual report, has occupied considerable attention during the past year!"

NEWS ITEMS LUNACY AND CRIME LORD DARLING'S NEW BILL

LORD DARLING'S bill to amend the law relating to the criminal responsibility of accused persons suffering from mental disease, the next of which has been issued, provides that-

(1) A person is not responsible to the law for an act or omission charged against him as a crime if at the time he is proved to be suffering from such a state of mental disease as deprive him (a) of capacity to know, understand and appreciate the physical nature and quality of act or omission made, or (b) of capacity to know that it was wrong, or (c) if he was suffering from such a state of mental disease as to be wholly incapable of resisting an impulse. (2) A person who is suffering from mental disease, and by reason of such is affected by delusions on some specific matter or matters but whose mental condition does not render him irresponsible to the law within the meaning of sub-section (1), is criminally responsible to the same extent as if the facts with respect to which such delusions exist were real.

BRAHMIN PRIEST'S DEATH REPORTED MURDER AT RAMGUNJ

INFORMATION is received from Sona-chaka in Ramgunj thana, of the alleged murder of a Brahmin priest by a Mohammedan. It is stated that Thakur Durga Mohon Chakravarty, of Souachaka, while going to Lamchar, a neighbouring village, on Saturday, was attacked by a Mohammedan who dealt him a fatal blow on the head killing him outright. The man was arrested immediately, and remanded to hajat pending further inquiry.

HOWRAH PILKHANA RIOT

MR. D. DUTT, Deputy Magistrate of Howrah, concluded the preliminary inquiry into the case in which Ismail Sheikh, Mohamed Ali, Ram Chandra and Ismail Khan, were prosecuted on charges of dacoity, rioting and grievous hurt in connection with the riot at Pilkhana, Howrah. It may be remembered that in consequence of the discovery of a car case of a pig in a mosque at Pilkhana there was a riot, in the course of which the shop of Tribhuban Rai was looted and six men were injured, including Ram Tapassya Misser, who died from the effects of injuries. Already fourteen accused have been committed to the Sessions on similar charges. The magistrate committed the accused to the Sessions.

OOTACAMUND REVEL BRILLIANT FANCY DRESS BALL

THE Race Fancy Dress Ball held last night at the Assembly Rooms was a splendid success. There was a large and distinguished attendance including Their Excellencies the Governor and Lady Goschen with their personal staff; the Honble. Mrs. Balfour, the Honble. Miss Goscheti, the Maharani of Cooh Behar with a party and H. H. the Yuvaraja of Mysore. Among others in attendance were a large number of owners, trainers and jockeys. The decorations included jockeys' colours which adorned the walls. The music was excellent and was provided by His Excellency's Band. The most remarkable feature was the splendid costumes of the ladies which were greatly appreciated. Two prizes were given for the best costumes. A programme of dances appropriate to the occasion was gone through without hitch, the executive deserving great credit for the brilliant success of the function.

A week when decades happened

MAHIR ALI

There appears to be no reliable source for the quote that there are decades when nothing happens and weeks when decades happen, commonly (and possibly apocryphally) attributed to Vladimir Lenin, but the beginning of this week felt a bit like that.

The likelihood that Iran's president and foreign minister had perished in a helicopter crash alongside seven others seemed obvious long before Tehran officially acknowledged the tragedy and announced five days of mourning. This was followed by reports that the International Criminal Court's (ICC's) chief prosecutor had sought warrants against leading figures in Israel and Hamas. Soon afterwards came the news that a pair of British judges had allowed Julian Assange the right to appeal against the British government's determination to extradite him to the US for a trial on patently absurd and politically motivated espionage charges.

Ebrahim Raisi, elected president in 2021 on a low turnout, and his foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, were guests in Islamabad last month after a period of tensions between the two countries and an exchange of hostilities targeting purported militants on both sides of the Balochistan border. Last Sunday, they were returning from a dam inauguration on the border with Azerbai-



jan also attended by the latter nation's president, Ilham Aliyev — the scion of Heydar Aliyev, who segued easily from a reliable Soviet apparatchik to a typical Central Asian potentate.

For the Iranians, the transport back to Tabriz relied on an old, US-designed helicopter, flying through hilly terrain in poor weather. A 'hard landing' was the initial official description in Tehran, although segments of Iranian media were talking about a crash early on, and the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, tried to reassure the nation that the consequences would not be disruptive long before official sources admitted that there were no survivors.

Raisi will be succeeded by his unelected first vice president, Mohammad Mokheer, in an interim capacity, with fresh presidential elections due

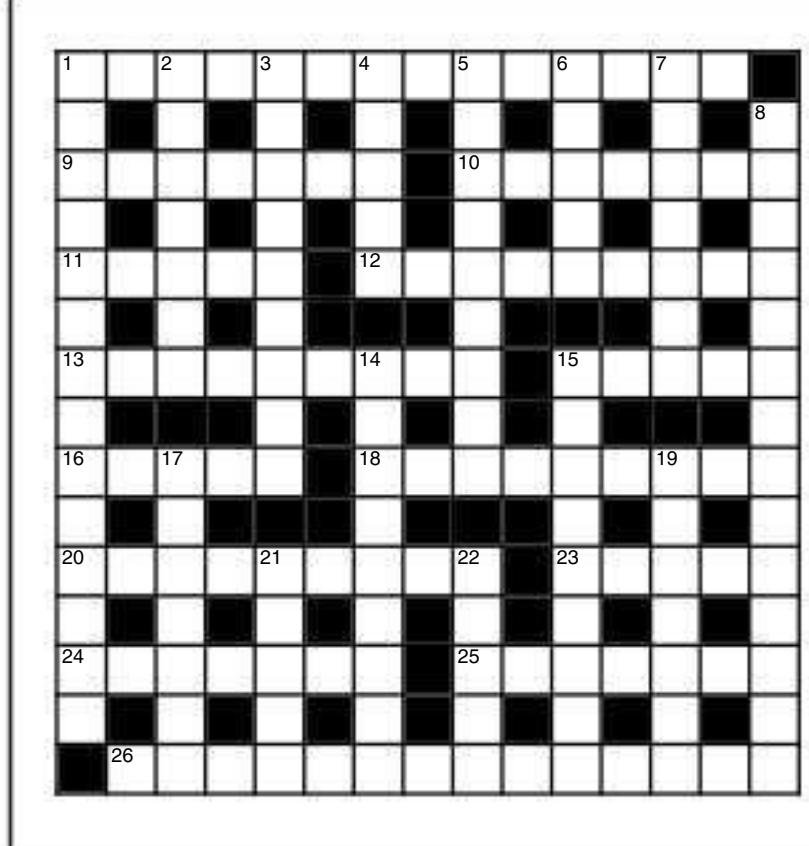
within 50 days. There is no reason to expect the pattern will be any different from the recent past, with the clerical hierarchy effectively picking the favoured candidate while offering the mirage of a democratic contest. It hasn't always been easy, though, with the clergy occasionally facing mild resistance from the likes of Rafsanjani, Khatami and Rouhani. Even the militantly conservative Ahmadinejad was too much of a loose cannon for it.

With Khamenei now 85, Raisi was considered a contender for the top job. The former is the second supreme leader since 1979. When Ruhollah Khomeini died 10 years later, the Khaleej Times put out a special edition. The only picture we could find of Khomeini with a foreign leader featured Yasser Arafat soon after the revolution. That found a prominent

place in the paper — and one of the KT's photographers came close to being roughed up by Iranian mourners at a mosque in Dubai because of that image. The Palestinian leader had apparently turned into persona non grata since the early days of the revolution, after which the regime had welcomed arms from Israel as part of the Iran-Contra deal under the Reagan set-up.

Iran has lately stood out as the only significant Middle Eastern power to meaningfully rage against the genocide in Gaza, but its motivations are suspect. Raisi had been implicated for decades in the repression that has stood out as a key characteristic of the regime that smothered the best aspects of the rebellion against the Pahlavi monarchy 45 years ago.

CROSSWORD



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

AWARDED APPRISE
RIGORMANL
TROUSSEAU RINSE
LNEWSDOAM
EYVORE HEADACHE
SVAMYEN
STILETTOES KNOT
NDTNLC
INTO DESTROYERS
NETNSRU
VIRTUOUS EDICTS
ARXABSA P
LOUISE TOOTHACHE
TPTERRIAC
DUTIEOUS EXPLOIT

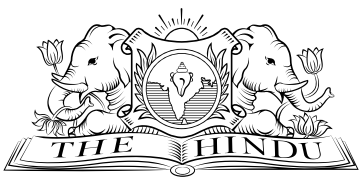
ACROSS

- 1 Fun was had in bed cavorting as newlyweds? (7,3,4)
- 9 Ignorant article in Le Monde about American conflict (7)
- 10 Complain about name-dropping in club (7)
- 11 Heather regularly spent years in Chad (5)
- 12 Lurking wild lion and tiger (9)
- 13 Eve maybe one on board (5,4)
- 15 Charlie meets unknown cleric (5)
- 16 Australian funds prestigious award (5)
- 18 Revolutionary character runs into Lot and Abraham? (9)
- 20 Statesmen arranged financial enquiry (5,4)
- 23 Group included in ban on Etonians (5)
- 24 Urine's a little vile (7)
- 25 The reverberation effect made on lutes originally? (7)
- 26 Three car makers organised test of public opinion (6,8)

DOWN

- 7 Dissension following trial (7)
- 8 Old description of Smlodon! (4,2,3,5)
- 14 Attending twice today (2,7)
- 15 Chemical engineer defends right to telephone customers (9)
- 17 Important lady found in wreckage of Nazi car (7)
- 19 Enmity encountered in Tehran courthouse (7)
- 21 Vocal supporter for one who delivers babies? (5)
- 22 People in authority briefly entertaining computing tax (5)

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



Powerful, symbolic

The recognition of Palestine by more nations is an indictment of Israel

The announcement by Ireland, Norway, and Spain, of their intent to formally recognise the state of Palestine, next week, is one more important sign of the changing tide of international opinion that Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cannot afford to ignore. In just the past month, in the UN General Assembly, 143 countries, including India, passed a resolution calling for the recognition of the Palestinian state by the UN Security Council, where the U.S. has vetoed such a move. Earlier this week, the International Criminal Court Prosecutor moved applications for arrest warrants for Mr. Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant for operations after October 7 in Gaza as well as the Hamas leadership for the terror attack that killed 1,200 in Israel, terming these as “war crimes”. On Friday, the International Court of Justice will pronounce another verdict in the petition by South Africa calling for additional measures in the prosecution of Israel for “genocide”. The latest decision by the three countries, that have been vocal in their criticism of Israel – they join eight EU members that have already recognised Palestinian statehood – may not materially change the situation on the ground. But it is meant to be what the Irish Taoiseach Simon Harris referred to as an “act of powerful political and symbolic value” to Israel, especially as it essays what could be the “final assault” on Rafah. While practically every country has condemned Hamas’s terror attacks, Mr. Harris said it would be a mistake to ignore the legitimate Palestinian government in the West Bank, saying that “Hamas is not the Palestinian people”. Norway’s Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said that the move aimed to support “moderate forces that are on a retreating front in a protracted and cruel conflict”. Spain’s action followed its denial of port facilities to a Danish-flagged ship with explosive material from India meant for Israel, which it said was a firm policy now. Israel’s response, however, has been to recall its envoys and summon the envoys of all three countries for a dressing down. In the immediate future, the multiple messages of near-global consensus are meant to push Israel’s government to rethink its plans for Rafah, to stop more civilian losses, and to allow humanitarian aid free access into Gaza. But in the longer term, they are meant to remind Mr. Netanyahu that even if he has disassociated himself from the “two-state solution”, this is something the world believes is the road map to peace. By turning deaf to these messages, Mr. Netanyahu is only furthering his isolation, especially from an international community that came out in full sympathy on October 7, but has grown increasingly horrified by the military campaign since then.

Snap poll

Rishi Sunak seems to have sensed a window of opportunity for his party

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak sprung a surprise election announcement when he revealed that the United Kingdom would head to the polls on July 4. While the incumbent government of the Conservative Party was not required to call for an election until January 2025, almost since the day Mr. Sunak entered 10 Downing Street, most polls have suggested that his party would lose the next election by a margin of over 20%, the likes of which are “usually only seen at exceptionally bad moments in the midterm”. It is possible that Mr. Sunak and his team seized upon the political capital that may accrue to them from the recent announcement that the U.K.’s inflation rate has dropped to 2.3%, the lowest in at least three years. There might have been a few other factors including a positive assessment of Mr. Sunak’s cabinet in steadying the economic ship in the post-COVID-19 scenario, and a legal victory securing the government’s plans to implement immigration reforms that will see some asylum seekers sent to Rwanda to have their applications processed there.

While it is true that polls suggest voter frustration at the end of 14 unbroken years of rule by the Conservative Party, Mr. Sunak’s comment that this election will take place at a time where the world is “more dangerous than it has been at any point since the end of the Cold War”, is not without merit. Indeed, the denouement of the long-drawn Russian invasion of Ukraine could make or break the security paradigm for Europe and the U.K., including not only serious questions regarding territorial sovereignty on the eastern front but also energy security with knock-on effects for prospects for economic stability. Similarly, the churn in West Asia, including the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in Gaza and the strategic churn punctuated by the threat of war in the Iran imbroglio, will have echoes throughout the region and certainly for the U.K. Finally, it is unclear that even with the Rwanda plan receiving a legal green light, the Sunak government has been able to have a tangible impact on small boat crossings at a broad level. Contrarily, government statistics indicate that even though such arrivals dropped by around 33% during 2022 and 2023, boat crossings for 2024 are at a “record high” by comparison, and between January 1 and May 21 of this year more than 9,800 people crossed the U.K.’s border through such means. In this context, his remark that the Labour Party would want people to think “this election is over before it’s even begun” might not be wrong, but he and his colleagues would do well to ask where the opposition’s confidence in this regard stems from.

An absconding MP, the colossal failure of the system

Hassan city in Karnataka, citadel of the Gowda family, has a proud legacy. Apart from hosting the Hoysala temples of the 11th century, it boasts of sending a Prime Minister, Chief Minister and a few MPs, MLAs to office - all from the same family. But now, the city also carries the dubious distinction of being the site of a series of dastardly crimes committed against hapless women in its precincts. So strong is the pernicious grip of the family over the polity that none of the survivors being exploited since 2021 had the courage to speak up or lodge a complaint until the sordid drama was forced into the open, with some political help.

Many questions

The case of missing Janata Dal (Secular) Member of Parliament, Prajwal Revanna, who is allegedly at the centre of this crime plot, is a telling commentary of a broken criminal justice system and the shadow of politics looming large over every aspect of administrative and police functioning. After all, how can one, no matter how important he or she is, go beyond the reach of law for so many days after allegedly committing such heinous crimes? Who is responsible for this abject failure to apprehend him in time?

Reportedly, various pen drives containing grisly scenes of the alleged rape, and sexual assault against at least 100 survivors, were strewn across public locations, such as the Maharaja stadium, parks and other places, on April 24, just two days before the polling in Hassan. This ought to have been the first clue for police to act. The prosecution branch should have been consulted for acting upon the minefield of information leading to the accused. Especially as he was known to all, the police should have sent a notice to the alleged perpetrator, Prajwal Revanna, that, pending enquiry, he should not leave the city or should have gone to the court for a restraining order, registering a case *suo motu*. A look out circular (LOC), should have been issued by the immigration authorities at the request of Karnataka police to prevent the accused from escaping via an airport. Yet, nothing was done and the accused escaped on the strength of his diplomatic passport to Germany without visa, one day after the polls.

Why did the police not act in time? Why was the Special Investigation Team (SIT) not constituted on the same day? Were they busy with elections, or perhaps the prospect of acting against the accused on their own was too daunting for the local police. But then, the information about videos was known much earlier to higher authorities, when the gag order on media was imposed by the court on arising



Yashovardhan Azad

is Chairman of DeepStrat, a former Central Information Commissioner and a retired IPS officer who served as Secretary, Security, and Special Director, Intelligence Bureau

them to the public. What does it say about the role of Home Secretary, DGP and Chief Secretary, who are well-versed with the most important daily developments of the day? Could the release of CDs have been well-timed to reap maximum political benefits? Irrespective of these factors, it was incumbent upon senior officials to authorise immediate punitive action since every political regime chants paeans of women’s empowerment and Nari Shakti.

The speed with which action proceeded after accused escaped is as impressive as the laggardly moves before. The first case was lodged a day after the flight of the accused. The SIT was then formed. The survivor’s statement was arranged before a magistrate and an LOC was issued. MLA HD Revanna, the father of the accused who is also allegedly involved in the case, was arrested on May 4 for allegedly kidnapping a victim of sexual assault and released on bail after a few days. More women, from various walks of life, summoned the courage to lay bare the brutal assault on their bodies. As of now, several rape cases have been registered.

But the accused is missing and unlikely to return to India before the election results. In our democracy criminals have as good a chance of victory in polls as others. Maybe, as an MP, he still expects some privileges during his arraignment.

Reaching out to Interpol

The Central Bureau of Investigation is the interface with Interpol in our country. The State police must register their information with the CBI to reach out to Interpol for locating, apprehending any accused. But as of now only a blue corner notice (BCN) has been issued by the Interpol and not a red corner notice (RCN).

Interpol notices are basically to share critical, crime-related information between member countries, seeking international cooperation for tracing or apprehending fugitives in any part of the world. Various types of notices are issued by the Interpol - red, yellow, blue, black, green, orange, and purple. In the context of this case, the BCN is to collect additional information about a person’s location, identity or activities in relation to a criminal investigation while an RCN is issued for seeking the location and arrest of the person wanted for prosecution or to serve a sentence.

The BCN has drawn no response so far. The RCN requires a court warrant for arrest which was only issued by the court on May 19, on the plea of the SIT. Accordingly, RCN would be or already is issued against the accused. The path is also clear for cancellation of his passport.

But this not a signal that the accused may be imminently arriving in India. He has the option to go to the courts and he can remain abroad with

recourse to the courts in Germany. Many on the wanted list from India abroad have managed to evade extradition through the tortuous legal procedures. In criminal cases, such delays help in vitiating the investigation process, with witnesses turning hostile or not being able to recall events accurately. This possibility underscores the importance of nabbing the accused at the earliest in heinous cases.

Every Budget, central or State, allocates more funds towards women welfare. Every statement on law and order in Parliament or outside mentions zero tolerance of crimes against women. Laws have been strengthened, rules amended and yet when it comes to the crunch, punitive action does not measure up to expectations.

The present case reveals inaction on all fronts. Ideally, the JD(S) should have expelled the MP the same day that the case was registered. His passport too should have been cancelled under the Passport Act since the Central government has the powers to revoke it on reasonable grounds such as involvement in criminal acts. As pointed out above, the state police have already failed to apprehend the MP in time. The senior officers too buckled under pressure. Moreover, despite having knowledge of the MP’s nefarious acts, the BJP and the JD(S) backed his nomination for fighting the elections and even the Prime Minister campaigned for him. Was this an intelligence failure, or did the information on him not matter?

The plight of the survivors

No one can say how soon the lost ground can be retrieved. But in the meantime, the SIT should have more women officers and investigators to reach out to all the women victims. Such crimes cannot go unpunished because of delays, technical lacunae, poor investigation or weak prosecution. One expected a nation’s outcry against such a hardened criminal. There is no media trial since the media was already gagged by the court order on the appeal of the accused. Every section of society should join hands in crying out for justice for the survivors.

As the nation awaits the trial of a man in a case involving perhaps the world’s most horrific incidents of crimes against women, the most heart-breaking image in the case – of a 48-year-old loyal household help, who served the father and grandfather of the accused for years, pleading with folded hands to the accused while the accused sexually assaulted her – will continue to send shivers down the spine of people for years to come. No punishment can ever be enough for such a dastardly crime.

The views expressed are personal

Parliamentary proceedings mention ‘zero tolerance of crimes against women’, yet, when it comes to the crunch, punitive action in India fails spectacularly

A visit to preserve China’s interests in Europe

The Chinese President Xi Jinping’s first trip to Europe (except Russia) in five years, earlier this month, was carefully constructed as evidenced by his ports of call – France, Serbia and Hungary. The first is a leading proponent of the notion of “strategic autonomy” of Europe, the second is a non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization, non-European Union (EU) outlier close to Russia, and the third is a pro-Russian maverick that has blocked many resolutions criticising China in EU.

World events, visit’s goals

The COVID-19 pandemic had the effect of closing off China to the rest of the world for an extended period, forcing Beijing to re-adjust its global investment goals because of economic problems. Indeed, Mr. Xi did not travel abroad for two and a half years and has not been too frequent a traveller even after the restrictions were lifted last year.

In this period, the world had been turned upside down geopolitically by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the meantime, the China-United States trade war has morphed into a technology war and the Biden administration has broadened and intensified the technology restriction regime on China. In the U.S. and Europe, accusations of Chinese dumping of cheap goods have intensified and there are calls for retaliation. A lot of them focus on electric vehicles (EV), an area where China has emerged a world leader.

Mr. Xi had three goals – to prevent the EU from getting too close to the U.S., to avert a trade standoff with EU and to bolster China’s standing in Europe. He has had to do all this in the face of the fallout of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that has hardened the western alliance against Russia, with China having to sustain some collateral damage. It has also had an indirect influence in shaping negative EU views on China’s trade policy.



Manoj Joshi

is Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi

The goals of French President Emmanuel Macron were fairly straightforward – to promote French trade interests as well as to push China to stop supplying weapons components to Moscow. He did his own messaging by meeting the Tibetan Sikyong (Prime Minister of the government in exile) Penpa Tsering on the eve of the Xi visit.

In Paris, Mr. Xi also met with the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen who has advocated a policy of “de-risking” from China by reducing dependence on Chinese imports and technology. Both Mr. Macron and the EU chief urged China to ensure a more balanced trade with Europe.

France is united with the EU on the issue of the cost advantage that Chinese EVs have over European cars. While the Chinese are keen to ride on the strength of their EV industry, the Europeans are equally keen to protect their car manufacturers.

In 2019, the EU had recast its doctrine to define China as “a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival.” A sceptical Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has described it as driving to a crossing where the lights are simultaneously green, yellow and red. But this somewhat convoluted formulation seeks to balance Europe’s China policy between the economic opportunity it sees there, with the risks from China’s economic policy and its national security postures.

The focus on Hungary

Mr. Xi got a warm welcome in Serbia and Hungary which do not otherwise attract top-drawer visitors. Chinese foreign direct investment in Serbia is growing and it has invested \$5.5 billion in the country, mainly in copper mining and a steel processing plant. The big investment common to both countries has been in the upgradation of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway project, and there are plans for more roads, tunnels and bridges with Chinese

investment. Newer plans exist for railways to link Chinese factories in eastern Hungary to markets in western Europe. CATL, the giant Chinese battery company, is setting up a plant to supply German EV makers. The Chinese EV giant, BYD, which hopes to capture the European market, has chosen the southern Hungarian city Szeged to set up its first factory in Europe.

Hungary is today the closest ally of China within the EU and it provides China access to the world’s largest trading bloc. Its world view is at odds with its Eastern European neighbours who are wary of Russian aggressiveness, and by extension, China.

Between eastern and western Europe

China had sought to develop ties with eastern European countries through the so-called 17+1 China and Eastern Europe (CEE) community to serve as a gateway for markets in rich western Europe. However, this has now fallen victim to the Ukraine war which has strained ties between China and many of the Eastern European countries which are backing Ukraine. In all fairness the CEE had begun to pall even before the invasion of Ukraine as the countries realised that despite promises, the Chinese remained focused on western Europe.

Europe itself figures large in Beijing’s world view. Among the key Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects have been railways linking China to Europe via Central Asia. With the help of high-speed trains, the Chinese aim is to crunch the overland distance between themselves and prosperous Europe, which they see as a market for their increasingly sophisticated products.

Given the global developments, Mr. Xi’s visit can be seen as a defensive one, aimed at preserving Chinese interests in Europe in the face of adverse geopolitics. But visits to Hungary and Serbia, though high on the friendship front, are not likely to break much ice with the rest of Europe which is increasingly sceptical of China.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ECI’s appeal

The Election Commission of India (ECI) asking political parties, in particular the two national parties, to desist from raising divisive issues has come a bit too late. With the election almost nearing to an end, the important guideline would not meet its true objective and purpose. Most politicians and parties are seasoned campaigners, the moral code of conduct

notwithstanding, but one wonders whether this has been adhered to this time. There has been mudslinging and blame games, with each side believing itself to be a paragon. The ECI has a major role to play in conducting polls the proper way. With all the machinery and with the powers that are bestowed on it, cannot the ECI have done better? **Balasubramaniam Pavani,** Secunderabad

Recognising Palestine

We are long past the gory wars of the Middle Ages and even the conflicts in Korea or Vietnam that bordered on human savagery. Yet, in the ongoing conflict in Gaza, the horrors are being reenacted. Proportionate response in hostilities is fair and revenge understandable, but bloodlust does no credit to humankind in this day and age. The attempt at a

merciless annihilation of Palestine by Israel has at last managed to kindle human sensitivity. The move by Spain, Norway and Ireland to recognise Palestine as a state i acknowledges that it has a right to sovereignty as any other nation. Nations must endorse this movement to enable the restoration of peace in this region. **R. Narayanan,** Navi Mumbai

It is in the spirit of ending the long-drawn battle between Israel and Palestine for peace to exist in West Asia that Ireland, Norway and Spain have formally decided to recognise the state of Palestine. This is a good gesture for others to follow. The U.S. should cease interventions in the crisis-ridden countries in West Asia and focus on

restoring peace. Reshaping its foreign policies towards the new world order is the dire need. The U.S. should venture to do this in the light of the havoc it creates by its mindless interventions. **N. Visweswaran,** Chennai
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Should doctors be kept out of the Consumer Protection Act?



Rajeshwari Sekar

is a medico-legal expert in Chennai with over 18 years of experience handling consumer court cases and medical cases



Saroja Sundaram

is the executive director of the Chennai-based Citizen Consumer and Civic Action Group

PARLEY

Earlier this month, the Supreme Court ruled that advocates cannot be held liable under the Consumer Protection Act, 1986, for deficiency in service. The Court also indicated that its 1995 decision that held medical professionals accountable under the Act may need to be revisited. It suggested that the definition of the term 'services' under the Act, which includes the medical sector, be re-examined. The issue will be placed before a larger Bench. Should doctors, like lawyers, be kept out of the Consumer Protection Act? Rajeshwari Sekar and Saroja Sundaram discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Aroon Deep**. Edited excerpts:

Is it appropriate for patients to take recourse to the Consumer Protection Act?

Rajeshwari Sekar: It is a welcome decision by the Supreme Court to revisit the facts of the 1995 case; it will give a better explanation for the word 'service'. *Indian Medical Association v. V.P. Shantha* was a landmark case which decided that doctors, medical professionals, and hospitals do come under the Consumer Protection Act as service providers. Doctors are highly qualified professionals who provide a service to the people. They are highly specialised. This cannot be equated with any other [profession] because human bodies react differently in different situations. A lot of work and research goes into medical practice. Many surgeries are high tech. Patients have to be carefully taken care of.

But there are people who misuse the Act. They don't want to pay the doctor's fee or the hospital fee. They create a ruckus and file a case under the Consumer Protection Act. This turns into a harrowing experience for doctors and hospitals. When things go well, a patient is happy, but when things go wrong, the patient blames the doctor and the hospital. This is dangerous. Doctors order a bunch of medical tests to protect themselves against these complaints. And that increases the cost of procedures. Everything has to be on record, so that if there is a dispute, they can prove that they were correct in doing whatever they did.

Saroja Sundaram: I think it is appropriate for patients to take recourse under the Consumer Protection Act because without the Consumer Disputes Redressal Commissions, the affected patients will not have an effective adjudicating body to get their grievances redressed. The Indian Medical Council Act, 1956, may define



An operation theatre. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

misconduct and take action on erring doctors, but how will it benefit the affected patient or family? I don't think the National Medical Council has the powers to award compensation to patients for the injuries they sustained. There may be provisions in civil and criminal law, but criminal law may be brought into effect only in case of death of patients. We all know that while there is a remedy available in civil law, it is a long-winded trial with elaborate rules of procedure, fees, and delays. This deters an aggrieved patient or family from approaching courts. The Consumer Protection Act is a benevolent legislation enacted with the main objective of protecting the rights of consumers, and we all know who a consumer is. When a person buys a product or a service for a consideration, they are a consumer as defined under the Act. As for the medical profession, it is not a business per se, but a service rendered that is often associated with a cost.

The judgment in the *V.P. Shantha* case clearly explained the relationship between a doctor and patient as a contract for service and said that it (the medical service) would come within the purview of the Act. I think this judgment should stand good because it benefits the affected consumers, who are the affected patients. Otherwise, where will patients seek solace?

What are the problems and opportunities in using the Consumer Protection Act as the pathway for patients to challenge adverse outcomes?

RS: In some cases, we find there is gross negligence [on the medical professionals' part]. In such cases, following the legal process is okay. But what about people who have done a good job and yet a shadow of doubt is cast on them? Patients go to court and file a case, then they go to the district forum, then to the State



Action against malpractice is one thing, but to compensate an aggrieved consumer is another. As we have an ombudsman for the insurance, banking, and electricity sectors, maybe we should have an independent authority to deal with these issues in the medical sector too.

SAROJA SUNDARAM

Commission on appeal, and then to the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission. It takes 10 harrowing years to prove that you are innocent. It's an experience that really takes the spirit out of doctors. The doctor is rendering a service. He is highly qualified, just like an advocate. He is ready to help the patient. But these are the problems – delays and frivolous litigation. And there are people who just don't want to pay doctors, so they come up with some case to cause trouble. It takes a toll on doctors.

If doctors' associations themselves have an authority who can view these cases with expert medical knowledge and act, that would be sensible, instead of a person approaching the court and going the long way. The courts cannot decide by themselves anyway; they have to get an expert opinion from a group of doctors. So, that can be avoided.

SS: I think largely it [the 1995 judgment and the Consumer Protection Act] gives an opportunity for patients to challenge malpractice and seek redressal. The remedies provided under the Act are quite advantageous to the patient. In all these years I don't think we will be able to point out any case of an unfair or incongruous judgment rendered by the redressal agencies under the Act. Expert opinion is sought if the issue is complex; only then are cases decided.

As for consumers, I think it is time to do a study to see how many frivolous cases have been filed over the years. In most cases it would be a genuine case of malpractice, or the patient or the family would have been made to strongly believe that they were wronged by the doctor. Non-provision of adequate information on time is one of the main reasons for this. The delay in consumer commissions is an issue that needs to be dealt with definitely because 10-12 years of delay in handling cases undermines the objective of the Act, which is to provide speedy redressal to complaints.

What would an alternative mechanism look like if consumer forums are deemed to be an

inappropriate way of dealing with medical complaints?

SS: Action against malpractice is one thing, but to compensate an aggrieved consumer is another. As we have an ombudsman for the insurance, banking, and electricity sectors, maybe [we should have] an independent authority to deal with these issues as a first step. The consumer should always have the option to file a case before the consumer courts. But as a first redress, we could have a body where the matter could be taken to first. Similarly, we have the option of mediation under the Consumer Protection Act. As of now, medical negligence is not covered under it. That is something we could work on.

Do grievance redressal forums actually draw a distinction between explicit malpractice and adverse outcomes that follow a risk that was present in some way or the other? How can physicians safeguard themselves against litigation in cases where they genuinely did everything that they could to prevent a specific outcome?

RS: What is needed is a very strong regulatory authority which can monitor medical professionals' activity, but they should also have powers to control what is happening.

There is medical indemnity insurance that a lot of doctors subscribe to in order to be safe if they get into any problem. But it is a difficult process if they have to go to court regardless.

SS: If you go through the judgments, there are several which have been decided against the consumers as well. It's not like every doctor is framed and that every case fought ends up in favour of the consumer. The Commissions have handled the cases quite diligently, I would say.

Diligent service delivery, maintaining proper records about the patient's history, taking proper consent for treatment will safeguard a doctor's interest. Following the checklist protocols required for maintaining proper medical records is important. Communicating clearly about the risks [before procedures or treatment] and outcome of the procedure/treatment, and timely referral of the patient in case of complications help physicians safeguard themselves against such litigation.



To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

Fear gives way to election fervour

While violence and fear marred elections in Kashmir earlier, this time the region recorded a relatively high turnout as well as many firsts

Peerzada Ashiq

In the last 34 years, parliamentary elections in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) have been a battleground for mainstream political parties and separatists espousing ideologies ranging from Kashmir's independence to accession to Pakistan. This year, for the first time in my journalistic career, I covered an electoral battle limited to the mainstream parties, with some championing the cause of semi-autonomous status for J&K and others for a complete integration with the Union of India. This is an unprecedented leap in the electoral dynamics of the region after the erstwhile State of J&K was stripped of special status and reduced to two Union Territories in 2019.

In 1999, I was a cub reporter with a local daily in Srinagar. Kashmir was in the throes of violence. Omnipresent militants kept security forces on their toes. As reporters, we had to prepare for days to cover the general election. We had to get special passes and plan to report from spots that ensured the least possibility of militant violence or street protests. The fear of being hit by stones on the street or even grenades near polling booths kept us on edge, especially on polling day.

The stage was set for elections in September-October. Most of the militant outfits and separatist groups had called for a poll boycott in all the three parliamentary seats of Kashmir Valley – Anantnag, Baramulla, and Srinagar. They described their decision as "a democratic way to reject India's rule in Kashmir and a means to seek international attention" to the Kashmir issue. The run-up to the polls were marred by attacks on security forces and workers of parties. 'Fidayeen' or suicide attacks by militants began in Kashmir. I could gauge the fear from the fact that very few rallies were held, and only under multi-tier security arrangements. Many areas such as Srinagar's old city and Baramulla's Old Town were no-go zones for mainstream leaders for electioneering. Angry local youth would throw stones at these leaders if they attempted to hold rallies in these areas.

On polling day, bullet-proof vehicles or long columns of security forces could be

seen on every lane. There were hardly any voters. In fact, no voter liked to be identified. Protesters checked locals for indelible ink and punished them on finding it. Many voters' houses were stoned at night. Reporters could only speak to voters whose faces were covered. Locals referred to the voters as "ghadar (traitors)". Srinagar recorded a voter turnout of 11.8% and Baramulla, 27.8% that year.

Cut to 25 years later. The scene has completely changed. The two regions recorded a turnout of 38% and 59%, respectively. The National Conference vice president, who is a candidate from the Baramulla seat, made his maiden poll speech in his 25-year-long political career in Srinagar's old city. The poll venue was less than 1 km away from the plaque bearing the names of more than 30 civilians who died in firing by security forces on May 21, 1990, when they were carrying the body of assassinated separatist leader Mirwaiz Molvi Farooq for burial. The Peoples Democratic Party president, who is a candidate from the Anantnag seat, addressed a rally in Srinagar's old city, a stone's throw from the house of Mohammad Abdullah Bangroo, one of the founding members of the Hizbul Mujahideen. Rallies during the late evening and door-to-door campaigns were held for the first time in the most volatile pockets of south Kashmir. Parties hired lyricists and singers to increase their poll pitch.

On polling day, stone-pelters, militants' families, and hardline cadres of the Jamaat-e-Islami, which was banned in 2019, stood in queue along with others who had boycotted elections in the past, at polling booths in Srinagar and Baramulla. Pockets of Pulwama and Sopore, which once recorded the highest number of militant recruits, led the change. In Sopore, the voter turnout was 44% compared to the less than 4% in the past. Outside polling booths, people debated Article 370, jobs, mining rights and harsh police verifications. I saw voters with varied ideologies for the first time. Indeed, this was the first election where ideology, and not *sadak, bilji, pani* (road, electricity, water), dominated the campaign.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Love and duty



Lzobang Sherab, 75, head of the family feeding his ailing wife Pustong Lamo, 85, before they went out to cast their vote in Warshi village, which is home to just one family and five eligible voters, in Ladakh. REUTERS

FROM THE ARCHIVES



FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 24, 1974

Special drive to move fertilizers by rail

New Delhi, May 23: A Railway Ministry spokesman claimed to-day that during the fortnight since the strike began, Railways had been regularly loading and moving imported foodgrains from all the major ports at near normal level.

On an average, the Railways have loaded daily 135 foodgrain wagons from Madras port,

about 100 wagons from the Visakhapatnam port, and about 180 wagons from the Bombay port.

From the minor ports in South India, movement of imported foodgrains for local areas was also arranged regularly.

The spokesman said, as the situation improved a week ago, the Railways instituted a special drive to move fertilizers, besides foodgrains from all major ports in the country. A programme for dispatches on an urgent basis was also drawn up in consultation with the concerned Ministries. Loading of petroleum products from all the refineries was also maintained at the normal level.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 24, 1924

Empire day in London

London, May 24: United Empire was the theme of the speeches at the Empire Day dinner under the auspices of the Colonial Institute this evening when the Duke of Connaught presided over a distinguished company of 400 including the Duke of York, Sir Joseph Cook, Sir Hugh Clifford, Sir James Allen and Sir Gordon Guggisberg. Mr. Thomas, proposing the principal toast, appealed to his bearers to drop the miserable class warfare and class talk. (Cheers). Let all, no matter of what class or creed, unite in making the Empire worthy of the sacrifices of those of all classes who defended the Empire in war.



CONTRAPUNTO

You will not be punished for your anger, you will be punished by your anger

-BUDDHA

It's Our Carma

That the Pune teen who killed two isn't already being tried as adult tells a lot about justice system

A drunk minor driving recklessly in Pune and killing two people in the process is mind-numbing. It's also a replay of similar events that occurred in other cities. Unfortunately, the response of the criminal justice is all too familiar. Across India, there's overwhelming evidence that the criminal justice system – police, judiciary, legal aid and prisons – is all but broken.

Police and crucial links | Always, the first link in the chain sets the tone for what comes later. If the process followed by the police is infirm, it will weaken subsequent prosecution. The performance of the police has come in for criticism and it's not misplaced. The most glaring process error is that it admittedly took the police eight hours to collect the blood sample of the minor who drove the car. The delay is inexcusable because it dilutes the alcohol level in blood.

"Heinous" is a legal term | The minor is 17. Under the Juvenile Justice Act he can be tried as an adult, provided he's guilty of a "heinous offence". Pune police did ask the Juvenile Justice Board to treat him as an adult. That should be the case. But the question here is did the police frame their FIRs in a way that would allow the judiciary to treat him as an adult?

The law here defines heinous as one where the *minimum* punishment under IPC invites seven years of jail. Supreme Court in an earlier case involving a minor pointed out that the wording of the law is crystal clear. The police need to approach the judiciary with legal charges that are consistent with their argument.

Juvenile Board's U-turn | JJB's performance has drawn adverse comments. The optics are terrible. Despite the severity of the incident, the minor in question merely got a gentle rap on the knuckles. Public outrage triggered a reversal and he's been remanded. How is this behaviour going to engender trust?

Numbers tell the story | There are two challenges the criminal justice system faces. One, is the manpower shortage in key areas. For example, there are 21 judicial officers for a million people when it should ideally be 50. Two, is the credibility problem. There's a nagging feeling that if not for public outrage, the course of the Pune Porsche case could have been different. A functioning justice system will also discipline parents who encourage lawlessness.

Able Are Unable

In swinging between routine callousness and occasional sentimentality, society fails the disabled

Faith can move mountains. A Goa-based man with 90% locomotor disability – three amputations on his limbs – has made it to the Everest base camp by sheer force of will. This would be a feat for anyone, and takes enormous extra effort for a person with disabilities. And yet, while we celebrate these outliers, the task is to make circumstances easier for all persons with disabilities. Basic thoughtfulness is needed to let them function on an equal plane – assistive technology, accessible pavements and ramps, for instance.

In India, we see public callousness, an overlooking of people with disabilities, or we see them through a sentimental lens. A person with a disability has no responsibility to be inspiring or heroic, but they need their due from the world. And this requires centering their perspectives – "nothing about us without us" has been the rallying cry of the disabilities rights movement. Around the world too, mainstream attitudes shifted from curiosity to exclusion to pity and remedy, but only recently to how disabilities are internally experienced.

Disability was once seen as an individual affliction to be medically 'solved'. Now, it is seen as a social matter – the focus on how the environment accommodates persons with disabilities. In cities and buildings, through state and workplace policy, we need to remove constraints for everyone.

While our regulations are great on paper, they are easier said than implemented – most public buildings are still not accessible to people with disabilities, seven years after a landmark law. This is not a favour: at some point in life, today's able-bodied can get blurred vision, or find it hard to climb stairs, or to eat and dress themselves. Society making room for disabilities is in everybody's interest.



Instant India

The country of the long queue has given way to the country of the short Q-comm

Jug Suraiya



In the India that was then, in the 1950s and 60s patience wasn't a virtue but a necessity. Whatever it was that you wanted or needed done, involved waiting.

To withdraw money from your bank you were given a token with a number, and waited for a cashier to call your number so that you could collect your cash.

You wanted a landline phone – no mobiles in those far-off days – you waited for what could take six months to get your connection. And when you did get your phone, and wanted to call someone in another city, you had to book what was called a trunk call and wait for your call to come through, which could take anything up to a couple of hours, much longer if the person you wanted to call was in a different country.

The waiting queues have given way to the Q for the Quick of India now where you don't have to stand in line to withdraw money, clutching a token and the frayed shreds of your patience. You go to any ATM, anywhere, and Bob's your chacha.

In cash-free India, you do phone banking through your mobile, which has long replaced Jurassic Park landlines, which can connect you instantly to anyone, anywhere from Agra to Zimbabwe.

What economists call 'deferred gratification' – you wait for a sale to get what you want at a lower price – has yielded to the instant gratification of India now, which wants to get everything the moment it wants it.

This has given rise to the booming business of Q-comm, or quick commerce, of companies which specialise in extra-fast deliveries of everything from food to fashionwear, consumer durables to costume jewellery.

One such Indian firm, which brings anything from air purifiers to smart phones to your doorstep within minutes, has been estimated by a global rating agency to have a potential valuation of some \$13 billion. A heck of a lot of instant moolah for instant gratification.

This sums up the difference between India then and India now. Then it was I'm patient, India. Now it's Impatient India.



jugularvein

Election's Caste Of Characters

Hindutva umbrella may bring together Brahmins & Rajputs with Dalits or Adivasis. Or, cleavages among OBCs & SCs may strengthen politics on the other side. Both trends may run simultaneously

Bharat Hun and Uday Chandra



This year's elections have unveiled new avatars of caste that will baffle both critics of India's politics and aficionados of its social life. Grievances also vary in each state.

In Maharashtra, Marathas are holding the state govt responsible for denying them OBC status and mobilising votes for INDIA.

Yadavs of UP and Bihar are voting for regional parties dominated historically by Yadavs, but increasingly for non-Yadav candidates too. Their counterparts in Haryana and MP may also endorse INDIA, having voted for BJP in recent elections. More than anti-incumbency, Yadavs, like Rajputs and Jats, are organising across states in new hybrid ways.

resulting splinters into a neo-Hindu whole. BJP under Modi negotiates separately with leaders of each group, offering them a share in the spoils of office and access to policymaking. In turn, subgroups in the reserved categories may prefer entry into the corridors of power over political sulking for the next five years.

• Second, new economic pressures are now driving the politics of dominant agrarian castes like Rajputs and Jats. Caste reservations have enabled people from OBC, SC and ST backgrounds to

however, only INDIA has supported these. Congress has proposed a nationwide caste census to guide national welfare policies and a lifting of the reservation cap.

BJP has been sidestepping the issue. At times it has, as in Karnataka, referred to Muslim sub-quotas among OBCs. But BJP has missed out on a major political opportunity, whether in Bengal or Tamil Nadu, to emerge as a voice for the subordinate *jatis*. A caste census promise based on the *jitni abaadi, utna haq* approach would have destabilised the regional parties in these states.

Rajput matrix | In the somnolent, *hawa-free* election, the appearance of Karni Sena alongside Ashok Gehlot, Rajasthan's former Congress CM, in Amethi sent an intrigued murmur through the crowd. Karni Sena, which demands reservations for Rajputs, has been touring northern India, organising oath ceremonies, whose participants vow not to vote for BJP.

In western UP, controversy rages over the caste identity of the medieval ruler Mihir Bhoj: was he Rajput or Gurjar, as newly-installed statues say? Elsewhere in UP, BJP voters are divided over whether their Rajput neta Yogi Adityanath has been sidelined by those at the helm.

In Gujarat, a Union minister's statement about Rajput rulers breaking bread with the British has sparked widespread anger.

In Rajasthan, denial of BJP ticket to a young Rajput politician, Ravindra Singh Bhati, has led to him fighting as an Independent rival to a BJP candidate. Via digital media, these disparate campaigns have crisscrossed and coalesced into snowballing Rajput *akrosh* against Modi sarkar.

Jat, Maratha, Yadav hybridities | Jats demanding OBC status in Rajasthan and Haryana are bandwagoning as they reject BJP and endorse Congress-led INDIA in surprisingly close contests in Barmer, Jhunjhunu, Sirosa and Bhiwani-Mahendragar. It remains unclear to what extent Jats in western UP will follow suit.



Uday Deb

Far from Mandal's heydays | After a decade of Hindutva, it is tempting to read these developments as the return of good old Mandal caste politics. It is this temptation that frames many analyses

of demands for a caste census in states as distant as Karnataka and Bihar. But there are crucial differences between the current moment and the days of Mandal Commission.

• First, BJP is now the governing party in New Delhi. So far, its political strategy has been to disaggregate OBC and SC groups, amalgamating the

make considerable strides relative to dominant groups across rural north India. Agriculture, by contrast, is nowhere near as lucrative or status-enhancing, as it once was. *Naukri*, abhorred historically by landowners, is now highly sought-after for the security it offers. The EWS category reservation created by Modi sarkar does reckon with the demands of rural elites facing economic ruin.

• Third, the caste survey in Bihar has inspired demands for similar exercises across states, from Karnataka to Maharashtra and Telangana. So far,

Rise of micro-groups | These elections promise to usher in an era of caste's new democratic reincarnations. On the one hand, within a broad tent of contemporary Hindutva, Brahmins and Rajputs may make common cause with Dalits or Adivasis. On the other hand, cleavages among OBC and SC groups may foment a fresh wave of anti-BJP politics. Both trends may run simultaneously in different states, throwing up a range of unpredictable electoral possibilities.

To make sense of these overlapping yet contradictory trends underway across both north and south India, we need a fresh analytical framework. As India emerges as a society of many different middle classes with various levels of precarity and security, caste pride and anger are becoming key ways to demand welfare and social justice benefits.

Shifting political alliances within and across *jatis* now jockey for power, demanding policies that pit fractals or micro-groups, rather than whole caste blocs, against one another. In this new game of snakes and ladders, social justice for some may spell social doom for others. And so we are left to wonder: whose *haq* is at stake and whose *insaaf*?

Hun is a social anthropologist. Chandra teaches politics and history at Georgetown University, Qatar

POLLITICS
Special Series on Elections

'EC should disclose data...doubt is created because of want of information, delay in action'

Former election commissioner Ashok Lavasa breaks down the issue of bias, turnout numbers and Form 17C in conversation with Dipak Dash saying there's no merit in suggesting data or votes will be manipulated, because there's a system of crosschecks. But there's need to "make things more open", because "more the transparency, more the trust".

• **Opposition parties and activists allege EC is biased.**

Election Commission's neutrality is always under watch, particularly tested in complaints against party in govt or its members. That's always been a challenge. But in terms of taking cognizance or responding to complaints, whether against members of party in govt, or anyone else, EC in the past has been known to take immediate action per procedure.

Complaints, especially of violation of Model Code of Conduct (MCC), are disposed of swiftly. EC would seek a field report first to ascertain veracity of complaint to reach a prima facie view whether a case is fit to issue notice. The person is given opportunity to respond before action is initiated. When timely action isn't taken, it leads to doubts, controversies. That's when people allege EC isn't observing neutrality. This isn't new. Delay creates misgivings.

• **How can it be dealt with?**

I've always been of the view, and had suggested even when I was in EC, that first, all complaints should be on EC's website. Action taken report should also be on the website so that people know the status of all complaints.

Second, disposal of complaints should be timebound, which should be included in MCC itself. It should specify procedure and timeline for Commission to follow. Delay of a day or two isn't an issue. Third, even political parties should take responsibility for MCC violations by their leaders, besides holding individuals accountable.

All this can be done only if there's a review of MCC in consultation with all political parties. I think there's

need to make things more open. The moment EC adheres to timelines, it's one thing for people to be satisfied with action taken, but at least nobody will accuse it of inaction.

• **EC's not made phase-wise vote count public. The matter's reached SC.**

Two aspects here. One, people are in doubt because information isn't available. But that doesn't indicate manipulation. It only creates doubt.

Two, system prescribed for conduct of polls, maintenance of records, preparation of presiding officers'

EC shared with public approximate numbers via media. Scrutiny as per procedure of presiding officers' diary, which also contains this data is done the day after. Once this is submitted by RO and observer, EC either decides on a re-poll, or provides a more accurate number of votes cast. EC being the custodian of all these facts should disclose this data. There's no harm in making it public.

I don't think there's any merit in suggesting the data or the votes will be manipulated, because there's a system of crosschecks. Doubt is created because of want of information.

• **EC officers say calculate votes cast from electorate numbers and turnout percentage in public.**

Technically, EC's right. Two types of people are interested. The candidate and aware citizens. Through polling agents, a candidate can know exact number of votes cast via Form 17C. But they must compile data of all Form 17Cs. If there are 10 candidates in an LS constituency, all of them need to collect this data from their polling agents. Such tabulation may have its own inaccuracies.

People at large don't have access to Form 17C. It's unfair for anyone to expect public to calculate votes cast by visiting the website.

It's far simpler for EC to compile and put out this data. It's like in a cricket match in olden days, when somebody would manually place the score, overs and wickets on a scoreboard. It could be said the match is on, score is being kept so there's no need for the board. But you do keep informing people. Since you have the data, therefore if you *disclose* the data, it's good for the system. More the transparency, more the trust.

There may be reservations on EC's part that these figures may change, there can be discrepancies, which will create doubt. But discrepancies can also be explained. There are one million polling stations, that many presiding officers are filling in the data; somebody can make a mistake anytime. But I don't think we should get carried away because somebody has made a mistake. Point is Form 17C is signed by an officer responsible on behalf of EC. It has legal validity.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred space



There is no reality except the one contained within us. That is why so many people live such an unreal life. They take the images outside of them for reality and never allow the world within to assert itself.

Hermann Hesse

Why Do Young Men Find Themselves Aimless, Stuck

Luke Kim from Miami

Modern/western culture lacks key developmental elements, including rituals and rites of passage. When a man turns 18 in US, in particular, the attitude is 'swim or die'.

Imagine the feeling of a Spartan graduating from the Agoge. Or, the moment a Maori youngster gets his tribal tattoos, marking his passage from initiate to intermedial – and perhaps even elder. Compare that to when a teenager gets his first job at a fast-food restaurant or graduates from high school. Rituals and rites of passage were held sacred by cultures around the world. Our worlds had a sense of romance and mystery before global connectivity made us homogenous.

Modern men have a shared consciousness built upon a common language of worldly attachments and desires. In place

of rituals and rites, we have trends and memes. With global connectivity and scientific thinking, we've become highly individualised, but perhaps at a cost.

Each lifetime is a journey, and we all share the experience of growing up/older. It's a process. This journey is more than a series of vanilla career milestones – it's something sacred we've lost as a population. In modernity, there's no incentive to participate in one's community because service and merit are decoupled. This is why young men find themselves aimless, stuck, and thrashing for purpose and passion. This is why elders have midlife crises.

On a human level, it's also alienating that your boss is not your mentor, your teammates aren't your friends, and your work is not yours – this is the

nature of modern work.

When a youngster lacks wisdom and guidance, he lives on the precipice of spirituality and philosophy, able to perceive it but not enter the sea. As soon as a boy becomes a man, he gets milked for testosterone in the form of return on investment (ROI). From his workplace to his family, the expectations pile up.

A young man's risk/reward ratio makes him easy to exploit. After all, the front lines of war and crime are rife with young males who ultimately seek to provide, protect, and prosper. Without guidance, male energy becomes a force rather than a channel.

Growing up, many people felt truly connected to their schools, teachers, and clubs. Service and merit were intertwined: they pledged into the same fraternity they



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Reviewing Agnipath

Tweaks a must to allay fears over the scheme

REPEATEDLY described by the government as a game-changer and a force multiplier for the armed forces, the Agnipath scheme has been under intense scrutiny ever since it was rolled out in June 2022. The retention of only 25 per cent of the inductees after the completion of their four-year tenure has been a contentious point in military and political circles, with the Congress promising in its 2024 Lok Sabha election manifesto that it would scrap the scheme and revert to the old recruitment procedure that had been followed by the Army, Navy and the Air Force.

Weeks after Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that the government was open to bringing about any change in the scheme, 'if required', a leading newspaper has reported that the Army is conducting an internal survey to assess Agnipath's impact on the recruitment process; it is seeking the views of Agniveers, unit commanders and the staff at regimental centres. On the basis of the survey's findings, the Army is likely to make recommendations to the next government on possible tweaks.

The Centre's reassurance that the future of young individuals inducted as Agniveers would not be adversely affected has failed to allay doubts and apprehensions about the job prospects of 75 per cent of the recruits, whose economic and social security would be at stake after their service period ends. The Congress is tapping into this unhappiness with the scheme and making it a poll issue in Haryana. A thorough review of Agnipath is in order, particularly the retention ratio. There is no quarrel with the objective of creating younger, fitter forces by reducing the average age of defence personnel, but the government must not lose sight of the long-term picture. Considering the widespread unemployment and underemployment in the country, the rehabilitation of tens of thousands of disgruntled, dispirited youth will require unwavering commitment from the public and private sectors.

Trapped in Bishkek

Government must heed students' pleas for help

THE plight of Indian students — largely medicos — trapped in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, highlights a crisis that demands immediate attention and action. Over 15,000 Indian students, including about 2,000 from Punjab and Haryana, find themselves in dire straits due to a recent surge in mob violence targeting foreigners. Reports of some youngsters surviving on tea and cucumbers and facing threats when attempting to procure food paint a grim picture. The fear is palpable and justified, given the physical assaults and harassment some students have endured in Bishkek. Their misery is compounded by landlords demanding exorbitant rents and an inability to safely access essential services.

While the Indian Embassy and Kyrgyz authorities claim that the situation has normalised, these reassurances ring hollow in view of the experiences of the students. Videos and pleas on social media starkly contrast with official statements, indicating a disconnect between the ground reality and diplomatic communication. The response from New Delhi has been slow and inadequate. The Embassy's advice to the pupils to remain vigilant and assurances of normalcy do little to remove the immediate dangers faced by them. Meanwhile, the Kyrgyz universities' move to switch to online classes is a welcome step, but it does not address the physical threats and psychological trauma the students are facing.

The onus is on the Indian government to prioritise the safe evacuation of its citizens by organising special flights and ensuring a secure passage to the airport, something that the medical students are currently unable to do on their own due to the hostile environment. The Indian authorities must engage in a diplomatic dialogue with Kyrgyzstan for the safety of foreign students and to prevent the recurrence of such incidents. Saving the lives of thousands of young Indians must be the nation's priority.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, MAY 24, 1924

Pathan terror in Bombay

THE people of Bombay are now confronted with a new menace in the form of Pathan terrorism. In Calcutta, a similar situation was created by a class of ruffians called "goondas" until a special Act was passed last year to deal with them effectively. Somehow, these large cities first of all harbour an undesirable class of people and then they suffer from their lawless activities. For sometime past, Bombay has been reporting daring crimes committed by Pathans: but what is perhaps more serious still is the terror prevailing in the minds of the people, who dare not move about freely or live without fear of their lives being in danger. One employer of a Pathan as a watchman confessed that he dared not dismiss him for fear of reprisals. A respectable leader who has built a fine house in the suburbs could not live there for fear of Pathans. In the neighbourhood of Pathan colonies, people fear to move about after sunset and many are the reports of midnight attacks on pedestrians. Making all allowances for exaggeration, it may be said that the time has come for the Government to take special measures to put an end to the menace that has now arisen. At a meeting of the City Corporation held on the 17th, the question was discussed and a resolution was adopted asking the Government and the Legislature to take effective steps for relieving the situation. Some of the speeches made on the occasion showed that after the war, a large number of Pathans migrated to Bombay, evidently in search of labour, and many were employed in the docks, on large public works and as day labourers.

The slowdown on tall poll promises

From reclaiming PoK to doubling monthly ration for BPL families, parties go all out to woo voters

TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

POLLING began in Mumbai at 7 am on May 20. I was there at 6:55! I voted in 1952 and in all elections held thereafter. I have voted in the Lok Sabha, Maharashtra Assembly and the Mumbai municipal elections. I have never missed any chance to cast my vote as a concerned citizen, except when the call of duty pinned me down to Punjab and, later, Romania.

I went with my neighbours, Satish Sahney and his wife Neelam, to the polling station, a five-minute walk from my home. I was happy with the arrangements for the aged, except for the lighting in the polling booth. To confuse voters, a person bearing the same name as one of the two leading candidates had been fielded. Since the symbol assigned to him resembled somewhat the one I wished to opt for, a brighter light was needed. At 95, the eyesight is not the same as it was even five years ago. However, I am not one to make a mistake.

Every vote is going to count in the current elections. The margins between the leading candidates in every constituency in Mumbai are bound to be slim. This is the unintended consequence of the coup carried out two years ago which led to the split of two major parties in my state — the Shiv Sena and Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party.

"If re-elected in the Lok Sabha polls, we will liberate Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK)," declared Home Minister Amit Shah in one of his election meetings. His possible rival for



UNDER THE SCANNER: Election promises, like poll manifestos, are closely scrutinised by rival parties. PH

the post of Prime Minister after Modi, Uttar Pradesh CM Yogi Adityanath, said at another poll meeting that "PoK will be in India six months into Modi's third term".

At yet another election meeting of the BJP Assam CM Hemanta Biswa Sarma said he would "shut down places producing Mullahs" and "end four marriages", referring to the widely held but mistaken belief that every Muslim man has four wives! It will be easier for Sarma to fulfil his promise than for India to take back PoK from Pakistan, as the two aspiring Prime Ministers have announced. That exercise would involve war with a nuclear-powered neighbour which would certainly invoke Chinese help. Going to war is not the type of decision that can be taken at election meetings where tall promises are made to attract voters.

Election promises, like poll manifestos, are closely scrutinised by rival parties and analysed and commented on. The Congress has offered to

Will INDIA win? I have my doubts. But it is true that the contest this time is much closer than it was in 2014 and 2019.

double the ration — presently, 5 kg of rice or wheat to each below-poverty-line (BPL) ration-card holder — that is now being distributed free of charge by the Modi government. Since more than half the population has been included in the BPL category (contradicting the government's statement that it has lifted millions from that category), the new Finance Minister is going to have her or his work cut out in case INDIA wins.

But will INDIA win? I have my

doubts. But it is true that this time the contest is much closer than it was in 2014 and 2019. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has succeeded in putting many Opposition bigwigs in jail. It has also succeeded in nudging many other Opposition leaders to defect to the BJP lest they were pursued by the ED or the CBI. But fear of the probe agencies has also brought the Opposition parties together lest Modi achieved his dream of an Opposition-mukt polity.

In the interregnum, Opposition parties are making their own tall promises that, if implemented, will spell disaster for the country's economy. Moreover, our country's citizens may get used not only to perpetual freebies but also to not working. No economy can sustain freebies for any length of time. Any government that is voted to office will necessarily have to equip our youth to undertake tasks that require different sets of skills, some manual but increasingly more service-oriented.

Modi has repeatedly predicted that the INDIA bloc will disintegrate after the Lok Sabha elections. It is a warning that needs to be taken seriously by all concerned. It would be ideal if the polity is divided into two competing blocs — one right of centre, led by the BJP, and the other left of centre, led by the Congress, the Trinamool Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party. Parties like the Telugu Desam Party and the YSR Congress Party of Andhra Pradesh, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi of Telangana and the DMK and AIADMK of Tamil Nadu have only regional relevance. They cannot be clubbed with the Right or the Left. Similar is the case of the regional parties that dot the northeastern states.

But to compete for power at the Centre, two main ideologies, one right of centre and the other left of centre, would be ideal. It will be more intelligible to political workers at first and through that route to ordinary voters so that they make up their minds about which side meets their requirements and their aspirations better.

Sharad Pawar, that dyed-in-the-wool practitioner of realpolitik, had predicted that the small regional parties would merge with the BJP or the Congress after these elections. Considering the ambitions of the leaders involved in the current elections, such as Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal, I doubt if that could happen so soon.

A constant refrain that is heard is that there is no leader comparable to Modi and that is why the voters are not ready as yet to consider a changing of the guard. Well, Rahul Gandhi, the scion of a noble family, has done a lot of catching up in the past year. It cannot be claimed that he has caught up, but he has made himself relevant now. During the course of electioneering, I heard people who preferred to give him a chance, which was not the case a year ago.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The promise given was a necessity of the past; the word broken is a necessity of the present. —Niccolo Machiavelli

A brief encounter with the CM

SATISH KUMAR SHARMA

IN the mid-1990s, I was posted to Rajkot Rural district in Gujarat as the Superintendent of Police. I had never met the incumbent Chief Minister and it was not mandatory for an SP to call on him. However, within a week of my posting, the CM visited Gondal, a subdivisional headquarters town in the district.

On the day of the visit, the Collector and I were at the helipad in the morning, waiting to receive the CM, when a tough-looking young man came walking towards the line demarcating the security perimeter around the helipad. A constable tried to stop him, but he brushed the policeman aside and strode towards the reception line-up.

I told a sub-inspector to remove the intruder from the helipad. The sub-inspector stopped the fellow, but the intruder resisted, and there was an altercation. I asked the local SHO to detain the fellow and send him to the police station. The SHO despatched him there in a police vehicle.

The SHO said the intruder was a ruffian and the brother of an influential person known to the CM. He also told me, with a hint of caution, that the detainee's brother was going to receive the CM at the very first place on his itinerary. I asked him to keep the intruder in detention until further instructions.

The CM arrived and drove down to a temple complex. Among the people waiting to receive him was the brother of the fellow we had detained. As he led the CM inside, he whispered something in the dignitary's ear, to which the CM just nodded.

The last event on the CM's itinerary was a public meeting. The function had begun and the CM's speech was on. The Collector and I were sitting on one side of the stage. The local MP came to me and requested me to release the young man we had detained. He said the man's brother had complained to the CM and the latter might ask me about it. I told him not to worry. He returned to his seat on the dais.

When the public meeting was over, the CM's convoy arrived at the helipad and he took leave of everyone. Just before boarding the helicopter, he tapped me on the shoulder and took me aside. 'How are you?' he asked me as if he had known me for years. 'Fine, sir Thank you,' I replied. Then, he asked: 'This fellow you have detained, have you arrested him in any criminal case?' I said: 'No, sir. We detained him only until the end of your visit because he had breached the security cordon. We will release him shortly.' 'Okay. Have you settled down?' he asked amiably. I said 'yes'. Before leaving, he shook my hand and said: 'My best wishes to you!'

There was no occasion to meet the CM after that visit, and he resigned from the post two months later. But I feel good every time I recall my brief encounter with him.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Parties must mend their ways

Refer to the editorial 'Mind your tongue'; the Election Commission of India (ECI) has risen to the occasion by issuing a stern warning to top campaigners and candidates from both the ruling BJP and the Opposition Congress against the violation of the model code of conduct by asking them to refrain from making personal attacks on one another or utterances along religious or communal lines. Former Calcutta High Court judge and BJP candidate Abhijit Gangopadhyay crossed the line with his derogatory remarks against CM Mamata Banerjee and has understandably earned the ire of the ECI. The body has set a good precedent by debaring him from campaigning for 24 hours. The ECI's reprimand should serve as a wake-up call to political leaders across party lines.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

Ensure adherence to model code

Refer to 'Mind your tongue'; the ECI has rightly issued a stringent directive to the BJP and the Congress amid growing concerns over the degrading campaign rhetoric amid the General Election. There is no doubt that the ECI's failure to be effective, impartial and prompt in its role as the watchdog of elections has left the Indian electorate disappointed. It has hit the credibility of the poll panel and eroded public trust in it. Courts should not have to intervene in such poll-related matters. The onus is on the ECI to ensure that all candidates and parties comply with the model code of conduct during an election season.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

Prioritise flyers' safety

Apropos of 'Deadly turbulence'; the tragedy aboard a Singapore Airlines flight is a stark reminder of the perils lurking in our skies. The death and the injuries sustained because of the unexpected disturbance are not just statistics; they should serve as a call to action for the aviation industry. This incident, which marked the first fatality for the airline in over two decades, highlights the unpredictable

nature of clear-air turbulence, a phenomenon intensified by climate change and one that can strike with little or no warning. It is imperative that airlines bolster their safety protocols. This would require investing in advanced forecasting technology, providing comprehensive training for flight crews and emphasising the non-negotiable necessity of seatbelt usage for passengers. The onus is on the aviation sector to adapt swiftly and ensure that flyers' safety remains their top priority.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Women's issues still unaddressed

With reference to the article 'Political parties pay lip service to women's safety'; politicians often seize upon women's issues to target their rivals, but they have never taken steps to help resolve them. The Nirbhaya gang rape case was used to attack the Congress, which was then in power at the Centre. But are women any safer now than they were a decade ago? Has the situation improved? Opposition parties use any crime against a woman to corner the ruling dispensation. But the same political parties fail to act when it happens on their watch. Unless concerted efforts are made by leaders across party lines, mere posturing about women's safety will do nothing.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

Victims' fear of stigma

The Swati Maliwal incident is yet another case of political weaponisation of violence against women. AAP's response to the controversy does not inspire confidence. Thanks to Maliwal's status and position, the police action that followed the incident was swift. And her call for justice is being heard. But unfortunately, most other victims don't have the power to seek justice because they fear going public with their allegations because of stigma. Several women in the Prajwal case reportedly had to flee their homes out of fear and stigma after some objectionable video clips of them started circulating. A swift investigation into such matters is necessary to ensure the delivery of justice.

SATWANT KAUR PANESAR, BY MAIL

Taking farmers for granted fraught with peril



DEVINDER SHARMA
FOOD & AGRICULTURE SPECIALIST

PM Narendra Modi perhaps got a sense of the massive farmers' resistance that has been building over the years in Punjab when he visited Patiala on Thursday to address a political rally. The city turned into a fortress as thousands of security personnel were deployed to keep protesting farmers away.

However, with their peaceful protest, including laying a 'siege' to the entry points to the city, holding demonstrations with black flags and staging a dharna outside the Deputy Commissioner's office, the farmers managed to demonstrate their ire and exasperation. Growers in the north-western region of the country have certainly emerged as a powerful force. After their iconic agitation at the borders of New Delhi in 2020-21, the farmers' movement has emerged as a counterbalancing exercise to neutralise the growing corporate influence so as to bring back the focus on the economic stability of

the toiling farming masses. Unlike in the past, farming issues have now begun to occupy the lime-light internationally. In Europe alone, 24 of the 27 EU nations recently saw unprecedented protests, which forced the heads of governments of member countries to listen to the irate tillers.

Contrary to how European countries allowed farmers to come all the way to capital cities, the Indian government had erected barriers to stop them from reaching New Delhi. Multiple layers of security personnel in riot gear and the fencing of highways with barbed wires and spikes had stalled the march of farmers. For the agitators, it became clear that they were not being allowed to enter the Capital to raise their demands. Instead of getting into a confrontation, they stayed put at the border.

Earlier this week, a large number of farmers had assembled on the call of protesting farm unions belonging to the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) at Shambhu and Khanauri in Punjab (bordering Haryana) to mark the completion of 100 days of the 'Dilli Chalo' march, which began on February 13 but was stopped by security forces.

"If the government does not allow farmers to reach Delhi, they too will not



UNREST: The growers have managed to demonstrate their dissatisfaction over their pending demands. ANI

allow BJP candidates to enter villages," goes the common refrain.

Besides BJP candidates, agitating farmers have also blocked the entry of candidates belonging to the Jan Nayak Janta Party, which was a coalition partner of the BJP in Haryana. Farmers continue to pose questions to the poll candidates about their demands, particularly a legal guarantee of procurement at the minimum support price (MSP) for various crops.

In any case, the agitating tillers are not letting BJP candidates enter the villages for campaigning in Punjab, Haryana and, to some extent, adjoining

parts of Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh. In Himachal Pradesh, too, apple farmers have been protesting against the failure to hike the import tariffs that can minimise the surge in imports. A number of video clips show how protesting farmers have made the BJP nominees beat a retreat.

It's been easy for some political leaders, a section of the urban elite and the media to accuse farmers of staging protests for vested interests and hurl abuse at them — labelling them as Khalistanis and 'anti-nationals'. What they have failed to realise is that all the vilification that continues to

We cannot keep farmers confined to villages, hoping that they will raise their grievances only at the block level.

be done has hurt the pride of the farming community. After all, let's not forget that the sturdy farmers of Punjab and Haryana pulled the country from the throes of a 'ship-to-mouth' existence, when food would come directly from the ships to feed the hungry. An ungrateful nation cannot be allowed to treat them as an economic burden. Even now, any shortfall in production arising from climatic aberrations shifts the nation's focus to Punjab's farmers. All efforts are then made to increase the procurement of wheat and paddy in Punjab and Haryana, jointly known as the food bowl of the country.

These cultivators continue to ensure food security for the nation, essential for maintaining national sovereignty. They slog day and night, defying the sweltering heat or harsh winters, to produce a bumper crop, only to be deprived of rightful prices.

What the farmers here want is a legally binding, guaranteed price. Farmers in France are demanding legislation to guarantee the cost of production plus profit margin and a cover for social costs. In Northern Ireland, tillers are asking for a farm welfare Bill that ensures legislative protection for fair prices for farmers. In other words, the demand for a legal mechanism to guarantee an MSP

based on the Swaminathan formula is now finding resonance across the globe. But to be told that paying a guaranteed price to farmers will distort markets is outdated economic thinking that has kept farming perpetually in poverty.

Market distortion is a fear that the corporate world has successfully drilled into public thinking. In the US, economists say that 50 per cent of the raging inflation is because of the higher profits that companies are extracting and passing on to consumers at the retail price. If that has not led to any market distortion, the fear that a guaranteed higher price for farmers will distort markets is unwarranted.

Farmers are an awakened lot, especially in the north-western region, where they are much more alert and aware. Having emerged as a powerful force after the year-long farmers' stir that forced the withdrawal of the three contentious farm laws, it will not be possible to ignore them anymore. Let's be clear. We cannot keep farmers confined to villages, hoping they will raise their grievances only at the block level. They are also citizens of this country and should not face barriers in exercising their democratic rights.

India must seize the opportunity in the FDI domain



SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST

THE government that will assume office next month will inherit an economy that is fast moving towards full recovery after the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact of geopolitical tensions. Over the past few months, multilateral institutions and global investment agencies have revised their growth estimates for India in the light of the latest economic data. The International Monetary Fund recently revised growth estimates for 2024-25 from 6.2 to 6.5 per cent. The United Nations has gone a step further and projected growth in 2024 to reach 6.9 per cent from the earlier estimate of 6.2 per cent. The driver of this higher growth is expected to be strong public investment and resilient private consumption.

Fitch Ratings, Moody's and Goldman Sachs have made similar upward revisions and their expectations now range between 6.6 and 7 per cent for the current financial year.

The catalyst for these

changes is the fact that most economic indicators are showing an upswing. Overall GDP growth in the third quarter of 2023-24 has touched a robust 8.4 per cent, following over 8 per cent growth in the earlier quarters. Similarly, the index of industrial production has risen by 5.8 per cent during 2023-24 compared to 5.2 per cent in the previous fiscal. The core sector industries have recorded 7.5 per cent growth over this period, while GST collections reached a record high of Rs 2.1 lakh crore in April this year.

Inflation is also largely under control, though food prices continue to remain an area of concern. During April, retail inflation touched an 11-month low at 4.83 per cent, but food inflation has remained at the double-digit levels. The mid-year update of the UN's World Economic Situation and Prospects 2024 expects inflation to decelerate from 5.6 per cent in 2023 to 4.5 per cent in 2024, thus staying within the ambit of the central bank's range of 2 to 6 per cent.

It is in this backdrop that developed economies like the US are finding investment in this country increasingly attractive. Significantly, India has found its mojo, as it were, at a time when the relations between the world's two economic superpowers—the US and China—are witnessing discontent. Analysts are



IMPERATIVE: The urgency of creating a conducive investment climate in India has grown as FDI flows have dwindled in recent years. ANI

expecting the East Asian giant to become more aggressive and yet more closed in its economic policies than ever before. At the same time, the Biden administration has begun to impose export controls aimed at China on sensitive high-technology products like semiconductors, along with their tools and personnel. This has more to do with security issues than any economic rationale as the curbs will likely hurt American industry. India's ban on TikTok for similar security reasons is now being viewed as a worthy precedent.

It is the US-China friction as well as the recognition during the pandemic that concentrating investments in a single location can be counter-productive that have

spawned the China Plus One policy. India is being viewed as a 'friendly' developing country and multinationals are thus looking at it through a fresh lens. It has not hurt that tech giant Apple has taken a big leap by shifting its established infrastructure here from our northern neighbour. It has begun making its latest models in this country, while investments in new plants have risen exponentially in the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Some Western economists are describing the strategic shifts in the US-China relations as a decoupling that has now reached an inflection point. It is for the new government to seize this opportunity and ensure that

Countries like Vietnam and Indonesia have easier investment terms and many firms are preferring to shift there.

the investment climate becomes easier for companies seeking to set up projects outside China.

In fact, improving the ease of doing business here will have to be one of the priority items on its agenda. Despite efforts made by the current regime to reduce regulatory tangles, bureaucratic red tape continues to bedevil foreign investors. In contrast, countries like Vietnam and Indonesia have easier investment terms and many companies are preferring to shift there. India will thus need to unravel much of its regulatory complexities especially at the level of state governments. Much streamlining has been done by the Centre, but several states continue to have onerous approval processes. This is one of the reasons that states in the south, for instance, tend to have a higher inflow of foreign investments.

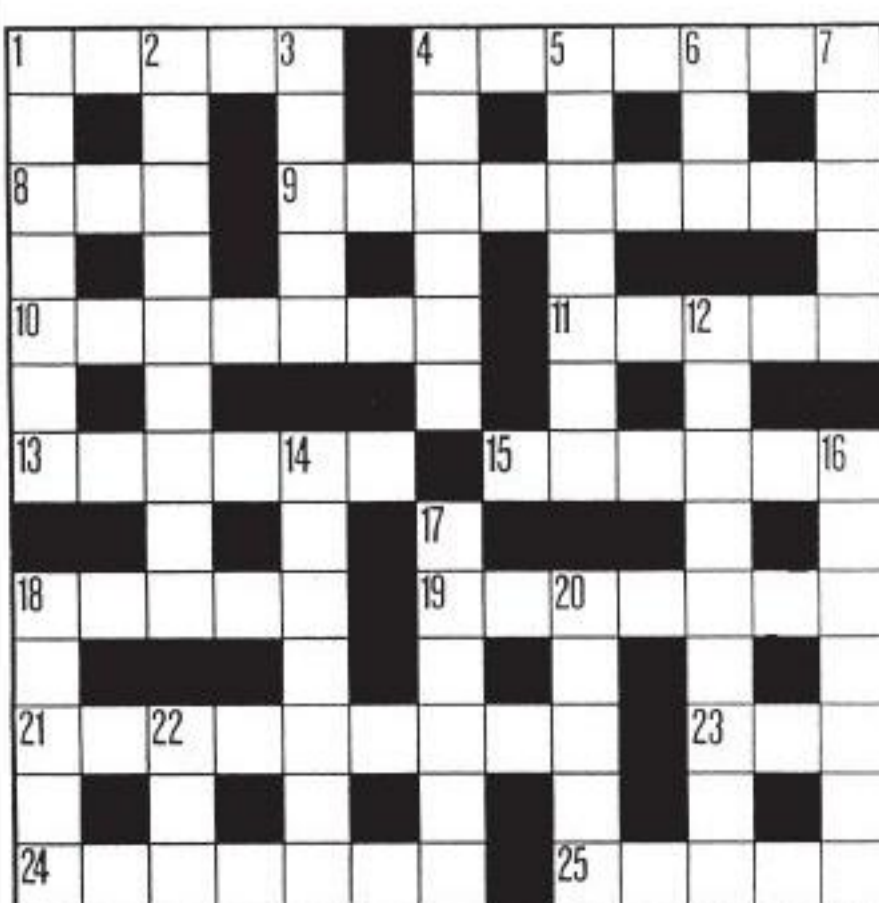
The growing protectionism that had accompanied the Make in India initiative has also been a worry for investors. Average import tariffs have been gradually rising over the past few years. On the bright side, top industry ministry officials recently warned domestic industry to prepare for a lower tariff regime as the country looks to sign more free trade agreements (FTAs). Thus, it looks as if protective tariff walls may slowly shrink, which is all to the good.

The drive to enter into FTAs also indicates greater flexibility in the approach towards market access. This has enabled the conclusion of FTAs with the UAE, Australia and Mauritius. The latest trade pact entered into with the European Free Trade Association has even taken an innovative approach involving a commitment of \$100 billion of investments from the group. Similarly, FTAs with the European Union, the UK and Oman are currently under negotiation.

The urgency of creating a conducive investment climate has grown as foreign direct investment (FDI) flows have dwindled in the past two years. One reason has been the slowdown in global transnational investment flows owing to geopolitical factors. Even so, concerted efforts must be made to reverse the trend and bring more FDI into the country.

Though many issues are bound to be on the agenda of the new government, FDI has to rank high. A protectionist attitude must be shed and outdated regulatory processes reviewed so that setting up a business does not entail hundreds of approvals. A window of opportunity exists right now in the arena of foreign investments due to shifts in geoeconomic ties. It must be utilised rapidly or the country will lose out in the long run.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1 Attack (5)
 - 4 Judicious (7)
 - 8 But for all that (3)
 - 9 To a disgusting degree (2,7)
 - 10 Pupil (7)
 - 11 Small furrow for sowing seeds in (5)
 - 13 Type of light cake (6)
 - 15 In quick tempo (6)
 - 18 Strict (5)
 - 19 Soothing (7)
 - 21 By the way (2,7)
 - 23 Tooth-like projection on wheel (3)
 - 24 Diplomatic skill (7)
 - 25 Having proper self-respect (5)
- DOWN**
- 1 Greek gods' mountain home (7)
 - 2 In an undertone (5,4)
 - 3 Very small amount (5)
 - 4 Weigh mentally (6)
 - 5 Wash and iron (7)
 - 6 Equality in a contest (3)
 - 7 A beast of burden (5)
 - 12 Thereby (4,5)
 - 14 Creation (7)
 - 16 Indebted (7)
 - 17 Suave (6)
 - 18 Sandbank under water (5)
 - 20 To institute (3,2)
 - 22 Small enclosure (3)
- YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION**
- Across:** 1 In prospect, 8 Mimic, 9 Caution, 10 Mongrel, 11 Balsa, 12 Oblong, 14 Deemed, 17 Utter, 19 Paragon, 21 Barage, 22 Bandy, 23 Where it's at.
- Down:** 2 Nominal, 3 Recur, 4 Sickle, 5 Equable, 6 Twill, 7 One and only, 8 Mumbo-jumbo, 13 Narrate, 15 Magenta, 16 Sphere, 18 Throw, 20 Rebut.

SU DO KU

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

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	40	31
New Delhi	42	31
Amritsar	44	28
Bathinda	45	30
Jalandhar	44	30
Ludhiana	43	30
Bhiani	46	32
Hisar	46	30
Sirsa	48	32
Dharamsala	31	24
Manali	30	14
Shimla	26	16
Srinagar	32	15
Jammu	42	29
Kargil	30	12
Leh	23	08
Dehradun	40	24
Mussoorie	28	19

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

- MAY 24TH 2024, FRIDAY**
- Shaka Samvat 1946
 - Jyeshtha Shaka 3
 - Jyeshtha Parvishite 11
 - Hijari 1445
 - Krishna Paksha Tithi 1, up to 7.25 pm
 - Shiva Yoga up to 11.21 am
 - Anuradha Nakshatra up to 10.10 am
 - Moon in Scorpio sign
 - Gandmoola start 10.10 am

It's Also the Journey, Not Just Destination

Tourism within India has to get more comfortable

Fuelled by economic growth and rising disposable incomes, the number of Indians holidaying abroad has skyrocketed. They are travelling not just to Paris, Lisbon or Tokyo but are increasingly choosing offbeat places and luxury locales. According to Mastercard Economics Institute's *Travel Trends 2024: Breaking Boundaries*, more Indians are travelling, especially internationally, than at any time in history. In the first three months of 2024, 97 mn people travelled through Indian airports. Reaching this figure would have taken a whole year to achieve about a decade ago. Annual data for remittances reveals a significant rise in overseas travel spending, which reached \$17 bn in FY24, an increase of more than 24.5% over the \$13.6 bn in the previous year. In comparison, India's inbound tourism earnings in 2023 were \$28.07 bn.

But domestic travel is sluggish. India's ranking in the



World Economic Forum's *Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI) 2024*, which reflects each country's ability to develop and sustain its travel and tourism industry, has slipped 10 places to 39 since 2019. India scored high on price competitiveness and availability of cultural and natural resources, underscoring its potential as a tourism hotspot in the same ranking. The destinations are fab. It's the journeys that can be Dantean. This has to drastically change.

Attracting high-end tourists, both domestic and international, won't be easy in a competitive landscape unless gaps, such as poor security, poor infra, air connectivity, lack of hotels across budgets and patchy services, are addressed. In a letter to the PM last year, the Indian Association of Tour Operators outlined a few more reasons for the decline in inbound travel: withdrawal of incentives to tour operators on their forex earnings and lack of marketing funds. While initiatives like showcasing India during the G20 summit last year and Lakshadweep's brand building have been cheer-worthy, they are not enough. Stakeholders need to iron out the problems to make India a pleasurable, comfortable and incredible place to explore and enjoy.

MACROECONOMICS

RBI Dividend Will Have Economic Dividends

An outstanding dividend by RBI provides the incoming government more elbow room to reach its medium-term fiscal target or improve the deficit's composition to drive more capex. In the first eventuality, GoI could help lower interest rates by trimming its borrowings. This, in turn, creates space for RBI to cut back on interest rates sooner. The second option of GoI speeding up its capex cycle allows for direct intervention in growth by crowding in private investment. Another policy course emerges from the RBI bonanza, priming consumption through tax giveaways. This seems to be the least likely scenario in a third term for NDA, which has deprioritised this approach.

RBI came into this windfall because of high interest rates in advanced economies, which may persist before an eventual cyclical inversion. The strength of India's recovery from the pandemic also contributed to the RBI surplus, and monetary policy would be inclined to pursue this course by easing interest rates ahead of the pack. Inflation is offering comfort on the demand side for an interest rate downcycle. Food inflation, less amenable to demand management, remains a concern.

The magnitude of RBI's dividend, surpassing GoI's budgeted amount from the public sector, is a significant development. With PSUs gaining market capitalisation, the dividend flow is expected to remain robust in the medium term. This could potentially influence the pace of privatisation, particularly when the ripple effects of government capex are strongly felt by PSUs. The stability of dividends as a revenue source, compared to the market-dependent capital receipts from divestment, may also factor into the government's decision-making, potentially leading to a slower fiscal glide path.



JUST IN JEST

You may wince, but the personality disorder isn't necessarily a bad thing

God Complex, Not As Silly as it Seems?

'God complex' isn't as simple as it sounds. Having GC is usually considered a negative. After all, who likes to be in the company of someone with unshakable belief in his or her own abilities to the point of discounting, even disparaging, views that may differ from his or her own? Many people, actually. But having GC — or narcissistic personality disorder — isn't a bad thing per se. Take former Swedish international and Paris Saint-Germain striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic. He was brash, outspoken, often referring to himself in the third person. When asked about the chances of a win before a World Cup game against Portugal in 2014, his answer, 'Only God knows who will go through,' elicited the reporter's comment, 'It's hard to ask him.' Zlatan replied in dead seriousness, 'You're talking to him.' But he was a great player.

People with GC can be successful because of their 'complex' feeding a confidence feedback loop. God is the ultimate example of an entity with GC, believing himself/herself/itself to be above the petty social and moral rules of mortals. Wasn't it a GC-afflicted person with a messiah complex who's described in the Bible (John 17:4) looking up to heaven and saying, 'I have brought you glory on Earth by finishing the work you gave me to do?' A whole bunch of people actually love him for that.

India must loosen the cords tying it too tightly to the pervasive influence of global Big Tech

Enable With Our Own Cable



Ateesh Tankha & Syagnik Banerjee

India's goal of *atmanirbhar* — aims for self-sufficiency. In an interview with ET on Thursday, the PM made it clear that India is committed to nurturing the 13 markers of a 'Viksit Bharat' focused on, among others, a fully digitised economy, providing the bedrock for sustained growth in manufacturing, services, agriculture, technology and RE. This is a credible goal, which will ensure that India catches up with its global peers and competitors, and become a significant and responsible consumer and exporter of cutting-edge goods and services.

Ideally, however, India's digital goals should also focus on ensuring autonomy of the world's largest free market by potential capacity, whose independence will help the community of its content producers, distributors and consumers to thrive and retain intellectual and commercial liberty.

This rests on three pillars:

1. Last-mile data delivery, including digital devices, operating systems, AI and application platforms.
2. Cloud services for data collection, analysis, testing and storage.
3. First-mile data delivery cross-country and cross-continent through undersea cables.

Global commerce today — and India is fast moving in this direction — is driven by user-generated clicks on an internet-enabled device. And as long

as markets — for stocks and shares, or socks and shoes — operate via platforms controlled by a handful of US-based global corporations, national sovereignty will always be vulnerable. It is well known that MAGMA — Meta, Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Apple — controls last-mile delivery via device screens that limit competition and hold us hostage. To this end, government agencies — in the US, EU and Asia — have tried to bring these corporations to heel via antitrust and privacy regulations and penalties in the last five years.

Countries like India are trying to domesticate data centres currently held on servers abroad. To this end, India has recently become the largest data storage location in the Asia-Pacific region, with an installed capacity of 950 MW, with plans to add another 850 MW in the next two years.

Yet, it's the first mile that represents the most dangerous and unassailable problem. Nearly 500 submarine cables, totalling more than 1.4 mn km in length, transmit 95% of all international data traffic, disseminating everything from banking data to military movements. This infrastructure was historically dominated by the US' SubCom, Japan's NEC Corporation and France's Alcatel, until Chinese companies began to furiously invest in this space.



Keep an eye out for underwater agents

US government paranoia about surveillance equipment being inserted into undersea cables of Chinese origin has forced it to intervene — through incentives, and the threat of sanctions, as it did to subvert a deal being led by China's HMN Technologies in which Bharti Airtel's Network i2i was part of the consortium — to secure projects for US-led consortiums.

But this is only one side of the story. There is a crony-capitalist commercial nexus that's left unspoken. Before 2012, share of the world's undersea fibre-optic capacity being used by Microsoft, Google, Facebook and Amazon was less than 10%. As of 2022, it's 66%

Lack of ownership and control over undersea cables could leave India commercially and militarily vulnerable, not to mention powerless against the threat of sanctions. In such a scenario, an information blackout could be more crippling than being precluded from trading in dollars.

India must set the ball rolling towards decoupling from the pervasive influence of Big Tech firms, both in terms of infrastructure and services, to avoid a future of enhanced prosperity but diminished control. Because, in the end, *atmanirbhar* will not be sustainable if sovereignty is not secured.

Meta over the posting of 'free' news content on Facebook, overnight 'accidents' could occur under the sea, unrelated to submarine sabotage, that destabilise a region politically, socially and economically.

For better or worse, it took China more than one-and-a-half decades to create a domestic infrastructure free of US influence and ownership, and a technological prowess that straddles all three pillars of digital sovereignty. India must work faster to prioritise projects that enable technologically advanced and autonomous undersea cables, if it has any intention of playing a pivotal role in the growth of cloud and AI services.

Data centres are all very well. But there is a lesson to be learnt from the ancient spice trade. Real power resided with entities that controlled the first and last miles of the Spice Road, not with those that invested in caravanserais, the lives of which were erratic, dispensable and short.

Meanwhile, it is estimated that Meta, Microsoft and Alphabet will invest about \$4 bn in cables in the next two years. That's some 35% of all undersea cable investments worldwide. It's not difficult to envision a situation in 10 years where their power resembles a vertically-integrated monopoly. They will then be able to prioritise traffic to their services through this infrastructure.

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Protection from AI's Echo Chamber



Rohit Kumar Singh

The news of Scarlett Johansson suing OpenAI, creator of ChatGPT-4o, for allegedly replicating her voice without consent, has amplified a growing global concern: who owns our voices in the age of AI?

The issue isn't limited to Hollywood. The likes of Jackie Shroff and Anil Kapoor have raised alarms about the unauthorised use of their iconic catchphrases, 'Jaggu dada' and 'Jhaakaas' respectively. The unauthorised use of these phrases, deeply intertwined with their public personas, underscores the potential for AI to exploit individual identity for commercial gain.

At the heart of this debate lies the question of privacy. AI's ability to replicate voices with startling accuracy poses significant threats, particularly in India where voice phishing scams are already rampant. The ability to convincingly mimic voices can supercharge these scams, causing

immense financial and emotional distress to unsuspecting victims.

Whether it's a celebrity's distinctive timbre, or an ordinary citizen's everyday speech, the unauthorised use of one's voice infringes upon the fundamental right to control one's identity. This concern extends to catchphrases and unique vocalisations.

The core issue with AI-generated content is the replication of a person's identity elements without consent. When an AI mimics Johansson's voice, it specifically aims to replicate her unique vocal characteristics, which can mislead the audience and dilute personal branding. This becomes problematic, as it may subliminally suggest endorsements or expressions of opinion that were never made by Johansson herself, leading to potential reputational damage.

The issue of IP in the AI domain is a labyrinthine one. While voices aren't explicitly protected under copyright law, 'performance' of a voice could potentially be considered a creative work deserving protection.

In India, the Copyright Act of 1957 offers some protection for sound recordings and performances, but its

applicability to AI-generated voices remains unclear. While it protects tangible expressions of creativity, the digital persona of a celebrity — be it through voice, image or even characteristic phrases — falls into a grey area. This legal ambiguity creates a fertile ground for disputes.

Globally, there's a push to develop laws that can protect against such infringements. The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) offers some protection by controlling the use of personal data. It categorises AI systems based on risk levels, with high-risk systems — like those used for biometric identification or critical infrastructure — facing stricter regulations.

The law mandates transparency and accountability, requiring developers to disclose when AI is being used to generate content, such as synthetic voices. While the EU law is a step in the right direction, its applicability and enforceability in the global AI landscape remain to be seen.

India, with its



Beware of artificial pearl necklaces

first-mover advantage with the launch of IndiaAI Mission, must take proactive measures to safeguard individual rights and privacy in the face of AI's burgeoning capabilities. This could entail expanding copyright laws to encompass AI-generated voices, establishing clear guidelines for obtaining consent for voice usage and creating stringent enforcement mechanisms. Also, protection to unique vocalisations and catchphrases intrinsically linked to an individual's identity should be extended.

Public awareness and education are paramount. Campaigns about the risks of voice phishing and ethical implications of AI-generated voices can empower individuals to protect themselves, and engage in informed discussions about responsible use of AI. We must proactively address the ethical, legal and societal implications to ensure that AI serves as a tool for empowerment, not exploitation.

The case of OpenAI-Johansson is a bellwether for challenges posed by AI in the realm of IP and privacy. India needs to establish clear, enforceable laws that protect individuals' digital personas just as robustly as their physical selves.

Ladies at the Head of the Lines



Soumya Kanti Ghosh

The first five phases of the 7-phase voting in the 18th Lok Sabha elections are done, with the 6th phase tomorrow. Indian voters, specifically women, have been exercising their constitutionally guaranteed right judiciously. The veering away of voters from a purely transactional relationship with the political class is a welcome development.

With polling patterns of the first five phases out in the public domain, presumed shortfall in voter turnout has, so far, been found to be more or less unfounded, especially with an increase in absolute number of voters.

The first four phases with 381 constituencies (70% of total seats) witnessed 66.95% voter turnout. While this falls just short of the 2019 level, it's a significant increase over 2019's high base in terms of absolute voter count. 451 mn voters have cast their votes so far, compared to 426 mn in 2019, indicating an impressive increase of 25 mn voters. Even a conser-

vative analysis puts the incremental numbers at 19 mn, excluding other ballot forms.

Based on an analysis of 19 mn voters, Karnataka (35.5 lakh), Telangana (31.9 lakh) and Maharashtra (20 lakh) account for the highest increase in incremental numbers, while Kerala (5.3 lakh) and Manipur (3.4 lakh) dragged the numbers down.

If we add phase 5 — the smallest with 49 Lok Sabha constituencies and 89.6 mn voters — the provisional voter turnout becomes 62.2% and counting. A final turnout could be at least 65%. At this rate, around 45-50 mn additional voters would have voted, as compared to 2019. Until phase 4, 90% of parliamentary constituencies have exhibited an increase in voters' turnout, or have maintained status quo.



Getting good marks

36 constituencies have witnessed a decline of more than 50,000 voters. Reserved constituencies maintain a lead over general constituencies, a testimony to the participative democratic process strengthening at the grassroots.

Of the 373 constituencies, 270 saw increased participation of around 12 mn women compared to 2019. When analysing 19 mn incremental votes, the net number of female voters increased by 93.6 lakh, while that of male voters rose by 84.7 lakh. This means for every 100 men voting, there are 110 women voters.

Increase in female voters shows that they are the new centre of gravity in politics, and that they are aware that their voice matters in deciding the efficacies or shortfalls of various policy initiatives and promises. Schemes like PM Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), PM Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) and PM Awas Yojana (PMAY) may have resulted in increased women's participation.

Of the 653 mn voters, male voters are projected at 343 mn, while female voters are projected at 310 mn. An SBI research report points to the structural shift evident in voters' turnout pattern and electoral outcome at select intervals that have decisively defined politics in the last three decades:

▶ 1996 and 2014 reveal structural change. While in the 1996 polls, this was evident in terms of the number of electorates, in 2014, the structural break came in the form of increased women voter turnout.

▶ Reforms initiated by P V Narasimha Rao in the early 1990s had an interesting byproduct — of aspirational Indians aligning with a change-centric electoral process. This resulted in voters' turnout witnessing a pivotal transformation in the 1996 general elections — 1984 excluded, being an outlier year after the post-Indira Gandhi assassination election — culminating into a short-lived Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, that was dethroned quickly.

▶ Another pivot came about in 2014, when India voted, pinning its hopes on freedom from a failing legacy of the previous decades. That transformative experience was led by women, when of the additional incremental 137 mn voters, 69 mn more women voted, up from 18 mn in 2009.

The average incremental voter turnout for three successive elections — 2014, 2019 and 2024 — is 80 mn. This is four times higher than that of 20 mn for the 15 elections prior to 2014. Clearly, the Indian voter is queen.

The writer is member, 16th Finance Commission



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Delayed Gratification

RASESHWARI DEVI

Why is it so difficult to turn the mind towards the Divine? Two realms face us. The first is the world that we see and perceive. The other is the spiritual world, the world of the Divine. We have practical experience of the first. It may not have given us much; it has mostly caused us sorrow, instead of happiness. While we hear great things about the spiritual world, the mind is naturally attracted to the world and its glitter because it is present, here and now. It is quickly drawn to the material world because the mind is of the same material as maya.

So, to escape the deadly grip of maya, we need to put in considerable effort. A typical seeker is disheartened quickly. Divine pursuits will not give immediate results, but the long-term rewards are fantastic; whereas worldly pursuits may provide instant gratification, but the long-term consequences are ruinous.

A study conducted at Stanford University in the 1960s explores the benefits of delayed gratification. They placed children in a room, a piece of tasty candy on a plate, with the instruction: you can eat the candy now or wait 15 minutes and get two candies. The researchers found that those children who preferred to wait had better indices: better health, scores and behaviour. This is even more relevant in the divine field because the spiritual world is all about delayed gratification. Do the hard work now and enjoy the fruits of your labour forever.

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Watching Shadows On the Wall

Horror movies have given a bad rap to shadows on the wall. But as we all know, in the relative safety and serenity of being alone in our rooms in real life, when sunlight or streetlights — and certainly moonlight — silhouette trees and outdoor objects tiptoe through half-closed curtains, bringing shadows to life. In the breeze, it could be the leaves and branches of a tree that sway against the bedroom wall. It's a mesmerising show of an ephemeral performance. These transient dancers, born from the interplay of



light and objects, hold stories that only you can decipher. Even indoor objects come alive. A chair becomes a dancer in poise, a potted plant becomes a sentient geometric shape. We sit or lie down, awaiting the next act, the moment when the mundane transcends into shape-shifting magic. Embrace the joys of watching shadows on the wall. Let them weave tales of untold beings, of whispered secrets, and of the delicate balance between light and darkness. For, in watching their show, we find the joy of becoming light as a shadow ourselves.

Chat Room

FII Flight to Avoid a Crash

Apropos 'Why FIIs Are Taking Flight' by Swaminathan S Ankersaria Aiyar (May 22), the writer is astonished at FIIs selling equities in the Indian market whereas the Indian investors are buying. The FIIs take calls on buying or selling of shares on the basis of rationality, unlike retail investors whose decisions may be based on emotions and momentum. The FIIs are likely selling shares because they believe the Indian stock market may nose-dive if the ruling party fails to win the ongoing parliamentary elections by a comfortable majority. They are well aware that the Nifty had crashed by about 17% in a single day when the late PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA failed to return to power in the 2004 parliamentary elections despite strong predictions about his comeback to power with a thumping majority.

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