

## Let Private Not Be Limited in India

Court should ring-fence 'community resources'

Supreme Court has begun examining the question whether private property is included in the material resources of the community, which the Constitution permits the state to redistribute. This clarification is required because the Constitution left the term 'community resources' vague, and in a subsequent court ruling, the minority view held it to include private property while the majority view did not subscribe to it. The vagueness has been perpetuated by further rulings down the line that had the minority verdict as precedent. So, the specific article in the Constitution, 39b, needs an authoritative interpretation that nine judges are now undertaking.

Apart from private ownership, the bench could elaborate on 'control', another aspect left vague in the article. It may also clear the air on redistribution from individuals to the collective, or among individuals. Principally, though, the matter will devolve on private property, which top judges of the country have repeatedly had reservations in viewing from the Marxist viewpoint as a common resource. Excluding this view, however, leads to a loss of the state's agency to further the Constitution's still-extant Indira Gandhi-era socialist ideal. In its current pursuit of meaning, though, the court is not reviewing the legal immunity granted to the guiding principles laid down in the Constitution for the state to promote public welfare.

It is almost 50 years since the need arose to find an answer to the question of 'what constitutes common resources'. In that time, India has changed its development course to become more reliant on market economics and its ability to create and distribute wealth. Yet, the role of state intervention to address inequality has not diminished. And, thus, the issue of interpreting resources and their distribution remains alive. A settled position delivered by a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court — which takes considerable effort to constitute — should see the matter through for a substantial period into the future.

What is 'national wealth' that is redistributed? It is essentially a fraction of private wealth that is taken as taxes by GoI. Margaret Thatcher had famously said that there is no such thing as public money — it is all taxpayers' money. Wealth is created by entrepreneurs. It is built by the middle classes, even the lower middle classes, via savings that is then invested in land, gold and increasingly equities. It is hard-earned. If too much of it is taxed, people have no incentive to generate wealth, and even if they do, they will do so via informal channels. No Indian needs to be told about the black economy and how it was created. Of course, government has the right to print money and distribute it. But

## Press the Hot Button For Cooling Needs

In a warming planet, cooling is no longer a luxury. It's a necessity. Intense heatwave conditions in many parts of the country, coupled with growing affluence, are driving up AC sales. AC manufacturers estimate a 25% jump in sales this year. With the recent report from the World Meteorological Organisation warning that Asia is warming faster than the global average, the demand for cooling will only increase with time. We need a cooling-global warming mitigation plan.

Rising mercury can cost the economy dear. Heat stress reduces productivity through increased mortality, health impacts and loss of working hours. By 2050, it will cost as much as 2.8% of global GDP. Today, only 13% of Indian households have ACs. Even at this modest level, cooling accounts for nearly 10% of electricity demand. Increased AC use led to a 21% increase in electricity consumption between 2019 and 2022. Cooling-induced GHG emissions are estimated to account for at least 7% of India's total emissions by 2037.

The challenge lies in meeting cooling needs without adding to the planetary and economic burden. Cooling is an economic opportunity, estimated to create up to \$1.6 tn in investment opportunities. Implementing the India Cooling Action Plan, launched in 2019, must be a priority. It aims to reduce cooling energy requirements by 25-40% by 2037-38 through passive and active measures, such as better construction, using design, building materials, landscaping, greening of habitations and cool roofs. Adopting systems like district cooling — creating a network of buildings cooled through a central unit — can bring cost and energy efficiencies. Tackling rising heat requires changing how we build, plan our towns and cities, and travel.

### JUST IN JEST

Proclaiming your beliefs loudly isn't just bad form, it's also churlish

## Sleeve-Wearers, Do Tuck Your Beliefs In

Subtlety's stock has been down for a while. It has tanked especially during this election time. Nothing showcases this slide as unsubtly as people wearing their beliefs on their sleeve. This is bespoke wokeness that predates PC culture. Under the garb of freedom to expression, loud, uninvited proclamations of one's beliefs, akin to a peacock flaunting its feathers in a library, are made — about one's religion, sexual inclinations, food habits, taste in movies....

Sleeve-wearers have traded any nuanced show for a bull-horn and soapbox. No matter how well-intentioned, their beliefs are thrust upon unsuspecting bystanders with the subtlety of a forghorn. And, in the 'right' hands, they are lapped up and become fabric for another tide of sleeve-wearers. This flaunting isn't just impolite but also crass. It reduces one's personal beliefs into showcasing, social media-style.

When beliefs are worn so openly, they become barriers rather than bridges, labels that constrict the believers while confining those outside the club. So, sleeve-wearers, fold up your sleeves, tuck away your beliefs and take quiet pride, rather than make loud declarations. Leave exhibitionism to the exhibitionists. For, once you enter the arena of competitive proclamations and chest-thumping, you'll find your beliefs becoming pointless, and only displaying them addictive.

Taxes spent on productive investment more than on doles is smart redistribution of wealth

## Play the Real Share Market



Dhiraj Nayyar

It's good that India is finally having a public debate on redistribution. For long, it has been the proverbial elephant in the room of our political economy. Historical, entrenched inequalities from the colonial era and earlier left a long shadow. As did the explicitly socialist policies followed by post-Independence GoI. In a country where the majority is not rich, redistribution is a potent tool for political rhetoric and action. In a country that's not rich, it is a destructive tool for action because the only thing that gets redistributed is poverty. Here are 5 things we should know about redistribution:

● **What is 'national wealth' that is redistributed?** It is essentially a fraction of private wealth that is taken as taxes by GoI. Margaret Thatcher had famously said that there is no such thing as public money — it is all taxpayers' money.

Wealth is created by entrepreneurs. It is built by the middle classes, even the lower middle classes, via savings that is then invested in land, gold and increasingly equities. It is hard-earned. If too much of it is taxed, people have no incentive to generate wealth, and even if they do, they will do so via informal channels. No Indian needs to be told about the black economy and how it was created. Of course, government has the right to print money and distribute it. But

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Tend the money plant

that is a sure route to runaway inflation and economic ruin.

● **Is redistribution about taxing the rich and paying the poor?** The primary instrument for redistribution is the tax system. There is an element of progressivity in direct taxes, like income-tax. So, people who earn more pay a higher rate of tax.

But indirect taxes are not necessarily progressive. Whether you're rich or poor, you pay the same tax rate on a good or service that you purchase. In India, the share of indirect taxes is not much lower than direct taxes.

● **Who gets what is redistributed?** This is a question of targeting.

Logically the poor should get the benefits. But in India's political economy, there are arguments made about redistributing on the basis of caste and religion, communities identified as a whole lagging behind socioeconomically of the rest because of historic social discrimination. This is likely to be inefficient because each of these categories has 'creamy layers', which tend to corner the benefits at the expense of the wider communities. Also, in practice, what is meant for redistribution is often cornered by middlemen and vested interests.

The current government has, on its part, ensured that leakages have been cut by the use of technology and a rationalisation of schemes. But leaky sieves could very well be reopened. In general, redistribution works well with high state capacity. Even with the best of intentions, India's state capacity is limited.

● **What is the redistributed amount spent on?** It can be palliative, or empowering. The former is the case for doles and other transfers of cash for no work, or no real productive work (such

as MGNREGA). Empowerment makes the case for spending on education, health, nutrition, electricity, clean water, etc, which together empower every Indian to earn a productive living. Redistribution has better outcomes when this strategy is followed.

East Asia is the prime example of this. The advanced West, particularly Europe, has spent heavily on doles, which has ultimately compromised the work culture and productivity of their economies. But, then, they were at least rich first.

● **What does a narrative in favour of redistribution say about the economic system in operation?** Essentially, it gives primacy to government as the arbiter of a country's economic trajectory, rather than to markets. It is not a system that will deliver growth, the essential ingredient for maximum prosperity.

Again, no Indian should need much convincing on this. Indianran into its biggest economic crisis in 1990-91 because of irresponsible fiscal spending. Even after the liberalisation of 1991, the country has continued to suffer from the leftovers of its heavily redistributionist past. The fragility of the first half of the 2010s had much to do with fiscal excess. Unnecessary taxation — on occasion retrospective, but mostly prospective — had rendered India unattractive to investment.

It was only recently under the present government, that corporate tax rates were brought at par with levels of competitor countries in Asia, and retrospective tax abolished. Taxes are now being spent on productive investment more than on doles.

It is critical to stick to this path, which already has a good element of redistribution built in, as India gets set to capitalise on a favourable domestic and international scenario for rapid growth.

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The author is chief economist, Vedanta



THE SPEAKING TREE

### Serving Others

SWAMI SIVANANDA SARASWATI

There is so much suffering in the world. What should we do to help?

You cannot completely remove all the suffering from this world. Just as in gout and rheumatism, the pain and swelling shifts from one joint to another joint, so also if suffering is eradicated in one place, another manifest in another place. The world is very crooked. It is like the tail of a dog. So many avatars, yogis, acharyas, saints and prophets came into the world and preached. Still it is crooked; still it is in the same state.

Therefore, do not bother yourself much in reforming the crooked world. This can never be done. Reform yourself first. Then the whole world can be reformed. How can you help the world when you are yourself weak and ignorant? It will be like one blind man leading another blind man. Both will fall into a deep abyss.

The greatest help or service that you can do to the world is the imparting of knowledge of Self. Spiritual help is the highest help you can render to mankind. One who serves the world serves himself. One who helps others really helps himself.

When you serve another person, think that God has given an opportunity to improve, correct and mould yourself by service. Be grateful to the person who gave you a chance to serve.

### Chat Room

#### Malé Jumps Over The Great Wall

Aprópos the Edit, 'How to Deal with Unrequited Love' (Apr 24), the resounding victory of president Mohamed Muizzu's People's National Congress has implications for the Maldives' international alliances, notably with China. Opting for alignment with China might currently appear as the remedy for Maldives to counter the challenges arising from a strained relationship with India. However, relying heavily on China's loan burden pushes poorest countries to the brink of collapse. The diverging paths of Malé and New Delhi were apparent when Muizzu opposed Indian troops' presence in the Maldives. Spoiling relations with India could prove detrimental to the Maldives' economic progress as the tiny nation risks overdependence on China. Fostering constructive neighbourly engagement is crucial for sustaining regional stability and security.

GREGORY FERNANDES

Mumbai

#### When the Deal Doesn't Ad Up

This refers to 'Misleading Ads Issue: SC Widens Scope to Look at All FMCG Cos' by Indu Bhan (Apr 24). This is a real health-risk issue. Adulterated products and misleading ads are not only prevalent in medicines but also widely present in food, drinks, consumer products, paints, etc, segments. People are already suffering from the ill effects of peak pollution. Adulteration of consumer products further affects the health and safety of people. Since this issue affects every single consumer in the nation, the Supreme Court, as a custodian of the welfare of the citizens, needs to act against misleading ads.

AL AGARWAL

By email

The Supreme Court has pulled up Patanjali for misleading ads, and is now looking at ads by other FMCG makers as well. Let the Supreme Court go further and demand that all celebrities who endorse these goods must state that they use the product, as well as how many packets of supari they eat per day, how many caffeine-loaded drinks they consume, etc.

TR RAMASWAMI

Mumbai

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

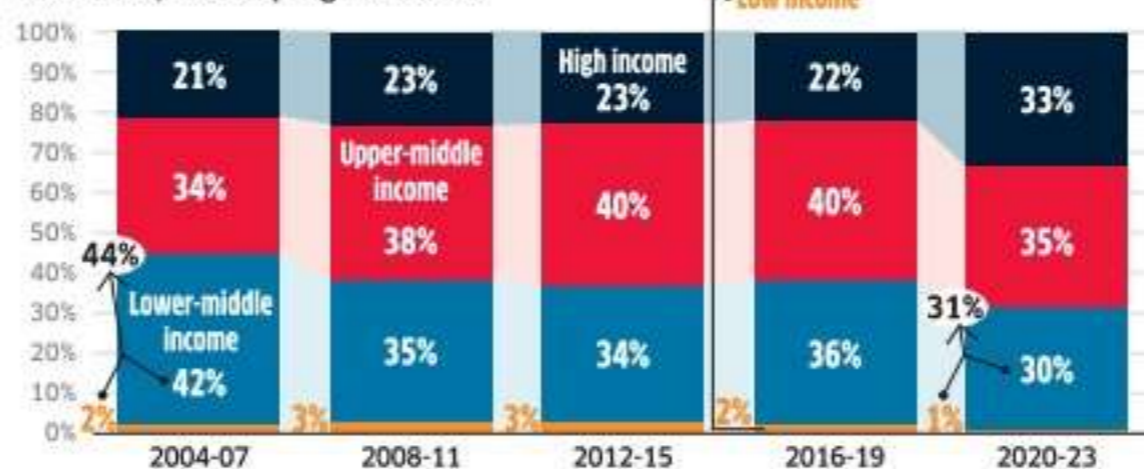
### ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was an ayurved-maker,  
Who kept apologising for being a faker.  
For each yogic pose,  
He gave out a dose,  
Of 'sorries' till they filled an acre.

### FDI Marginalisation

Global investment flows are increasingly concentrated in developed and major emerging markets, exacerbating economic vulnerabilities in smaller and less developed countries. The share of total greenfield FDI projects in LDCs has dwindled from 3% in the mid-2010s to just 1%. And the share of FDI in developing countries that goes to low-income and lower-middle-income economies has decreased by a third over the past decade....

Less-developed countries' marginalisation in foreign direct investment



Note: Income categories based on World Bank classification. Analysis excludes cross-border greenfield projects in China to net the effects of the declining share of China as FDI recipient. Source: UNCTAD

### Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



I didn't notice the emperor's new clothes. I was busy admiring his new sunglasses.

## Send Signal to Investors



Karl P Sauvant

Of WTO's 164 members, 125 have agreed on the text of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA). They are convinced it will help them to attract more FDI for growth, and want to annex it to WTO's main rules.

89 of these 125 members are developing countries, 27 LDCs. IFDA focuses on increasing transparency and reducing bureaucracy to make the investment process easier, but contains no prescriptions on investment policy, market access, investment protection and investor-state dispute settlement. Among other things, IFDA addresses:

- ▶ Routine information host governments should make available to foreign investors.
- ▶ Efficient and transparent handling of investment proposals and resulting projects, and the establishment of a focal point for investors.
- ▶ Suggestions that host countries support investors by creating supplier databases and development programmes.
- ▶ Permitting signatory developing countries to implement the agreement as per their ability, drawing on it for technical assistance and capacity-building by international organisations.
- ▶ While countries can better their investment-facilitation frameworks unilaterally, these 125 countries see value in anchoring their efforts in shared commitments.
- ▶ Moreover, even if this agreement were to be annexed to WTO's main rules, it would leave FDI policy and regulation to individual members. WTO members not wishing to sign IFDA are not bound by its rules, but can enjoy its benefits.
- ▶ India, however, does not support inclusion of this agreement in the WTO rulebook. It argues that WTO is for rule-making on trade, not investment, and that plurilateral agreements can only be included in the WTO rulebook if all

members agree.

However, WTO rules contain agreements on investment:

- ▶ GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services), covering FDI in services sectors, which accounts for some two-thirds of global FDI.
- ▶ WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Investment Measures (TRIMs).

Both agreements address specific aspects of WTO members' FDI measures. IFDA recognises that to trade, firms first need to invest. Indeed, much of the trade occurs within GVCs, and within the international production networks of MNCs.

The inclusion of plurilateral agreements in WTO's rulebook is not new. Plurilaterals like the Agreement on Government Procurement (India has observer status), and the Agreement on Trade in Civil Aircraft are part of the Marrakesh agreement.

India can block or unblock IFDA integration into the WTO rulebook. Unblocking the process would allow 89 other developing countries, including LDCs, to reap its benefits.

There is a way forward that will respect India's argument that IFDA can only be integrated into the WTO rulebook if all members agree.

▶ A ministerial declaration adopted by consensus by all members. This declaration could say that IFDA constitutes a self-contained and separate agreement and any other provisions negotiated on investment-related issues would be separate and distinct from IFDA. The declaration could also state that any IFDA participant is free to limit its membership to only IFDA as agreed.

You'll certainly get attention

### STEP UP TO THE PLATE

Odette Singapore

Forget the fact that this 3 Michelin stars establishment, located inside the National Gallery Singapore, was judged Asia's finest restaurant in 2019 and 2020. Instead, simply enter the 3,100 sq ft Odette and bathe your senses in the French cuisine with Asian/Singaporean characteristics as served since 2015 from the artful kitchen of chef-owner Julien Royer.

Odette's exquisite fare includes spot prawn tartare capped with mussel-imbued cream and caviar; Normandy brown crab with wasabi oil and Nashi pear; and Heirloom beetroot variation. The ambience is classy without being ostentatious, reflecting Royer's view that Odette 'falls between the range of tradition and innovation — food that's tasty and

uses classic cooking techniques, but is interpreted in a modern way'. Sourcing is important for Odette, reflected in the ingredients of its dishes ranging from Kampong pepper roasted pigeon to Kyoto miso-glazed endive. And to put that cherry on top, pastry chef Louisa Lim — named Asia's best pastry chef 2023 by the annual 'World's 50 Best Restaurants' list by media company William Reed — has gorgeous delights. Don't miss the Odette special of La Pêche — poached peaches and raspberries. Odette is exquisite taste.

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# Opinion

THURSDAY, APRIL 25, 2024

## Code Red

Challenge of left-wing extremism can't be dealt with only as a law and order problem

**W**HILE THERE ARE external headwinds to the India growth story, there is a far graver internal threat if it is allowed to spiral out of control, notably, left-wing extremism (LWE) that has a presence in 12 states, some of whom have plentiful reserves of coal, iron ore, aluminium, manganese and so on. These are also tribal heartlands. Unless it is checked, this can have a negative impact on green-field investments in the mining and metal sectors like steel production that underpin rapid economic expansion. In the first decade of the current millennium, LWE's sway extended over 150 districts accounting for 40% of India's geographical area and 35% of its population. The big factor of change since then is that the spread of LWE has steadily shrunk with a sharp decline in the number of incidents and fatalities from the peak levels of 2010 according to official data and the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP).

The NDA regime's efforts against LWE have "gained new energy", recently reflected in Chhattisgarh in which 29 Maoist cadres were killed by security forces. The resource-rich Chhattisgarh in fact is the main battleground of LWE as it accounts for 15 out of the 70-odd LWE-affected districts in the country. While LWE is in retreat, the internal threat to the growth story remains as the extremists still have significant operational capabilities to take on the Indian State. The challenge of dealing with extremism is more than a law and order problem as there is a socio-economic dimension as well. In many of the affected districts in Chhattisgarh and other states, the extremists run a parallel administration. Extremists may be committed to the violent overthrow of the Indian State but they "operate in a vacuum created by the absence of administrative and political institutions, espouse local demands and take advantage of the disenchantment among the exploited segments of the population", according to a status report of the union home ministry in Parliament during the earlier UPA regime.

Significantly, this status paper also recognises the continuing neglect of the land question as extremists raise land and livelihood-related issues. If land reforms are taken up on priority and the landless and the poor in the affected areas are allotted surplus land, this would go a long way to tackling the developmental aspects of LWE. The upshot is that accelerated socioeconomic development in the affected states is imperative to check LWE in the country. To be sure, the current NDA regime also recognises this and indicates that it is implementing existing flagship schemes of the government in the affected districts.

A number of specific schemes are being implemented with a special thrust on expanding the road network, improving telecom connectivity, skill development, education, and financial inclusion of the local population. During the past eight years, 9,356 km of roads at a cost of ₹10,000 crore were laid under two specific schemes for LWE areas. But if the problem is to be rooted out in three years, there is also the need to beef up the State's capabilities on the ground in terms of improving the police-population ratios in the LWE affected states. While more security camps have been set up, at least 22 police stations in Chhattisgarh — the ground zero for LWE — did not have a phone as on January 1, 2022, according to SATP.

## Sundar Pichai has no time for an employee rebellion

IT HAS BECOME clear over the last year that Silicon Valley companies, which for the longest time could keep Wall Street happy with enormous growth alone, finally had to begin existing in the real world. This meant layoffs, cost savings, and doubling down on profit. And it meant putting to bed the tedious myth that these companies ever cared about employees bringing their "whole selves" to work.

That was the stern message from Alphabet Inc. Chief Executive Officer Sundar Pichai's recent memo to workers, sent amid the latest round of discontent at the company — this time over the company's \$1.2-billion contract (shared with Amazon.com Inc.) to provide cloud services to Israel. By Tuesday, at least 50 employees had been fired for involvement in several protests at Google's offices.

Pichai's tone was a stark departure from the company's historically touchy-feely approach to facilitating and heeding employee activism. Not now, Pichai wrote: "This is too important a moment as a company for us to be distracted."

For most of his tenure, Pichai has been described in many quarters as a "peace-time CEO", a highly capable executive steering a ship whose course had already been set by the visionaries who came before him — in his case, Google co-founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page.

That changed when OpenAI fired the first salvo in the artificial intelligence wars in late 2022 with the release of ChatGPT, embarrassing Google by beating it to the breakthrough moment. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, who quickly invested in OpenAI, would lay down the battle lines in the following months, making it clear

he thought Google's business model was now at risk. "They have to defend it all," he told the *Financial Times*.

With a fight on Alphabet's hands, the pressure is on the mild-mannered Pichai to get things in order. This hasn't been going altogether well. The company's rollout of AI has been confused, controversial and suffering from the perception it is lagging behind competitors. Its cloud business remains a distant third in market share behind Microsoft and Amazon. It's telling that Brin has recently returned to Google, like a retired old general "back in the trenches", as the *Wall Street Journal* put it.

So when Google employees held sit-ins and other protests against the company's involvement in Project Nimbus, the company did not hesitate to force out the unruly. "Every single one of those whose employment was terminated was personally and definitively involved in disruptive activity inside our buildings," Google said in a memo to employees. The No Tech for Apartheid group disputes this, saying some "non-participating bystanders" were also let go.

What seems certain, though, is that Google is not remotely considering heeding to the protesters' demands, unlike in 2018 when it decided to back away from Project Maven, a Pentagon contract involving the use of AI. That episode provoked a fresh debate on what role American tech companies should play, or perhaps be obliged to play, in bolstering the tech capabilities of the US and its allies. Google erred on keeping its employees happy and the "don't be evil" culture intact.

Defence money is flowing to technology companies. "America's military-industrial complex has been rapidly expanding from the Capital Beltway to Silicon Valley," concluded a recent report from the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. From 2018 to 2022, Alphabet received \$4.3 billion from US defence spending compared with \$13.5 billion for Microsoft and \$10.2 billion for Amazon. As the defence sector, like every other industry, works to integrate cutting-edge AI, venture capital is pouring into defence tech startups: \$100 billion between 2021 and 2023, according to Pitchbook, more than the amount in the previous seven years combined.

There's opportunity on the table. Google wants it and fears missing out. There is no time for employees to spend work time talking about "disruptive issues" or "debate politics", Pichai has decreed. Looking at Google's predicament, he's probably right.



DAVE LEE  
Bloomberg

## REAL POLITICS

BJP MANIFESTO MORE OF A DEVELOPMENT CHARTER; CONGRESS STILL ROOTED IN CONVENTION

# Aligning words with deeds

**T**HE MANIFESTO MATTERS a lot in elections in a democracy like India. It matters not only as a *kathami* (statement of commitments and promises) for political parties, but also appears as a continuity of their *karami* (doings). When both the *kathami* and *karami* of any political party combine in a balanced way, they impress the hearts and minds of the public. While interacting with people in various parts of India, one observes that they weigh the *karami* to check the *kathami* of the political parties presenting manifestos. The parties' *karami* (performance profile) provides a meaning to the words that are printed in the manifestos. The continuum of performance and a track record of delivery of development schemes by a political party create a trust capital, which in turn puts soul into the words of a manifesto. The public — regardless of whether they are literate or illiterate, urban or rural, modern or traditional — read the promises critically.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) released its Sankalp Patra, the manifesto for the 2024 parliamentary election. The form and contents of the manifesto is organised around the trust value that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has cultivated over 10 years of his governance. The performance of the Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government provides inner strength, meaning, and capacity to influence to the promises that the BJP has made in the Sankalp Patra. The delivery of development initiatives, abolition of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, and construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya have reframed the image of the BJP as a doer. Another feature of the Sankalp Patra is the continuity of the development vision and work that the NDA government has implemented so far. The long-term mission, vision, and goals proposed in the earlier tenures are



BADRI NARAYAN  
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included in the Sankalp Patra in the form of schemes and policies. The third feature of the manifesto is the diction: The vision of development is planned around economic or occupational categories such as poor, middle class, youths, senior citizens, farmers, fishermen, etc. It has refrained from making primordial identity-based commitments. This manifesto triggers our experiential memories that are recent, which is why it has a strong mobilisational impact. Fourth, it promises community support-based social welfare schemes such as Garib Kalyan Yojana, Nari Shakti schemes like Lakhpati Didi, empowerment of self-help groups, and Mudra loans for youths and vulnerable sections such as SCs, STs and OBCs. These are, in fact, capacity-building strategies that prepare them for self-sustainability. For example, free ration and pensions not only respond to the immediate and everyday requirements of the poor but also provide socioeconomic mobility and prepare them to move out of poverty into the lower middle class bracket. The sustainability of the Indian development universe, reflected in the Sankalp Patra in various ways, is a key vision of the BJP that informs its goal of Viksit Bharat. The social welfare vision that the manifesto has adopted towards communities such as

senior citizens appears to be a future-based strategy. India has over 149 million senior citizens, whose numbers may more than double by 2050. The Sankalp Patra has various provisions to create a social psyche (*manas*) for development among the marginalised and vulnerable sections — on the lines of *garv* (pride), *gaurav* (sense of glory), *aatmanirbharta* (self-sufficiency), *vikas* (development), *suraksha* (security), and decolonising our minds, which evolved from Modi's "Panchpran" for a Viksit Bharat in 2047. The Sankalp Patra has also focussed on small initiatives for communities to make them self-sufficient. So, it looks like a development charter more than a political-electoral manifesto. Implementation of "One nation, one election" and the Uniform Civil Code are among the big promises in the manifesto.

The Congress, which is the principal opposition party in this election, also released its manifesto with the title Nyay Patra. It has tried to develop a counter to the BJP's Sankalp Patra. It has also used terms and categories such as youth, women, disabled and LGBTQIA+ as communities to be addressed. The manifesto includes various promises for these communities. But the problem with the Congress's words and promises is that the

**The problem with the Congress's words and promises is that the party is facing a trust crisis. Most of those who benefitted from Congress rule are old or middle-aged**

party is facing a trust crisis. Most of those who benefitted from Congress rule at the Centre are old or middle-aged. For many youths and first-time voters, Congress performances are distant memories, and so these are words which are yet to be trusted. However, the Congress is trying to utilise its performances in fulfilling promises in a few states such as Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. We will have to see how this discursive strategy is going to work on the ground.

Secondly, the entire notion of "nyay", which the Congress has proposed in its manifesto, evokes primordial identities such as caste and religion through some promises. Hence, the party's diction in the manifesto is still rooted in conventional social justice-based politics. Its reiteration of a caste-based survey in the manifesto may satisfy some sections of the marginalised, but it may be unfit for the discourse of a future India that is emerging from the womb of a neoliberal economy. Recently, a study on both manifestos released by the Singapore Development Bank also indicated the populist undertones of the Nyay Patra. This manifesto is trying to assemble various forms and spaces of dissatisfaction and discontent and making provisions to satisfy them. But many discontents that it addresses, such as the censorship of media, have no concrete factual base. Such perceptions, which may or may not be the reality, can be the product of rumours, suspicions, and fears. The manifesto tries to address various anxieties that have no concrete base. So, in some portions, the tone and tenor appear negative and imaginary.

I would conclude that manifestos partly influence electoral mobilisation, but they largely affect the post-election governance and development politics of the nation. Time will tell which party wins this election and whose manifesto would remake India.

## A case for higher RBI penalties



SRINATH SRIDHARAN  
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**REGULATORY PENALTIES** FOR financial institutions (FIs) serve as a vital tool against infractions of legal and regulatory frameworks, as well as lapses in fiduciary responsibility and compliance. FIs are more than profit-seeking entities; they represent the bedrock of trust essential for a nation's financial well-being. That is why Indian regulators should shift from passive oversight to assertive enforcement.

Following the global financial crisis, there was a noticeable surge in regulatory fines levied against banks and other FIs. One might question if this uptick was a belated response from regulators, aimed at deflecting scrutiny from their oversight failures during the market turmoil.

Within the domain of the RBI, the fines imposed on its regulated entities (REs) for breaches are low, insufficient, and a "slap on the wrist", failing to instill a sense of deterrence. Every quarter witnesses the penalisation of one or more REs, yet the fines imposed are often trivial. It has levied fines of less than ₹75 crore in a recent 12-month period. It is not a joke that lawyers' fees to read and advise the RE on regulatory penalty and to give "comfort" to the FI's board is more than the penalty.

The RBI must demonstrate its resolve, particularly when its REs repeatedly violate fundamental requirements such as anti-money laundering/know your customer processes. Such lapses cannot be treated lightly. To be fair, the RBI is the most agile and active of the Indian financial regulators. It does not earn anything from such penalties that accrue in its balance sheet. Its intent of penalties is to let the entity know of its displeasure and to

nudge them into compliance.

A couple of decades ago, the imposition of penalties on banks would have sparked moral outrage among bank leaders and board members. The current paltry penalties levied by regulators can be likened to monopoly money — devoid of real consequence. Inadequate penalties fail to instill a sense of accountability among FIs. However, in today's hyper-capitalist environment, supposed moral righteousness can easily be painted by various PR strategies funded by hefty marketing budgets.

Here's a proposal for the RBI: impose hefty fines on REs for violations, ranging in tens and hundreds of crores rather than lakhs, depending on the severity of the infraction. Rather than directing the penalties to the RBI balance sheet, let the REs bring that amount as special-tier equity capital under a separate category termed "regulatory risk capital".

This designated tier can be publicly disclosed each quarter, shedding light on the bank's struggles with compliance. Not only would this bolster the institution's capital reserves to address deficiencies in regulatory behaviour, but it would also factor in the associated risks. By declaring penalties under this tier, FIs become directly accountable to their shareholders.

Furthermore, in cases of significant breaches, the RBI could implement higher risk weights for deficient products solely

for the offending FI. This measure, effective until the next supervisory inspection, would diminish the competitive advantage of the entity in the market, impacting its financial performance and serving as a deterrent against non-compliance.

Presently, FIs readily convene board meetings to acknowledge regulatory correspondence and promptly settle penalties. Depending on the gravity of the transgression, the stock markets may experience a brief reaction lasting one or two days. Numerous investor relations professionals dismiss such penalties as an unavoidable "cost of doing regulated business in India", a stance deemed unjust but accepted as reality. Compounding matters, the presence of former regulators on the boards and advisory boards of many FIs inadvertently lends tacit validation to these occurrences.

When regulators are compelled to pursue compliance from their REs, it reflects unfavourably on the entities themselves. Without a fundamental shift towards a culture of compliance as a core value and integral aspect of conducting business, the outlook for society appears bleak.

Rarely do consumers complain as the time and process complexities are loaded against them. The RBI and other regulators should reconsider using digital tools to have a "customer is right" model of grievance redress. Again they can impose significantly higher financial penalties for

**Rather than directing the penalties to the RBI balance sheet, let entities bring that amount as a special-tier equity capital**

**Significant fines are essential to compel banks to allocate resources towards bolstering control systems and mitigating unaddressed risks**

any instances of non-compliance or substantial consumer grievances.

Following fines, FIs typically allocate greater resources towards compliance and monitoring efforts. However, the effectiveness of remedial actions often falls short due to inadequate enforcement and monitoring, both internally and by regulatory authorities. This suggests the necessity for bolstering supervisory teams to enhance oversight capabilities, something that the RBI has been scaling its focus on.

By introducing additional capital requirements as penalties and imposing significant financial consequences on management, regulatory authorities can more effectively incentivise adherence to regulatory standards and foster a culture of compliance within FIs. Significant fines are essential to compel banks, particularly their management and boards, to allocate resources towards bolstering control systems and mitigating unaddressed risks. For FIs, financial performance matters.

But then, concepts like financial inclusion, financial literacy, and consumer protection are the social order of regulators. To ensure that FIs comprehend these social needs folded into regulatory compliance norms and processes, it often requires linking consequences to personal incentives. Call these higher penalties "cost of conduct". Like a point system in video games, hold these penalties as a way to affect the continued tenure of the management, as well as regulatory nod for any extension or hike in compensation. Bringing in punitive actions that can influence those would be a signboard for better causal behaviour.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Unfair playing field

According to media reports, amid mounting opposition pressure, the Election Commission of India (ECI) is learnt to have started examining complaints against a speech made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Rajasthan. This is nothing new for PM Modi who relentlessly badmouths the Congress party in every speech and roadshow. Is he scared of the Congress? Why doesn't he talk about

increasing unemployment and inflation? The ECI said it has started examining Modi's controversial speech, instead of immediately launching proceedings against him and the Bharatiya Janata Party for inciting communal passions and hatred. It sounds very much like the State Bank of India asking for four months to provide details of the electoral bond donations. How can the ECI act against Modi, who appointed the incumbents? Unless

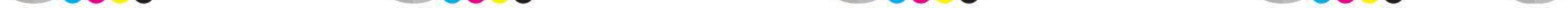
the Supreme Court warns, the poll panel won't move ahead. Its commissioners will be "examining" the issue till the election is over. —Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee, Faridabad

**Banned spice mixes**

Food adulteration is not new to India. Companies such as Dabur, Zandu, Baidyanath, Nestlé, and Patanjali have been found guilty at some point or the other. The case involving MDH and Everest is more embarrassing because

Hong Kong and Singapore have banned a few of their spices due to the presence of a high level of pesticide residues. Though these countries' food regulators will share their reports, it raises a big question over the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India. The regulator needs to do a lot of soul searching because it has not been doing its duty diligently. —Bal Govind, Noida

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## Surat symptoms

The BJP is resorting to the foulest means to eliminate any opposition

A malady that enfeebles Indian democracy – the elimination of contest, at the level of ideas, and political mobilisation – got a geographical tag in Surat, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate has been declared elected unopposed to the Lok Sabha. Democracy without an Opposition ceases to be one, but the ruling BJP has declared it as an objective in its slogan, a Congress-less India. Such an intent is in itself authoritarian, even if pursued through fair electoral means. What unfolded in Surat is far from fair: it was the foulest of tactics outside of any electoral play book. Signatories of Congress candidate Nilesh Kumbhani's nomination papers declared on affidavit that their signatures were forged. All political parties routinely field a dummy candidate to deal with the unlikely event of the primary candidate's death or rejection of nomination papers. In Surat, Suresh Padsala, who was fielded by the Congress as dummy, also had his nomination papers rejected after one of his proposers declared on affidavit that his signature too was forged. Eight other candidates withdrew their nominations, leaving the BJP candidate, Mukesh Dalal, as the only one standing. He was promptly declared the winner on April 22 by the Surat District Collector and also returning officer, and the BJP began celebrations. If at all the unopposed election of the BJP candidate signifies an absolute consensus among Surat's nearly 17 lakh voters, it is a silence that speaks loudly about a serious illness in India's democracy.

This elimination of contest through the misuse of state power, money, and misinformation has become a major threat to Indian democracy. Another candidate picked by the Congress in Gujarat not only left the party but also joined the BJP within a few days. Mr. Kumbhani's proposers were his brother-in-law, nephew and a business partner, and the story of their forged signatures does not sit well in a functioning democracy. Mr. Kumbhani is not protesting either. He has gone uncommunicado. Early this year, an election officer himself tampered with the ballot to declare the BJP candidate the winner in the Chandigarh mayoral election – a result which was overturned by the Supreme Court of India. It is unlikely that the contest would have been close in Surat, had it happened. The BJP had won the seat with massive margins in all Lok Sabha elections since 1989. Therefore, the point about the uncontested election of Mr. Dalal is the extermination of the Opposition rather than about his own victory. Contestations of ideas and their synergies over centuries have made India hospitable for democracy. The BJP needs to evolve a political culture in which disagreements with opponents are negotiated through fair contests.

## Hot button

Voters must be incentivised by minimising risks due to heat exposure

The Election Commission of India (ECI) suspects ambient heat dissuaded voters from turning out in greater numbers during the first phase of the general election, on April 19. It has since constituted a task force with representatives from itself, the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and the National Disaster Management Authority to assess local heat and humidity for five days before each phase of polling and work with State electoral apparatuses to ensure adequate facilities at booths. The IMD declares heat wave conditions in a region depending on whether one of a few conditions is met, centred on deviations of the daytime temperature from the decade-long average. But these declarations are not concerned with the people's experience of ambient heat. Even without a heat wave, people of all ages are at significant risk if the relative humidity increases the wet-bulb temperature beyond 30° C and they spend more than a few minutes outdoors. Heat can also accumulate and persist in some locations more than others. For example, semi-planned or unplanned areas can exacerbate the risk of heat stress through poor ventilation, crowding, not installing shaded resting spots, and overlooking heat radiated by asphalt surfaces.

Getting more people to vote is like getting more children to school, which the midday meal scheme contributed significantly to. The ECI would do well to implement similar measures to incentivise voting by minimising heat exposure. The physiological adversity a voter may suffer when commuting between home and polling booth can be controlled to a limited extent by tweaking the polling dates and hours. (In the same vein, rescheduling the elections to non-summer months may spare voters the heat but not the wrath of some other elements.) The task force must ensure every booth has shaded waiting areas with seating; air flow; oral rehydration options; sanitary facilities; fruits; updated first-aid kits; wheelchairs; accessible architecture; and medical services every dozen booths or so. Some additional needs go beyond the task force. For example, the ECI's pledge to increase voters' awareness of heat management protocols and provisions at booths should not encroach on the duties or resources of the Accredited Social Health Activists, and must instead bank on a separate cadre. The Health Ministry must also collect and share data about heat-related morbidity and mortality as well as reconcile its numbers with those of the National Crime Records Bureau, so that officials can identify problems and institute reliable long-term countermeasures.

# The conflict, from Nebuchadnezzar to Netanyahu

The ghost of Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar (642-562 BC) would have probably gleefully approved of the recent first-ever direct projectile exchanges between Iran and Israel. After all, he sowed the seeds of this historic animosity in 586 BC by destroying the first Jewish temple, sacking the Jewish kingdom of Judea and taking its citizens in captivity to Babylonia. Jewish scripture Jeremiah described Nebuchadnezzar as the "Destroyer of Nations".

### A long enmity

While much water has flown down the Nile during the tumultuous regional history, the Jew-Persia enmity has survived 26 centuries; barring last century's Pahlavi era in Iran when the two non-Arab, pro-American states had a tactical alliance. But the advent of the Islamic Republic in 1979 restored the historic "normalcy", and the Mullahs in Tehran have been unswerving in denouncing Israel as "smaller Satan" and vowing its destruction. To this end, Iran has pursued weapons of mass destruction capacity, including drones, missiles and nuclear weapons. Leaders of Israel, the region's only putative nuclear weapon state, consider Iran an "existential threat" and have vowed to never allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.

Till this month, the two confined their ill-concealed hostility to shadow boxing. Iran has backed non-state proxies such as Hezbollah, the Houthis and Hamas which have become a pernicious threat to Israel's security while providing Tehran the fig leaf of deniability. Israel too has waged a determined campaign against them. It has also been engaged in undeclared air and missile operations against Iranian and Hezbollah presence in Syria and has tried to sabotage Iran's nuclear programme. A precarious strategic dynamic had come into place – until an unacknowledged airstrike on April 1, suspected by Israel, on the Iranian embassy compound in Damascus, killing seven Iranians, including two generals. Iran retaliated on April 13 with over 300 drones and missiles on the Israeli targets, Israel claimed that 99% of the Iranian projectiles were shot down. In an unacknowledged tit-for-tat five days later, Israel hit the Isfahan airbase in central Iran with drones and a missile. This first direct confrontation between the two long-sworn enemies appeared designed by each to declare victory to their respective domestic audience. However, they have set a "new normal", with dangerous portents.

Several historical, religious and geopolitical factors have sharpened Israel-Iran hostility. Four centuries of crusades widened this divide. Unlike Europe where Jews were often persecuted, small Jewish communities ("Mizrahi") lived amicably



**Mahesh Sachdev**

is a former Indian Ambassador and a West Asia expert

among Arabs from Morocco to Iran, albeit with ghetto-based existence often confining them to trades such as money-lending and jewellery-making. The Zionist movement since 1897 urged the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine and the Balfour Declaration provided it a quasi-formal commitment. As a larger number of occidental Jews ("Sephardim") migrated to Palestine under a British mandate, terrorism by Jewish gangs such as Stern and Irgun sought to push out the local Arabs. The Nazi holocaust of Jews during World War Two accelerated the exodus of the Sephardim to Palestine.

In 1947, the United Nations adopted a resolution to partition Palestine. While the state of Israel was created, for various reasons, the intended Arab state of Palestine and the neutral city of Jerusalem could not be formed. In 1967, Israel defeated Arab armies and occupied Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza which have largely been under its control since. Worldwide demand for a "two-state solution" has been gaining momentum. While Arab states have largely paid lip service to the "Palestine Cause", Iran has been more vocal and strident. It created the anti-Israel "axis of resistance" comprising Hamas, Hezbollah and Houthis, sustaining them with weapons and money. It has created an elite Quds (Jerusalem) Force to support them. Much of its military preparedness and nuclear programme has been Israel-centric.

Although Islam initially regarded Jews as "People of the Book", their perceived duplicity later cast them in a negative hue. An epic Muslim victory over a Jewish army at Khaybar near Madinah in 628 AD, set a new hostile historic benchmark. Even today, the Arab anti-Israeli demonstrators can often be seen chanting in Arabic "Khaybar Khaybar ya Yahud, jais Muammad sauf ya'ud" ("Khaybar, Khaybar O Jews, Muhammad's army shall return"). Last year, Iran unveiled "Khaybar" a 2,000-km range missile capable of hitting Israel. Most Iranians are Shia and Iran has sought to foster loyalties among Shias of Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and even South Asia.

### The plans by Iran and Israel

At a geo-political level, Iran also seeks to appeal to the global one billion-strong Muslim Ummah by playing up the emotive Palestine Cause. Tehran seeks to create a cleavage between Muslims in the street, who are pro-Palestine, and moderate Arab regimes seeking a non-disruptive political solution to the problem. The moderate Arab regimes resent Tehran's one-upmanship and aggressiveness of its non-state proxies. Since 2020, the United States has tried to create an anti-Iran "Abraham Accord" alliance comprising

Several historical, religious and geopolitical factors have sharpened the Jewish-Persian conflict, which can impact India's 'act west' policy if it flares up

some moderate Arab states and Israel. Some observers believe that the Hamas attack of October 7 was meant to disrupt the regional heavy-weight Saudi Arabia joining this alliance.

With that short backdrop, we can now analyse the strategic motives of Iran and Israel in the current conflict. Iran believes that it needs more time as it is still short of a nuclear weapon capability. To buy more time, Tehran wishes to bleed Israel into wars of attrition with its proxies while avoiding a frontal conflict. Israel, on the other hand, a much smaller country with a small standing army, aims to wage short swift wars leveraging the state-of-art U.S. armaments designed to maintain regional superiority. Barring the West Bank (which it considers the Judea), Jerusalem (site of the Jewish temple) and the Golan Heights overlooking Syria, it professes no territorial ambitions. Israel vacated Gaza in 2005 to avoid human costs and is currently waging a no-holds-barred war against Hamas to avenge the October 7 monstrosity.

Arab and Muslim regimes feel uncomfortable with the horrible death and devastation in Gaza during the seven-month-long Israeli invasion. They also fear being sucked into a war in which Iran, unable to inflict pain on the two Satans, could turn to their regional cahoots. They also fear that the resultant regional instability would disrupt oil production, their economic mainstay. While flaunting their strategic autonomy, they know their vulnerabilities and are clenching at various straws in the wind. The Saudi Foreign Minister's dash to Islamabad on April 15 was likely to have been prompted by the need to enlist Pakistan for the Kingdom's security. Similar motivations seem to be at work with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi wrapping up his three-day state visit to Pakistan on April 24.

### Potential impact on India

An open conflict between Israel and Iran would impact Prime Minister Narendra Modi's energetic "act west" policy. Apart from an expected oil price surge, it would create insecurity for over nine million Indian expatriates in West Asia remitting around \$40 billion annually. It would also dent the prospects for carefully laid down multilateral architecture such as I2U2 (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the U.S.) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

Last, but not least, with a large Muslim community and the third-highest Shia population after Iran and Pakistan, such a conflict may have domestic ramifications for India. All reasons enough for India to intensify its prayers that a direct Iran-Israel conflict is avoided and Nebuchadnezzar and Khaybar remain confined to history books.

# The Indian seafarer deserves better in choppy high seas

Amid rising safety concerns among Indian seafarers following the recent attacks on commercial ships in sensitive geographical areas such as the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, India submitted three papers to the 11th Session of the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) Legal Committee (LEG), which is from April 22 to 26, 2024. These submissions address crucial issues such as seafarers' security, contract terms, and broader maritime security challenges. India has stressed the need for a comprehensive approach to maritime security and advocated improved contractual conditions for seafarers. While acknowledging the IMO's efforts to combat maritime fraud, India has called for broader international cooperation to tackle various maritime threats, including piracy, armed robbery, extremist attacks, regional conflicts, and emerging risks such as drone attacks and the use of maritime weapons.

### Sea piracy is back

Recent pirate attacks off the coast of Somalia, including hijackings, suggest a resurgence of piracy. In December 2023 and January 2024, Somali pirates targeted vessels such as the *MV Ruen* and *MV Lila Norfolk*. India has called for vigilance, proactive measures, and international cooperation to combat piracy and protect seafarers, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

India has also highlighted the impact of unlawful recruitment practices on seafarers' well-being and international trade. Since 2020, over 200 cases of seafarer exploitation have been reported to the Indian Maritime Administration. India has urged international coordination to address these issues and ensure seafarers' rights under the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006.

The maritime industry, vital for global trade, depends heavily on seafarers who often face challenges and risks.

India, with 9.35% of global seafarers and



**K.M. Seethi**

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With Indians playing a significant role in keeping the global shipping industry running, their welfare and safety acquires significance

ranking third globally, confronts these issues, evident from recent incidents such as the seizure of *MSC Aries* and the detention of *MT Heroic Idun* at Nigeria (this last case went on for several months).

These events highlight the vulnerabilities of Indian seafarers, catalogued by a survey, showing how a majority lacked legal representation, felt unfairly treated, and were unaware of their rights. India has submitted papers to the IMO's Legal Committee, which emphasise seafarers' security and contract terms. Yet, enhanced international cooperation is needed to safeguard seafarers and ensure uninterrupted navigation, especially amid rising incidents involving Indian seafarers and geopolitical tensions.

Three years ago, the Maritime Union of India highlighted a 40% increase in kidnappings in the Gulf of Guinea, with 134 cases of assault, injury, and threats reported. Incidents such as the kidnapping of 20 Indian nationals from the *MT Duke* (off the western coast of Africa) and the ship owners paying hefty ransoms highlight the dangers faced by seafarers.

### An Indian initiative on rights

In response, the Indian government and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) launched the 'human rights at sea' initiative. Reports reveal cases of seafarers being held in foreign jails, stranded in foreign waters, and subjected to illegal detentions. 'Human Rights at Sea' has highlighted abuses against Indian seafarers, including 200 held in foreign jails and 65 stranded in Indonesia for 151 days. The NHRC has highlighted the challenges of holding ship owners accountable for violations against Indian seafarers operating under foreign registrations to evade taxes and has stressed the need for proactive cooperation among stakeholders and mechanisms to protect human rights in the maritime industry.

Maritime piracy is a growing concern for Indian seafarers. With around 2,50,000 Indian

seafarers serving on specialised cargo vessels worldwide, recent data from the International Maritime Bureau show a more than 10% increase in serious piracy incidents over the last 10 months. Armed pirates have boarded nearly 90% of targeted cargo ships, endangering seafarers.

Addressing piracy requires a comprehensive land-based solution. While private guards on merchant navy ships can deter piracy, the volatile nature of piracy-prone oceans poses challenges, as highlighted by Bjorn Hojgaard, CEO of Anglo-Eastern Univan Group, a major employer of Indian seafarers.

Further, reports suggest that Iranian shipping companies, in collaboration with international recruiters, exploit Indian seafarers by luring them with false promises of high salaries and opportunities in the Middle East. These seafarers often face overwork, are provided insufficient food, and are forced into transporting illegal cargo, despite paying hefty fees to secure overseas jobs.

### Seafarers need support

Despite these risks, many Indian seafarers remain committed to their careers at sea, which makes it imperative to have improved rights and protection. Currently representing 9.35% of the global seafaring population, India aims to increase its share to 20% in the next 10 to 20 years, with ship management companies playing a crucial role.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian seafarers demonstrated their resilience and professionalism, enhancing India's standing in the global maritime market. The Ukraine-Russia conflict has also created opportunities for new players in the Indian maritime sector.

Recent attacks on commercial ships have heightened safety concerns among Indian seafarers, with some considering quitting their jobs due to security fears. This underlines the urgent need for government support and enhanced protection measures.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Campaign trail, politics

It appears that the Bharatiya Janata Party's lofty goal of 'crossing 400 seats' in the ongoing general elections is facing hurdles. This can be read in the silence after much chest thumping. The rhetoric has now moved to tapping religious narratives. The lowest point was in conveniently interpreting the Congress party's

manifesto on income distribution and inequality. It is surprising to have the Prime Minister of India stoop so low.

**Soundarajan,**  
Chennai

There may be many who are criticising the Prime Minister for his recent speech in Rajasthan by terming it as hate towards a particular religion. But the

Congress and its allies seem to have conveniently forgotten that they have been the pioneers in using the caste and religion tag. It is unfortunate that our political leaders are stooping so low in order to divide the people for their own benefits. This needs to be condemned and the only way is to vote wisely.

**A.P. Thiruvadi,**  
Chennai

As a senior citizen aged 92, I long to see a newly elected government at the Centre which has Cabinet Ministers are honest and straightforward in their dealings and transactions. Voters should think twice before exercising their franchise. I hope all voters have my sincere plea in mind.

**Mani Natarajan,**  
Chennai

### At Chepauk

If Ruturaj Gaikwad showed what power-hitting is all about, Marcus Stoinis showed that savage-hitting can do the trick ('Sport' page, April 24). He scored his runs with utmost ease and in style. His progressive decimation of CSK's bowling attack once again underscored the need to clear the boundary on a regular basis. He is an

abundantly gifted player who may not suit Test cricket but is an essential member of any squad in the shorter formats of the game. One feels sorry for the yellow supporters who left the ground in total disbelief. I wish to see a few more match-winning knocks from this Australian powerhouse.

**V. Lakshmanan,**  
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

# The reality of the Swachh Bharat Mission

India was ranked right at the bottom of 180 countries in the Environment Performance Index (EPI) in 2022. The EPI ranks countries on climate change performance, environmental health, and ecosystem vitality. It measures 40 performance indicators across 11 issue categories, such as air quality, and drinking water and sanitation. The government responded to the rank saying the methodology is faulty and does not quantify the Indian scenario objectively.

For 10 years, the Modi government has embarked on much-hyped campaigns of development. These included the Swachh Bharat Mission, the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, and the National Clean Air Programme.

Is the EPI linked to these missions? It should be, because these missions aim to enable better living standards. The SBM is meant to address the issue of WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Health). Likewise, the SCM is supposed to deliver on the clean energy requirements of towns. However, what we have seen is an increase in the vulnerability of the population owing to air and water pollution, among others.

**The Swachh Bharat Mission**  
So, what went wrong? Let us take the example of the SBM and SBM 2.0, which was launched in 2021 and which aims to make all cities free of garbage. Sanitation and waste management in India are associated with the wide prevalence of caste. Historically, the subjugated castes have been forced to carry out sanitation work. The SBM tried to create a narrative that sanitation is everyone's job. Instead, it has ended up continuing the same old caste practices.

The SBM is a politically successful project; no Opposition party or community has raised objections to it. While the entire



**Tikender Singh Panwar**

is a former directly elected Deputy Mayor of Shimla and an urban practitioner

A scheme fully owned by the state has become a toolkit for privatisation of public health services and continues caste discrimination

project is governed and monitored by state agencies, the design makes it clear that large capital-intensive technologies are promoted.

The Union government claims that India is open defecation-free, but the reality is different. A Comptroller and Auditor General report in 2020 raised many questions about the government's claims over the success of the SBM on this front. It indicated the poor quality of construction of toilets under this scheme. A few urbanisation studies pointed out that in some metros, communities in slums still do not have access to public toilets. Even in rural India, toilet construction has not been linked to waste treatment. In peri-urban areas, the faecal sludge generated is tossed into the environment. Septic tanks are cleaned by manual scavengers and the sludge is thrown into various water systems.

One thing the government intended to do via SBM was to reduce the involvement of people in waste management by replacing them with large, capital-intensive technologies. However, these installations have refused to live up to their promoters' promises, leaving town after town screaming for resources to fix them and, importantly, respond to the health crises emerging from badly managed waste (if at all) as well as the rates and forms of urbanisation local governments believed these technologies would support. In this scenario, the governments outsourced most of the work to private players, who employed the same subjugated communities to handle waste.

Take, for example, solid and liquid waste management in cities. In most towns, the Union government is employing technological solutions in handling solid waste. Some of these solutions are in the form of waste-to-energy plants and biological methanation. But there are barely any success stories in either case.

City governments are being

asked to buy more machines including road sweeping machines that cost no less than ₹1 crore, more vehicles to transport the waste from one corner to another with geo-tagging, and so on. Funds are made available to the city governments for such plans. However, all this work is being handed over to large contractors entering the city domains for making sanitation a profit entity. Most of the workers employed by these contractors are Dalits. Hence, a scheme fully owned by the state has become a toolkit for the privatisation of public health services and continues caste discrimination.

On March 30, 2024, in the Himachal Pradesh High Court, the Urban Development Department said that there are just five sanitation inspectors in the Shimla Municipal Corporation, which comprises 34 wards. Instead of recruiting more such inspectors, this cadre is being declared dead after they retire. In a State where there are more than 50 municipal bodies, there are only 20 sanitation inspectors, which means that there are some municipalities that have no sanitation inspectors.

There are similar problems with other programmes too. Such failures have been dragging down India's EPI performance.

**Development model**  
The EPI may be quite comprehensive. However, one of its features of mapping exposes the unsustainability of our development processes. This means that or development models must be altered. The EPI must also be seen in the background of a recent judgment where the Supreme Court observed the links between climate change and basic human rights. Climate scientists have said that the reasons for the current problems are anthropogenic and systemic in nature.

We will have to link policies to human rights in order to tackle these issues.

# Thriving on the politics of fear

The BJP's ads show the party's contempt for the Constitution and the rule of law

## STATE OF PLAY

Janaki Nair



The Congress' victory in the 2023 Assembly election in Karnataka was a difficult pill for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to swallow, especially since the grand old party had secured its biggest vote share in 34 years. Then the Congress decided to implement its five guarantees: free bus rides for women, ₹2,000 a month to each woman-headed household, free electricity up to 200 units, 10 kgs of rice, and guarantees for the young and unemployed. But above all, the Siddaramaiah government had wrested control of the police. It has lost no opportunity to remind the police to return to the impartiality to which they are committed and literally shed their orange tinge (in two police stations, Kaup and Vijayapura, the police donned saffron for Vijayadashami). In short, the government has honoured its commitment to the Constitution both by offering welfare schemes and by protecting all citizens equally.

The previous 'double engine' government (2019-23) had introduced, with extraordinary speed and little discussion, the Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Act, 2021; the Karnataka Religious Structures (Protection) Act, 2021; and the Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Act, 2022. These laws had emboldened the majority and induced fear among all the minorities. They had also bred a whole layer of intermediaries (apart from the police) who decided which parts of the cattle trade would be allowed. The regime also honoured as 'martyrs' those who

had dubious pasts, such as Harsha of Shivamogga.

So it was with some relief that the citizens returned to things that mattered after May 2023: jobs, alleviation of poverty and price rise, freedom of speech, the rule of law, and dealing with the prospect of drought. The fulfilled guarantees drove public discourse in a different direction.

On the eve of elections, given that it had no positive pushback against the guarantees, the BJP tried to once again produce fear. There was an attempt to hoist a Bhagwa Dwaj on government property; it swiftly thwarted. A purported quarrel between a shopkeeper and a gang of local toughs (Hindus and Muslims) was handily turned into opposition to the Hanuman Chalisa, but this too died down. Then a blast in Rameshwaram Café and the unfortunate killing of Neha Hiremath by her former classmate Fayaz have fallen like ripe fruit into the hands of the BJP and given it the verve it lacked on urgent economic questions.

Now, the BJP's full-page advertisement carefully curates random 'fears' into a full-fledged red alert. It crosses all standards of decency and amplifies isolated events. It also stands in striking contrast to the Congress' advertisements based on its guarantees and on the unfulfilled Union government promises. The BJP advertisement, in stark black

and red, warns against voting for the Congress. A man who resembles Mr. Siddaramaiah leaves bloody footprints as he walks away. A swirl of accusations posed as questions surround him: should a college going girl be sacrificed for love jihad? Should tea drinkers have to fear bombs in a café? Should those visiting the Vidhana Soudha hear the slogan 'Pakistan Zindabad'? Should the grazing cow have to fear the chopping block? In this compilation of nine accusations, six single out the Muslim as the enemy and three others serve as assorted warnings about Naxal violence, the reallocation of Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe welfare funds, and the sharing of Cauvery waters. The advertisement appears in all the major Kannada newspapers, but curiously, the BJP has chosen to keep this warning only for the Kannada-reading public.

The advertisement about the dangers of voting for the Congress is ironically the BJP's warning against itself. Wracked by internal dissidence, it falls back on the exhausted capital of Islamophobia, hoping to assert itself as the keeper of law and order, including instant 'encounter' and 'bulldozer' justice. It thus reiterates its contempt for the Constitution and indeed the rule of law that the people of Karnataka enjoy.

The Congress' aggressive campaign for the rights of the Government of Karnataka to its share of taxes is exemplified in its use of the *chombu*, colloquially, an empty vessel. The BJP has now claimed, perhaps emboldened by the Prime Minister's impunity, that the Karnataka *chombu* is full of the blood of Hindus. As a coded call for 'revenge,' it thus buries any idea of Karnataka or, indeed, of India.

# Tensions grow in West Asia, a heavily militarised region

West Asia accounts for 30% of the global arms imports and spends the most on the military among all other regions

## DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy

West Asia supplies the most extractive resources for the world's consumption, which makes peace an imperative in the region. Yet tensions are escalating in the region on account of the Israel-Gaza conflict, the hostilities between Iran and Israel, and the attacks and counter-attacks between Israel and Iran-backed militias from Lebanon and Yemen.

Apart from this, the region has also become one of the most heavily militarised in the world. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's 'Trends in International Arms Transfers 2023', four of the top 10 largest importers of arms last year were from West Asia, with the U.S. being the main supplier (**Table 1**).

All this has resulted in West Asia becoming a powder keg.

## Crises in the region

Israel's shadow war with Tehran underwent a dramatic escalation recently. Iran launched its first-ever full-scale military attack against Israel on April 14 in retaliation to the Benjamin Netanyahu government's attack on April 1 on an Iranian compound in Syria in which General Mohammed Reza Zehadi, the top commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, was killed.

Israel has been continuing its attacks on the Gaza Strip in response to the October 7 Hamas attack which led to the death of 1,139 people. Nearly 34,000 Palestinians have been killed so far. The conflict persists despite the international community urging for an immediate ceasefire. The 10-month-long Gaza war and the amping up of Iran-Israel hostilities has caused concern among international actors amid existing tensions such as the unresolved Yemeni civil war, the Lebanese

political crisis, the 14-year-long Syrian civil war, and the Turkey-Cyprus conflict, among others.

Amid these crises, West Asia today accounts for almost 30% of the global arms imports and spends the most on the military among all other regions in the world. **Chart 2** shows region-wise military expenditure as a share of the GDP. In this measure, West Asia and North Africa have been consistently leading for over three decades now, though the share has come down from the peak of over 10% of GDP, reported in the 1990s. West Asia spent 4.6% of its GDP in 2020 on the military, compared with 3.3% in North America.

## Share of GDP

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the oil and natural gas rich nation-states, have consistently spent over 5% of their GDP on defence in recent years, the highest among countries in this region. Jordan, Oman, Kuwait and Israel have also spent close to 5% of their GDP on their militaries in the last decade. **Chart 3** shows the military expenditure as a share of GDP for individual countries in the West Asian region. Though Saudi Arabia and Oman's shares are on a decreasing trend, they continue to lead others in the world in this measure.

This is also the region where the share of the labour force employed in the armed forces is the highest. **Chart 4** shows that 2.5% of the labour force is engaged in the military in the West Asian and North African region, compared with only 1.2% in Europe and Central Asia.

The consistent demand for arms can be attributed to the growing instability in the region fuelled by domestic insurgencies, transnational terrorist attacks, unstable regional boundaries, and, in some cases, foreign policies and the need to project "hard power". The hanger of the 'Arab Spring' that led to a lot of churning and resulted in the aforementioned issues has also contributed to the increased militarisation.

## A region in turmoil

The data for the charts were sourced from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute



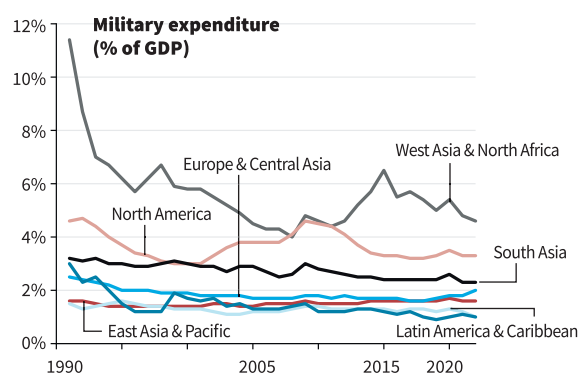
**Escalating tensions:** A drone view of the apparent remains of a ballistic missile in the desert following a massive missile and drone attack by Iran on Israel, near the southern city of Arad, Israel. REUTERS

**Table 1:** United States has been the main supplier of arms to the West Asian countries. Numbers in %

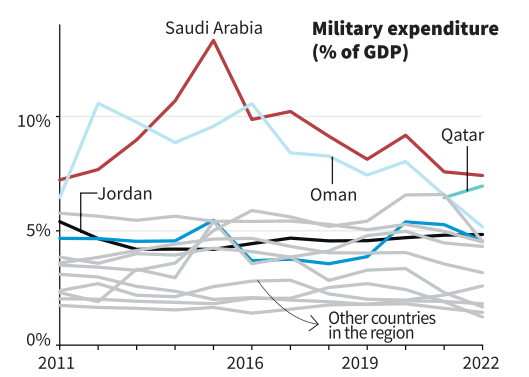
Recipient	Top supplier	Second	Third
Qatar	U.S. (49)	U.K. (26)	Italy (21)
S. Arabia	U.S. (72)	Spain (15)	France (6.5)
Turkey	Spain (51)	Germany (31)	U.S. (11)
UAE	U.S. (55)	France (27)	Turkey (12)
Israel	U.S. (53)	Germany (47)	Italy (0.6)
Kuwait	Italy (94)	U.S. (6.0)	-
Bahrain	U.S. (100)	-	-
Iran	Russia (100)	-	-

While most of these countries are sourcing their military supplies from the U.S. and Europe, Iran is entirely dependent on Russia

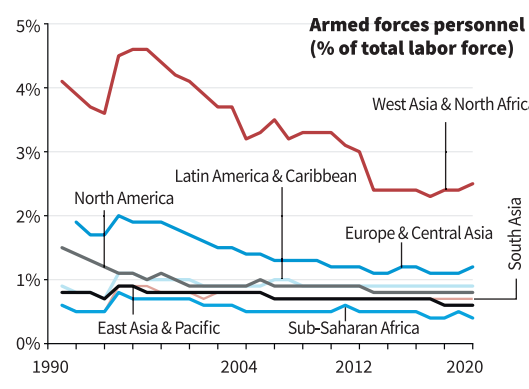
**Chart 2:** The chart shows the region-wise military expenditure as a share of their GDP. West Asia and North Africa have been consistently leading all regions for over three decades



**Chart 3:** The chart shows the military expenditure as a share of a country's GDP in the West Asian region. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman lead in this measure in the region



**Chart 4:** The chart shows the share of the labour force employed in the armed forces. The West Asian and North African region leads in this measure



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 25, 1974

## Power Board's frantic efforts to get coal

Madras, April 24: The Tamil Nadu Electricity Board faced with coal crisis is leading a hand to mouth existence with only 2.5 days' stocks on hand. The daily requirement of both Basin Bridge and Ennore Thermal Stations is about 4,500 tonnes. The Chairman of the Board, Mr. M.G. Raja Ram, said: "I am frantically searching for coal all over the country. With the impending railway strike, coal receipts, particularly from Singareni, are very poor."

The Chairman said one ship, authorised by the Director-General of Shipping, was at present loading about 6,000 tonnes of coal from Calcutta Port. This was expected to dock in Madras in about ten days. The Board had chartered a foreign ship with the help of the South India Shipping Corporation and it was now on its way to Calcutta for loading coal.

He said coal arrivals from Singareni had been disappointing. As against a monthly allotment of about 70,000 tonnes, despatches from Singareni for Madras had never exceeded 40 per cent of the requirement.

The State grid had now an average supply of 20.5 million units daily (this was the position at midnight on April 23). The relief from Neyveli accounted for about 5.6 million units, while Kerala gave about 1.7 million units on an average in Ennore, one 110 mw set and one 60 mw set were generating power. The average generation was about 97 mw or 2.3 million units a day. Basin Bridge gave 1.05 million units. Hydrel power that was fed into the grid accounted for 9.8 million units a day, and with Neyveli and Kerala power, the grid was receiving on an average 20.5 million units daily.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 25, 1924

## Indian Railway orders in England

London, April 24: Orders have been placed with Messrs. Hawthorn Leslie and Company of Bebbarn-Tyne and Kerr Stuart Company of London for 4 and 6 tank engines respectively for Indian State Railways in addition to 40 passenger engines recently ordered from the Vulcan Foundry of Newton-le-Willows for the East Indian Railway Company. The contracts were secured in the face of keen continental competition, the deciding factors being high class character of work and speed in delivery.



# OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

## Missing in the campaign heat

Climate crisis and disasters need to enter our political lexicon, and voters must interrogate candidates on these matters

Asia earned the title of the second warmest region in 2023, with its mean temperature 0.91°C above the 1991-2020 reference period, according to the State of the Climate in Asia report released by the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO). While the report did not rank countries within the region, India was singled out for extreme weather events it faced last year, including heatwaves, floods, and a glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF). The world is at a critical juncture, WMO secretary general Celeste Saulo said, "where the impact of climate change intersects with societal inequalities". Her statement is significant as nearly a billion people set out to vote in the general elections over the next few weeks, during which, incidentally, the India Meteorological Department has also predicted heatwaves. The climate, unfortunately, has yet to become a conversation in Indian elections.

Most poll manifestos have been muted on the climate crisis. While there are mentions of forest rights, rights for the indigenous people, and scaling up of the country's renewable energy capacity, the true test lies in viewing ecological disasters in political terms, as questions of justice. The report spoke of the below-normal winter precipitation in the Hindu Kush region, which made news in January. Its impact in the form of near-dry levels in key reservoirs has become apparent now. In view of these weather extremes, promises by parties to reduce economic losses in the hills and improve irrigation systems in the plains would appear hollow if not viewed on a country-wide, even global, canvas. Disasters such as the GLOF in South Lhonak lake last year in Sikkim can serve as a case study to help decision makers. The report itself, Saulo claimed, could act as a tool for decision making at the regional level. But that can happen only if these disasters shape the debate during campaigns.

So far, extreme weather has only found cursory mention in the plans of the parties. The BJP, for instance, plans to launch a mission to make the country "weather ready" and "climate smart". The Congress plans to appoint a committee to study landslides and protect coastal zones. The CPI(M) promises to initiate measures to prevent the degradation of riverbeds in urban areas. None of the parties has an overarching climate vision.

But the onus also lies on the voter, who must seek accountability from the candidates they elect. The challenge lies in electing a government that is not short-sighted in its climate preparedness and employs policies beyond the immediate and the populist.

## Avoid ban on exports, tap farm opportunity

Raising India's share in the exports of 20 agricultural products excluding rice and wheat to 10% from the current 2.2% underlines welcome ambition on the part of the government. With close to 46% of the country's workforce engaged in agriculture, it has to be made more remunerative — a recurrent poll promise made by political parties across the spectrum. There is an opportunity in the projected global food demand over the next few decades. Besides, climate stress is starting to show in agricultural productivity. India must cash in on it. Outlining an export target sets the tone for this.

That said, no agriculture export focus will seem meaningful if the government remains free to impose export bans/restrictions every time prices in the domestic market start to pinch. Agri-exports in the April-February 2023-24 period fell by just under 9% over the corresponding period in 2022-23, largely because of the restrictions and bans on products such as rice, wheat, sugar, and onion, with the Red Sea and Russia-Ukraine crises also playing a role. While rice and wheat are not on the list of the targeted products, onion is. However, the ban on onion exports, announced in December 2023, was extended indefinitely in March. Given food inflation has proved difficult to tame, and there is uncertainty over when it is likely to cool, chances are, the ban will stay till the elections are over. If the cost of the *thali* (a typical Indian meal) remains the barometer against which political intent to boost agri-exports is calibrated, an export target could mean little.

India must also improve compliance with phytosanitary standards, be it pesticide use in farms or post-harvest storage to prevent deterioration. Raising farm exports needs concerted efforts in multiple fields and there is no room for half-measures.

## Climate crisis compass for water management

India's critical water infrastructure must be built to withstand, respond to, and recover rapidly from climate disruptions

The India Meteorological Department's recent warning on intense heatwave conditions over parts of eastern and peninsular India comes at a time when Bengaluru is already grappling with a severe water crisis. Heatwaves and compound events increase evaporation rates from water bodies and soil, as well as raise water consumption due to a temporary surge in demand under high temperatures — factors likely to threaten the city's future sustainability.

However, Bengaluru is not alone. Mumbai, Chennai — the list of thirsty metropolises is growing longer by the day, raising concerns about the potential collapse of urban health, safety, and sanitation systems unless urgent action is taken. Indeed, when it comes to extreme heat and other warming-related disasters, India was among the worst-hit nations in 2023, according to a just-released report by the World Meteorological Organization.

Intense heatwaves and El Niño or suppression of monsoons during the summer are not new phenomena for Indian cities. According to a study published in *Nature*, surface temperatures over India have been rising more frequently due to the climate crisis over the past two decades.

With 600 million Indians already facing high-to-extreme water stress and approximately 200,000 people dying annually due to inadequate access to safe water, the situation is projected to deteriorate further due to the increasing frequency of climate crisis impacts. India's demand for water is projected to significantly exceed its supply by 2050.

It is therefore urgent for the country to devise a comprehensive framework for water management that could significantly reduce socioeconomic vulnerabilities by anticipating, preparing for, and adapting to changing climate conditions.

India, however, does not lay any explicit focus on the effective integration of climate concerns in its water management. The focus of national government flagship schemes such as the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT), Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY), Jal Shakti Abhiyan, and National Groundwater Management Improvement Scheme, among others, is on providing better service delivery. While the National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC) mandates local governments to include climate adaptation and mitigation strategies in their development projects, studies reveal that their incorporation has remained cursory, mainly focused on compliance. This approach results in missed opportunities for proactively addressing the impact of the climate crisis on water resources in a comprehensive manner.

An aggressive policy framework to integrate climate concerns in all aspects of water management — from planning, design and infrastructure to operation and maintenance — while addressing the financial, technical and capacity challenges is an immediate imperative.

However, a successful transformation of India's water management from a security-centric approach to ensuring its sustainability and resilience requires effective implementation on the ground. Designing efficient climate-adaptive water management systems would require a strong technical capacity for modelling and projection that would inform proactive strategies to address any potential disaster. Such definite risk assessments that include the probability, occurrence, and degree of potential hazard of the climate crisis on water resources are not available to the government.

India should collectively mobilise its existing institutional climate capabilities for predicting water disasters. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), National Remote Sensing Agency (NRSA) and India Meteorological Department (IMD) can significantly help create a comprehensive approach that could guide the design, planning, and delivery of adaptive water management systems. Access to knowledge of traditional or local practices of building water resilience and their dissemination, as well as encouraging the adoption of diverse and locally appropriate techniques, would be crucial. Each of these "day zero" events offers opportunities to



India's demand for water is projected to exceed its supply by 2050 HT PHOTO

carry out simulations and analysis of the climate crisis's impact on water resources.

Lastly, addressing the complex interplay of water-climate crisis and development requires more than just government intervention. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) in implementing challenging climate action projects are emerging as a global model, according to the World Economic Forum. PPP can offer a way for the private sector to complement government efforts, easing budgetary strain and facilitating the sustainable, efficient, and timely implementation of ambitious climate-adaptive water projects.

However, the historical trend of PPPs in India shows that the private sector has limited engagement in water projects. Water management is capital-intensive, with significant fixed costs and returns that accrue over the long term. Despite the potential benefits, only a small fraction of national projects focus on water supply and treatment PPPs, representing just 0.25% of total project expenditure, according to Department of Economic Affairs data from December 2019.

Various factors have discouraged

private sector participation in water PPP projects, including political, regulatory, and financial risks, as well as changes in policy, unrealistic targets, imbalanced transfer of financial risks, and awarding contracts to under-resourced companies. Tariffs set too low for cost recovery have also been a deterrent, barely covering operational and maintenance costs.

To enhance the attractiveness of water PPPs, the government should conduct a thorough review of past successes and failures. Implementing clear legal and regulatory frameworks, establishing supportive institutions, and offering attractive incentives would encourage a steady flow of private finance, knowledge, and capacity to this critical sector.

Bengaluru's situation serves as a stark reminder of the severe water crisis that cities are likely to face in the future. As weather extremes become the "new normal", India's critical water infrastructure must be built to withstand, respond to, and recover rapidly from the disruptions they cause.

Aparna Roy is fellow and lead, Climate Change and Energy, ORF. The views expressed are personal

## Path for inclusive India lies in decentralisation

India has emerged as one of the fastest-growing large economies in the post-Covid period. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) confirms 415 million persons came out of multi-dimensional poverty in India between 2005-06 and 2019-2021. The Covid disruption, however, compromised some of the gains. Recovery is still on for the bottom quintiles. Monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) has risen. Per capita incomes, however, remain low. Social indicators have improved post 2005, but there is still a very long way to go.

Political democracy has thrived with persons belonging to vulnerable social groups reaching high offices. The constitutional provisions for devolution, however, have not seen funds, functions, and functionaries becoming mandatorily accountable to local governments and communities. There is evidence that this compromises the journey towards more shared growth.

Eight challenges to inclusion require a more deliberative and decentralised approach: Income of the bottom quintiles (wages of dignity); semi-skilled and skilled employment with productivity; learning outcomes in schools (education to employability); improved child nutrition; quality health care for all and public health capacity; life of dignity for urban working class; green growth, a healthy Air Quality Index, and climate resilient agriculture; and nano, micro, small and medium enterprises with adequate credit access.

The southern states brought down income poverty and multidimensional poverty through high adolescent girls' participation in higher secondary/tertiary education, the decline in fertility, improvement in health care services, formation of women self-help groups (SHGs), livelihood diversification through skills and collateral-free bank linkage for SHGs. A sincere effort to emulate the development of the social capital of women's collectives is currently taking place in the entire country under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAYNRLM). When these happen, private investments in manufacturing and services also follow as human capital and skills are key to investment decisions and productivity.

Evidence shows higher devolution leads to higher gains in human development and reduction of multidimensional poverty or an increase in MPCE. It is time to push decentralisation, with professionals and community resource persons (CRPs), in local governments. Responsibilities listed for gram panchayats in the Eleventh Schedule and for urban local bodies in the Twelfth Schedule must devolve to them. The countervailing presence of vibrant social capital of women's collectives will improve accountability and community connect.

If the same set of 20 indicators of human well-being gets monitored real-time, from the level of the gram panchayat to the Prime Minister, with untied financial resources to meet community needs, India will be a very different nation. The Mission Antyodaya framework for monitoring and planning for panchayats is already in place. It can be further tweaked. Employable education and skills alone will unlock the demographic dividend.

While governance reforms are needed, there is also a case for additional financial resources for human development routed through local governments. Crafting credible decentralised public (community-owned and led) systems for human capital holds the key to a faster transformation of lives and livelihoods.

We need to connect households to frontline health workers and institutions with local government-led primary health care governance. Improved systems of quality generic drugs with batch-wise testing and digitised warehouses will improve transparency. Family medicine courses for Health and Wellness Centre doctors will be very useful. Preparedness for pandemics requires higher infrastructure and human-resource spending in health.

India needs to improve learning outcomes as the top priority. Children have reached schools, but learning is a serious challenge. They need blended learning using e-learning materials with teachers trained for this; trust on life skills, sports, cultural activities, co- and extra-curricular activities; TV screens and sound boxes in classrooms; no teacher shortage school wise; *panchayats* and women's collectives, responsible for schools; and equity in access to e-learning. We need better management of the school system and a system of assessing teacher performance.

The decline of 8 points when it comes to stunting in Sikkim, 6.6 points in UP, and 5 points in Bihar between the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-4 (2015-16) and NFHS-5 (2019-21), is evidence that the nutritional standards are aspirational but achievable. A community-led movement under the local government for early breastfeeding, clean drinking water, diversity of food intake, growth monitoring, basic medicines in time, sanitation, housing, low pollution, and women's collective-led interventions hold the way to transformation. Daycare centres will be needed in very poor regions.

Skill and education equivalence is needed. Short-, medium- and long-duration interventions that improve the employability of youth are needed in partnership with industry and the services sector. Good teachers and health care providers from India have global demand. General graduate courses must offer employable certificate/diploma/apprenticeship-based opportunities before graduation. Urban poor need assured public services. The challenge of housing needs a solution. Elected leaders at the *basti* level will improve direct community-led action along with the mobilisation of women's collectives. Urban-like infrastructure in emerging rural areas, with town and country planning legislation for rural areas as well, will ensure norm- and standard-based development.

Green growth cannot be an afterthought. We need to go by the evidence to promote climate-resilient agriculture, regulate cars and construction, promote less polluting construction technologies and public transport, low-carbon emissions, community-led action for lifestyle changes, to reduce consumption. Devolution for an Inclusive India is the pathway to shared growth and human capital.

Amarjeet Sinha is a retired civil servant. The views expressed are personal

{ STEPHEN WHITING } COMMANDER OF US SPACE COMMAND

Frankly, China is moving at breathtaking speed in space, and they are rapidly developing counter-space weapons to hold at risk, our space capabilities



## Clarity on consent in sexual relations key in curbing rape

Mutual consent is the accepted basis of any intimate relationship. A plethora of cases are regularly reported in which "consent" becomes a bone of contention between the parties, with one insisting on its absence while the other on its presence. Many criminal justice systems in the world are making efforts to set a standard of consent in cases of sexual offences. It is also fundamental to understand consent to eliminate rape shield defences that continue to haunt rape survivors. In the absence of a clear understanding of the concept of consent, they are left without a sense of justice. Thus, evolving an understanding of consent becomes imperative.

A recent survey by the online dating app Tinder has revealed that young adults are largely ignorant about the importance of seeking consent in a sexual relationship. About 65% of respondents in the age group of 18-30 stated that they do not have adequate knowledge on what constitutes consent, and how it should be sought. The latest National Crime Records Bureau data reveals that there is one rape every 16 minutes in India. The statistics are even more appalling. Every day, we come across reports of room partners allegedly raping their roommates despite sharing platonic relationships, the shocking instances of digital rape, and the non-criminalisation of marital rape, which exacerbates the issue of underreporting of rape as these acts seldom make it to the official statistics due to lack of sensitisation around consent.

Consent is defined under Sections 90 and 375 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). While Section 90 defines consent generally as unequivocal and voluntary, Section 375 defines situations regarding what will constitute a violation of consent in cases of rape. The initial amendment regarding consent in rape laws was triggered as an aftermath of the decision in *Tukaram v. State of Maharashtra*. This resulted in the Criminal Amendment Act, 1983, which added Sections 376B, 376C, and 376D in IPC, and simultaneous change was brought in the Indian Evidence Act by incorporating Section 114A, which presumes the absence of consent if the victim contends absence of consent in sexual intercourse if the act of sexual intercourse is proved. Subsequently, Section 53A was added in 2018 to counter the character assassination of the survivor to imply consent based on the sexual history of the woman. The amendments are introduced based on the Justice Verma Commit-

tee Report that sheds light on the interpretation of consent as unequivocal in the light of the recommendations made by the 84th Law Commission of India: "Consent is the antithesis of rape. Some may find any discussion on consent too complicated. When circumstances in life present an infinite variety, the law must be well equipped to deal with them, nuances of consent are therefore unavoidable."

An attempt is being made to redefine consent as an affirmative expression across different jurisdictions. Recently, the "only yes means yes" law was introduced in Spain after the La Manada case joined the country because of the inability of the then rape laws to provide justice to the survivors of gang rape. The laws in the United Kingdom and Canada have also been modified to add the element of "affirmative consent". In India, even though Section 375 doesn't explicitly use the term "affirmative consent", the text implies that the standard of consent is on a par with that sought by the United Nations Handbook, in terming/requiring consent as "voluntary and unequivocal" and making it mandatory for the parties to take active steps to ascertain consent.

However, the practical reality shatters the academic and legal discussion on the concept of "consent". The general public finds affirmative consent difficult to fathom and sometimes too regulatory in nature. The field experiences reflect how understanding consent is so deeply laden with patriarchy, despite bodily autonomy being considered a fundamental right, that the discussion on consent still remains a privileged affair. Contextual circumstances, such as power disparities, relational dynamics, material inequalities, and socio-cultural norms continue to plague not only the members of the society but also the institutions trusted to enforce the provisions of law.

While the change in law on consent is a welcome step, it needs to be brought with necessary measures that fill the gaps that dilute the evolving understanding of consent. Guidelines that aid in interpreting active consideration of consent need to be drafted. The idea should percolate to all levels of the criminal justice system through frequent capacity-building exercises to equip the stakeholders with the confidence and intent to handle such cases with empathy.

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## OUR VIEW



## Universal Basic Income can't end Indian poverty

*The politics of redistribution has brought various versions of a UBI into focus. While people in deprivation clearly need relief, a UBI alone can't be relied upon to make poverty history*

Election campaigns can generate more heat than light, and now that a war of words has broken out over redistribution between India's ruling party and its chief opponent, we could do with more of the latter. To redistribute earnings from the rich to the poor literally, the idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) has been kicking around in policy debates across the world since it was first proposed by Thomas Paine, an American revolutionary, and refined by English writer Thomas Spence in 1797. The BJP government's PM-Kisan scheme of cash transfers to farmers clearly draws inspiration from it. A poverty-focused version has found its way to the Congress manifesto for the ongoing Lok Sabha polls. If elected, the opposition party promises to give an unconditional income of ₹1 lakh a year to every poor family. Such a proposal must be evaluated on two aspects: as a durable way to end acute poverty and as a short-term fix for farm-sector distress, stagnant rural wages (or worse), rising household indebtedness and weak demand for consumer goods among the non-well-off, all of which call for attention.

While over 810 million people are officially eligible for free food, those in deep deprivation are estimated at around 220 million. Since poor families tend to be a tad larger than rich ones, it is safe to assume that we have about 40 million very poor households. If an income transfer is confined to the worst off, the Congress plan would require an outlay of ₹4 trillion. At about 1.2% of GDP, that's not beyond the realm of fiscal viability. Policy critics who decry the rural jobs guarantee of 2005 as an unaffordable waste have come to acknowledge its role in poverty relief. That five more years of post-covid food handouts are deemed necessary by

the government stands in mute testimony to the need of direct support. However, a UBI for the poor is likely to fall short as a long-term solution to poverty, particularly if basics like reliable law-and-order, safe drinking water, quality healthcare and effective primary education are not readily available in rural areas. State funds must address these deficiencies. Mobility barriers need to ease too. A survey on education outcomes earlier this year reported that 40% of our 14-18-year-olds cannot divide a three-digit number by a single digit. This is for students who have been to school. It points to lacunae of governance and delivery beyond the usual culprit of resource constraints. So, a UBI cannot be the be-all and end-all of welfare, as some of its champions see it. Nor is development something to be doled out to passive recipients, in the manner of ladling out porridge into bowls of the hungry. What people need first and foremost is political agency, a basic sense of citizenship with attendant rights and its entitlement to dignity. This generates demand for good education, healthcare and skill acquisition, raising what people earn and helping them emerge from poverty. Land reforms undertaken decades ago in some parts of India are seen to have had such an effect. The key is to empower folks in the spirit of our freedom movement.

Over time, a UBI has been tried out in many parts of the world. Nowhere has it been an unqualified success. In India, regular cash disbursements could offer the poor instant relief, but emancipation from hold-backs need to go hand-in-hand with redemption from poverty, given the role of liberty in achieving better lives. All said, while a UBI may hold appeal as a policy, perhaps even across party lines, it's not a magic formula to make poverty history.

## THEIR VIEW

## A decade's data shows that India is yet to recover fully from covid

*A comparison of 5-year spans before and after the pandemic reveals how much further we must go*



**MADAN SABNAVIS**

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Economic data since covid times has been erratic. 'Base effects' bear influence even today, which makes interpreting growth indicators harder. The pandemic saw two severe lockdowns imposed that impacted India's economy at the macro level as well as individuals at the micro level. Reverse migration to villages took place. Relief was more through monetary policy than handouts, unlike in the West. The question is whether the bruises of covid and its lockdowns have fully healed.

Let us look at data. As single-year numbers can be distorted by 'base effects,' we should look at averages over 5 years. Hence, 2018-19 can be taken as the cut-off year before covid for us to compare half-decade periods.

First, on GDP, India has been the world's fastest growing major economy for the last three years. However, the compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) for the period 2019-20 to 2023-24 was 4.3%, compared with 7.4% in the five-year period ending 2018-19. Clearly, there is a long gap to be covered here. In absolute numbers, real GDP increased from ₹98.01 trillion in 2013-14 to ₹139.9 trillion in 2018-19, which is an increment of ₹41.9 trillion. In contrast, GDP for 2023-24 is expected at ₹172.9 trillion, which is an increase of ₹33 trillion over 2018-19.

Second, the same story is seen in the case of value addition in manufacturing.

The CAGR in the half-decade ending 2018-19 averaged 8.3%, which then dropped to just 3.1%. Hence, while robust PMI numbers bring about cheers every month, the fact is that Indian industry has not really recovered.

Third, inflation control has been a casualty too. Various factors led to spikes. Lockdown scarcities pushed up prices, followed by a global commodity price boom as the world bounced back to an extent from lockdowns. This was followed by the Ukraine War, which hardened global oil prices as well as retail rates in India. Average inflation was 4.5% in the pre-covid period and 5.6% in the next five-year span.

Fourth, while there is lots of optimism on fiscal plans, with India's deficit ratio aiming for a roll-back to the 4.5% of GDP mark in 2025-26, the average fiscal deficit before covid struck was just 3.67%. It increased to an average of 6.56% in the five years ended 2023-24. In absolute terms, it increased from an average of ₹5.63 trillion to ₹15.61 trillion. This meant the banking system was under pressure, as the government's gross borrowings averaged ₹13.78 trillion, up from ₹6.24 trillion. This ballooning of the deficit is not because of largesse extended, but explained largely by a major drop in revenue and substantial deferral of disinvestment plans.

Fifth, the Centre's debt-to-GDP ratio increased from 48.1% in 2018-19 to 56.9% in 2023-24. Interestingly, it had declined in 2018-19 compared with 2013-14, when it was at 50.5%. India's state-level debt-to-GDP ratio increased from 22.4% in 2013-14 to 25.3% in 2018-19, and then to 28.4% in 2022-23. There has been a worsening overall and it will take at least another 2-3 years for us to get back to pre-covid times.

Last, the pandemic's biggest setback was to employment. There was wide-scale reverse migration during the lockdowns, and while people have gradually returned to their work places, it shows a link with the level of economic activity.

With the economy slowing down, it was clear that demand for labour would be strictly need-based, as also seen in investment data. Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy data on unemployment shows that India's joblessness rate over 50 weeks from January 2016 to February 2020 averaged 6.6%. For the subsequent period starting March 2020 (when the first lockdown began) to February 2024, it averaged 8.5%.

There are two fields which were not linked directly to covid but have shown a better performance in the post-covid period. The first is agriculture, where average growth was 3.2% in the period till 2018-19. This improved to 4% for the subsequent quinquennium ending 2023-24. Relatively good monsoon rains (barring in 2023) and their fairly satisfactory distribution helped. Also, the reverse migration that began in 2020 added more hands to the farm labour force, which had faced shortages in the past on account of rural folks seeking employment in urban zones.

The other was foreign trade, especially exports. Here, the country did much better. In the five years ending 2018-19, growth averaged 1.2%, which increased to 8.1%. This is impressive. While lockdowns affected exports in 2020-21, things improved as the world economy moved upwards again, notwithstanding the speed breaker erected by the Ukraine War.

We could conclude from all this data that while most economic indicators have looked quite vibrant in the last two-three years, much of it can be attributed to base effects. A more comprehensive view of India's economic performance before and after covid shows that there is still some distance to be covered. Also, fiscal correction is still a challenge, and while economic minds have their eyes set on a deficit ratio of 4.5%, the ideal of 3% did not look distant in the pre-covid period. This may be a fair way of summing up the country's current economic position.

*These are the author's personal views.*

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

Basic income works everywhere. We all can realize it. We just have to give up the belief that the rich should have the right to tell the poor what to do.

KARL WIDERQUIST

## GUEST VIEW

## India and China: Convergence will follow divergence

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China and India have had a long history of convergence, with around the same per capita income from 1500 to 1980, but have since diverged. Their growth paths are expected to converge in the next two decades, with the rise of India's middle class and changing geopolitics. China and India will account for more than half of all global growth. Mention the two countries to economists and their first thought will be their differing economic-emergence paths: China is a manufacturing-led growth success and the world's big exporter of goods, while India had services-led growth and has a global reputation for service exports.

In 1991, India's services sector had a much larger share of national output than the global norm, while its manufacturing sector's slice was well below. China's sectoral profile was the inverse. In the next two decades, the outlier status of both got amplified. The Indian government has been trying to ramp up manufacturing through initiatives like 'Make in India' with fiscal incentives for

manufacturers. On this sector's annual output, India's global rank improved from 14th in 1990 to sixth in 2015. In 2023, it accounted for 3.3% of the world's total manufacturing output, ranking it fourth. However, the sector's contribution to GDP has declined, falling from around 17% two decades ago to 13% in 2022.

Meanwhile, China accounted for 28.4% of global manufacturing output in 2023 and has held the top spot for a decade, with the sector making up nearly 30% of its GDP. Its gross production is three times that of the US, six times that of Japan, and nine times that of Germany.

Consider services. As of April 2024, India ranked eighth globally on this sector's output, placed at about \$1.5 trillion. It is over half of India's GDP. Thanks largely to IT services, the country's share of global service exports increased from 3.7% in 2019 to 4.9% in December 2022. China's services sector has also grown since the late 2000s, with the wholesale and retail trade, real estate, hotel and catering services making up its bulk.

Have the trade patterns of China and India diverged? In 1982, the shares of service exports in total exports for China and India were in line with the global norm. Only the US was a significant exporter of services. But

then, India became a services major, with its share of services in total exports greater than the global norm. China went for factories.

China has had an export-oriented development strategy since the 1980s, while India began to globalize in the early 1990s. India remains far less involved in global supply chains than China, with low participation in cross-border networks. However, the imports of both are similar. Both mainly import goods (75-80% of total imports), particularly manufactured products and raw materials.

Which will grow faster in the future? China's GDP per capita is a multiple of India's today. To catch up, India must outpace China.

Neither country can afford to remain a one-trick pony. New Delhi is focusing more on manufacturing to create jobs, while Beijing aims to ascend the services value chain through modern skills, a strategy that may also help China avert a middle-income trap, which it remains vulnerable to.

The growth paths of the two economies

are expected to converge over the next two decades. Apart from changing growth strategies, a rising middle class and the remaking of global politics, this would be influenced by cooperation on climate action and China being India's largest trading partner. Both countries are trying to rebalance their economies on the sectoral slice-up and external fronts. China is easing its goods fixation by developing a big domestic market for services. There is enough room for India to use factory output as a growth escalator, while China uses services.

Both countries are also focusing on environmental concerns that must be balanced with their economic imperatives. Both are also accelerating their push for energy security in times of geopolitical turbulence, even as a clean-fuel drive is altering the landscape. India's upcoming elections and government stability could revive the interest of foreign oil companies in investing here, though this may depend on the policy framework.

The growing economies of India and China are a major source of global demand and also a growing influence on other developing economies. China's effort to rebalance its economy may create new opportunities for exporters of factory products, but it may also reduce demand for commodities over the medium-term. China's producer prices have contracted for the past 10 months, which means the cost of goods being shipped from the country is falling. This is good news for people around the world who are still struggling with high inflation.

India has the world's largest youth bulge, and this could be a source of future growth. India has also invested heavily in physical infrastructure and is the fastest urbanizing country in the world. It needs its young population to contribute to economic development by starting and expanding businesses, using their education and training to develop new products and services, and contributing otherwise through their knowledge and skills.

China and India are expected to contribute 50.3% of global economic growth in 2023: 34.9% and 15.4% of respectively. The Asia-Pacific region, seen as driving about 70% of the world's GDP, is clearly the world's action spot this century.

**A left-behind India could plausibly catch up as economic rebalancing efforts are made by both**



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Globalization versus democracy: Voiceless multitudes need a say

Big decisions taken by the US that impact the world might well be different if the millions impacted overseas also had a vote



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Democracy is in retreat across much of the world, with authoritarian leaders and extremist movements gaining momentum amid widespread discontent with established political parties and institutions. As democratic governance comes under strain, our most cherished ideals, such as equal freedom and rights for all, are increasingly at risk.

Democratic backsliding has many causes, including the depredations of Big Tech and the rapid spread of mis- and disinformation. But the one that plays a critical role is emerging from a strange concoction of unchecked economic globalization and severe political balkanization. This has enabled major powers like the US to wield disproportionate influence over the well-being of billions of people worldwide, who have no political voice.

The bedrock principle of democracy is that people affected by the decisions of political leaders should have a say in selecting those leaders. This idea is so fundamental that even authoritarian countries like Russia and North Korea hold elections, ostensibly allowing citizens to 'choose' their leaders. Of course, these elections pose no real threat to the existing regime. In North Korea's 2023 election, for example, Kim Jong-un's Workers' Party received 99.91% of the votes.

To comprehend the problem, imagine that US presidents were elected solely by voters in the District of Columbia. Every resident of Washington would have the right to vote, and the candidate with the most votes would become president. Even if this process were free from fraud, it would be difficult to consider the US a democracy under such conditions. Elected leaders would naturally prioritize the interests of Washington residents over those of Americans everywhere else, whose well-being would have little to no impact on their chances of being re-elected.

While this scenario may seem far-fetched, people all around the world find themselves in the same position as a disenfranchised Texan or Michigander. Accelerated economic globalization over the past four decades, driven by increasingly interconnected supply chains and the rapid advance of digital technologies, has facilitated the free flow of capital and goods across national borders. But this also means that major powers are now able to affect individuals and communities all over the world with just a few clicks.

As matters stand, the well-being of billions of people hinges on the decisions made by the sitting US president. While American leaders have the power to disrupt numerous economies by severing supply chains or manipulating financial flows, the citizens of these countries have no influence over US elections. Similarly, Ukrainian or Georgian citi-



ISTOCKPHOTO

zens have little say over who rules Russia, even though who rules Russia can have a large influence on their well-being. Of course, even Russians have no real say on who rules Russia.

This erosion of global democracy could have far-reaching geopolitical consequences. While the US government puts considerable effort into managing its domestic economy effectively, it has adopted a cavalier approach to foreign policy.

The ongoing crisis in the Middle East is a case in point. US President Joe Biden's unconditional support for Israel's war against Hamas over the past six months has benefited Israel's embattled prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu. But as US Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren have pointed out, the goals of ordinary Israelis—who want to end the war and bring home Hamas's hostages—differ significantly from those of Netanyahu and his far-right political allies, who apparently seek to prolong the conflict to maintain their hold on power.

This underscores the anti-democratic nature of hegemonic powers. If Israeli citizens could vote in US presidential elections, America's Middle East policy might have been markedly different. Such a policy would likely have aligned more closely with the interests of both Israelis and Palestinians,

rather than with Netanyahu's political agenda.

I hasten to add that matters would likely be worse if former US president Donald Trump won the US election. But I suspect that Biden's Democratic Party would win, but with a rather different Middle East policy, if ordinary Israelis—and not just Netanyahu and his cronies—had a voice in the White House election scheduled this November.

There is no easy solution to this conundrum. Israelis will not be voting in US elections anytime soon, and Ukrainians will not influence the selection of Russia's next leader. The advance of digital technology and globalization, and the consequent erosion of global democracy, highlights the trade-offs and vulnerabilities inherent in the current international order.

As I argued in my book *The Republic of Beliefs*, it is possible to establish binding laws and regulations even without direct state intervention. The key, as Eric Posner and Cass Sunstein have also pointed out, is to foster appropriate norms that are self-enforcing. At the same time, we must strive to create more effective multilateral organizations and international charters aimed at strengthening democratic governance worldwide.

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GUEST VIEW

# Snooping isn't a good way to ensure child safety online

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Recently, reports emerged that India's ministry of electronics and IT has been working on an app, Safenet, that links parents' phones with those of their children, so that they can monitor the online activities of their offspring. While parental controls on internet platforms typically offer options of granting app or website access and placing limits on the time spent, Safenet is said to go further by sharing call details and SMS logs, apart from data on all content viewed on platforms like YouTube. The Internet Service Provider Association of India has suggested that this app should be made available by default on all personal devices. This proposal is a classic example of techno-solutionism, an attempt to use technology to solve a complex social problem.

Online safety for kids is a complicated issue, with debates over the overall impact of internet usage on children. Since this impact is highly context-dependent, policymakers present a strong argument that any 'duty of care' in the online environment should rest

primarily with parents, just as it does in the physical environment. However, the devil always lies in the details.

First, in the physical environment too, parents do not have complete control over a child's information ecosystem. Parents are often in fact surprised to discover how much their children know, because they do not control all their interactions in school either with peers or their environment. However, in the digital realm, while parents can potentially get complete visibility of their child's online interactions, it could conflict with a teenager's need for independence, as child psychologists point out. There's a delicate balance between parental oversight and teen autonomy that needs to be addressed.

Second, tools made available that allow an intimate invasion of privacy are very likely to be misused. This is particularly concerning for children who face abuse from their own families. Further, one-third of women in India experience intimate partner violence, according to National Family Health Survey-5. Abusive partners can also use such tools to monitor and exert complete control over their victims. Identity verification, often proposed as a solution to this, is far from foolproof, given low digital literacy among women. In the gender context,

another unintended impact of such tools would be parents exerting more control over the activities of adolescent girls than boys, a phenomenon observed routinely in the offline world. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a recent interview with Bill Gates, spoke about the power of technology in the hands of women. However, in a deeply patriarchal society, tools for control over the information ecosystem of girls would be out of sync with that vision. It could widen the gap between boys and girls with respect to information access, on top of an already-prevalent digital divide.

As is evident, over indexing on one part of the 'online kids safety' puzzle leads us to newer problems. We therefore need an all-of-ecosystem approach.

First, we need to update our laws. For example, under the new Indian law that replaces the IT Act, 2000, there should be room for codes of practices similar to the UK's Age Appropriate Design Code and the Aotearoa New Zealand Code of Practice for

Online Safety and Harms. These codes provide guidance to platforms on features to make them safer for children. The newly passed Online Safety Act in the UK also requires platforms to conduct a risk assessment from the perspective of children.

Second, we need platforms to design behavioural 'nudges' to drive uptake of the parental controls already available. Many popular platforms have parental controls or family centres that aim to maintain a balance which lets parents know about their child's usage patterns without granting them the power to eavesdrop. Platforms should come forward to co-design child safety codes with the government that would suit the Indian context.

Third, we need education institutions to chip in. Among parents' key concerns are screen time and their inability to monitor legitimate uses versus unwanted activities. However, even schools (especially affluent ones) have been driving up screen time by making education more tab or screen based

in the post-pandemic world. This perhaps requires a rethink.

Fourth, every educator and parent would acknowledge that every solution, technological or otherwise, is prone to circumvention by children. Children are creative, often more adept at using the internet, and have networks with peers that adults often know little about. Therefore, we need to invest in fostering children's own ability to navigate the online world safely. We should focus on inculcating self-responsibility, so that kids are able to tell good apart from bad, feel free to seek support when needed, and develop mature relationships with technology where they are in control and not the other way around. For this, we should update school syllabi, introduce this as a life skill, revise civic education curriculums and also create space for discussions on tech and society.

Finally, a survey by Young Leaders for Active Citizenship revealed that 80% of parents seek guidance from their children off and on to navigate the internet. We perhaps ought to flip the entire household dynamic on its head, so that today's up-to-date teenagers can become coaches for safer internet usage at home. After all, we know that many millennial parents themselves are hooked to Reels and may be in need of help too!

# India should reconsider polls held in the heat of its summer

A turnout drop should put temperatures under the lens as a factor



**DAVID FICKLING**  
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Voter turnouts shouldn't slump as the planet warms up

How do you run a democracy when the mercury rises above 40° Celsius? That's the problem faced by voters in India. A swathe of the country's east is sweltering under a brutal heatwave. The city centre of Kolkata has emptied out, schools have cancelled classes, and one TV presenter collapsed on air with heat stroke.

The first round of 7-phase general elections, which took place on Friday, seems to have been another casualty: turnout was down four percentage points relative to the last poll in 2019, as reported. Multiple officials quoted by the paper cited the effect of extreme heat, adding also that a wedding season and general apathy may have been factors. Some of the most intense temperatures last week were on the east coast, keenly watched battlegrounds where Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has traditionally been weak relative to its performance in the north and west. There were about 7.6 million fewer voters in the 102 seats polled Friday, as per estimates by Yogendra Yadav, an election analyst and political activist. The world's largest democracy is going to struggle more with this as the planet warms. It will have to overhaul its hulking electoral machinery to keep up.

The length of voting lines in US federal elections are a perennial scandal, prompting lawsuits, protests and a *Curb Your Enthusiasm* story line. The challenges you'll face standing around in the middle of fall in the US are nothing, however, compared to an Indian pre-monsoon heatwave. There's both idealistic and cynical reasons to change. Encouraging the highest possible turnout ought to be an end in itself for any democracy. US elections have been held at the start of November since the mid-19th century because farmers in what was then a largely agricultural society had completed the harvest and the coldest winter weather was yet to come. That was seen as the best way of boosting turnout.

India may have ended up with its recent run of summer elections for similar reasons. Prime ministers get to choose the date of the polls. Between monsoons, wedding seasons, religious festivals, three separate cropping seasons and surprisingly intense winters, however, there just aren't that many suitable dates. Every Indian general election since 2004 has been held in April and May. There's a more widely reason to target changing seasons, too. Climate seems to have measurable if much-debated effects on voter behaviour. In the UK, all but one of the 11 general elections since 1979 have also happened in April, May or

June, when politicians appear to believe the spring sunshine will imbue people with optimism that will benefit incumbents. By the same token, waiting in line in furnace-like temperatures might not be the best way to convince wavering voters the government has its priorities straight.

There are plenty of fixes that could be made here. India has nearly a billion registered voters, but few provisions to make the ballot process easier. Postal and absentee voting is only available to people with disabilities, those over 85 (raised this time around from 80 in 2019), and certain essential services workers. Everyone else needs to turn up on the day or miss the opportunity. Roughly half a billion people who have migrated from other areas of the country face barriers to voting in their home towns, an issue that the country's Election Commission is only starting to address.

In-person pre-poll voting may be a challenge, given the sheer scale of the vote. There simply aren't enough poll workers to run it in a country with a million voting booths. Still, postal ballots ought to be far more widely used.

Above all, though, Indian politicians need to reconsider the timing of the polls. Punishing monsoon seasons aren't going away any time soon. Indeed, they're only likely to get worse as the accumulated carbon pollution from richer countries, as well as that resulting from India's own failing renewables programmes, raises temperatures in April and May to still-more unbearable levels. An earlier ballot, perhaps kicking off after Republic Day in late January would avoid the worst times.

It's possible the current election could provide the catalyst for such a change. Despite the BJP's roots as an urban, upper-caste party, the constituencies that Modi has increasingly relied upon since coming to power in 2014 have been rural, lower-income and lower-caste voters who are likely to be put off by sweltering weather on election day. The low turnout Friday appears to have rattled the BJP.

We should usually worry when populist leaders start messing around with the mechanics of elections. If it would mean more voters getting to India's polls without withering in the summer heat, that might be a risk worth taking.

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## Turncoats

**Former Veep Venkaiah Naidu flags party-hopping, calls for strengthening anti-defection law**

The pervasive trend of politicians of all hues switching parties, for better career prospects or in pursuit of election tickets especially ahead of Assembly or Lok Sabha polls, is nothing new. This phenomenon, commonly known as party-hopping, has now been flagged by former Vice-President Venkaiah Naidu as particularly damaging to our democracy. It also raises questions about the efficiency of the anti-defection law in curbing such practices. The law, enshrined in the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, was introduced to deter elected representatives from switching allegiance to other political parties after being elected. The law aims to maintain stability and integrity within the political system by penalising defections and preserving the sanctity of electoral mandates. However, despite its existence, party-hopping remains a disturbing trend in Indian politics. Politicians often defect from their original party to join another for a ticket, ministerial position or personal ambitions. Additionally, the anti-defection law is limited in its scope and does not address the broader issues of political morality and ethics. Politicians often exploit legal loopholes and engage in prolonged legal battles to circumvent disqualification, thereby escaping accountability for their actions. This not only undermines the democratic process but also erodes public trust in the political system. However, the toothlessness of the anti-defection law and the failure to effectively address this issue reflect deeper systemic challenges within the political system.



So, why is the anti-defection law still toothless in addressing this issue? One of the primary reasons is the loophole in the law that allows for defection without disqualification under certain circumstances. The law permits defection if one-third or more of the members of a legislative party together decide to join another party, effectively legitimising mass defections. This provision has been exploited by political parties to engineer defections and destabilise rival Governments. Moreover, the anti-defection law lacks stringent enforcement mechanisms and timely interventions. While the law penalises individual defections, it does little to address the systemic factors that incentivise party-hopping, such as the allure of power, patronage politics and lack of internal democracy within parties. Furthermore, the anti-defection law is subject to political manipulation and selective application by ruling parties. To strengthen the anti-defection law and address the scourge of party-hopping, comprehensive reforms are necessary. This includes closing loopholes, imposing stricter penalties for defections, enhancing oversight mechanisms and promoting internal democracy within parties. There needs to be a concerted effort to foster a political culture based on principles of integrity, accountability and ethical conduct. Urgent reforms are needed to strengthen the law, uphold democratic principles and restore public trust in the integrity of the political process.

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### PICTALK



Devotees carrying holy water from Ganga river wait in queues to perform 'puja' at Vindhyaachal Dham, in Mirzapur

## Nurture workplace safety and inclusivity

Effective workplace safety and inclusivity initiatives demand a holistic approach, addressing fundamental needs while nurturing higher aspirations

In the ever-changing landscape of workplace safety and inclusivity, this journey is quite often likened to Maslow's theory where foundational components set the stage for higher aspirations. Like Maslow's hierarchy that progresses from physiological needs to self-actualisation, our modern-day approach must deal with basic requirements before going up to more ambitious aspirations. The demand of today goes further than what organisations aspire for but rather addresses what is most urgent at the particular moment. Statistics indicate a diverse workforce composition inclusive of X-Gens, Millennials, Gen Zs and soon Generation Alpha. As this demographic shift occurs, are we ready? What kind of policies and practices should be considered for this new era?



**Safe Workplaces:** Organisations are increasingly investing in creating both physically and psychologically safe environments. Initiatives encompass Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) policies, which not only ensure workplace safety but also serve as a magnet for high-performing employees. ESG's emphasis on societal contributions resonates with individuals seeking purpose beyond monetary benefits. **Respectful Workplaces:** Establishing psychologically safe environments mandates clear policies, including Codes of Business Conduct, Grievance Redressal protocols and Workplace Harassment guidelines (including Prevention of Sexual Harassment). Additionally,

dedicated committees should address issues promptly while proactively working on prevention initiatives. Diversity and Inclusion: To remain relevant, organisations must adopt equal employment policies, refine communication practices, foster employee resource groups and establish Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) councils. Failure to prioritise these initiatives could deter potential candidates and partners, underscoring their importance in today's landscape. **Flexibility:** Sensitivity toward employees' diverse needs is paramount. Accommodations for special circumstances, accessibility for differently-abled individuals, gender-neutral facilities and amenities such as nursing spaces are essential. **Appreciation:** Cultivating a culture of appreciation is pivotal for fostering a sense of belonging among employees. Initiatives such as team bonding activities and addressing unconscious biases contribute significantly to creating supportive environments. This culture of appreciation propels individuals

toward self-actualisation, the pinnacle of Maslow's theory, counteracting toxicity and promoting inclusivity. Training and Development: Prioritising continuous training and development programs is essential to cultivate a culture of growth and inclusivity within organisations. By equipping employees with the necessary tools and resources to excel, companies demonstrate their unwavering commitment to fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace environment. **Accessibility and Accommodation:** Guaranteeing accessibility for all employees, irrespective of their physical capabilities, is imperative to foster inclusivity. This involves implementing measures such as installing wheelchair ramps, providing ergonomic workstations and offering assistive technologies to facilitate equal participation in the workplace. Additionally, organisations need to establish policies that address accommodation requests promptly and with utmost respect for employees' needs and preferences. *(The writer is founder Kelp; views are personal)*



SMITA SHETTY KAPOOR

# Graft dominates election discourse

Mounting concerns over corruption and economic uncertainties are shaping the contours of the political contest

Innocuous developments are unfolding amidst the growing fervour of the impending elections. Despite concerns of the RBI regarding inflation, escalating toll rates, and transportation costs, the nation finds itself amidst a politically charged atmosphere. Nonetheless, certain court rulings are adding intrigue to the evolving scenario.

In addition to the impact of electoral bonds, which have added colour to the political landscape and influenced prices, three other judgments are exerting significant influence. These include the Supreme Court's hearings on the Voters Verifiable Print Audit Trail (VVPAT), commonly known as the voting slip; a judgment regarding the denial of payment to Reliance Infra for the Delhi Airport Metro EPL; and the severe criticism of Patanjali's owners, who are contemners of court orders regarding their advertising. These developments are intensifying the dynamics of the electoral contest.

Not less interesting is the ED mounting fresh money laundering probe into the Chhattisgarh liquor scam and the ED linking Kerala CPM leaders to bank fraud. Could there be more arrests even after Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal and Kavita of BRS? Will prices take a backseat to politics and court rulings, or will they remain pressing concerns alongside these factors? Voters, though reticent, are far from oblivious. Whether attending rallies of prominent leaders or not, they are keenly aware of every development that influences their lifestyle. Conversations range from questioning why individuals with questionable backgrounds align themselves with the BJP to analysing defections from BJP to Congress factions. Both voters and party members evaluate the potential implications of each unfolding event, particularly returning officers of Chandigarh municipal polls and Himachal defections. Corruption is not a non-issue. Arrests of select opposition State leaders on corruption charges by central investigative agencies such as CBI, ED, and income-tax department are unlikely to change



the general public perception that corruption pervades all political parties. Many view the pre-election arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal as a strategic move aimed at thwarting the popular politician's participation in the election campaign, rather than a genuine effort to address corruption. It leads them to think that possibly price surges of many medicines and commodities or galloping rises in tolls have electoral bond connections. Former Vice President Venkaiah Naidu's recent remark on corruption involving all parties has given it a new dimension for the voters to rethink the extent of the impact of corruption. Amidst the dropping of corruption charges against former Union Civil Aviation Minister Praful Patel, allegedly implicated in an Rs 25,000-crore aircraft purchase scandal, questions arise as to why Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal faces arrest for his alleged involvement in a Rs 100 crore State liquor policy issue. People ponder whether the Air India sell-off was conducted transparently or mired in controversy. The action against Kejriwal has spurred opposition unity, evident from the overflowing rally at Delhi's Ramlila Ground. The recent Supreme Court decision concerning Reliance Infra's Delhi Airport Metro's EPL has prompted questions



**THE COURT'S REJECTION OF PATANJALI'S APOLOGY IN A CONTEMPT CASE STEMMING FROM MISLEADING ADVERTISEMENTS CONTRAVENING ITS ORDER SERVES AS A STARK EXAMPLE OF HOW THE RULE OF LAW CAN RECTIFY CORRUPT PRACTICES**

about corporate exploitation of public sector Delhi Metro. The Court overturned its own 2021 order directing Delhi Metro to pay Reliance Infra Rs 2782 crore, which had ballooned to Rs 7686 crore with accrued interest. Chief Justice DY Chandrachud, along with Justices R Gvai and Surya Kant, justified this drastic action, citing a 'miscarriage of justice' resulting in an 'undeserved windfall for Reliance Infra. This ruling, following closely after the electoral bond controversy, has heightened voter scepticism. Had Delhi Metro been forced to pay, it could have burdened commuters with significantly higher fares.

Likewise, the court's rejection of Patanjali's apology in a contempt case, stemming from misleading advertisements contravening its order, serves as a stark example of how the rule of law can rectify corrupt practices, unveil false brand images, and maintain price stability. The court's warning to be prepared for consequences, along with its criticism of the Uttarakhand Government, underscores the power of legal intervention. Erratic power bills and arbitrary demands in UP and many States are also potential issues. Each of these cases, people realise, are instances of political linkages affecting price rises and profiteering. The glaring lapses on the part

of the executive and administration add to the woes of the people and the breakdown of the law-and-order machinery. The judiciary is uncovering corrupt practices that impact economic and administrative systems, consequently rising cost of living. Dainik Bhaskar has done a study on prices in Rajasthan. It finds that compared to 2019, prices of petrol, diesel and cooking gas increased by 42 per cent; food items cost 34 per cent more; medicine prices for diabetes and heart diseases rose by 54 per cent and people's dining outside has been reduced by 40 per cent. Pulses have become costlier by 20 per cent, vegetables by 233 per cent; taxi fares by 67 per cent, edible oil 100 per cent, and FMCG rose by 60 per cent. Salaries during the period for different classes have risen by 11 per cent to 26 per cent. Price concerns persist, with numerous unnecessary infra, road airport and metro projects shocking even political workers. However, this doesn't diminish the significance of religious fervour surrounding the Ram temple and Modi's assurances, which remain potent issues in certain regions, albeit overshadowed by economic factors and caste considerations. Amethi and Raebareli, however, remain in focus, more than Varanasi. *(The author is a senior journalist; views are personal)*

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### EMBRACING NANO INFLUENCE

Madam — Apropos the news article, "The rising power of nano influencers", published on April 24, this is my response. The rise of nano influencers marks a shift towards authenticity in social media marketing. These individuals, with modest followings of 1,000 to 10,000, offer brands a refreshing avenue to connect with consumers. Unlike macro and celebrity influencers, nano influencers embody reliability and community-driven engagement. Their appeal lies in their resemblance to ordinary individuals—friends, family and colleagues—eschewing the polished facades of traditional influencer marketing. This authenticity fosters genuine rapport and trust, essential commodities in an era inundated with impersonal ads. Brands increasingly gravitate towards nano influencers for their cost-effectiveness and heightened engagement rates. Moreover, their endorsements carry the weight of peer recommendations, bolstering consumer confidence and purchase decisions. Yet, challenges persist. Identifying influencers aligned with brand values and managing logistics pose hurdles. Nonetheless, the allure of genuine connections propels brands towards embracing nano influence, fostering deeper, more meaningful consumer relationships amidst the din of commercialism.

Meera Iyer | Bhopal

#### PHULE'S PROGRESSIVE LEGACY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "A timeless inspiration for India's reform agenda", published on April 24, this is my response. Jyotirao Phule's legacy as a pioneering social reformer resonates strongly in modern India. His relentless efforts to uplift marginalised communities, particularly women and Dalits, laid the groundwork for a more inclusive society. Phule's advocacy for education, gender equality and social justice remains as relevant today as it was in the 19th century. His establishment of the Satyashodhak

#### Unveiling historical wounds



Apropos the news article, "Historic legal battle unfolds over Gyanvapi", published on April 24, this is my response. The ongoing legal battles concerning worship rights at Gyan Vapi, from Varanasi courts to the Supreme Court, resonate with ethical implications. Both sides' legal prowess seems even-

ly matched, yet the essence of the dispute is far from symmetric. One side defends worship rights, while the other asserts property ownership, blurring the lines of justice. The roots of this conflict delve deep into history, where Aurangzeb's divisive legacy still casts its shadow.

Reverend Sherring's accounts vividly depict the systematic desecration of Hindu temples under Mughal rule, highlighting a painful chapter often overlooked. The struggle over Gyan Vapi transcends legalities; it's a battle to reclaim dignity and heritage. As the judiciary delves into this sensitive matter, it must recognise the injustice endured, ensuring that this trial isn't merely legalistic but a reaffirmation of justice for a wounded community. History's scars must not dictate the present; it's time for healing and restoration.

Divya Menon | Chennai

Samaj provided a platform for empowerment and caste equality, echoing the need for grassroots movements in contemporary times. Moreover, Phule's forward-thinking educational reforms, such as vocational training and multilingual education, mirror present-day policies like the New Education Policy, of 2020. Embracing Phule's vision means prioritising the inclusion of marginalised groups in all spheres of society, from politics to education. As we commemorate Phule's legacy, it's imperative to mainstream the periphery, ensuring every citizen's voice is heard and valued. By doing so, we honour Phule's spirit and move closer to realising his dream of a truly egalitarian society.

Kavita Mehra | Jaipur

#### ETERNAL QUEST FOR LIBERATION

Madam — Apropos the news article, "The Mysteries of Afterlife", published on April 24, this is my response. The Upanishads, with their timeless wisdom, unravel the intricacies of existence

and the journey of the soul beyond mortal realms. Central to their discourse is the juxtaposition of the transient with the eternal, delineating the essence of the self (Atman) from the cycles of birth and death.

Karma, the architect of destiny, weaves the fabric of our lives, transcending the boundaries of time and space and shaping our journey through successive rebirths. Yet, amidst the karmic tapestry, lies the ultimate pursuit — moksha, liberation from the shackles of samsara, a merging with the divine essence. Through contemplation of these profound concepts, the Upanishads beckon us to introspect, to seek beyond the veneer of mortality, towards the realisation of our true nature and the attainment of eternal bliss. In embracing their teachings, we embark on a voyage of self-discovery, navigating the depths of consciousness towards the shores of enlightenment.

Naina Kapoor | Chandigarh



The Statesman

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Battle in Kerala

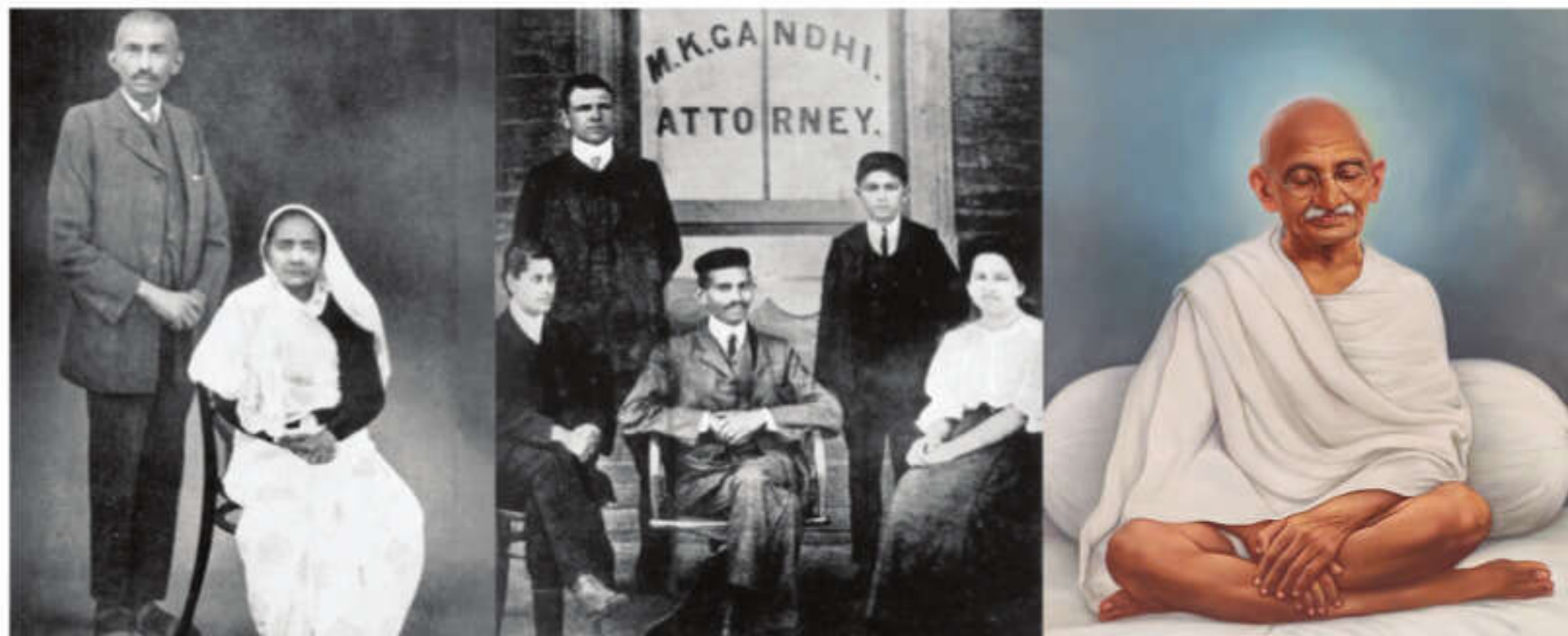
With all 20 Lok Sabha seats in Kerala at stake in the second phase of polling tomorrow, the electoral drama unfolds with its usual intensity, underscoring the unique political landscape of the state. The Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) spearheaded by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) - CPI (M) - are once again at the forefront of this battle, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) making strenuous efforts to establish a presence in a state where it has traditionally been peripheral. Despite these efforts, including high-profile campaigns and rallies led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP's influence in Kerala remains limited. The state's political narrative continues to be dominated by the UDF and LDF, reflecting a deep-seated ideological divide that overshadows the BJP's narrative. Interestingly, while the Congress and the CPI(M) align under the INDIA alliance at the national level to counter the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, in Kerala, they remain fierce adversaries. This dual role showcases the complex dynamics of Indian politics where regional interests often dictate party alignments differently from national coalitions. Adding another layer to this complex political tapestry is Mr Rahul Gandhi, the Congress leader, contesting from Wayanad. His candidacy brings national attention to Kerala, emphasising the importance the Congress places on the state. Mr Gandhi's presence in the fray is likely to invigorate the UDF's campaign, providing them with a significant boost given his appeal among various demographic segments, particularly the youth and minorities. The Congress's strategy in Kerala, however, faces scrutiny, particularly its national stance against the BJP's policies, including controversial ones like the Citizenship Amendment Act, positions it as a defender of secular and liberal values. The Left, meanwhile, continues to consolidate its base by focusing on local governance issues and leveraging its track record in managing the state's affairs, particularly during natural calamities and the Covid crises. The LDF's emphasis on social welfare programmes and their opposition to the BJP's national policies resonate well with Kerala's electorate, who are deeply politically conscious and value ideological consistency. For the BJP, the challenge remains significant. Despite its national dominance, local strategies in Kerala have yet to bear fruit. The party's efforts to woo voters through development promises and nationalist rhetoric have made limited inroads in a state where political loyalty is historically entrenched and ideologically driven. As Kerala heads to the polls on April 26, the likely scenario remains a continuation of the UDF-LDF binary, with the BJP's impact expected to be limited. The real contest is between the Congress's efforts to regain lost ground through its national figures and promises of progressive policies, and the Left's endeavour to maintain its stronghold through consistent local governance and ideological purity. The electoral outcome will be a critical commentary on the evolving political priorities of Kerala's electorate, reflecting broader national trends as well as localised political currents.

Wong in charge

As Singapore stands on the cusp of a historic leadership transition, the imminent departure of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong ushers in a new era marked by continuity and change. Mr Lawrence Wong's ascension as the country's fourth Prime Minister heralds a departure from the legacy of the Lee dynasty, promising a leadership style that blends tradition with innovation. For nearly six decades, Singapore has been steered by the firm hand of the Lees - except for the term in office of Mr Goh Chok Tong - with Lee Kuan Yew's iron will laying the foundation for the city-state's remarkable ascent on the global stage. Now, as the baton passes to a new generation of leaders represented by the "4G" cohort, the narrative of Singapore's political landscape is poised for a subtle yet significant shift. Mr Wong's emergence as the chosen successor reflects the People's Action Party's (PAP) recognition of the need for adaptation in the face of evolving challenges. While acknowledging the formidable legacy of his predecessors, Mr Wong's rhetoric hints at a departure from the status quo, emphasising the imperative of embracing change in a rapidly changing global environment. Crucially, Mr Wong's leadership style contrasts with the enigmatic authority of earlier leaders, signalling a shift towards a more collective and consultative approach. His tenure promises to be characterised by consensus-building and inclusivity, epitomised by initiatives like Forward Singapore, which sought citizen input on critical issues ranging from taxation to social welfare. However, Mr Wong's ascent is not without its challenges. Despite his competence, he faces the daunting task of navigating Singapore through a complex geopolitical landscape fraught with threats ranging from extremism to great-power rivalry. Moreover, his relatively low profile among Singaporeans poses a communication challenge in rallying public support for his leadership vision. Yet, it is precisely Mr Wong's status as a compromise candidate that may work to his advantage. His lack of association with elite circles and his humble upbringing resonate with a populace increasingly clamouring for greater fairness and inclusivity in governance. In a society where meritocracy is sacrosanct, Mr Wong's ascent underscores the possibility of success outside the traditional corridors of power. As Singapore braces for the upcoming general election, the stakes for Mr Wong and the ruling Peoples' Action Party are undeniably high. While the ruling party's organisational prowess and track record of governance virtually guarantees electoral success, the degree of support garnered by the opposition will serve as a barometer of public sentiment towards the envisioned changes under the 4G leadership. In essence, Mr Wong's elevation symbolises Singapore's willingness to adapt and evolve in the face of dynamic challenges. As the city-state navigates the complexities of a post-Lee era, embracing change is not just a matter of political expediency but a strategic imperative for securing Singapore's continued success and prosperity on the global stage.

'We are thieves...'

In the slim 100-page 'Hind Swaraj' Gandhiji provided an overview of civilizations, past and present. 'That civilization which is permanent outlives it. Because the sons of India were found wanting, its civilization has been placed in jeopardy. But its strength is to be seen in its ability to survive the shock. Moreover, the whole of India is not touched. Those alone who have been affected by Western civilization have become enslaved'



On World Earth Day, the United Nations led the comity of nations by addressing a triple planetary crisis to foster climate stability, and asked that we live in harmony with nature and forge a pollution-free future. But it is Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts, shared a century ago, which remain universal lessons for all humanity. "I suggest that we are thieves in a way," he wrote in 'Trusteeship'. "If I take anything that I do not need for my own immediate use and keep it I steal it from somebody else. I venture to suggest that it is the fundamental law of Nature, without exception, that Nature produces enough for our wants from day to day, and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, there would be no pauperism in this world, there would be no more dying of starvation in this world. But so long as we have got this inequality, so long we are stealing." What he wrote in 'Young India', on 22 October 1925 about the 'Seven Social Sins' has become part of meme-lore: "Politics without Principle, Wealth Without Work, Pleasure Without Conscience, Knowledge without Character, Commerce without Morality, Science without Humanity, Worship without Sacrifice." These sinful idiomatic phrases continue to provoke, incite, and inspire, especially 'Science without Humanity', in our age when climate change, carbon footprint and net-zero energy emissions are common parlance. He was barely 39 years old, when Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi wrote 'Hind Swaraj'; returning from England his mind was buzzing with issues plaguing modern civilization. It was not just the physical environment or industry, nor the condition of cities, families, and women that bothered him. Gandhiji wrote, "This civilization takes note neither of morality nor of religion. Its votaries calmly state that their business is not to teach religion. Some even consider it to be a superstitious growth. Others put on the cloak of religion, and prate about morality. But, after twenty years' experience, I have come to the conclusion that immorality is often taught in the name of morality... Civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails miserably even in doing so." Having put religion and morality at the core of civilizational growth, the young barrister explained, "This civilization is irreligious, and it has taken such a hold on the people in

Europe that those who are in it appear to be half mad. They lack real physical strength or courage. They keep up their energy by intoxication. They can hardly be happy in solitude. Women, who should be the queens of households, wander in the streets or they slave away in factories. For the sake of a pittance, half a million women in England alone are labouring under trying circumstances in factories or similar institutions. This awful fact is one of the causes of the daily growing suffragette movement. This civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destructed." Turning his gaze to India, he wrote, "It is my deliberate opinion that India is being ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization. It is groaning under the monster's terrible weight. There is yet time to escape it, but every day makes it more and more difficult. Religion is dear to me and my first complaint is that India is becoming irreligious. Here I am not thinking of the Hindu or the Mahomedan or the Zoroastrian religion but of that religion which underlies all religions. We are turning away from God." His powerful words still echo after the passage of the 20th century hailed for its triumph of 'science and technology'.

'Hind Swaraj' addressed the charge against Indians being lazy people, while the Europeans were industrious and enterprising. Gandhiji said, "We have accepted the charge and we therefore wish to change our condition. Hinduism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and all other religions teach that we should remain passive about worldly pursuits and active about godly pursuits, that we should set a limit to our worldly ambition and that our religious ambition should be illimitable. Our activity should be directed into the latter channel." Once again, as in 'Trusteeship', he wanted the readers to become religious, and unafraid to challenge Western civilization. "It is a charge against India that her people are so uncivilized, ignorant and stolid... It is a charge really against our merit," he said. In the slim 100-page 'Hind Swaraj' Gandhiji provided overviews of civilizations, past and present. "That civilization which is permanent outlives it. Because the sons of India were found wanting, its civilization has been placed in jeopardy. But its strength is to be seen in its ability to survive the shock. Moreover, the whole of India is not touched. Those alone who have been affected by Western civilization have become enslaved. We measure the universe by our own miserable foot-rule. When we are slaves, we think that the whole universe is enslaved. Because we are in an abject condition, we think that the whole of India is in that condition." Introducing the concept of Swaraj in simple words, he wrote: "We can see that if we become free, India is free. And in this thought, you have a definition of Swaraj. It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is, therefore, in the palm of our hands. Do not consider this Swaraj to be like a dream. There is no idea of sitting still. The Swaraj that I wish to picture is such that, after we have once realized it, we shall endeavour to the end of our lifetime to persuade others to do likewise. But such Swaraj has to be experienced, by each one for himself. One drowning man will never save another. Slaves ourselves, it would be a mere pretension to think of freeing others."

It is only towards the end of 'Hind Swaraj' that Gandhiji focused on machinery and industrialization as witnessed during his stay in England. "Machinery has begun to desolate Europe. Ruination is now knocking at the English gates. Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin. The workers in the mills of Bombay have become slaves. The condition of the women working in the mills is shocking. When there were no mills, these women were not starving. If the machinery craze grows in our country, it will become an unhappy land. It may be considered a heresy, but I am bound to say that it were better for us to send money to Manchester and to use flimsy Manchester cloth than to multiply mills in India. By using Manchester cloth we only waste our money; but by reproducing Manchester in India, we shall keep our money at the price of our blood, because our very moral being will be sapped, and I call in support



RAJU MANSUKHANI The writer is an author, researcher on history, and a former deputy curator of Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Warning signs

SIR, The recent unprecedented flood in Dubai on April 19 has sparked a much-needed discussion on weather modification and geo-engineering. Theories on what caused the extreme rainfall include cloud seeding, global warming, and poor drainage systems. The Arabian Sea is warming at one of the fastest rates, with its surface temperature increasing by 1.2°C to 1.4°C in the last four decades. The trend is evident; cities around the Arabian Sea, including Mumbai, will increasingly be hit by extreme rainfall and cyclones as global warming intensifies. A warming planet will spare none, not even the wealthiest sheikhdom. The implications for

India are vast. The Arabian Sea's warming poses a significant threat to the western coastline, including Mumbai, and the states of Gujarat, Goa, and Kerala. Mumbai, in particular, is extremely vulnerable. The financial capital of India, like Dubai, experienced extreme rainfall events in the past. These events will only become more frequent and severe as global warming intensifies. The impact on India's economy, infrastructure, and population cannot be understated. The recent events in Dubai serve as a stark reminder that the effects of climate change are no longer a distant threat but a present reality. India must act decisively and urgently to mitigate these risks and protect its people and

its future. Yours, etc., Shruti Saggara, Pune, 23 April. CHENNAI PRODIGY SIR, From the chess cradle of Chennai has emerged another talent in D. Gukesh, who has turned heads by becoming the youngest champion of the 2024 FIDE Candidates Tournament in Toronto. Gukesh became only the second Indian after five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand to win the Candidates. The 17-year-old Indian prodigy, with nerves of steel and strategic brilliance, secured the championship title after a nail-biting final round. Gukesh's achievement is a historic moment for Chess. His accomplishment ushers in a new

era of youthful talent. His calm and collected demeanor throughout the tournament, coupled with his sharp tactical mind, has captivated fans worldwide. Yours, etc., Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai, 24 April. BIBLIOPHILES SIR, Apropos Sourav Malik's letter to the editor 'Reading Books' published in the 23 April edition, old-timers who are bibliophiles and steeped in ignorance of electronic gadgets need to avail themselves of every opportunity to read books. Most of such species of human beings possessing library tickets borrow story books, novels and magazines from the book loan counter. Needless to say, the ordinary members of a heritage library, save the National Library at Kolkata, have no access to digitized rare books and manuscripts, the same being the exclusive preserve of academics, researchers and journalists. The charm of a book is immortal in the memory of the person who reads it. Reading books since boyhood enriches his vocabulary in the long run. The Kolkata Book Fair boasts of a slew of books of national and international publications triumphing over the solitary users of electronic gadgets. Yours, etc., Anindya Ghosal, Burdwan, 23 April.

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

Foreign Minister reflects on 70th anniversary of Geneva Accords

In a recent interview granted to the press on the occasion, the official recalled that on July 21, 1954, the Geneva Accords were signed after 75 days of intense and complex negotiations, marking the first time in the nation's history that the fundamental national rights of Viet Nam - independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity - were affirmed in an international agreement, recognised and respected by the countries participating in the Geneva Conference. This was a result of the resilient struggle by the people under the leadership of the Party throughout the long resistance against colonialism, culminating in the glorious victory of Dien Bien Phu. He said alongside the victory, the accords completely ended the colonial domination and old imperialism that had lasted nearly 100 years in the country, ushering in a new chapter in the cause of national liberation and reunification. It marked the establishment of socialism in the North and the launch of the democratic national revolution in the South, aiming to fully realise the goal of national independence and unity. The signing of the Geneva Accords was not only a historical milestone for the nation but also held significance for the era, he said, adding that it represented the collective triumph of the three Indochinese countries and peace lovers worldwide. This agreement, along with the



Dien Bien Phu victory, strongly encouraged oppressed peoples to rise up in the struggle for national liberation, heralding the era of the collapse of imperialism worldwide.

Describing the accords as the first international agreement negotiated, signed and enforced by Viet Nam, Minister Son said it not only affirmed Viet Nam's independent and sovereign status on the international stage, but also represented a significant milestone in the development of Viet Nam's revolutionary diplomacy. It left valuable lessons and contributed to the cultivation of numerous outstanding diplomats in the Ho Chi Minh era. According to him, Viet Nam kept expanding international solidarity, pooling support from people worldwide to the righteous struggle by the Vietnamese people during the negotiations of the Geneva Accords. Throughout the process of negotiating, signing and implementing the accords, Viet Nam consistently adhered to the principles of peace, national independence and territorial integrity, while remaining agile and flexible with a strategy appropriate to the balance of power and the global and regional context, in order to achieve strategic objectives. The foreign minister also underlined lessons on studying and forecasting the situation, using dialogue and peaceful negotiations to resolve differences and conflicts in international relations, adding that they are especially relevant in today's complex global landscape. He further said that in the overall cause of national liberation and reunification, and specifically in the negotiations, signing and implementation of the Geneva Accords, Viet Nam consistently received significant and invaluable support, material and otherwise, from international friends, primarily from Laos, Cambodia, socialist countries and peace-loving people worldwide. In the process of renewal and following the Party's sound foreign policy, Viet Nam continues to garner invaluable support and cooperation from the international community on the basis of equality and mutually beneficial cooperation. The Vietnamese Party, State and people always highly value and keep in mind the support and assistance from international friends, he said.



## A thought for today

Everyone wants to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down

OPRAH WINFREY

## Just Bad Ideas

*Inheritance & wealth taxes are wrong responses to the social fallout of economic transformation*

Inheritance tax was the hot button topic yesterday in India's dynamic election campaign landscape. Sam Pitroda, chairman of Indian Overseas Congress, suggested it though the idea doesn't feature in the Congress manifesto. But it attracted attention because a tax to address the political fallout of inequality has gained global currency. A prominent advocate is Joe Biden, who proposed a wealth tax that received strong pushback.

None of these ideas are new. They haven't caught on because they are impractical. For example, US doesn't have a federal inheritance tax. Only six states, and not the ones that house tech giants, have some sort of inheritance tax. If they haven't spread, it's because they can lead to a flight of capital.

**Uneven flow of benefits** | The world's in the middle of a new industrial revolution (IR), led by communications technology. It's following the pattern of the previous IRs. The benefits of technological transformation flow unevenly. Typically, labour is at the tail end of the transformation as upgrading human skills to meet new requirements takes time. Govts are trying to manage the immediate fallout of this transformation by sometimes coming up with bad ideas.

**Wealth, a mirage?** | Financial markets reward creators and innovators in this transformation through hyperinflation of share prices. This notional wealth is the source of attention, particularly through ideas such as Biden's wealth tax, which proposed taxing unrealised capital gains. That is, the notional appreciation would be taxed. Elon Musk's fluctuating fortune shows how unworkable this idea is. Two years ago, his notional gains were huge. Now, his net worth is eroding in the wake of a sharp fall in share value.

**Inequality is real** | The uneven pace of the flow of benefits, however, does have real world consequences. In India, this comes through a weakening link between four decades of robust GDP growth and the structure of employment. Job creation at the mass level hasn't kept pace with economic growth, catalysing damage control by political parties. Expanding the welfare state has been the go-to approach for all of India's political parties.

**People matter** | Subsidies however are a short-term fix. And redistribution through measures such as inheritance and wealth tax is wholly counterproductive. The only ways out are a recalibration of policies that inhibit labour-intensive manufacturing, and a massive investment in upgrading human capital. Skilling is the only long-term solution.



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## It's Her Call

*Who has a say on a woman's decision to donate her organs? It should be only her decision, as an HC ruled*

Madhya Pradesh high court has directed a Bhopal hospital to go ahead on a case where a woman was to donate a kidney to her brother, but the hospital sought an NOC (no objection certificate) from her husband. The law in no place requires spousal consent. But clearly society does. Repeatedly. Such an order is not the first instance nor will it be the last matter to be heard on the issue. Every year, at least a couple of such cases are being heard in various high courts on the matter of 'spousal consent' to donate organs.

**The skew** | Three things are well established. One, India's organ donation landscape is grossly gender-unequal. Four of five living organ donors are women while four of five recipients are men. Two, the one-sided flow of organs is mostly from mothers and wives to sons and husbands. Emphasis is on the direction of the relationship. Three, in cases where it could be a married woman donating to her brother/father/mother? Get an NOC.

**The scandal** | Doctors have long held majority of kidney donors being 'wives', betrays widespread coercion, or manufactured consent, by families. This is but an extension of the commodification of women, of denying them ownership of their bodies post-marriage to the extent that they cannot decide (a) whether they at all want to 'give' organs and if they do, (b) who will receive their 'donation'.

**The scene** | Nobly questions a woman donating an organ to her husband. Hospitals insist on NOCs from a spouse if a woman wishes to donate to her birth-family. Authorisation committees in hospitals don't seek such NOCs when the recipient is in the woman's marital family. It will take more than a non-mention in the law to correct this mentality.



## Showing the finger

*Poll-day's fave pic hides a fistful of meanings*

Bachi Karkaria

Every polling day, every media carries the photograph of a beaming first-timer holding up her marked finger. Mandate 2024's too-hot-dates and too-cool dudes may make finding one as challenging as, erm, finding an alternative to YouKnow-Whom. All preceding rallies are marked by the same index, accusingly jabbed or sanctimoniously wagged. So it's important to point out that a finger is not just a finger. It holds a whole range of political metaphors in its hands. Here's my five-point exercise played in tune with today's sweeping symphony.

● Every alliance has stridently declared that it will get the thumbs-up, and silently prayed that it won't get fingered. Or altogether amputated. Candidates have also tried to thumb their nose at the rules of electoral engagement, but, like fingers, they are all not of the same size.

● Musicians use fingers to manipulate their instruments. Politicians do this by plucking at our heart-strings. Mostly, they are just harping on the same, flat scores.

● Or, like all parties are cut into 'fingers'; plunged into hot oil they become 'fries'. In politics, it only needs hot water to turn them to a crisp. As for that similarly shaped snack, fingers are fishy - when dipped slyly into pies.

● Or, like all parties are doing, let me invoke legend. When learned Vidyotamma held up five fingers to indicate the five senses, yokel Kalidas mistook it for a slap, and raised his combative fist in response. Wow! thought the Ujjaini princess, he's wisely showing that the five senses become stronger when they unite towards a common end. In today's context, it's equally clear that if the components of the five-initial alliance were to work in tandem, they could truly be a threat. However this too looks like a myth.

● Finally, different fingers can convey the same thing. The held-up little finger says we want to pee. The held-up middle finger says we are pissed-off.

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Alec Smart said: "Move over, statistics. Now it's 'Lies, damned lies - and pollitics'."

## Soak The Rich? Won't Help The Poor

*Nowhere has redistribution of private assets solved inequality. It is only by broadening the participative base of economic activity that everyone wins. Democracy and private property walk hand in hand*

TK Arun



As tumbrels trundled their way to the guillotine over the cobbled streets of Paris, carrying their load of the former lords of the land, the cronies who sat watching and knitting debated many things, but not whether to redistribute erstwhile feudal estates. That decision had already been made by the act of the Revolution.

As our learned judges of the Supreme Court debate the meaning and ambit of Article 39(b), which enunciates the directive principle enjoining the state to make sure "that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to subserve the common good", they would do well to bear in mind two things.

One, radical redistribution of property has historically been a feature of revolutions that turned the world upside down; and, two, the only exception to this has been land reform to end feudal rent, hand over ownership of land to the tiller and incentivise investment and enthusiasm to raise output.

The Constitution of India was drawn up to build a modern nation out of diverse elements, ranging from the debris of Britain's foremost colony to the hopes and aspirations of 40 crore Indians to end poverty and ignorance, and disease and inequality of opportunity. The Constitution was meant to bring order and organising principle to the building of a new nation, not to create new ructions and revolt - unless it was by way of resistance, from the entrenched traditional elite, to the spread of democracy.

Historically, the bourgeoisie - the burg- or town-dwelling capitalist - has been at the forefront of the fight for democracy and liberation from the arbitrary authority of kings and feudal lords. Democracy and private property have walked into the modern world of capitalist prosperity, holding hands, rather than at each other's throat. The makers of India's Constitution could not have included private property among the material resources of the community meant for redistribution.

The only exception is agricultural land. The French

physiocrats believed that land alone was the only source of wealth and income. Such a misconception is natural in any pre-industrial culture. The industrial revolution put paid to that illusion. In today's advanced economies, the share of agriculture in income generation or employment would be less than 2% of the total. An artificial intelligence unicorn today needs land only in the sense in which Archimedes needed land when he declared, give me a place to stand and a lever long enough, and I will move the world.

than in the days of non-economic obligations to and dependence on the landlord, on the part of the majority of society. Land reforms are essential for creating the human agency that drives people to acquire education, access healthcare and aspire for social mobility. Land reforms do, in fact, arrange the community's resources in a manner that subserves the common good.

This is evident from the southern states that carried out land reforms and the associated politics of empowering the people, and have relatively advanced indicators of social development and very little poverty. Another state that fits this description is J&K, where National Conference, under Sheikh Abdullah, carried out land reforms before Independence.

But doesn't redistribution of private assets have the potential to solve the problem of widening inequality, accompanied by unemployment, poverty and hopelessness that induced 1,70,000 suicides in India in 2022, 27% more than in 2018?

At no point in humankind's known history has the proportion of the population experiencing absolute deprivation been as low as it is today. More and more people have been delivered out of poverty and want across the world. Nowhere has this process been primarily the result of redistribution of assets. Growing the pie, and giving people a slice of the increment, rather than cutting up the original dish for redistribution, has achieved this.

Economic growth is not a zero-sum game. Everyone could win, with nobody losing. The point is to broaden the participative base of economic activity, as a portion of the growth would accrue to those creating it. That calls for investing in organising people into citizens with rights, dignity and associated expectations from the world, including the provision of functional education, healthcare, and infra, physical, as well as financial.

Globalised growth, which offers unprecedented access to the world's ideas, talent, technology, markets, and even capital, marks a new dawn, in which bliss it is to be alive, but to be young is very heaven. Dreaming of a golden past, magic carpets or redistribution of wealth is part of the night. The point is to wake to that dawn, fully equipped to grasp it.



Let him play golf, make the economy grow

In the world after the scientific and industrial revolutions, concentrated ownership of land only served to hinder democracy and retard the spread of education and generalised healthcare, essential to create a productive, industrial workforce. In the conquered territories it controlled after the end of World War II, US implemented thoroughgoing land reforms, most effectively in Japan and South Korea, and laid the ground for subsequent industrialisation and prosperity. Taiwan and Vietnam, besides China, forge ahead, powered by past land reforms.

Land reforms are, thus, integral to reconfiguring social relations in a fashion more conducive to democracy

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## Prayer For The Son Didn't Work For The Party

*Deve Gowda's party JDS is battling to simply exist. For years, much of its efforts have gone into building the career of his political heir Kumaraswamy*

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Powerful state parties dominate politics in Tamil Nadu, Andhra and Telangana. Even in Kerala, the two coalitions CPM-led LDF and Congress-led UDF have crafted their unique regional identities.

Among southern states, Karnataka stands out with a markedly different dynamic. Unlike TDP in Andhra, formed by thespian NT Rama Rao to rally the Telugu 'jaati', or DMK in Tamil Nadu, born out of the Dravidian movement, Karnataka hasn't witnessed the rise of a regional behemoth capable of challenging national parties.

Its sole regional outfit of note, JDS, has struggled to establish itself as a major force 25 years since HD Deve Gowda named his Janata Dal faction JD (Secular), and Sharad Yadav's was named JD

(United). EC gave both new symbols in Aug 1999 and granted both national party status for the time. By 2004, JDS was a state party, its reach limited to Karnataka. JDS has fought for survival ever since, unrivalled in many ways, but with fights within outnumbering its battles with outsiders.

**Electoral road** | Sustainability is key to survival. Especially in politics. As a state party, JDS never could exert pan-Karnataka influence, and held sway only in the south dominated by Vokkaligas. After all, Deve Gowda was 'Govdara Gowda'.

The Vokkaliga community couldn't help JDS beyond a point even in assembly elections, where the party has never made it to even second position. Between 1999 and 2023, JDS fielded 1,273 candidates. Only 15% became MLAs, 56% forfeited deposits. The party's best performance came in its first assembly election in 2004, when it won 58 seats. With this haul, Gowda began what's since become his party's survival

tool - coalition-building. Gowda earned the reputation of playing kingmaker, which critics describe as 'not-so-deserving'.

JDS's performance in LS polls has been even weaker. In 2014, it won two of 25 seats it contested, got fewer votes than NOTA on three, and in 10 assembly segments, the difference between NOTA & JDS was under 5%. In 2019, it did better than NOTA on all seats it contested - just six per a seat-sharing agreement with Congress - but won just one.

**Enter HDK, exit Siddaramaiah** | 2004 was a pivotal year. JDS's 58-seat win in assembly polls came when it went to voters with Siddaramaiah as its face, who many considered Gowda's successor. Siddaramaiah was made deputy CM in the Congress-JDS Dharam Singh govt.

This was also the year Gowda's son HD Kumaraswamy, better known as HDK, became MLA for the first time - he'd won the 1996 LS polls for Janata Dal and lost two subsequent LS polls and the 1999 assembly election. 2004 was also the year BJP won its most assembly seats in Karnataka until then, 79. In five elections preceding, it had a cumulative 108. When in 2005, Gowda expelled Siddaramaiah, JDS lost its second-biggest politician. Whispers of 'appa-makkala paksha' (father-son's party) soon after became a moniker.

**Coalition crossroads** | When Dharam Singh's govt collapsed, JDS stitched an alliance with BJP (2006), HDK became CM & BS Yediyurappa deputy CM in what came to be called the 20-20 power sharing - CMship for 20 months each.

But HDK didn't honour the agreement, creating massive sympathy for Yediyurappa. HDK's 'backstabbing' earned BJP 110 seats of the 224-seat assembly in 2008. Corruption scandals

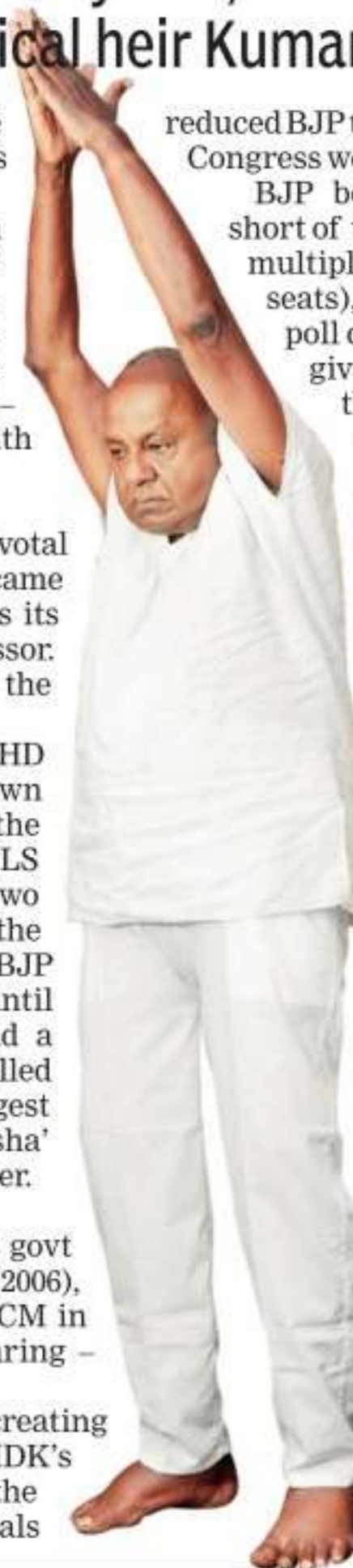
reduced BJP to 44 seats in 2013, when Siddaramaiah-led Congress won 122.

BJP bounced back with 104 in 2018, falling short of the magic number. Between 2018 and 2023 multiple CMs took office, including HDK (JDS 37 seats), backed by Congress (78 seats). The post-poll coalition with Congress appeared to have given JDS a lifeline, but it gave way after their combined failure in 2019 LS polls - managing only one seat each.

**Missed a turn** | A reputation for keeping all 'power' it manages to gain within the family, hurt the party, as many left following Siddaramaiah's exit, including HDK's close aides. That it will ally with anybody willing to help it occupy the treasury benches has eroded its credibility, and failure to nurture politicians of heft scuttled its growth.

This time, JDS is contesting on just three LS seats. Two nominees are family - HDK from Mandya and nephew Prajwal Revanna, the incumbent, from Hassan. A third family member is contesting on a BJP ticket - HDK's brother-in-law, well-regarded cardiologist CN Manjunath, on April 26 will face Congress firefighter DK Shivakumar's brother DK Suresh, in Bangalore Rural.

With murmurs of a merger with the saffron party - something Deve Gowda is said to be resisting - 2024 could be this southern party's most critical year yet.



Karnataka votes on April 26 for the first (14 seats) of its 2-phase election

POLLITICS  
Special Series on Elections

## Calvin &amp; Hobbes



James Anderson

Sri Aurobindo calls yoga, "...the art of conscious self-finding." Before finding meaning and truth in our lives, we must know ourselves. This is destiny in itself. Everything unfolds from that. Destiny is more a matter of who we are than what we do. Yog is an end in itself: it provides the point of joining. To join with the Divine is our destiny and as it is conscious, the process is accelerated. Integral Yoga goes a step further, targeting conscious union of Spirit and Matter. This is the yog of transformation and has to be lived through every particle of our being.

Personal effort is mandatory. Before we get a sense of soul presence, we need to summon the noblest parts of our nature to align to any semblance of our Truth. This 'divine possibility' steers us uncertainly in the right direction.

## Destiny Is Who You Truly Are

However, there is always a Higher Force and, through aspiration and surrender, the grinding effort gradually abates. Yog keeps us awake. We perceive many layers of conditioning that comprise our 'personality'. It is all superficial. To access any truth, we have to look within and interiorise our awareness. As the orientation changes, our life begins to expand and grow. We peel away the covering on this yogic path. Simultaneously, we move closer to our life-purpose. Before, we were little more than toys of outside forces, now we find a degree of immunity.

As our awareness shifts, we invoke greater guidance within. We discard old props and belief-systems that had sustained us and become aware of something inside which stands back and watches

the play of our nature. We experience the Witness who observes but does not intervene. We align with it and learn to detach from outside shocks and circumstances. We become more intact but there is still no radical change.

When we identify with this Witness, our true consciousness steps forward. In the Mother's words, "...is not only aware but knows and effects." The knowledge possesses an executive action: it is aligned to Shakti. Gradually, this Witness becomes our Teacher. This is indispensable to

reaching our destiny. This Divine Person, who has accompanied us through many incarnations, appears when we become attentive to its presence. This is how the connection gets forged. Initially, it speaks in the faintest whisper and we must be attentive and heed its instructions.

## Sacredspace



What we call our destiny is truly our character and that character can be altered. The knowledge that we are responsible for our actions and attitudes does not need to be discouraging, because it also means that we are free to change this destiny.

Anaís Nin

To find our destiny and our Truth, we must change our nature. We had initially witnessed discord, now we are conscious and the nature starts to integrate. As we focus, each part aligns to the Truth. Ultimately, Truth must be installed in all our being. Every inner movement is observed as it rises to the surface. We observe our body; a detailed map of our inner psychology. We give this process considerable time. This inner work must be embraced into our daily life.

Destiny is about finding our true individuality. It is a lifetime's work. It is cemented through progressive harmony. Harmony is the glue that holds us together. As it perfects, a true identity is formed and our svadharma is reached, expressing the divinity that was once submerged below the surface.

James Anderson is coordinating editor of NAMA, the Journal of Integral Health, published in Puducherry



## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

### RETROGRADE

Rahul Gandhi on 'financial surveys' and 'revolution,' Pitroda's idea on inheritance are bad economics — and bad politics, too

IT IS AN idea that harkens to perhaps the worst aspects of India's socialist past. The chairman of Indian Overseas Congress, Sam Pitroda's comments on the inheritance tax, have raised the spectre of wealth redistribution, almost four decades after the very same Congress party under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had abolished it. The then finance minister V P Singh had noted that the estate duty, or the inheritance tax as it was then called, had "not achieved the twin objectives with which it was introduced, namely, to reduce unequal distribution of wealth and assist the states in financing their development schemes." Clarifications on Pitroda's remarks by a string of party leaders do little to allay concerns. Especially given how, of late, Rahul Gandhi himself has been framing his party's twin planks of social justice and economic welfare. Speaking at Hyderabad, he promised a financial and institutional survey to find out who holds the country's wealth. He added that, "after this historic step, we will take revolutionary measures." Read with Pitroda, there is an allusion to wealth redistribution.

Such talk is hare-brained, retrograde, and a classic self-goal. More so when the Congress itself had withstood pressure during the UPA's term to reintroduce this tax. This not only turns the clock backwards, it also reveals an inability to learn from the past. Collections from the tax are likely to be a pittance considering state capacity and the myriad ingenious ways that are likely to be constructed to avoid paying the tax. In fact, this was even the case when the tax was in place. The then finance minister had acknowledged in his budget speech that collections from the tax were "only about Rs 20 crore" and its cost of administration was "relatively high". Ironically, Pitroda's pearls find no mention in the Congress party's manifesto. In fact, the manifesto, on the issue of tax, makes some encouraging noises — for instance, it speaks about ushering in an era of "transparency, equity, clarity and impartial tax administration", ensuring "stable personal income tax rates", "lessen(ing) the burden of tax", and eliminating "exploitative tax schemes".

That concentration of capital is a problem, that marginalised sections must get a leg-up, that efforts must be made to address inequalities of opportunity, expand the pie, is beyond debate. The Congress has promised a socio-economic caste census as a tool of affirmative action that will address inequalities rooted in historical injustices. Yet, the cavalier manner in which Gandhi has conflated these two issues, in the middle of an election campaign when there is little room for nuance, raises fears of a direct assault on wealth. And that, too, when the story of India's wealth creation has just begun. There are indications that more and more Indians from all walks of life are beginning to participate in wealth creation — there are now more than 150 million demat accounts in the country as per recent data. By portraying the caste census as a magic wand that will deliver justice to one and all, by loosely talking of "surveys" and "revolutionary" steps, by floating the inheritance tax trial balloon, the Congress does a disservice to its own economic journey three decades after the landmark 1992 reforms that brought the curtains on the Licence Permit Raj. In the name of votes, Rahul's colleagues should tell him, it's unwise to fiddle with those curtains.

### CRUELTY AS POLICY

UK's Rwanda law for asylum seekers violates humanitarian principles, smacks of bad governance

EVERY MONTH for the last 10 months, refugees and asylum-seekers have died trying to get into the UK. Desperate to escape existential dangers — crippling poverty, political persecution, war and climate change — the refugees are preyed on by agents and make the journey across the treacherous waters of the English Channel on small boats. Hours after the Rishi Sunak government's Rwanda Bill was passed by the British parliament, five people including one child died on such a crossing. PM Sunak said "[The incident] is just a reminder of why my plan is so important... We want to prevent people making these very dangerous crossings." There is little doubt that the UK, like much of the developed world, is facing an influx of undocumented migrants. So far this year, the number of people trying to make it into the country has grown by 25 per cent over the same period last year. However, there is a cruel irony in using the suffering of those who will be worst affected by the law to resist it.

The Bill has its origins in a policy formulated by former PM Boris Johnson in 2022, under which the UK government could deport some asylum-seekers to Rwanda, where they will be assessed for permanent resettlement. The British government has reportedly paid close to 300 million pounds to the Rwandan government for this scheme. The UK supreme court, however, struck down the policy in light of Rwanda's poor human rights record. The Safety of Rwanda Bill is meant to address "the Court's concerns and will allow Parliament to confirm the status of the Republic of Rwanda as a safe third country". The UNHCR has asserted that "Such arrangements...are contrary to the letter and spirit of the Refugee Convention."

Setting aside the legal and moral issues, the Rwanda Bill is bad policy. A relatively small number of undocumented migrants coming into the UK will fall under the law's ambit. Those willing to risk their lives to escape their homes — and those that exploit them — are unlikely to be deterred. At an initial cost of 1.8 million pounds per asylum-seeker, scaling the policy is not financially viable. Then there's the fact that many, if not most, of the prospective deportees will likely approach the British courts for relief, burdening the system and exchequer. What the UK — like so many other developed countries — needs is a streamlined process for asylum and immigration. As a former Chancellor of the Exchequer and investment banker, Sunak likely knows this. He must realise xenophobia is a poor basis for policy.

### LIVE AND FORGET

In an often overwhelming world, staying sane means learning to remember and allowing to forget

PHONES, WALLET, SUNGLASSES, keys. A box of cornflakes, even a ukulele and, once, a gate valve. These are among the things that passengers have forgotten in cabs in 2023, according to Uber India's annual 'Lost and Found Index'. Further insights suggest that Delhi is the most forgetful city in India, that people are most prone to absentmindedness in the evening — from 7 pm to 9 pm — and that the festive days around Diwali tend to make people more distracted than any other time of the year. No doubt this information is amusing, and even useful — one could, for example, learn to be vigilant about one's belongings during the weary, post-work cab ride home. But the real lesson here is that forgetfulness is inevitable.

In *Remember: The Science of Memory and the Art of Forgetting*, the American neuroscientist Lisa Genova explains that "a finely orchestrated balancing act between data storage and data disposal" is key to a well-functioning memory system. In other words, as much as remembering — to turn off the gas, your child's smile when you return from work or that the deadline for filing tax returns is close — is necessary, so is forgetting — your score in Class X boards, the heartbreak of an early love or the time a colleague slighted you. In their own way, both help maintain sanity in an often overwhelming world. Consider the condition of the titular character in Jorge Luis Borges's story 'Funes the Memorious' whose prodigious memory forced him to note the progress of decay, corruption, fatigue and death and doomed him to be "the solitary and lucid spectator of...an intolerably precise world".

It is, of course, annoying — not to mention inconvenient and even expensive — to forget one's keys or phone in the back of a taxi. But if living a happy, full life means having a fallible memory, that's not too steep a price to pay.



SANJAY SRIVASTAVA

UK's Rwanda Bill is a symptom of West's complicated attitude towards migrants

THE GOVERNMENT OF the United Kingdom has passed its "Rwanda Bill" — it will now become law. Under the Bill, asylum seekers deemed to have illegally entered its territories after January 1, 2022, can be sent to the African country for "processing". Crucially, irrespective of whether an asylum seeker is found to be "genuine" or not, they cannot return to the UK and must opt for settlement in either Rwanda or another country. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government devised the legislation after furious opposition to what was earlier a "scheme" to send "illegals" to Rwanda. In 2023, the supreme court declared the scheme unlawful, pointing out that Rwanda was not a "safe" country and the plan went against the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

In return for acting as an offshore processing centre, the impoverished African nation will receive substantial amounts of money. These run into hundreds of thousands of pounds. The Bill, it has been suggested, will act as a deterrent to those who make landfall on the UK coastline in small boats (sometimes no more than inflatable rafts with an engine strapped on) crossing the English Channel from European ports. These ongoing acts of extraordinary desperation — what can the world's wretched do but risk their already debased bodies? — continue to take a toll on passengers on matchstick carriers.

On April 23, an attempted crossing from the French coast came to grief with the death of five passengers who fell overboard when the engine of the overcrowded boat stalled. One of those who died was a seven-year-old. Notwithstanding this, those who remained on the boat chose — after the engine had been restarted — to carry on towards the English coast rather than turn back to the safety of the nearby land. How should one judge the desperation and hope for another future?

The Rwanda Bill — which Home Secretary James Cleverly described, without a hint of irony, as a "landmark moment" — is not unique. Australia's offshore refugee programme involved the tiny South Pacific nation of Nauru (population around 13,000 with a GDP of approximately \$US135 million). It is estimated that in 2021-2022, around two-

The Rwanda Bill — which Home Secretary James Cleverly described, without a hint of irony, as a 'landmark moment' — is not unique. Australia's offshore refugee programme involved the tiny South Pacific nation of Nauru (population around 13,000 with a GDP of approximately \$US135 million). It is estimated that in 2021-2022, around two-thirds of Nauru's revenues came from payments connected to the Australian refugee scheme. The processing centres are not currently operational, though they are kept in a 'readied' state, should Australia need them again. Nauru's refugee servicing industry lingers on.

thirds of Nauru's revenues came from payments connected to the Australian refugee scheme. The processing centres are not currently operational, though they are kept in a "readied" state, should Australia need them again. Nauru's refugee servicing industry lingers on. While themselves much in the news, the UK or the Australian de-territorialised systems of national governance are also part of longer — and growing — trends in dealing with troubled populations that disturb the borders of rich countries. The European Union (EU) finances refugee-blocking and processing arrangements across several countries in the third world ("Global South") seems a sanitisation of the relationship between the rich and poor hemispheres) and both the Trump and Biden administrations have been active in formulating such arrangements in their South American backyard.

In recent times, Western governments' attitudes towards refugees have important symbolic dimensions. These are intended for both domestic consumption as well as consolidating the idea of the West at a global level.

First, the idea of "control" over national borders has been a powerful tool of electoral politics across many Western countries and refugees and asylum seekers are grist to the "sovereignty" mill. A significant precursor to Australia's Nauru "solution", for example, was erstwhile prime minister John Howard's 2001 statement that the Australian government would control who came into Australia. This, in turn, was linked to the government's refusal to allow a Norwegian ship carrying rescued refugees to dock on its shores.

Howard's "strong" stance is widely credited with winning an election his party was expected to lose. It is unsurprising, then, that a constant refrain to the UK's Rwanda Bill has been Rishi Sunak's statement that "international courts" will not be allowed to determine the country's domestic policy. The idea is that British "sovereignty" is under threat from extra-national forces, including refugees and international courts. This, of course, echoes significant parts of the Brexit narrative.

"Sovereignty" has a mythical status in the life of nations. Buying a wide variety of Chinese goods is rarely seen as undermining European

sovereignty, while dealing with human beings whose lives have been affected by geopolitical conflicts in which powerful nations of the world have played a significant role, is.

Second, on a global level, the Rwanda Bill is part of the symbolic register of "compassion" that forms an indispensable part of Western notions of the self. If sovereignty demands a policy of extra-territorial governance, then the Rwanda solution is also an answer to charges of callousness towards the world's most vulnerable populations. For, it retains the idea of compassion — financed through payments to Rwanda — by suggesting that asylum seekers still have access to refugee status. Only that it has to be determined elsewhere. One can be both a "strong" leader and protect national borders by staving off international forces that may "undermine" sovereignty but also be compassionate.

Beyond these symbolic registers, there is an additional one that should also trouble us. The emerging "asylum economy" — in Nauru and other parts of the world — has something troubling about it as a form of neo-colonial relationship between rich and poor nations. It is as if the solution to the historical and geopolitical conditions that produce refugees and asylum seekers is to create massive holding camps in the third world.

There are very few indications that the conditions that create refugees and asylum seekers will abate any time soon. Women, men and children do not get into creaky boats — with prior knowledge of the fate of others who have made similar journeys — to either challenge national sovereignty or test the limits of Western compassion. There will be more legal challenges to the Bill, though the sight of refugees being bundled onto planes to camps in Rwanda will, some will hope, be a tonic to Sunak's party's electoral chances. What is entirely unclear is if any of this has anything to do with addressing the underlying causes that lead such large numbers to put themselves in harm's way with the faintest idea of making landfall along a coastline of hope.

The writer is British Academy Global Professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS University of London



GURU PRAKASH

### APPEASEMENT VS JUSTICE

Congress engages in the former in the name of the latter

OVER THE LAST couple of days, the political discourse is heating up. Prime Minister Narendra Modi recalled a statement by former PM Manmohan Singh in which he called for the first claim of minorities especially, Muslims, over national resources. From the reversal of the progressive Shah Bano verdict to acquiring the unique distinction of being among the first countries to ban *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie — Congress has never shied away from brazen appeasement.

After tendering his resignation from the Nehru cabinet on September 27, 1951, B R Ambedkar said in Parliament: "...why is no relief granted to the Scheduled Castes? Compare the concern the government shows over safeguarding the Muslims. The Prime Minister's whole time is devoted to the protection of Muslims... what I want to know is, are the Muslims the only people who need protection? Are the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the Indian Christians not in need of protection? What concern has he shown for these communities? So far as I know, none and yet these are the communities which need far more care and attention than the Muslims."

Manmohan Singh's statement in 2006, then, must not be viewed in isolation. Neeraj Chowdhury writes in *How Prime Ministers Decide*: "Rajiv Gandhi had thought that the Muslim Women's Bill would satisfy the Muslims and the opening of the locks on the grille would make the Hindus happy." The surreptitious art of trying to gain political lever-

age by exploiting the sentiments of the masses has long been the modus operandi of the Congress party.

Minority appeasement and social justice cannot coexist. Period. In the 2009 general elections, Congress went to the extent of promising nationwide reservation for Muslims in jobs and education. There is a constitutional basis and a history of social marginalisation that provides a moral justification for reservation for SCs, STs and the OBCs. Muslim leaders like the Owaisi brothers have publicly stated that they have been rulers of this country in the past. The NCERT medieval history textbooks bear testimony to the widespread presence of a Muslim aristocracy. They were connoisseurs of art and culture and there have been robust sources of social capital and networks within the community. Dalits remain largely landless whereas the Waqf Board owns several assets and properties across India. It is difficult to find the logic behind the accommodation of Muslims in the quota meant for socially backward communities.

Hansraj Gangaram Ahir, Chairperson, National Commission for Backward Classes says, "There is 32 per cent reservation for OBCs in Karnataka. Under this, they have done bifurcation, like Category I, (B), II(B), III(A), III(B). There are 95 castes including 17 castes of Muslims under Category I. In Category II(B), there are 103 castes including 19 Muslims. What has happened in Karnataka is that all Muslims in the state are categorised as OBC. We have asked them on what basis this

reservation has been given. We are not getting a proper clarification from the Karnataka government."

The Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission and the Sachar Committee sowed the seeds of the idea of including Muslims in the reservation meant for SCs, STs and OBCs. However, this goes against the fundamental spirit of the Constitution of India. The Supreme Court has, meanwhile, reserved its verdict on the minority institution status of Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University. This will determine if marginalised sections will get reservations in admission and recruitment at both universities. The façade of Dalit-Muslim unity and the rhetoric of "Jai Bhim, Jai Meem" falls flat here. The Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka governments are already flirting with the idea of including Muslims in the OBC category.

The Constitution turning 70 years old is a milestone to celebrate. The men and women who drafted this document were people of great vision and foresight. There is unwarranted fear-mongering by a section of the Opposition around the Constitution that reflects a lack of vision and imagination. The principles of equality and fair treatment are the cornerstone of the Constitution.

For us Dalits, the Constitution is a matter of commitment, not politics. It empowers us. We will leave no stone unturned to ensure that our constitutional safeguards are not diluted.

The writer is national spokesperson, BJP



### APRIL 25, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

#### BANGLADESH FIRING

INDIA ASKED BANGLADESH to cease immediately unprovoked firing on Indian BSF personnel and civilians across the border. Two, including a sub-inspector, were reported to have been injured when Bangladesh Rifles personnel opened fire at Sonahat in Goalpara district of Assam to prevent the construction of a barbed wire fence by India. An External Affairs Ministry spokesman said intermittent firing was continuing till 2pm.

#### INDIA-MEXICO TIE-UP

INDIA AND MEXICO have formally decided

to set up a joint commission to give a fillip to their bilateral trade and cooperation in various fields. The countries signed two agreements, one in the field of science and technology and the other in educational and cultural exchanges. Both agreements were signed by Natwar Singh on behalf of India and Laiz Del Amo, general director of cultural affairs, on behalf of Mexico.

#### SETHI ON KHALISTAN

HOME MINISTER P C Sethi said that the government would not allow the formation of Khalistan at any cost. He reiterated the government's stand that it was prepared for bi-

partite or tripartite talks with the Akalis. He said he had sent several letters to the Akalis to come to the negotiating table but to no avail.

#### MIZORAM ELECTIONS

THE FATE OF 133 candidates would be folded into ballot boxes in the fourth assembly elections of the hilly Union territory of Mizoram. It has been the most hard-fought election campaign and looks like a contest between the ruling People's Conference and the Congress (I). The Congress (I) has made an all-out bid to come to power after forming governments through controversial elections in Assam and defections in Meghalaya.

# 9 THE IDEAS PAGE

## Message in turnout patterns

First phase of elections has registered underwhelming voter participation. Hindi-speaking states have seen the highest decline in people exercising franchise



SHREYAS SARDESAI AND RAHUL SHASTRI

THE FIRST AND largest phase of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections has registered an underwhelming voter turnout of around 66.1 per cent, which is a drop of nearly four percentage points compared to 2019. There is a decline in turnout in 19 of the 21 states, which had one or more seats going to polls in this phase.

To enable us to arrive at a few distilled facts, we group the states in three categories: Hindi-speaking states, East and Northeast states and the Rest of India (Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and the Union Territories). (See Table 1). This grouping draws on certain common characteristics: For instance, in most of the Hindi-speaking states, the BJP has traditionally been strong with deep networks. In 2014, it won 35 out of the 36 seats from this group that went to polls in the first phase. In 2019, it won 29 out of 36.

In Eastern and Northeast States, the BJP had little presence pre-2014, but in the past decade, through acquisitions and partnerships with local parties, it has become the decisive force in the 18 seats that went to polls in the first phase. It and its coalition partners in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won 16 of the 18 seats in 2019.

In the Rest of India, the BJP/NDA is relatively weaker: it won just 10 out of the 48 seats in 2019 in these regions. The opposition is either a dominant force (Tamil Nadu) or a serious challenger (Maharashtra).

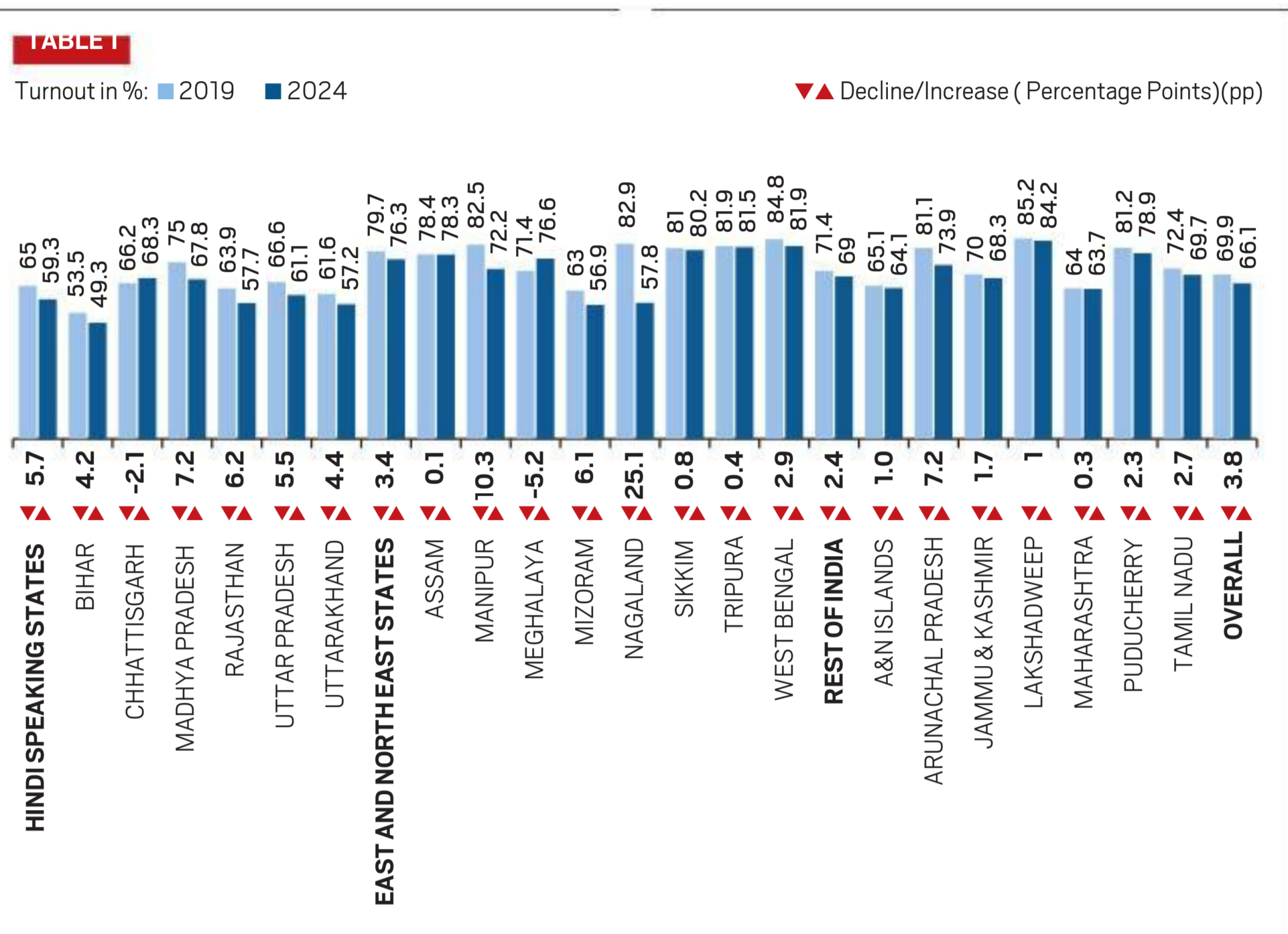
We observe that the decline in turnouts in the first phase of 2024 is the highest in the Hindi-speaking states, followed by East and Northeast states, followed by the rest of India. In fact, if we consider East and Northeast states without Nagaland, which faced an extraordinary situation of a poll boycott in six of its districts, the decline in turnout is the least (2.1 pp).

If we consider turnouts in this same set of seats longitudinally from 1999, we arrive at Table 2.

It is salient that the trend in every successive election from at least 1999 has been an increase in combined turnout in these seats. 2024 breaks this trend. The trend for each group is also worth noting. For East and Northeast states, there has been an increase in turnouts every election, irrespective of the incumbent gaining or losing power. For the Rest of India group, the period when the United Progressive Alliance was voted into power — the 2004 and 2009 elections — the turnouts increased by a huge 12.4 pp. After 2009, both increases and declines in turnouts have been small.

In Hindi-speaking states, the turnout declined in the two elections the UPA was voted into power, but it increased by a massive 14.2 pp in the two elections the NDA was voted into power. However, perhaps unexpectedly, the Hindi-speaking states have the highest decline in turnouts in the first phase of 2024: The BJP's strongest suit seems to display weakness at least as far as turnouts are concerned.

This observation is buttressed when we



Group/Year	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
All 102 Seats	57.8%	58.6%	62.7%	69.3%	69.9%	66.1%
Hindi Speaking States	54.3%	52.2%	50.8%	62.2%	65%	59.3%
East and North East	68.7%	71%	74.5%	79.7%	79.7%	76.3%
Rest of India	57.6%	60.5%	70%	72.6%	71.4%	69%

Source: Election Commission of India

compare the turnout figures in seats where the NDA won in 2019 versus the seats where the Opposition INDIA bloc won in 2019. In 2019, the NDA won 50 out of 102 seats. In these seats, the turnout has dropped by 5.1 pp. The INDIA bloc won 49 seats in 2019. In these seats, the turnout has dropped by less than half of that in the NDA seats — by 2.4 pp.

There does seem to be a steeper drop in enthusiasm for voting in seats where the BJP has been strong.

This observation is further supplemented by the data on the impact of the so-called double-engine sarkar on turnouts. In 2018, the BJP lost state elections in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. In the 18 Lok Sabha seats from these states which have gone to polls in Phase 1, turnout percentages in the 2018 assembly elections were customarily high: 77.5 per cent in Madhya Pradesh and 76 per cent in Rajasthan. In the Lok Sabha elections that followed, turnouts dropped by just 2.6 pp in MP and 12.6 pp in Rajasthan, and the electorate who voted for the Opposition at the state-level decisively voted for the BJP in nationally. In 2023, the BJP won state elections in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. But in these 18 seats, turnouts have dropped by a massive 17.6 pp in Rajasthan and 13 pp in MP.

The double engine seems at least unable to energise the voters to turn up for the so-called

We observe that the decline in turnouts in the first phase of 2024 is the highest in the Hindi-speaking states, followed by East and Northeast States, followed by rest of India. In fact, if we consider East and Northeast states without Nagaland, which faced an extraordinary situation of a poll-boycott in six of its districts, the decline in turnout is the least (2.1 pp).

## Think about thinking

It's time to address the fear of mathematics and literary classics

IN GOOD FAITH SWATI RATNA AND ALOK TIWARI

HUMANS ARE PROUD of the fact that only we, among all living beings, have the ability to engage in higher-level thinking — “cogito, ergo sum”, or, “I think, therefore I am”. Our ability to entertain complex thoughts does not merely characterise us. It defines us.

This cognitive capacity has stood us in good stead. We have postulated and proved mathematical theorems, we are exploring the cosmos, we have developed relativistic and quantum physics, we have written epics, we have refined the art of lying and deception, and of course, we read Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Mathematics, philosophy, religion, family, nation, sciences, literature, and the list of our thought-derived innovations goes on and on.

The impressive success of our cognitive faculties, that of a species with thousands of years of near-continuous, accretive history and eight billion plus living members, masks something troubling and humbling. Most humans are quite lousy thinkers, when tested against the benchmarks mentioned. Study after study has revealed that the ability of an average human to comprehend complex arguments leaves a lot to be desired. A distressingly large number of kids proclaim their fear of mathematics because it is “tough”. Many readers choose to read pulp fiction over the literary classics because they are deemed “incomprehensible”. It is understandable that a person does not like mathematics or literary classics, but to fear them for being tough or incomprehensible is also a

probable symptom of the lack of cognitive capacity to enjoy them. This widespread cognitive weakness is something to worry about, for it chains a plurality of humans to sub-par intellectual existence with attendant costs.

The costs of poor human cognition are immense. If we have to develop as knowledge-driven societies, we need to improve the human capacity to think coherently. With the increasing technological and organisational complexities of our times, those unable to think properly about the issues confronting them are at the risk of being left behind. Cognitive weakness has serious costs for the person concerned, with respect to that person's ability to gainfully participate in the modern socio-economic system. Further, poor human cognition has a huge negative externality, that is, a cost not fully internalised by the person having poor cognition. Society loses out in many ways. Public discourse deteriorates when complex issues, requiring cognitively demanding public deliberation, are not given the careful thought they require. Heuristics, cognitive biases, etc., in unexamined, sub-conscious thinking lead to the prevalence of social stereotypes and prejudices. Lower cognitive capacities create a ready marketplace for simplistic, inappropriate solutions to complex problems, to the detriment of everyone.

Another issue that merits attention is that earlier epochs were less driven by mental faculties than is the case today. The Industrial Revolution reduced the need for human mus-

cle power and we saw tremendous expansion of universalised elementary education around the world. Humans increasingly moved from using brawn to brain. Today, we have the age of Artificial Intelligence dawning upon us. If AI succeeds in fulfilling even a fraction of its promise today, most of the lower-level thinking would move to AI entities. Therefore, humans can find employment and maintain their sense of self-worth only if they can engage in higher-order thinking, and to do so, humans will have to develop the faculties for higher-order thinking. In other words, the time is now ripe for the universalisation of higher-level cognitive training.

How do we address the issue? We are already on the job. The modern education system, for all its criticism, has done a remarkable job towards upgrading our intellectual abilities. We are taught literature, mathematics, social and natural sciences, etc., at school and college to strengthen our capacity to think and comprehend properly. However, for most of us who do not move into cognitively demanding academics or professions, schooling is the last formal cognitive training that we get. As already discussed, it is proving quite insufficient for our times.

To ensure the universalisation of higher-order cognitive training, a beginning may be made by introducing “human cognition” as a compulsory subject from class VI onwards. The new subject can be crafted by taking relevant material from psychology, linguistics,

“national-level” issues.

Further, if we compare constituency-wise declines as compared to 2019, there are higher than average declines in turnouts in constituencies like Ganganagar in Rajasthan, which was a nodal constituency for farm protests, Jhunjhunu (with a high proportion of young army aspirants disappointed with Agnipath scheme), Sidhi in MP, which is one of the poorest constituencies in the state and Shahdol where tribal and Dalit percentage of the population exceeds 50 per cent.

It is too early to tell if these are indications of disenchantment of three of the four “castes” posited by the Prime Minister — farmers, youth women and the poor — but a mass of observations pointing in a similar direction can be worrying signs for the BJP.

In the crucible of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the Hindi-speaking states, the one centrepiece which much of the BJP leadership's campaign gravitates towards: The Ram Janmabhoomi temple does not seem to have yet had the effect the ruling party had banked upon — mobilising the swing voters to turn up. This third time, there does not seem to be any observable wave for the BJP. Whether this decline in turnouts will also translate into a shift in outcomes, it is too early to tell, but these are straws in the wind.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### HEARTS, NOT VOTES

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘After phase one’ (IE, April 24). Political parties must acknowledge the citizens' dissatisfaction, reflected in the low voter turnout during the first phase of elections. They should prioritise administration and holistic national development. It's crucial to remember that even the mighty Roman Empire crumbled to dust. Elections should centre on serving the nation and its people, rather than exploiting religious divides. Citizens are increasingly aware of these tactics, urging political parties to shift their strategies towards winning hearts, not just votes.

Ajay Corriea, *Vasai*

### EVALUATE & ADJUST

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘After phase one’ (IE, April 24). It may be premature to speculate election results or trends based on low voting in the first phase of Lok Sabha polls when compared to previous ones. This phase covered a heterogeneous mix of seats. The severe summer this time is another distinctive factor. Still, since no political party can afford to ignore even marginal variances, it should plan its election strategy dynamically, making adjustments as the poll progresses. The BJP is aiming to get 400 plus seats. It should analyse the low percentage of voting more carefully — is it a function of voter confidence in BJP's win or a function of no alternatives?

YG Chouksey, *Pune*

### MAYAWATI'S PLAY

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘A calculated step’ (IE, April 24). Mayawati's decision not to join the NDA or INDIA is a clever move. If the BSP had formed an alliance with INDIA in UP, its voter base might have shifted to the alliance partners and, in the long term, its core base of Dalit society might have diminished. If Mayawati joined hands with the BJP, she might have got one or two ministerial berths in the next government. Caste equations play an important role in UP where parties like the SP and BSP are constantly trying to outsmart one another in the elections. Had both the parties come together, they could have raised a formidable challenge to the BJP.

Atul Thakre, *Nagpur*

### QUEEN'S GAMBIT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘The challenger’ (IE, April 24). Dommaraaju Gulesher has shown that not only does he possess exceptional talent, he also has a mature head on his shoulders. His calmness after losses and equanimity after wins were striking, and the influence of mentor Viswanathan Anand unmistakable. The chess ecosystem in India is flourishing with young players from tier 2 and 3 cities playing well. Asia has changed the chess world order by ensuring, for the first time, that two Asians would be battling it out for a world title. There should be more elite tournaments in India.

SS Paul, *Nadia*

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“In cutting the UK loose from more than 70 years of international norms regarding refugees, the Rwanda law is not just a wasteful gesture. It also marks a reckless and disgraceful lurch away from a hard-won system of institutional respect for human rights.”

— THE GUARDIAN

## An intrigue where there's none

Read the Congress manifesto. There is not even a semblance of thought to seize the private wealth of citizens and redistribute it to others



PRAVEEN CHAKRAVARTY

MUCH LIKE THE Shakespearean play *Much Ado about Nothing*, the Congress party's manifesto seems to have incited excitement, intrigue, and disbelief with a dash of comedy. But unlike the play's title, the Congress's manifesto has “much ado about many things” for a billion Indians.

When the manifesto was launched on April 5 in Delhi, there was excitement over its fresh and bold ideas such as the right to apprenticeship, reversing the damage of the last decade, restoring status quo ante with China, legal guarantee on MSPs for farmers, right to healthcare, doubling India's share of mining, new law for gig workers and so on. These were genuine policy proposals formulated after extensive consultations with the public, stakeholders and domestic and international domain experts.

On April 6 in Hyderabad, Rahul Gandhi dwelled further on the social justice pillar of the manifesto to outline the Congress's concern over growing inequities in Indian society along caste lines. He asked why is it that when OBCs, Dalits and tribals constitute roughly 70 per cent of the population, their share in the upper echelons of society, such as senior officers in public sector banks, government bureaucracy and corporate India, is less than 10 per cent. He highlighted the manifesto's promise that a new Congress government in June will initiate a socio-economic caste census to understand the extent of social and economic disparity. He termed it as the “X ray” of Indian society to better inform us of the gravity and spread of the inequality disease. It is important to note that there is no quibble between the BJP/RSS and the Congress/INDIA blocs about the ugly truth of India's caste-based inequality. The point of departure is that the former believes it is not in the national interest to reveal these ugly scars while the latter believes it is the logical first step before we can arrive at policy solutions. To be clear, Rahul Gandhi has been articulating the demand for a caste census ever since the first Bharat Jodo Yatra in 2022.

The natural next question is what after the “X ray”? The Congress's manifesto outlines policy proposals for greater reservation for the oppressed castes and specifies a slew of ideas to increase representation for these caste groups in various fields such as education, business, government contracts, jobs, loans and budgets. It promises to adopt affirmative action policies to redistribute and rebalance the skew in the share of rewards for the oppressed castes. Rahul Gandhi termed this as “jitni abaadi utna haq” (proportional rights), again not for the first time, but it caused enough intrigue. While one can have a legitimate debate on whether these are the right policies to achieve the desired outcome of a fairer society, no one can deny that should be our

pursuit. After all, the philosophy behind proportional rights for oppressed castes is no different from the desire for equal representation for women who constitute half the population.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi then added a spin to this saga when he told an unsuspecting crowd in Banswara, Rajasthan that the “Congress party says in its manifesto that it will redistribute wealth by taking away your gold, mangalsutra and assets and giving it to Muslims.” Of course, nowhere in the 48 pages of the party's manifesto is any such thing mentioned. While Modi may have just blatantly lied, it was a loud enough dog-whistle for the BJP ecosystem to stoke fear, angst and confusion among voters. Soon, a WhatsApp was circulated saying the “Congress party will confiscate two-thirds of the assets of the salaried professionals under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Wealth Redistribution Scheme”. There are reports of cab drivers asking passengers if the Congress indeed plans to take away people's gold and one newspaper even published an elaborate analysis by some self-styled analyst of this purported “scheme”.

While these insinuations are laughable, they can trigger a toxic combination of communal, class and caste tension lit by a flame of lies. The BJP may harbour a desire to change or even abandon the Constitution, but as things stand today, India is still a constitutional republic under which there is simply no way that a government can enter the homes of people, usurp their gold, land and other assets and give it away to someone else. It is a preposterous assertion but evidently one that Modi can utter without qualms. If any, the only time in the last four decades that there has been an attack on private property of citizens was when Modi took away people's money overnight through demonetisation. There is not even a semblance of thought in the Congress manifesto or the leadership to seize the private wealth of citizens and redistribute it to others. Admittedly, this pot of confusion was deliberately further stirred by a pliant media using a past-his-prime Congressman's stray comments endorsing inheritance taxes as a redistribution policy tool. On the contrary, on page 31, the manifesto explicitly promises that neither tax rates nor taxes will increase for people in the five years of a Congress government.

Indian society is plagued by rampant inequality along caste lines. This disease needs to be cured immediately. A caste census is the first step. Greater allocation of government resources for the poor, increased reservation and higher representation of oppressed castes are all forms of “redistribution”. This is what forms the very tenet of a “representative democracy”. Much as we are all agitated about growing inequity, rest assured that neither Rahul Gandhi nor the Congress party has any secret plans to seize your private wealth to solve this. Meanwhile, please read the crisp 11-page 45-page Congress party manifesto for yourself and decide who is bluffing.

The writer is chairman, All India Professionals' Congress, and a key member of the manifesto committee

## Trade fragmentation

India must adjust to emerging trends

Following a contraction of 1.2 per cent in 2023, global merchandise trade volume is expected to grow 2.6 per cent this year, and 3.3 per cent next year. Yet, deepening fault lines and growing tensions between trading blocs have put cross-border trade relations at risk. Multilateral bodies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have thus rightly underscored the issue of restrictions in trade flows in the post-pandemic world, and the need to preserve the gains from economic openness. The latest World Economic Outlook of the IMF notes that since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, countries are finding themselves comfortable trading with other members of the trade blocs they are part of, rather than those of politically distant blocs.

Total merchandise trade has slowed by 2.4 percentage points more between countries that are not in the same bloc, indicating that the extent of trade flows is increasingly being determined by the economic positioning of different countries and their possible trading partners. The relationship is even stronger for trade in strategic sectors, such as machinery and chemicals. Economic and ideological rivalry between the US and China has led to a weakening of trade links between the two largest economies of the world. As a result, countries in the West are moving towards “friend-shoring” and “near-shoring” policies to de-risk their trade flows, while China calls for self-reliance. The position taken by emerging-market economies (EMEs) and developing countries like India in this context remains crucial. For countries that are non-aligned and not particularly associated with any trade bloc, things could become more difficult in the future.

Disruptions on two of the most important shipping routes — the Panama and Suez canals — further elevate risks to the trade outlook. Shortage of fresh water in the Panama Canal and the diversion of shipping traffic away from the Red Sea led to supply-chain delays and higher shipping costs. Signs of fragmentation are not just confined to merchandise trade but are also being seen in services trade and data flow policies. This can especially affect countries like India which specialise in the services sector. For instance, the US’ import of information, communication and technology (ICT) services from its Asian trading partners (mostly India) fell from 45.1 per cent in 2018 to 32.6 per cent in 2023. By comparison, the US’ imports from its North American trading partners increased from 15.7 per cent to 23 per cent during the same period, a clear evidence of nearshoring.

Trade fragmentation is fraught with danger owing to reduced competition and efficiency loss from lack of specialisation. A study by the WTO shows that a decoupling of the global economy into geopolitical blocs could reduce world gross domestic product (GDP) by 5 per cent in the long run, while fragmentation of dataflow policies along geopolitical lines can reduce global real exports by 1.8 per cent and global real GDP by about 1 per cent. Reduced portfolio and foreign direct investment flows induced by trade disruptions could also reduce capital accumulation in EMEs. Given the emerging trends in global trade, which are unlikely to reverse in the near term, trade policy in India needs to be calibrated to remain relevant in global markets.

## Efficient job market

Gainful job creation remains a challenge

Policy challenges in India are often complex and layered. In the context of employment, even as the headline unemployment rate declined to a six-year low of 3.2 per cent in the July-June 2022-23 period, India has a serious employment problem. In the absence of remunerative work, a large potential pool of talent remains underutilised and is engaged in casual work. To improve job prospects, the government plans to upgrade the National Career Service (NCS) portal in the coming months. Leveraging artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques, the revamped portal is expected to improve job matching, recommend personalised skilling programmes, and provide other employment-related services like career counselling, job *mela*, vocational training, and apprenticeship. The upgraded website will also have micro sites for states and districts.

The NCS portal has witnessed a strong surge in the number of vacancies and active employers in the nine years since it was launched. In 2023-24, for instance, over 10 million vacancies were put up on the portal, compared with 3.5 million the previous year. Vacancies advertised were mainly in finance and insurance, operations and support, and construction. The proposed changes in the website will help both employers and those seeking employment in terms of better matching and reduced costs. While the initiatives must be welcomed, it must also be noted that it will not solve the employment problem. The real issue in India is that the economy is not creating enough remunerative jobs. Data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey suggests that India has been witnessing a consistent surge in self-employment, with well over half of the country’s workforce being self-employed. Over 57 per cent of workers in usual status were self-employed in 2022-23. In 2021-22 and 2020-21, the self-employment rates were 55.8 and 55.6 per cent, respectively.

Much of the increase in self-employment is said to be distress-led. Worse, the rise in the self-employed category has mostly been driven by those identified as “unpaid helpers in household enterprises”, who comprised 18.3 per cent of the workforce in 2022-23, up from 13.6 per cent in 2017-18. Alongside, the shares of both casual labourers and salaried workers have declined. Worryingly, the lack of jobs has also pushed many working-age Indians to move back to the farm sector. Agriculture employed 45.76 per cent of the total workforce during 2022-23, indicating that job creation in India is still slow.

Such aggregate trends observed in the labour market in terms of both quantity and quality of jobs call for a need to go back to the basics. One of the biggest policy failures over the years has been India’s inability to create enough jobs in the manufacturing sector, which would have helped bring the surplus workforce out of agriculture. It is to be hoped that sustaining higher economic growth will help kickstart the private-investment cycle and create jobs. Thus, the revamped career service portal will help improve efficiency in the job market but will not help solve the employment problem, which should remain the top policy priority.

# Sri Lanka & Bangladesh look east

The shifting sands of the South Asian trade landscape may be worthy of some serious reflection for India’s regional trade strategy

Earlier this month, a senior government official in Sri Lanka stated that their application for membership to the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) was awaiting approval and that they were in discussion with the RCEP members as they evolved an accession mechanism for new members. Sri Lanka had formally conveyed its intent to join the 15-member mega-regional trade agreement in 2023. In addition, Sri Lanka signed a free-trade agreement (FTA) with Thailand in February this year. Clearly, the island economy is working on a growth strategy that emphasises outward orientation and integration with the East Asian regional/global value chain (RVC/GVC) hub.

This is a commendable policy response from an economy that is yet in the midst of economic recovery. It is also simultaneously revealing of a realisation, by Sri Lanka, of the imperatives for export diversification, given that their recent external debt crisis was partly due to the foreign exchange reserves being constrained by an extremely narrow range of exports in goods and services. These include apparel and textiles, primary commodities like tea and rubber, and in services, mainly tourism. In addition, Sri Lanka has been plagued by decreasing labour productivity, an ageing labour force, and increased out-migration of its declining young, working-age population. Backward integration with RVCs, which is invariably labour-intensive and promotes manufacturing specialisation and competitiveness, would therefore imply positive outcomes for both the labour force and industrial development in the country.

Another noteworthy aspect is Sri Lanka’s willingness to participate in deeper FTAs. While the RCEP includes World Trade Organization plus regulatory provisions in many areas, the coverage in the bilateral FTA with Thailand also extends to customs procedures, investment, and intellectual property rights in addition to substantial tariff liberalisation for both countries over a period of 15 years. These provisions, through their “lock-in” effect, will help push structural and regulatory policy reforms in Sri Lanka, thereby making it more attractive for investment by multinationals. The RCEP, in addition, offers common and cumulative rules of origin that are facilitative of GVC integration and will help Sri Lanka attract export-oriented foreign investment. In addition, Thailand brings to Sri Lanka the advan-

tage of linkages with the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). The EEC, which is a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), is aimed at developing Thailand’s manufacturing capabilities in the high-tech sector and enabling an extension of trade and investment opportunities through RVCs and connectivity projects to the neighbouring Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and Asian economies. Linkages between Port City Colombo, also an SEZ, and the EEC to establish trade and logistics routes are already being explored. In this context, it is worth noting that Thailand, over the past couple of years, has been among the largest recipients in Asean of Chinese and Japanese investment, with the former particularly focused on the electric vehicle segment. Other Asean economies, like Malaysia, have also expressed a keen interest in facilitating their large corporations’ investment in Sri Lanka as well as offered support to Sri Lanka’s application to the RCEP. The FTA policy can, therefore, potentially help Sri Lanka consolidate its as yet fragile economic recovery.

Beyond potential benefits, Sri Lanka’s participation in the RCEP signals an important shift in the trade landscape in South Asia. Bangladesh too has indicated its interest in becoming a member of the mega-regional trade agreement. Smaller, regional economies are thus actively looking for alternative trade agreements and arrangements beyond South Asia. While it is well established that “persistent” and “anticipated” conflict has constrained both the South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) and the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in promoting intra-regional trade in the region, thus far the bilateral trade treaties and agreements with India have provided positive alternatives in the smaller economies’ export strategy. These include the India-Sri Lanka FTA as also the long-standing, historical trade treaties with Bhutan and Nepal that have functioned like *de facto* FTAs. In addition, in 2008, India unilaterally offered the least developed countries (LDCs), including in South Asia, a Duty-Free and Tariff Preference scheme covering over 90 per cent of their total exports. Together these arrangements have given all South Asian economies, except Pakistan, preferential access to the Indian market.

However, after the pandemic and following the Ukraine crisis, smaller economies are realising that mere LDC preferential market access may not anymore be sufficient to secure for them manufacturing diver-

## COMPARATIVE SHARES OF INDIA AND CHINA

	Import share (%)		Export share (%)	
	2012	2022	2012	2022
Bangladesh	13.77	15.98	2.34	3.64
	17.83	24.45	1.41	1.21
Sri Lanka	22.25	22.33	5.68	6.85
	6.15	23.67	1.06	2.11

Notes: Figures in black are for India and in red are for China. Source: ADB, integration indicators

sification and, hence, a long-term growth path for their economies. Bangladesh, which has also faced external sector vulnerabilities during this period, is scheduled to graduate out of its LDC status in 2026. They, therefore, recognise the necessity for infusing dynamism into their comparative advantage beyond the single sector focus, which has thus far been the source of their exports and economic growth. Furthermore, their traditional export markets, predominantly the European Union and United States, registered a slowdown in the recent past and are expected to recover at a slow to modest rate. East Asia, in contrast, has maintained its economic dynamism and is projected to continue to contribute strongly to global trade growth in the immediate and near future.

The other potentially significant implication of smaller South Asian economies looking eastward through bilateral and mega-regional trade agreements is the likely perpetuation of an evolving trend, that is, an increasing share of China in their global trade. Accounting for almost a quarter of their imports from the world, China already has a significantly higher share in the imports of both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka than India does. China’s share in Sri Lanka’s imports has increased by almost four times over the last decade while India’s has been almost stagnant. In the case of Bangladesh, even though India’s share in its imports increased in the last decade, it remains significantly lower than that of China (see table). As for exports, though India’s share is higher than China’s for both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, their integration with the East Asian RVCs may well alter this trend in favour of China.

Hence, the shifting sands of the South Asian trade landscape may be worthy of some serious reflection for India’s regional trade strategy.

The writer is senior fellow, CSEP, professor, SIS, JNU (on leave) and author of India’s Trade Policy in the 21st Century, Routledge, London, 2022 and Regional Economic Integration in South Asia: trapped in Conflict?, Routledge, London, 2013. The views are personal



STRAIGHT TALK  
AMITA BATRA

TA) and the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in promoting intra-regional trade in the region, thus far the bilateral trade treaties and agreements with India have provided positive alternatives in the smaller economies’ export strategy. These include the India-Sri Lanka FTA as also the long-standing, historical trade treaties with Bhutan and Nepal that have functioned like *de facto* FTAs. In addition, in 2008, India unilaterally offered the least developed countries (LDCs), including in South Asia, a Duty-Free and Tariff Preference scheme covering over 90 per cent of their total exports. Together these arrangements have given all South Asian economies, except Pakistan, preferential access to the Indian market.

However, after the pandemic and following the Ukraine crisis, smaller economies are realising that mere LDC preferential market access may not anymore be sufficient to secure for them manufacturing diver-

# An idea for the next government

Competing political parties customarily present their vision and outline plans through manifestos before elections. But at India’s level of development and aspiration, any such “to-do” list is unlikely to be complete and cover every group’s expectations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has talked about taking big decisions if the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance is voted back to power for a third consecutive term. The Indian National Congress, which is the leading constituent in the Opposition alliance, has also promised big initiatives in different areas. The aim of this column, however, is not to compare the two. It is to highlight an important idea or theme that should be pursued by the next government, regardless of its composition and structure. The situation reminds this writer of a conversation from 2009 with a prominent economist. The United Progressive Alliance was voted back to power with a bigger mandate. India had witnessed unprecedented growth in the preceding years and the popular view was that it also remained relatively unaffected by the global financial crisis.

The crux of the discussion was that the private sector had done exceedingly well since the beginning of reforms in 1991, and now it was time for the government to reform itself. The argument remains as powerful today as it was in 2009. This is not to suggest that the system has not improved over the years, but a lot remains to be desired. Developmental outcomes are significantly affected by state capacity and its ability to deal with challenges. In this context, economist Karthik Muralidharan’s timely new book *Accelerating India’s Development: A State-Led Roadmap for Effective Governance*, highlights several areas where improvement in state capacity — sometimes by just refining processes — can significantly improve outcomes. To be fair, the Indian state does some things exceedingly well — conducting

Lok Sabha elections is one example — but fails to do more mundane and regular things. As academics like Devesh Kapur have argued, the Indian state does well in episodic tasks and when the exit is automatic.

While there are several areas where state capacity needs to be improved, this column focuses on just a few broad aspects. Arguably, the Indian state is unable to effectively undertake developmental work due to the lack of fiscal capacity. Granted, India cannot match the developed world in level of expenditure. But despite increasing formalisation, its tax collection to gross domestic product (GDP) has not improved significantly. As the Fifteenth Finance Commission noted in its report, India’s revenue has remained stagnant for years and is much lower than its peers. According to an International Monetary Fund study for the Commission, India’s tax collection gap was worth over 5 per cent of GDP compared to the potential. Bridging this gap can significantly increase fiscal capacity and reduce borrowings, which tend to crowd out private investment. In this regard, the implementation of the goods and services tax, which was expected to boost both formalisation and tax collection, has underperformed. Since its problems are well known, the next government would do well to initiate reforms. It should also aim to increase the direct tax collection base, particularly income tax.

The problem, however, is not limited to revenue. Spending must also be efficient. Government support and subsidies, for instance, are not targeted well and end up benefitting the well-off. They are also often designed for short-term political gains. As Prof Muralidharan notes in the book, for instance, in 2019-20, the Punjab government spent over ₹6,000 crore on farm power subsidy, compared to ₹380 crore on agriculture research. The story is not very different for the Union government. India thus needs to get its fiscal priorities right.



REAL TERMS  
RAJESH KUMAR

# How ‘BK-16’ puts democracy on trial



## BOOK REVIEW

VIPUL MUDGAL

Academics have an adversarial equation with journalism. If a journalist writes pompously, her editor may accuse her of being dense or academic. And if a scholar is too eloquent, her peers might call her flippant or journalistic. Having been in both camps, my all-time favourite is an academic who can write movingly without losing the rigour. Scholar-storyteller Alpa Shah has that rare quality. Her book is a lucid account of the struggles, life histories, and peculiar circumstances of victims of the state’s crackdown on dissent.

*The Incarcerations* is the biography of 16 disparate prisoners of conscience — poets, professors, lawyers and journalists — called the BK-16 and the

chronology of key events surrounding their arrests and prosecution. The array of inventive charges against them ranges from inciting violence to terrorism to waging a war against the state to plotting to kill the Prime Minister of India, and the list goes on. The book shows how the prosecutors seem more interested in prolonging the trials, and the incarcerations, rather than in proving the charges.

The author is convinced that the prosecution has no case. She paints the predicament of the BK-16 who variously come to the aid of the forest dwellers whose lands happen to bear coal, bauxite, iron ore and a wealth of other minerals. The industry wants the forests to be cleared of human habitation, biodiversity, or legal interruptions, to be able to mine without remorse or ecological alarms. This is also where the armed, underground Maoists are at war against the state, represented by the garrisons of paramilitary forces. The tribals seem to be at the receiving end from both sides.

Set against this backdrop, the book does not attempt to illuminate the

state’s anxieties or its rationale for militarising the region. She calls murders, incarcerations and dispossessions “the stuff of the daily life”. For years, the London School of Economics professor has combed this area for ethnographic research. One of her earlier books, *In the Shadow of the State* (2010), documents insurgency, environmentalism, and indigenous politics in Jharkhand.

This book narrates the stories of the BK-16 and a chronology of what transpired on that fateful January day in 2018. Her portrayal of Jesuit priest, Father Stan Swami, and the lawyer and trade unionist, Sudha Bharadwaj, are soul-stirring. She has quoted from diverse sources and conducted interviews to portray the characters of not only renowned writer-intellectuals like Gautam Navlakha, Shoma Sen, Anand Teltumbde, Varavara Rao, and many others, but also lesser-known Dalit singers, Jyoti Jagtap, Sagar Gorkhe, and Ramesh Gaichor of the Kabir Kala Manch whose part in the conspiracy was to sing soulful *sufi* songs.

The author documents the trials of

the BK-16 and the investigations around the “recoveries” of malware and self-incriminating letters in the laptops seized from them. Curiously, the (dangerous!) accused went about using, rather nonchalantly, the actual names of one another and their real intentions (such as plotting to kill Prime Minister Narendra Modi, provisioning ammunition and so on). She quotes Ajai Sahni, one of India’s finest terrorism experts, to say that the letters have “... all the hallmarks of mischievous fabrication...”

The digital evidence of the Pune Police makes for spine-chilling reading. The author follows the malware through multiple investigations by the media and cyber experts who establish that the “evidence” was likely to have been planted in the seized laptops, perhaps both before and after the arrests. These are independent

specialists from the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab, a California-based cyber security company, SentinelOne, and a leading forensic outfit Arsenal, based in Massachusetts, USA. The defence lawyer Mihir Desai said such cyber-forensic examinations became possible only after the court allowed them to have cloned copies of the hard drives seized by the police.

Alpa Shah cites eyewitness accounts to describe the violent incident at Bhima Koregaon in Pune. The victory pillar that towers over the river Bhima marks the sacrifices of the Dalits who had died in 1818 in a battle against an overpowering upper-caste army. The incident has a special significance for the region’s Dalits. The annual commemoration of the Dalit victory, *ala Black Lives Matter*, was initiated by Bhimrao Ambedkar as far back as 1927 to “re-ignite the valour of their forefathers”. It is here that the upper-caste Hindu mobs waving saffron flags assaulted Dalits.

Alpa Shah views that day’s event from the eyes of a 39-year-old Dalit activist, Anita Sawale, a victim of violence and an eye-witness of the attacks in which a youth died and several civilians and policemen were injured. In her first information report, she named right-wing upper-caste leaders Sambhaji Bhide and Milind Ekbote, who had faced cases of rioting earlier and were denied bail after their complicity was confirmed by a citizens’ fact-finding committee appointed by the Pune Rural Police.

One section of the book is devoted to how the case was taken over from the rural police and turned on its head by an assistant commissioner of Pune Police. The instigators of violence changed from the Hindutva groups to activists and government critics, many of whom had never visited Bhima Koregaon, and a new narrative of the riots developed. Five and a half years after the first arrests, about half of the BK-16 have come out on bail recently but there is still no sign of a trial. Is this not a marker of India’s democratic backsliding? The author calls it the country’s greatest challenge since the end of colonial rule.

The reviewer heads *Common Cause*, known for its work on police reforms and high-impact PILs