



Trust in machines

It is reassuring that the Supreme Court found nothing to impair faith in EVMs

The Supreme Court of India's rejection of the demand for 100% verification of the paper trail left by the votes cast through electronic voting machines comes as no surprise, as there is no hard evidence that the current verification system suffers from any irremediable lacuna. The two concurring judgments of the Bench reiterate the faith the judiciary has so far reposed in the integrity of the electoral process, especially after the introduction of the voter verifiable paper audit trail, or VVPAT. In the process, the Bench also rejected the idea of reverting to paper ballots, as such a measure would indeed be regressive and negate the gains from the elimination of vulnerabilities associated with paper ballots. This is not the first time that the Court has declined to interfere with the system in place; it had earlier refused to order 50% verification of the paper trail in one case and 100% verification in another. The Court has utilised this petition to review the administrative and technical safeguards in the system and found nothing to impair its faith in it. The two directions given by the Court address the other serious apprehensions: that the symbol loading units be secured and kept in safe custody for 45 days after declaration of results and that the top two losing candidates could seek a verification of the micro-controllers in 5% of the EVMs in specified polling booths so that tampering, if any, may be detected.

In a 2013 ruling, the Supreme Court held that "a paper trail is an indispensable requirement of free and fair elections". In another case, it favoured the increase in the number of polling stations in which VVPAT verification would be done from one per Assembly constituency or segment to five. The introduction of a paper audit trail itself was in response to apprehensions that voters had no way of ascertaining if their votes were recorded correctly. It is somewhat ironical that the verification system put in place to address such fears itself has become a bone of contention as to the extent to which the paper trail has to be verified. Justice Sanjiv Khanna, in his opinion, has recorded suggestions that VVPAT slips may be counted through machines, and that symbols loaded in the VVPAT units may be barcoded for easy counting in future. It ought to be clear that such technological advancement alone can make the process suspicion-proof. A larger point to be made is that the apprehensions and suspicions of possible manipulation indicate a level of mistrust in the Election Commission of India not seen in the past. Voter confidence in the system of voting and counting is one thing, but the need for the election watchdog to be seen as impartial is quite another.

Aid for war

Ukraine, Israel win as Biden gets bipartisan support for aid package

After lengthy negotiations, the United States Senate has passed with bipartisan support a \$95 billion programme to send aid to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. The final vote tally was 79-18, with three Democrats voting alongside 15 Republicans against the bill. The aid package brings together four distinct bills that the House of Representatives passed separately last weekend, respectively supplying almost \$61 billion in aid for Ukraine, above \$26 billion for Israel, over \$8 billion for the Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific region, and one bill relating to Tik Tok. In their current shape, the bills closely resemble an aid package that the Senate had passed earlier this year, an initiative that was ultimately shot down when House Speaker Mike Johnson refused to bring it to the floor of his chamber. Now that it has been passed in the Senate, the legislation will move forward to the desk of President Joe Biden to sign into law, as he has said he intends to do, thus opening the door to helping Ukraine to push back against Russian aggression, to providing wartime assistance to Israel and humanitarian aid to Gaza, and to countering territorial threats in the Indo-Pacific that are linked to China. The fact that the omnibus aid bills package passed with such strength in the Upper Chamber of Congress constitutes a key win for Mr. Biden, Democratic lawmakers, and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who has toiled for long months to send aid to Ukraine, in the face of opposition from the far-right wing of his own party.

That opposition, which threatens to spoil the plans of the Republican Party 'mainstream', includes the likes of the House Freedom Caucus, comprising ultra conservative members of Congress who broadly support the agenda of former President Donald Trump. They are especially opposed to aid packages, which they consider a threat to their isolationist vision for the U.S. — to the point where Mr. Johnson had to introduce a 'sweetener' into the bill to win their vote, a promise to ban Tik Tok if it did not divest itself of Chinese ownership within a year. That the far-right segment was able to exert its influence on the agenda of Congress to this extent is remarkable, given that it only has a slim majority in the House, and both the Senate and White House are in the hands of the Democrats. In any case, this sizeable aid package is likely to be the last one that is approved for Ukraine and other U.S. allies until after November, which will see the White House, the House of Representatives and one-third of the Senate head to the polls. If Mr. Trump emerges victorious, the rightward slide of the Congress might gather considerable momentum, giving the MAGA movement the teeth that it needs to carry forward its agenda of institutional nihilism.

Sounding the gavel on curative jurisdiction

"The certainty and guidance which men seek in the law stems from their yearning for security and safety, which is the legacy of childhood." — Prof. H.L.A. Hart

The Supreme Court of India is a rather extraordinary court. In addition to its being the highest court of appeal, a federal court, as well as a court of advisory jurisdiction, it also possesses the power to appoint and transfer judges of the High Courts and the Court itself.

In 2002, the Court took on a new power called the "Curative Jurisdiction". It is a power to correct its judgments, after they have become final. This is distinct from the power of review under Indian law, which enables all courts to rectify errors which are apparent from their records.

The Court has a constitutional role to declare the law. The law must, and often does, progress with the growth in human knowledge and with societal change. The judgments of courts must reflect and sometimes trigger the changes in law. It is for this reason that courts modify their views. Examples of changes in the Court's views include the right of privacy, decriminalisation of homosexuality and so on. Curative Jurisdiction is different. This is not merely the Court changing its view on a position of law but is a reversal of the Court's own view in a specific case, above and beyond even the power of review.

The Delhi Metro Rail judgment

In this article, we argue that the Supreme Court does more harm than good in the exercise of this jurisdiction, and we propose to demonstrate this through the analysis of a judgment rendered on April 10, 2024. This was a decision of a three-judge Bench of the Court in a curative petition in *Delhi Metro Rail Corporation Ltd. ("DMRC") vs Delhi Airport Metro Express Pvt Ltd ("DAMEPL")*, which rekindles this question.

DAMEPL succeeded before an Arbitral Tribunal in a high value claim. The award was predicated on a plea that the termination, by DAMEPL, of a long-term contract relating to a stretch of the Delhi metro rail, was valid. Such termination was based on a termination clause which permitted DAMEPL to terminate the contract based on issuance of a notice to cure defects in the event that DMRC "failed to cure such breach or take effective steps for curing such breach". The breach, according to DAMEPL (as



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upheld by the Arbitral Tribunal) was the existence of defects in the metro's construction. According to DAMEPL and the Arbitral Tribunal, the failure to cure such defects had triggered DAMEPL's right to terminate.

Prior to the termination, DAMEPL had stopped rail operations on the basis that the line was unsafe to operate. Shortly after the termination, both parties had made a joint request to the Commissioner of Metro Rail Safety to reopen operations. The CMRS sanctioned this subject to certain conditions including speed restrictions. While reliance had been placed on the CMRS sanction by DMRC, the AT, after examining the CMRS sanction, held that it would not be material in deciding the issues.

The challenge to the award moved to the Supreme Court which upheld the award after setting out the limited scope to challenge an award under Indian law. A review petition was also dismissed. However, for the first time ever, the Court, in a curative petition, set aside an arbitral award.

Exercise of curative jurisdiction

The interference by the Court was on two grounds. First, that interpretation of the termination clause was perverse since the Arbitral Tribunal had failed to recognise that it was sufficient for the DMRC to take effective steps to cure the breach — curing the breach in its entirety was not necessary. Second, that the CMRS sanction was vital evidence which had been ignored.

This is significant for two reasons. First, the Court had hitherto supported a position of minimal interference in arbitral awards. And second, that the Court held that its own verdict in 2019, which was in line with this pre-existing position, was wrong.

It settled law that a court, while setting aside an award does not sit as a court of appeal. The Court is bound to accept a potentially incorrect, though plausible, view on the interpretation of a contract and does not have the power to reappraise evidence. While the Court no doubt has the power to interfere with a "perverse" interpretation, the subjective slope between a "perverse" interpretation and a "plausible but incorrect" interpretation is slippery.

Further, had the Arbitral Tribunal ignored vital evidence, a ground for interference would have been made out; but not when the Arbitral

Tribunal, being the sole judge of weight of any evidence, had considered the evidence and held it to be of little significance.

Thus, the Court exercising its Curative Jurisdiction, reversed its own judgment which had upheld the arbitral award.

The problems

Imagine if you went to a dentist to have your wisdom tooth removed. The procedure is carried out. You then go to a board of senior dentists who tell you that the dentist did the right thing. Four years later, they call you back in for a review, and then tell you that they are doing a "curative procedure" and putting your wisdom tooth back in.

Curative Jurisdiction is effectively the Supreme Court seeking to correct its mistakes.

While there is merit in correcting one's mistakes, an institution which underpins the country's judiciary and which is the final interpreter of the Constitution must look beyond errors in individual cases. The Supreme Court declares the law for the nation and posterity, and not for one-off cases.

While it is no doubt true that the interpretation set out by the Supreme Court in *DMRC vs DAMEPL* is the correct interpretation and would have been justified had it been an exercise of appellate jurisdiction, the exercise itself could be said to be beyond the contours of permissible interference with an arbitral award. There are many such instances when awards based on incorrect interpretations are upheld owing to the principle of minimum judicial interference. Courts have, by and large, adopted a hands off approach, at least post 2015, to further the policy of lawmakers as reflected in the 2015 amendments to the arbitration legislation.

One looks to the Supreme Court for guidance and strength. It is the beacon of law. We expect it to be a pole star. The exercise of revisiting one's own decisions is good in an individual, but is not good for an institution that declares the law. Our perceptions of right and wrong are often influenced by the immediacy of the trend of current thought. A Supreme Court which swings back and forth based on changing trends lacks the constancy and gravitas which we believe to be fundamental to a court of last resort.

To borrow Justice Jackson's words, the Supreme Court is not final because it is infallible but infallible because it is final.

A top court which swings back and forth based on changing trends lacks the constancy and gravitas that is fundamental to a court of last resort

The right and the future of India's masjids

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's frequent attempts to allude to the Ram Mandir in the ongoing election campaign as his major achievement indicates the Bharatiya Janata Party's desire to seek electoral benefits from the subject. Seen in the wider context of the ongoing survey of the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi and claims over the Shahi Idgah Masjid in Mathura, it is apparent that the mandir-masjid conflict may enter a new era in the post-2024 election period.

In June 2022, in the wake of the Gyanvapi controversy, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat made an appeal in Nagpur — that the present generations of Muslims should not be held responsible for the wrongs committed in history by Muslim rulers. "Why look for Shiv linga in every Masjid?" Bhagwat asked. It was a sensible statement but nothing substantive has followed since then.

Instead, the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath, has remained most vocal with regard to Kashi and Mathura. In a speech in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly in February 2024, while drawing parallel with the *Mahabharat*, he said, "Krishna asked for five villages, today's Hindu society asks for three centres: Ayodhya, Kashi and Mathura." He appealed to Indian Muslims to give up claim in Kashi and Mathura. During the Ayodhya movement of the 1980s and 1990s, there was a slogan 'Ayodhya to Jhanki Hei, Kashi Mathura Baaki Hei'. It is now certain that the "Kashi Mathura Baaki Hei" part of that slogan has been politically activated.

History and the Jama Masjid

Though the oldest Masjid in India is located in Kerala, no other Masjid has been connected with Muslim history as closely as Delhi's Jama Masjid. During the 1857 Rebellion, it was a site of enormous activities and was defiled and desecrated by the colonial army. We learn that on



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In the aggressive quest for electoral gains using the trump card of religion, there ought to be a quiet realisation that masjids are central to the religious lives of Muslims

September 20, 1857, the British sepoy danced around a victory fire inside the Masjid. It was transformed into a military barrack.

Unspeaking forms of defilement took place inside the Masjid premises during its military occupation. In numerous ways Muslims paid a disproportionate price with their lives and property. They were humiliated for their participation in what many historians call India's First War of Independence. Sadly, the Hindutva right barely recognises Muslim sacrifice. Many months later, the Jama Masjid was returned to Muslims. Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst's book, *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion*, provides vivid details about various aspects of the uprising and how it has impacted Muslim identity.

Interestingly, there were discussions to demolish the Jama Masjid during the 1857 rebellion. It was revealed by William Howard Russell, who served as the Indian correspondent for *The Times* during 1857-59. In his diary titled *My Diary in India, in the Year 1858-9*, Russell wrote: "It has been warmly suggested that we should destroy the Jumma Masjid. The fact is that the Mohammedan element in India is that which causes us the most trouble..." Mr. Russell goes on to add, "if we could eradicate the traditions and destroy the temples of Mahomed by one vigorous effort, it would be well for the Christian faith and for the British rule."

The Jama Masjid still stands in Delhi and has been a witness to the challenges that Indian Muslims have faced ever since. On December 6, 1992 when the Babri Masjid was demolished, hundreds of Muslims gathered that evening at Delhi's Jama Masjid and were addressed by the Shahi Imam. Nothing much was reported on January 22, 2024, the inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya.

Ever since the Supreme Court of India's verdict

in November 2019 on the Ayodhya dispute, Muslims all over India have conducted themselves with great dignity in the hope that it would close the mandir-masjid conflict chapter forever. But that does not seem to be the case given the way the issue is still raised in the Bharatiya Janata Party's campaign by its tallest leaders.

For the Jama Masjid's renovation, a request was made to the United Progressive Alliance government to approve financial assistance from abroad, which was turned down on the ground that it could have security concerns. No security concerns are seen in the global mobilisation of resources by the Hindutva right for its activities. In 2021, in response to a question raised in Parliament on the state of the Jama Masjid and its need for renovation, the Modi government declined to do so.

The danger of further polarisation

The fact remains that masjids are central to the religious lives of Muslims. The first Masjid of Islam was built in Madina called Quba during the Prophet's time. At this point, the Hindutva right has a template based on politics, mobilisation and judicial intervention to grapple with future mandir-masjid disputes based on what took place between December 6, 1992 and January 22, 2024 or even prior to it.

Standing in its way is the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991 that aims to maintain the religious character of places as they existed on August 15, 1947. Given that changing this Act of 1991 is far easier than the dilution of Article 370, it is not hard to imagine what its fate could be. Whatever it may be, the mandir-masjid controversy may take centre stage and go beyond Kashi and Mathura, deepening religious polarisation even further and undermining India's fledgling secularism.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Super cautious

In a 'show me the man and I will show you the law' mode, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has taken the circuitous route to serve notice for violation of the model code of conduct stated to have been committed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Page1, "EC sends notice to Nadda for plaint against Modi", April 26). The spewing of malice and hate, utterly indefensible, has been handled with kid gloves by the ECI without even mentioning the name of the venom spewer. It would have been logical had the ECI taken the sensible stand that "he who asks questions cannot avoid

the answers"

Ayyasser Raveendranath,
Aranmula, Kerala

Think coalition

We have observed over the 10-year rule of the Narendra Modi government that, to its credit, there has been much good work done. Yet, a one-man show backed by single party majoritarian rule can be dangerous in the long run. By now we are familiar with Mr. Modi's style of functioning, which can be described as "my way or the highway". There is a need for a coalition government. Even though it would have quite a few limitations in terms of ensuring faster growth, such a government would have

built-in checks and balances. One-man rule is neither good nor desirable in a nation as large, diverse, multi-religious and multi-ethnic as India. Let us hope that intelligent voters will ponder over the matter dispassionately and exercise their vote in the days ahead.

Satish Murdeshwar,
Pune

Bell poll expenses

India is now moving ahead in the next phases of voting and the onus is now on the Election Commission of India to ensure that it discharges its most important role with utmost diligence. Its initial hesitance in squaring up to

tall, important leaders on hate speeches, and using religion to garner votes requires faster action. Huge money is being spent on canvassing, promotions, and other expenses. Why not have a robust body to check expenses?

The Union Finance Minister was candid in one of her interviews to say that she does not have that much money to contest elections. Does that not tell the real story?

Balasubramaniam Pavani,
Secunderabad

Jarring

It does not behove the stature of the Prime Minister of India to make a jarring statement that the

INDIA bloc will scrutinise the safes of "mothers and sisters" allegedly with the intention of "looting" their wealth and passing it on to others. It is unfortunate that the leader says that the election manifesto of the Congress is the replica of the policies of the Muslim League. Why is there an attempt to stoke the flames of communal hatred when he extols himself to be the champion of social justice?

Abdul Kader,
Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu

Extend voting time

The decision to hold the general election amid sweltering heat has led to a disappointingly low voter turnout. It is disheartening

to witness a significant portion of eligible voters staying away from the electoral process due to the discomfort and health risks posed by the oppressive weather. This low voter turnout undermines the very foundation of democracy and raises questions about the fairness and inclusivity of the electoral process. The Election Commission of India should reconsider time restrictions. Voters should be allowed to exercise their franchise until 9 p.m. This would enhance voter turnout and, thereby, the overall integrity of the electoral process.

Laigudi Muralidharan,
Laigudi, Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu

GROUND ZERO



Workers at the Nagaisuree Tea Garden in Jalpaiguri, West Bengal. SHIV SAHAY SINGH

Death and distress in the Dooars

In the lower reaches of the Himalayas in West Bengal, workers struggle with hunger, poor pay, and the intermittent shutting down of large tea plantations. The poverty is sometimes killing, reports Shiv Sahay Singh, who met those involved in the production of tea

Almost two months after her husband Dhani Oraon died at 58, allegedly of starvation, Asharani Oraon weighs 29.9 kg. When she was rescued by the district administration after pressure from tea garden unions and brought to a hospital on February 6, 2024, four days after Dhani's death, Asharani weighed 26 kg. Dhani was a worker at Madhu Tea Garden in West Bengal's Alipurduar district, which had reopened in December 2021 after being closed for about seven years.

Even with a blanket wrapped around, Asharani, 53, whose body mass index (BMI) on April 7 stood at 13.8 kg/m² (denoting severe thinness), is frail and can barely walk. She mumbles that the hospital is feeding her "eggs, banana, and rice". Still in shock, she cannot answer any questions about her husband's death.

At Madhu Tea Garden, the old ramshackle hut of the Oraons, barely held together by tarpaulin sheets, has been razed by Rajesh Lakra, a local tribal leader, who has built a new shed for Asharani. He has launched a campaign on social media in support of tea garden workers, weeks ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. Hibiscus flowers bloom in the deserted compound.

Based in the Dooars, the 'door' to Bhutan, ranging between 90 metres and 1,500 metres above sea level, is a blue-sky, green-hill, flowing-rivulet remote area that people from around flock to, for a break. The region is different from Darjeeling — the other tea-growing area of Bengal that is cooler, wetter, more misty — with the tea itself tasting different. The Dooar brew is bright, smooth, and full-bodied, lighter than Assam, unlike Darjeeling's GI-protected soft, smoky liquor.

"This year, 2024, marks 150 years of tea production in the Dooars area, as the first tea plantations in the region were set up in 1874, a few decades after Darjeeling," says Bijoy Gopal Chakraborty, the president of the Confederation of Indian Small Tea Growers Associations, a tea trader based in the Dooars.

The death of Dhani, a permanent worker, has raised questions about incomes lower than the minimum wage, food insecurity, and a sick sector's use by politicians as a poll plank.

As per the Paschim Banga Cha Majoor Samity (PBCMS), a trade union representing tea estate workers, of the 150 big tea gardens, 18 (12 in Alipurduar and six in Jalpaiguri) are closed. The Tea Board of India statistics say that the annual production of tea from West Bengal in 2023 was 422 million kg, 54.5% of which was produced from the Dooars.

For the 3.5 lakh to 4 lakh tea garden workers, minimum wages and land ownership are key issues in the Lok Sabha elections, as the industry holds the key to seats like Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri, where elections took place in the first phase on April 19.

The uncertainty of closure

Neighbours and relatives of the Oraons say the couple could not get the benefits of the public distribution system because Dhani's Aadhaar and ration cards were not linked, and the system could not recognise his fingerprints, common among people who do manual work.

Katya Kharia, one of the neighbours, says the family was receiving about ₹1,500 per month by

The workers in small tea gardens are treated as agricultural labourers and do not have rights of wages and provident fund like big tea garden workers

ANURADHA TALWAR
Trade union activist and convener of PBCMS

way of FAWLOI (Financial Assistance to Workers of Locked Out Industries) when the garden was shut. When it reopened, the money stopped, but Dhani was weak and could not work. "We would help them with rice, but it was not sufficient," Kharia says. She also complains that the wages, usually paid every two weeks, are sometimes irregular at the tea garden.

The starvation death allegation led to a fact-finding mission on February 4 and 5 by members of the PBCMS and the Right to Food and Work Campaign (RTFWC-West Bengal chapter), which is supported by organisations and individuals.

"The inaction by the government has made this entire population... already weak due to the long closure, vulnerable. Dhani Oraon, even though he was a permanent worker, was neglected by both the management and the government...", the fact-finding report noted.

Asharani is not the only one who has an alarmingly low BMI. After the alleged starvation death, the PBCMS and RTFWC conducted a survey across seven tea gardens in Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri districts. Out of the 122 tea garden workers surveyed, 64 were underweight, with a BMI less than 18.5 kg/m².

Marayam and Swati Oraon, two tea garden workers, complained that with the daily wage being ₹250 (West Bengal's minimum wage is ₹376 per day even for unskilled labour), it is difficult to sustain families. "After opening the garden, the only advantage is that we do not have to go out to work in other places," says Marayam.

Temba Oraon, another tea garden worker, is reconstructing his hut after an elephant attacked it and trampled upon its remains a few months ago. "I was given a torchlight and a tarpaulin sheet from the forest department, but no compensation," says the feeble-looking Temba, busy on a Sunday afternoon at a betel nut plantation, to generate additional income.

Purbayan Chakraborty, a lawyer who was part of the fact-finding team, says as per the Plantations Labour Act, 1951, the tea garden management is mandated to provide for repair, which they never do, leaving workers to fend for themselves. He also adds that the Act mandates that the Assistant Labour Commissioner conduct an inspection and take necessary steps for rehabili-

tion, but such inspections are never done.

Laws and livelihoods

Over the past 10 years, the Minimum Wages Advisory Committee on Tea for the State of West Bengal has held 20 meetings, but has not been able to reach an agreement on minimum wages. This month, the Calcutta High Court's Circuit Bench at Jalpaiguri directed the Labour Commissioner of the State to fix minimum wages within six weeks, to be implemented within two weeks. The last time the wages of tea garden workers were hiked was on April 27, 2023, when the State government raised the daily wage rate from ₹232 to ₹250. This was challenged by various tea garden managements before the High Court.

With more and more big gardens either turning sick or shuttering, small growers are contributing to the bulk of the production in the tea sector. The Tea Board of India data indicate that in 2023, small tea growers (about 34,000 in the State, with less than 25 acres per firm) contributed to 118 million kg (54.5%) of the tea production in the Dooars, whereas big tea gardens produced 112 million kg. In fact, across the State, small tea growers contribute 63.7% (269 million kg of 422 million kg) of all tea production in the State.

"This is because the governments, both at the State and Centre, are encouraging small tea growers. The big gardens, which employ a large number of workers, are not getting any incentives. The workers in small tea gardens are treated as agricultural labourers and do not have rights of wages and provident fund like big tea garden workers," says Anuradha Talwar, a trade union activist and convener of PBCMS.



The entire exercise by the government is aimed at usurping our land

KIRSEN KHARIA
Uttar Bangal Cha Shramik Sangathan

Unlike Darjeeling tea, which is struggling with low production, tea growers in the Dooars face price stagnation. "The tea from the Dooars has not made a brand for itself like Darjeeling tea or Assam tea has," says Chakraborty, who approaches the subject from a trader's perspective rather than a worker's.

He adds that low rainfall in the Dooars is forcing planters to use pesticides. Last month, bought leaf tea factories (BLFs) wrote to the Tea Board of India saying that they would procure only green leaves that meet the compliance standards of the Indian food safety regulator, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India. The tea growers raised the issue with Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee when she was campaigning for the Lok Sabha poll in north Bengal. She assured them that she would look into it.

Poll stops

In the last Lok Sabha poll, the region had overwhelmingly voted for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the 2021 Assembly election, too, the BJP continued with its electoral dominance. The Trinamool Congress leadership accuses the BJP of doing nothing for the tea gardens. "The BJP's guarantee is a zero guarantee," the Chief Minister had said while addressing a rally at Alipurduar on April 6, adding that her party had done more.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who in 2019 had derived a 'personal' connect with the people of the Dooars, harnessing his chaiwala (tea seller) past, had during this election campaign blamed the West Bengal government for the plight of tea garden workers. Addressing a rally in Jalpaiguri district on April 7, he had said, "The tea gardens of Bengal are in the worst condition compared to anywhere in the country...The workers of the tea garden are being denied even basic facilities."

The issue of land rights and dwelling too turned out to be crucial this election season. "Tea garden workers live on land leased by the company owner from the State government. So, they have no land rights and are subject to being ha-

passed and evicted," says Talwar.

She says in 2020, the West Bengal government formulated a Cha Sundari Scheme to provide free housing units to tea garden workers. Now, instead of houses, the government is issuing pattas for 5 decimals of land (a little over 2,000 square feet) under the Cha Sundari Extension Scheme, along with a ₹1.2-lakh bank transfer, to build houses. People fear eviction, whether they accept the scheme or not, as there is no clarity.

A Cha Sundari dwelling unit at Dekhlapara tea garden in Alipurduar district is testament to why the scheme does not have many takers. Dekhlapara is a tea garden that has been closed since 2000. Houses and general infrastructure are crumbling. Yet, out of the 327 dwelling units, only 70 have been occupied.

Bishal Malpaharia, who has shifted into the Cha Sundari dwelling unit, says other members of his family live in the tea garden quarters. "This is for a small family," he says of their home measuring 394 square feet.

Bishnu Tanti, a worker at Dekhlepura, says the garden was operational for eight months during 2023, giving people hope. He has not moved to the Cha Sundari dwelling unit, but Tanti has accepted the ₹1.2 lakh and is building a kitchen in his tea garden quarters.

Hundreds of workers have agreed to join the scheme and issued no-objection certificates for the land they currently occupy. They have received an initial cash transfer of ₹60,000. A few are still resisting.

Bandhu Oraon says he is a fifth-generation tea garden worker. "My dwelling unit is spread over 10 decimals of land; why should I agree to a patta of five decimals?" he says.

Over the past few months, Kirsan Kharia of Nagaisuree Tea Garden of Jalpaiguri district has been trying to unite workers against accepting homestead pattas. Kharia says weeks ago a large contingent of police along with local authorities tried to survey the garden and threatened him.

"We do not want five decimals of land. We have been living in these houses for generations and want land rights for our dwellings. The entire exercise by the government is aimed at usurping our land," says Kharia, who is associated with the Uttar Bangal Cha Shramik Sangathan.

Kharia says the government wants to sell tea garden land to corporates and shift the workers into an invisible remote corner. The activist refers to the 2019 Tea Tourism and Allied Business Policy of the State government, by which a maximum of 150 acres or 15% of tea plantation land could be used for tourism and other businesses.

Collapse and uncertainty

Several local associations and unions under the banner of the Joint Action Committee fielded an Independent candidate, Arjun Indevar, 62, for the Alipurduar Lok Sabha seat. His campaign was built on the demand of land rights for tea workers. Indevar is from the Madhu Tea Garden and says tribals, Gorkhas, and other locals have been working in the area since 1874. "The land of our forefathers was taken away under Section 6 (3) of the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act, 1953. We are being made slaves and cannot even repair our houses," he says.

Meanwhile, Kismat Mahali's house has bricks falling apart; there is no electricity. "I have not received money under the Cha Sundari Extension Scheme. I need to build the house as soon as possible," Mahali, a worker at the tea garden, says. Kharia, who was campaigning for Indevar, remains quiet as Mahali narrates how difficult it is to stay in the dwelling with her grandchild. "How can I persuade her not to accept the government scheme?" Kharia says.

April is tea plucking season and the slow process leaves room for chatter. At Nagaisuree, spread over hundreds of acres, women talk about leopard attacks in the garden and that adjoining gardens pay a higher incentive for those who pluck over 25 kg a day, the mandate.

A few hundred metres away from the tea bushes, there is a mobile crèche, where children play, unaware of the tea garden tensions.



The closed Dekhlapara Tea Garden in Jalpaiguri, West Bengal. SHIV SAHAY SINGH

the hindu businessline.

SATURDAY - APRIL 27, 2024

Redistribution row

Politicians have muddied the discourse

The debate and discussion around inequality and redistribution has been going on for over a thousand years. As a result two things have become absolutely clear: it's desirable and it should be within reason. The desirability of it takes care of the moral aspects of an excessive concentration of wealth. The aspect of reasonableness takes care of the economic consequences. But in democracies that depend on voting there is a third aspect that the original proponents of redistribution of wealth had never considered: politics.

This aspect refuses both to consider the moral imperatives and the economic implications. In consequence, electoral democracies pose the issue in its most extreme forms, namely, all or nothing, mangalsutras or plutocracy, expropriation or concentration of both wealth and inequality. This approach achieves nothing, especially in a country like India which from the very start in 1947 has been consistently striving to strike a balance. The Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act 1950, had sought to redistribute surplus lands. Vinoba Bhave sought to achieve the same result via voluntary action, namely, the Bhoodan movement. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 ensured that an estate would be divided equally between all successors and not go just to the eldest son. Then came the taxes recommended by Nicholas Kaldor: the gift tax, the annual wealth tax and the capital gains tax. An inheritance tax had already been imposed in 1953. These taxes were followed up by a steady increase in income taxes until in 1973 the marginal rate reached over 100 per cent!

The State governments were also doing their bit — by not collecting taxes due to them in the interests of the poor. To supplement their non-efforts there were the Finance Commissions and the Planning Commission. It's a long list that gives ample evidence of India's efforts at redistribution and prevention of concentration of wealth. That said, the rates of taxation and inheritance duties, the mode and extent of redistribution, the legality of expropriation, the issues of compensation to those who are expropriated and the constitutional guarantees have been subjects of debate since the early 1950s. All institutions of the Indian state have sought to dampen the enthusiasm of politicians and by and large they have been successful. The politicians tried to reduce the freedom of the judiciary (fourth amendment) but the judiciary responded a decade-and-half later with the doctrine of 'basic structure'. The politicians responded with the 44th amendment that says the right to property is not a fundamental right. And now we have a nine judge bench examining Article 39 that talks about community resources and who has the right over them.

In sum, India has always been aware of the problem of redistribution and has been trying hard to solve the problem. It was wholly unnecessary, therefore, for an important opposition figure to speak in an intemperate manner about the problem. It has provoked an equally intemperate and regrettable response from the ruling party.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



"Ask them to call again later! I want to enjoy watching these debates while the power cut lasts!"

India needs a long-term integrated energy policy

Transnational pipelines are a more geopolitically risky option than LNG imports



GETTY IMAGES

CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICH MISHRA

How will India deal with western sanctions imposed on its oil and gas suppliers? This is an issue that crops up every now and then.

This has been a subject of discussion not only in the domestic market but also at the international space, mainly because India is among the large consumers of fossil fuel.

In fact, just a couple of days back a *businessline* report quoting sources had said, "With sharp escalation in tensions in the Middle East... the Indian government is in a huddle over what its strategy on oil imports should be and the alternatives it could explore in case of supply disruptions in West Asia and continued volatility in oil prices."

It further said, "The Commerce Ministry is in close consultations with the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas to weigh alternative supply options that could be explored if the situation in West Asia worsens. As over 40 per cent of India's oil at present is sourced from the region, the task is not simple."

"One option being considered is to increase purchase from Russia and see if it can be routed through the Chennai-Vladivostok route, which passes through the Sea of Japan, the South China Sea and Malacca Strait, in case the traditional route through the Red Sea cannot be used," the report said.

This constant debate leads us to a question about whether India has missed the bus in handling its energy security.

Ensuring energy security is a dynamic

process with new geopolitical developments and changing energy mix due to climate change pressure.

PIPELINE RISKS

So in India's case would a transnational pipeline network work?

India has been unsuccessful in this area, mainly due to political factors which have also put a question mark over the commercial viability of these projects.

Given the ease with which LNG can be imported now (assuming there is no volatility), geopolitically risky trans-border pipelines with large capex may not be a viable option in today's world.

"The current contracting environment is characterized by an over-investment cycle owing to the anticipated LNG supply that will be coming onstream. By 2030, almost 200 million metric tonne (MMt) more LNG will be added from plants under construction today. This represents a growth of almost 50 per cent and it is as large as the previous over investment cycles in 2005-06 and 2013-17.

"Consequently, for long-term LNG contracts scheduled to begin beyond 2029, new contracts are likely to face downward pressure on prices. In February 2024, QatarEnergy had signed a 20-year contract extension with Petronet LNG Ltd. for 7.5 million metric tonne per annum. This was reported to be at 12 per cent Brent oil. This sets a

Political factors need to be weighed while going in for transnational pipelines. India needs to figure out its energy mix for the next 25 years

new benchmark in the market given its size and duration for a buyer in Asia," said, Chong Zhi Xin, Senior Director, S&P Global Commodity Insights.

For example, a Rystad Energy — a global independent research and energy intelligence company — report said, "Russian oil production has remained strong despite sanctions imposed by Western countries in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The country's gas and liquefied natural gas (LNG) industries, on the other hand, have suffered due to limited pipeline infrastructure and reliance on Western companies."

Rystad Energy expects Russian piped gas supply to China to increase due to new infrastructure, but the outlook for Russian LNG is less rosy. The Kremlin has set an ambitious plan to commission 100 million tonnes of LNG capacity by 2030 but Rystad's forecasts show the country will miss that target by as much as 60 million tonnes.

Despite a bleak outlook, it expects Russia's planned LNG projects to go ahead despite sanctions and challenges in securing vessels and long-term contracts, thanks to government support and incentives on financing, research and development, and tax breaks.

However, there are diverse views on whether having transnational network would have worked better for India as it would depend on nature of sanctions and their geopolitical impact and the pressure put on India to comply with western sanctions.

Further one has to consider that pipeline supplies may leave the buyer at the mercy of supplier country. Whereas in case of LNG as is the case with crude oil, the buyer has flexibility to change supply sources.

Asked whether India's attempts to have transnational pipelines to

transport gas had failed because of political reasons, Talmiz Ahmad, former Indian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia; Oman, and the UAE, confirmed that "energy security concerns had been overwhelmed by political considerations".

Ahmad, who was Additional Secretary for International Cooperation in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas in 2004-06, said that, for instance, the Myanmar-Bangladesh-India gas pipeline did not fructify because the Bangladesh side, due to domestic political compulsions, wanted certain bilateral matters to be included in the tripartite gas agreement which were not acceptable to the Indian side.

Similarly, the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project, despite agreement on several technical and commercial issues, did not progress due to political instability in Pakistan, while the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project had the added problem of civil conflict in Afghanistan, he said.

"Political issues do overshadow commerce," Ahmad said. Given the political challenges that have bedevilled pipeline projects, it now made sense to obtain gas as LNG, he added.

"However, the bigger issues that India faces today are uncertainty relating to the place of gas in our energy mix. What India needs is a long-term and integrated energy policy that projects the country's energy requirements over the next 25 years, while taking into account domestic production, import requirements of fossil fuels, and our commitments to transition towards clean energy," he pointed out.

To sum up, there are no simple answers to whether pipelines import would have served India's energy security better, but what is clear is that India needs an integrated energy policy.

Improving access to menstrual hygiene products

Lower or zero taxes may not make much of a difference. Low cost sanitary pads work better but the urban poor are left out

Vikas Choudhry
Debapriya
Shruti Khanna

In recent years, there has been a monumental shift in the fight for menstrual equity with the elimination of taxes on feminine hygiene products in many countries, aiming to make menstrual products affordable.

However, the global landscape still paints a grim picture marked by low usage and restricted access, with approximately 500 million women, girls, and menstruating individuals experiencing period poverty worldwide.

The world witnessed a global wave of tax-free initiatives for menstrual products, with Kenya eliminating Value Added Tax on sanitary products in 2004, followed by 17 other countries, including India.

The central argument was that reduced taxation would naturally lead to lower prices, making it easier for consumers to access these products. Yet, real-world case studies indicate that achieving this outcome is unpredictable.

In countries like Australia, removing GST from menstrual products led to reduced consumer costs, largely due to a robust legal framework within the retail sector. In contrast, VAT exemptions on sanitary pads in Tanzania did not yield the same results as 90 per cent of product sales in the country occur through small

shops with significant price variations. Similarly, India and Bangladesh have experienced inconsistent or no reductions in prices.

India abolished taxes on feminine hygiene products in 2018. Despite this progressive step, research shows that several adolescent girls and women across communities continue to face persistent challenges in accessing and affording these products.

Firstly, GST exemptions on sanitary pads lowered prices, but local manufacturers, lacking input tax credits, found it economically unviable to produce them at lower costs. Secondly, many adolescent girls remain unaware about menstruation until they experience their first period.

The level of education also contributes to this awareness: stats reveal that exclusive use of hygienic methods during menstruation is four times higher among women in rural India with higher education (62 per cent) than those without education (15 per cent).

Regional disparities further compound the issue, with rural areas less likely to opt for menstrual protection than urban areas. A cross-sectional study published in BMC Public Health, conducted among adolescent women in rural India, revealed that women in the wealthiest quintile were four times more likely to use hygienic methods than those in the lowest quintile.

Meanwhile, in urban slums, many



MENSTRUAL HYGIENE. Breaking barriers

were able to afford only one sanitary packet per month priced at ₹30-35, which is insufficient for adequate menstrual management (*Indian Journal of Gender Studies*).

While government schemes like the Scheme for Promotion of Menstrual Hygiene (2011) aim to provide six sanitary napkins at ₹6 through ASHAs in villages, urban poor lack such support.

The Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana (2019) offers low-cost sanitary napkins in urban areas, but ASHA distribution networks are more extensive in rural areas. While the scheme represents progress, attention must be given to programme awareness, especially in areas lacking ASHA-like facilitators.

SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS Lastly, deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers persist, as menstruation is often

associated with the notion of being impure in many parts of India. With 70 per cent of mothers considering menstruation 'dirty,' crucial conversations with daughters get hindered (MoHFW data).

The Covid pandemic exacerbated the issue of menstrual inequity. A study by the IIM Ahmedabad, revealed a concerning 27 per cent reduction in the consumption of safe period products in areas with strict quarantine measures compared to others. In rural areas, this reduction was 33 per cent.

Menstrual inequity has far-reaching consequences. While use of hygienic practices by women increased by 20 per cent between 2015-16 and 2019-21, the proportion using unsafe methods decreased by 13 per cent in the same period. Around half of Indian women still use unsafe products such as rags, old cloth, ash, sand, etc to manage menstruation, which poses a direct risk of reproductive and urinary tract infections.

The road to menstrual equity is long, and it's evident that a multifaceted approach is essential

It emphasises the need for making menstrual hygiene products more accessible and affordable, and breaking the pervasive silence surrounding menstruation.

Choudhry, Debapriya and Khanna are with Sambodhi Research

✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Assam's potential

With reference to the article 'Assam's semi-conductor push is transformative' (April 26), the project stands as a beacon of hope for the region's economic transformation. However, unlocking its full potential necessitates a concerted effort to confront significant hurdles. Primarily, bridging the skilled workforce gap demands multifaceted solutions. Furthermore, infrastructure development and supply chain management is paramount for long-term success. The Assam semiconductor project can serve as a catalyst for inclusive

industrial development.

Amarjeet Kumar
Hazariabagh, Jharkhand

SEBI vs IRDA

Apropos "A tale of two financial Regulators", it is an obvious fact that SEBI and IRDA are poles apart when it comes to safeguarding the interests of investors and policyholders. The IRDA still has a long way to go compared with SEBI which was unequivocally instrumental in providing a protective sheath to shareholders. SEBI's proactive measures and hawk-eye are reasons for the growth of India's equity markets in contrast to the insurance

market. A major lacuna of IRDA is in its inefficacy in regulating the health insurance companies regarding certain restrictive clauses like "Maternity Clause of Three years," which is in contravention to "Maternity Benefit Act 1961"

Roy Markose
Bengaluru

Food safety

With reference to the Editorial 'Spice trial', food adulteration is not new to India, many companies have been found guilty in the past. Hong Kong and Singapore's move against MDH and Everest's consignment is embarrassing. This incident has also put a question mark

over FSSAI's working, which needs to do a lot of soul searching. If the processed food products we consume are harmful for our health, then the food regulator will have to be proactive rather than reactive in ensuring public health.

Bal Govind
Noida

Apropos, 'Spice trial' (April 26), Singapore and Hong Kong has banned a slew of spices and condiments belonging to MDH and Everest brands exported from India, since the sample tests confirmed the presence of a high levels of pesticides. Following these embarrassing bans,

the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has rushed to close the barn door after the horse has bolted. It commissioned quality checks on MDH and Everest spice mixes to determine whether they have carcinogen traces above permissible levels.

When the country is pushing to increase exports to new markets, allowing a dangerous quality lapse is a huge credibility dent. The quality of food products in the domestic market cannot be ignored. Undeniably, there is a crying need to ramp up our quality control systems.

N Sadasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

Central banks in a cashless world



MARIANA MAZZUCATO & DAVID EAVES

Economics has always had a strange and much-debated relationship with money. For a long time, economists — including Nobel laureates like Merton Miller and Franco Modigliani — regarded money merely as a medium of exchange. But by building on the work of John Maynard Keynes and Hyman Minsky, economists have since moved beyond a narrow focus on

the quantity of money to consider its structural influence on the real economy and the financial system.

A structural understanding of money and finance becomes even more important in an increasingly digitalised and cashless world, because there is a growing need for policymakers to operate not just as market fixers but as proactive market shapers. A cashless world not only changes people's relationship with money and creates new opportunities for how it is managed or even conceived; it also puts new pressure on central banks to reimagine their role and become more innovative.

Cashless transactions are growing faster than ever as reliance on physical cash declines. Consumers, businesses, and governments clearly prefer cashless technology's cost-effectiveness and ease of use. Tap-based payment systems, once

confined to the realm of tech-savvy urbanites, now pervade even the most rudimentary economies. Interoperable payment systems are quickly emerging as the core economic infrastructure of the digital-era economy, marking a departure from the past 2,000 years of government-issued physical cash.

As with all technological change, this one is not neutral. It has a momentum of its own, and if policymakers do not direct it in the public interest, it could lead to deeper forms of exclusion and other structural problems across the economy. For example, digital payments systems in many countries are not interoperable, which means that the owners can determine who gets access and thereby extract undue rents. Those already on the margins are then pushed further outside the cashless world or, worse, outside the formal economy altogether.

Here, a central bank can serve as more than just a regulator, by influencing or even creating shared infrastructure. It can not only reduce the costs of digital transactions but also create new opportunities to improve efficiency and financial inclusion for those on the fringes of the formal economy. That is what India has done with UPI, an interoperable digital payments infrastructure that has been strongly shaped by the central bank.

It is also what Brazil has done with its Pix system, an interoperable instant-payment service that allows individuals and businesses to send and receive money at any time of day, usually for free or at very low cost. According to the Brazilian Central Bank (BCB), Pix is now the country's most popular payment method, surpassing credit and debit cards and other transfer methods rivaling cash.

This may sound like a typical fintech success story. Yet it was the BCB that stepped in proactively to build Pix, after it realised that private players would not make their systems interoperable on their

own. Before Pix, each financial institution used its own transaction system and set its own fees. But now the competition has shifted away from fees to focus on the quality and quantity of services that financial institutions offer. By driving this change, the BCB is helping to shape a much larger trend toward serving the common good. When a common-good framework becomes the foundation for most economic activities, there will be many more opportunities for collaboration, coordination, and co-investment between governments, private companies, civil society, and international organisations.

Of course, this role for central banks challenges the traditional view that they are regulation-oriented market fixers that should focus only on guaranteeing financial stability, thus leaving questions of equity, access, and inclusion to the private sector. The public sector has long been assigned the task of merely de-risking the value creators, not taking risks or creating value itself. This narrow view of the state's role in wealth creation has limited poli-

cymakers' understanding of the range of tools and instruments they have for catalysing sustainable economic growth. Although ensuring the financial system's stability will remain essential, Brazil and India's market-shaping efforts around interoperable payment infrastructure demonstrate that central banks have the tools to do more for the common good.

In the United Kingdom, the Bank of England's newly declared secondary objective is to facilitate innovation in providing financial-market infrastructure services when it exercises its powers as a regulator. It seems the appetite for more ambitious market-shaping may be spreading. We certainly hope so, because bringing about an equitable future will require more ambitious central banks.

Mazzucato is founding director of the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose. Eaves is co-deputy director and associate professor of digital government at the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose ©Project Syndicate, 2024

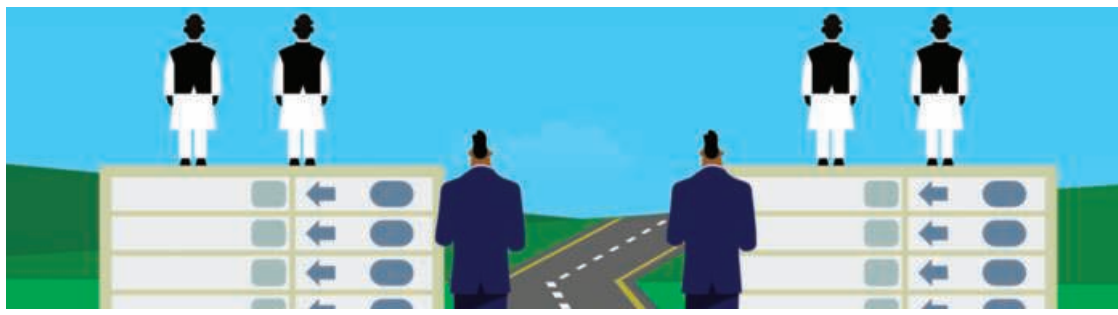


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Odisha example before Andhra



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

“Alliance talks are based on statesmanship,” observed Biju Janata Dal (BJD) heir apparent and former bureaucrat V K Pandian, in an interview just before the arrangement between the BJD and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) collapsed and died ahead of the Assembly and Lok Sabha polls in Odisha (being held simultaneously on May 13). Statesmanship would not appear to be the casualty here: Since then, neither Prime Minister Narendra Modi nor Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has criticised each other in public meetings. Mr Modi's target has been the Congress while Mr Patnaik has described his work in the state while asking people to vote the BJD. The campaign of the state unit of the BJP is another matter altogether. It has launched a bitter attack on Mr Pandian, calling him the “face of corruption”. So, while the two top leaders are keeping the door half open and half closed, the BJD — the version headed by Mr Pandian,

not Mr Patnaik — is in the BJP's cross-hairs. Confusing? Not for voters in Odisha, who have shown the most sophisticated sense of discrimination while voting in Assembly and Lok Sabha polls. Odisha has 21 Lok Sabha seats. In 2014, the BJD had won 20 and the BJP took one. In 2019, the BJD got 12 seats while the BJP got nine.

But in 2019, the BJP was unable to transfer this advantage to Assembly seats: The BJD won 112 of the 147 seats. The BJP managed only 23. While the BJD registered a 12 per cent vote share lead against its closest rival, the BJP reaffirmed its position as the growing alternative party in the coastal parts of the state.

Slice and dice the electoral data and it becomes even more interesting. Take the Bhubaneswar Lok Sabha seat. The seat was won for the BJP by Aparajita Sarangi (earlier in the Indian Administrative Service), who defeated Arup Patnaik, former Mumbai police commissioner and BJD candidate, by a 30,000-vote margin.

Despite this, the BJP could not win a single Assembly segment and had to actually yield one to the Congress (Jatni). In the Jayadev Assembly constituency, it was in third place, with a 40,000-vote gap between it and the BJD — huge in an Assembly constituency! Bhubaneswar-North saw the BJD winning by a margin of more than 25,000 votes. Ekamra Bhubaneswar reported a

BJD win by nearly 50,000 votes. The Bhubaneswar-Central, Khurda, and Begunia Assembly constituencies also registered unambiguous victory for the BJD. The BJP was nowhere in evidence.

Other constituencies, like Bargarh, tell the same story. The bigger point being made here is: Odisha has cracked it best. It votes for the BJD at state level and BJP at Centre, and understands clearly what the stakes are. No confusion.

By contrast, neighbouring Andhra Pradesh doesn't exert its grey cells much while voting. Andhra Pradesh will also see simultaneous Assembly and Lok Sabha polls as it did in 2019. Then the YSR Congress, led by Jagannathan Reddy, stormed to power in the Vidhan Sabha, winning 151 of the 175 seats and 22 of the 25 Lok Sabha seats in the state. N Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party (TDP) got just three. Among voters, there was no argument. People wanted Jagannathan as Prime Minister and Jagannathan as chief minister.

Here's the thing: What makes voters vote the way they do? On the welfare front, Jagannathan and the YSR Congress hold a stellar record even though the state is badly in debt. His Members of Parliament (MPs) have frequently tried to flag issues relating to Andhra Pradesh — like Food Corporation of India's decision to stop buying parboiled rice, leading to serious upheavals

in the market.

By contrast, MPs of the BJD have been good boys, mostly siding with the government even when they have been adversaries in the state. Naveen Patnaik continues to be loved and respected, especially among women voters: His efforts to promote women's self-help groups are expected to yield returns. There is the additional feeling that this could be his last election, so people are ready to back him — for the state. However, in the Lok Sabha, this time the BJP might surpass the BJD.

In Andhra Pradesh, the team that powered Jagannathan to victory — his mother and sister YS Sharmila — has broken up. Sharmila is contesting the Kadapa Lok Sabha seat and Jagannathan is trying to explain why she had to leave his side. On the other side, despite being kept waiting at the National Democratic Alliance door, the TDP has forged a big-ish alliance comprising the BJP and Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party (JSP). The TDP will field its candidates across 17 Lok Sabha seats, while the BJP and JSP will contest six and two seats each. In the Vidhan Sabha, the TDP will contest 144, the BJP just 10 and the JSP 21.

Will Andhra Pradesh follow the Odisha model, voting differently in Lok Sabha and Assembly elections? Or will Odisha follow Andhra Pradesh, voting in new faces in both? The outcome could have momentous implications for India.

Frontrunner & elusive poll theme

Excitement is often highest in 'wave' elections. There is a sense of anticipation, a better future, even vengeance. For these reasons, 2024 is turning out to be an unexpectedly themeless election

We are now at about the halfway point in the Lok Sabha election campaign and what stands out is — and I say so with some trepidation — how little stands out. Trepidation because the nutcracker of the argument is the frontrunner's inability to define this campaign so far.

Since Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) first rose, say from 2012 onwards, they have defined the terms of competitive politics in India. In 2014, it was the call for *achche din* (better times) for all and a “56-inch chest” and *laal aankh* (angry red eyes) for enemies, namely, Pakistan and China.

In 2019, it was a clarion call on national security, and a changed approach to it, defined as “*ghus ke maareng* (will kill the terrorists/enemies inside their homes)”.

For 2024, though we are now headed for the third of the seven phases, a theme has yet to emerge for the BJP. China is totally missing, and Pakistan mostly so.

None of this distracts from the theme that the party remains the frontrunner by some distance. That is why its diffidence in settling some consistent and durable terms of engagement in this contest is intriguing.

This might indeed be the reason why voting percentages have been lower this time. And the summer hasn't even fully begun yet.

Or could it be that they see the lack of a contest, which makes it unexciting, like the anticipation of a one-sided cricket match between two vastly unequal rivals? When the result is so easy and safe to anticipate, why bother going out to vote? If you speak with people from the BJP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and Modi government supporters in general, as I did over some travels in Bengaluru and around last week, this apprehension is widely expressed.

Anybody who has followed Indian elections over a length of time, however, will tell you that this is almost never the case. In fact, voter enthusiasm — the excitement on the street — is often the most in “wave” elec-

tions. There is a sense of anticipation, a better future, sometimes even vengeance. For all these reasons, 2024 is turning out to be an unexpectedly themeless election.

The big surprise is that Narendra Modi, the greatest conjurer in our national politics, has not yet presented a theme to this election. Or a thread that can run through phases one to seven. Already, until the conclusion of phase two on Friday, he and his party had presented new themes and moved on — some not lasting even a week in the campaign. The extent to which the BJP campaign has been defined by the Opposition and the issues set by the Congress, at least in the past three weeks, is also remarkable. It is generally an unlikely thing for a deeply entrenched incumbent and frontrunner to keep reacting to the challenger.

This BJP has worked hard to earn an entirely deserved reputation as a party constantly in campaign mode. Campaign 2024, therefore, began on the theme of Narendra Modi leading India to a much higher global stature than anybody in the past — the unspoken comparison was with Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi.

The pathway to it began with the gates of Bharat Mandapam, which hosted the G20 summit. The entire show was choreographed to project Modi as the new leader of the world, and it was acknowledged as being so by the heads of the most powerful states.

Of course, this set piece received a setback with the failure of the plan to collect the Quad leadership in New Delhi around Republic Day, and even more so with US President Joe Biden turning down the invitation to be chief guest. Now, what role the Nijjar-Pannun issue played here, or what kind of shadow it set on the G20, especially between India and the Anglosphere, we don't know. What can reasonably be concluded is that this momentum of rising global stature was, if not broken, delivered a rude wobble.

The other plank built during the same pre-election weeks was a large appeal to the woman voter, especially with the hurried

passing of the law for women's reservation in elected bodies. The law, with no deadline for implementation, will await the next census and delimitation — and for all we know, it may miss 2029. Again, it doesn't feature prominently in any of the BJP's campaign talk. In fact, the party's women candidates in this election are just about one in six, or 16 per cent.

The Ram Mandir was consecrated in January, again timed for the elections. And yet, check the last 100 speeches of the top 20 leaders of the BJP across states and see where it prominently features, and with how much emphasis. It only popped up on your TV screens this Friday as suggestions emerged that Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi might visit the temple.

Yet another plank was cut and installed with great enthusiasm weeks before the elections were announced, with the award of the Bharat Ratna to two of the most prominent backward-caste/rural underclass leaders in our history: Charan Singh and Karpooji Thakur. This was the plank of social justice. We haven't heard much about it since then. For sure, the first created the justification for Charan Singh's grandson to leave the INDIA bloc and join the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) instead.

If you lean back and see the state of the campaign right now, it is defined by the challenger, although probably even the Congress people might be surprised by that description.

In the past three weeks, both parties have released their manifestos. You can note how consistently the Prime Minister mentions the Congress manifesto, raising questions and fears over it, and how subdued he and his key leaders are in their references to their party's own manifesto. Similarly, Rahul Gandhi's April 6 speech at manifesto release in Hyderabad, where he promised a survey of “institutions, society and wealth”, followed by a revolutionary process of distributing it fairly (he didn't use that word, but the implication is clear) among the “90 per cent” left out, has defined Modi's campaign since.

Of course, he has taken the fears to ordinary women losing their *mangalsutra* and “*stridhan*”, as the “Congress” will loot them in their lives and after. The latest came after Sam Pitroda lit the inheritance tax fire. Are these fears justified or not is an academic point. Unless you think, midway in this campaign, that the Congress party has a realistic chance of coming to power.

Most Congress people and their Opposition allies would tell you on the sidelines that their most realistic target is to hold Modi below that 272 mark. That's why Modi's approach to this election, despite the odds favouring him so heavily, is intriguing. He's setting it up in terms of fears of the Congress returning to power, rather than his 10-year track record, and the promise of Viksit Bharat in 2047.

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AI edition of books

EYE CULTURE

ATAMU BISWAS

“It is a curious fact that the last remaining form of social life in which the people of London are still interested is Twitter.” This is the beginning of the 1897 story titled “The Importance of Being on Twitter”, by English writer Jerome Klapka Jerome. One may wonder how that's possible. Wasn't social media, even the internet, unquestionable in those days? Well, German artist Mario Klingemann shared this story in 2020. He revealed that the story was manufactured by GPT-3, the predecessor of ChatGPT. All Klingemann offered was the title, the author's name, and the initial “IT”. And it resulted in a story written in the style of Jerome K. Jerome.

The estates of Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, or Ian Fleming have approved “continuation novels” by new writers in order to maintain the literary franchise's worth. The question naturally arises: Why not apply AI? Nevertheless, AI is engaging in a growing number of artistic endeavours. Today, it's possible to digitally resurrect a deceased actor to complete an unfinished film. In 2019, Huawei generated a melody for Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony's* third and fourth movements, using AI. Beethoven's *Tenth Symphony*, which was left unfinished, was finished in 2021 thanks to AI.

Likewise, because of the authors' passing, many literary classics remain unfinished. Many people agree that Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury*

Tales is not finished. Many authors have attempted to finish Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. A version was even produced that purportedly had been “ghost-written” by him, channelling the spirit of Dickens! In 1990, the renowned Dumas scholar Claude Schopp re-discovered Alexandre Dumas's last, unfinished book, *The Last Cavalier*. Over the next 12 years or so, Schopp used published pieces, drafts, and letters to piece together the occurrences, and the book was published in 2005. It might be thrilling to know what happens to Charlotte Heywood in Jane Austen's *Sanditon* or how Cecilia Brady handles her grief in F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*. Then there's Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*, Kafka's *Amerika*, Terry Pratchett's *The Shepherd's Crown*, and so on — a whole genre of other unfinished novels. We could even want to finish Virgil's *Aeneid*, Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and Plautus' *Amphitruo* if we dig into ancient Greek and Roman literature. Who knows how the original writers would have completed them, though? However, AI may now add a new dimension to them. Furthermore, several AI models may generate disparate renditions of an incomplete book.

Since GPT-3's Twitter story, AI has greatly improved. All that is required for the GenAIs to perfectly emulate the writing style of a certain author is to have a large portion of that author's writings in their training data. Simple. Thus, should unfinished books published as “AI editions” be considered “ghost-written” in some sense? The most alluring aspect of an

incomplete work, on the other hand, is that readers are free to guess and feel in charge of the piece without the author. A partially completed book, thus, holds the promise of revelation.

Why would we want to use AI to complete incomplete novels then? Pleasure is one apparent response. Of course, there are also business motives. Philosophical questions regarding morality and literary conundrums still exist. Even so, Japanese novelist Rie Kudan recently got the Akutagawa Prize, one of Japan's most coveted literary honours, while acknowledging that about 5 per cent of her book *Tokyo-to Dojo-to* was generated verbatim by ChatGPT! It's important that the selection committee finds nothing wrong with Ms Kudan's use of AI. Thus, the question is: How can we strike a balance between reality and morality? It's never simple, nevertheless, to evaluate such “half-human, half-AI works” in terms of originality, intellectual property rights, ethics, and, most crucially, the rights of the departed. In many parts of the world, even the laws are unclear.

Given that GPT-3 penned the Twitter narrative in the vein of Jerome K. Jerome, is it possible that an AI version of a Dickensian tale will incorporate the description of the internet era or that Virgil's *Aeneid*, a follow-up of the Trojan War, will include details about contemporary warfare like drones and missiles? In any case, AIs are known to be biased, to have hallucinations, and to lack a sense of reality. A shade of uncertainty thus remains.

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D&I in Indian advertising



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

Diversity & Inclusiveness. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has just put out a report “Mainstreaming Diversity & Inclusiveness in Indian Advertising”. It makes for interesting insights.

The heartening news is that India scores well on gender representation. Indian ads showed 31 per cent women as protagonists in 2019. The percentage has gone up substantially in subsequent years — 38 per cent (2020), 34 per cent (2021), 39 per cent (2022), and 45 per cent in 2023.

However, in contrast to most other global markets, India is quite a distance away in terms of celebrating the inherent diversity in its ethnicity and skin colour, according to the ASCI. The global average for different ethnic groups being featured in advertising is 19 per cent. It is as high as 39 per cent in North America and 20 per cent in Europe. In India the

score is a poor 3 per cent. In the portrayal of diversity of skin colour, the global average is 27 per cent — a massive 54 per cent in North America, 30 per cent each in Latin America and Europe, but a piffling 4 per cent in India. To be honest, I am not sure I would agree with these statistics. There is surely an error somewhere there.

The ASCI claims it reviewed over 261 new ads that went on air in October 2023 (across 13 languages) to build a D&I snapshot, but from my four decades in advertising my experience is that advertising beyond Hindi channels these days mostly features local celebrities/models, local locations, local clothes, local customs, local festivals and therefore local ethnicity and local skin colour. Most brands today shoot ads specifically for the South. Ditto for the East. So one is not sure how and why the ASCI index shows such low scores, unless of course the weight for Hindi is over-indexed.

In terms of representing a wider spread of age groups, India is somewhat closer to the global pattern. Women aged 40 and above are shown in 25 per cent global ads while 16 per cent Indian ads feature this cohort. Fifty-eight per cent females shown are with lighter skin tones compared to 25 per cent males. Thirty-nine per cent female characters are expected to have a lean & slender body type compared to 16 per cent for

males. Eighty-six per cent females in Indian ads are 20-39 years, as compared to 62 per cent of their male counterparts in the same age bracket. Thirty-five per cent female characters are 2.5 times more likely to be shown as young/very attractive versus 14 per cent for males.

A content analysis of ads in India shows that male characters are likely to be three times more authoritative than female characters; 17.5 per cent females are likely to be shown as sole care givers compared to 3.5 per cent males. Less than 1 per cent of ads overtly show LGBTQ+ representation. Less than 1 per cent of ads feature someone with a disability. Only 4 per cent of ads feature the 65 and above age group.

Women are nearly always featured in a progressive narrative, where they are generally in control, and/or part of stories that celebrate the new normal slice of life wherein roles within a home are gender-agnostic. The pie is divided as follows: “New normal” slice of life 22 per cent; firebrand/progressive 3 per cent; regressive codes 4 per cent; status quo codes 32 per cent; pseudo-progressive 23 per cent and not part of narrative 17 per cent.

The ASCI report also puts valid questions to brand handlers and agency folks:

Does your brand communication reflect the diversity of the people in your markets? Does the communication

feature a range of people that are representative of the cultural and ethnic mix in your market?

The report urges marketers to think beyond gender — age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, body size, religion, ability, etc — and aim for inclusive casting. It also suggests choosing central characters from under-represented groups without the story centring around their identity — that could be a pathway for progression. Going micro, the report has more to say — (1) Show people, especially women, owning their own behaviour and having control of their lives; (2) Use beauty as a way to show personality rather than as a way to suggest physical attraction; (3) Bring alive personalities that are complex and layered.

Advertising has progressed considerably from the time I joined the business in the mid-80s. Back then I used to handle Horlicks, a mainstreamer brand by any count. The woman protagonist would always be a young mother in her early 30s, saree-clad (at 8 am in the morning at breakfast), with well-oiled, long hair in a bun, a very light lipstick — harried and hurried — with a naughty child, a generally pre-occupied husband and a bored mother-in-law in the frame. We've come a long way from there.

The writer is chairman of Rediffusion



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Trivialising the equality debate

Political parties must ensure that there is a healthy dialectic between growth and the battle against economic inequalities

That India is among the rare exceptions in the Global South which has embraced privatisation and globalisation without a major economic crisis is a fact often not appreciated enough. It is also the fastest growing major economy in the world and will emerge as a key driver of global growth. Indian democracy can rightly take credit for these achievements.

These two positives about India's economy, and by extension, its politics should not distract us from the fact that the economy has, so far, failed to move its workforce from low-income farming to well-paying non-farm jobs. The window to do this, given India's demographic transformation, will close soon. Rising capital intensity in most high value sectors has made generating better paying jobs outside farms more difficult today. Growing trade protectionism across the world will make export-led growth more difficult. Meeting these challenges should be the focus for the political class. It is on this front that the ongoing polemics between the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are deeply distressing.

The Congress, after its crushing defeats in 2014 and 2019 elections, seems to have decided that populism without any concern for fiscal prudence or even larger salience is the way forward. Its strategy of selling the caste census and doing away with the 50% cap on SC-ST-OBC reservations is exactly that. Such plans, even if implemented, will only tweak the existing distribution of jobs rather than solve the larger structural challenges described here. The BJP, which is clearly aware of the generalised economic discontent over India's inability to generate quality jobs, knows that the Congress's populist trick can gain traction if left unchallenged. However, it has decided to counter this by making it a Hindu-Muslim issue rather than approaching it from a non-polarising, macroeconomic viewpoint. Nothing could be a bigger disservice to India's inequality debate. In an ideal world, the debate in India should be focused on three key points.

One, India is not at a stage in its economic transformation where it can prioritise redistribution over growth. The size of the cake is just not big enough to tend to the needs of 1.4 billion people. Even if India were to implement radical ideas such as inheritance tax, they would not generate the resources needed to pull everyone up to a decent living standard. Policy/political adventurism must not spook enterprise and private capital.

Two, this does not mean that capital or profit maximisation should override all democratic concerns. Grassroots mobilisation against their excesses or breach of rules must be strengthened to make sure there is a healthy dialectic between growth and the fight against inequality. Almost all political parties are conspicuous by their absence in such struggles on the ground.

Three, the growing obsession with using fiscal resources to support the incomes of the poor, notwithstanding their good intentions, is increasingly coming at the cost of investment in institutions which could be the biggest weapons in the fight against inequality. The proliferation of high-cost private services in areas such as health, education and the collapse of State-owned extension services in key areas such as agricultural R&D are the examples of this crisis. The reasons for this are not difficult to understand as politicians find it much easier to transfer money to voters rather than take on the challenge of dealing with institutional inefficiencies and sabotage.

{ THIRD EYE }

Barkha Dutt



What the South thinks — lessons from a road trip

Narendra Modi is, by miles, the dominant political persona of this election. But faith-centric issues are not the motivation for BJP supporters in South India

For the last two weeks, I have been on a road trip that began from Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of the Indian mainland, heading towards Kashmir. I have had the chance to meet people across the stretch of peninsular India — in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and spots of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

That my journey began in this way — with a series I call the Dhabas of Democracy, because when elections are here, can food be far behind — is just one of the ways in which 2024 feels different from other campaigns I have reported on in the last three decades. Typically, journalists like myself have been guilty of being North-centric. Come poll season and we drop our anchors in the Hindi heartland, parking ourselves for inordinate lengths of time in Varanasi, Amethi, or Lucknow. This could be seen as the bias of geography of a Delhi-centric media. But it was also because all the political earthquakes located their epicentre in the Hindi-speaking North.

Irrespective of how many roots the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) manages to grow in the southern states, that is the one thing Modi's relentless focus on states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala — greenfield projects for the BJP — has already changed. It is ironic that the biggest resentment and apprehension in these states is what the impending delimitation may mean for their political relevance. Right now, these states are critical to the BJP's long-term ambition as

a pan-national party and to the Opposition's strategy for the containment of Narendra Modi's rise. The South has never been as important, even if it does not eventually have the last say on numbers.

The other thing that feels different is the issues that are dominating these elections. (Health warning: My impressions are based on my travels through a specific geography, and I may come away with a very different sense once I travel through the North or West or East). But it's intriguing that in the South, where there are ornate temples and wood carvings in every village, where, in fact, the sheer scale and architecture of temples is much bigger and more omnipresent than the North (along with churches and mosques), the Ram Mandir, evidently, does not have much electoral recall. And I am talking of Modi voters and admirers.

In fact, the most common refrain among fans of Modi, especially in states like Karnataka and Telangana, has been a thumbs up for India's influence on the global stage. BJP voters give the Prime Minister (PM) the credit for this. And repeatedly — and unprompted — when I have asked what the biggest achievement of the Modi government is, nearly all have pointed to what they see as an India that is more important in the world than it was earlier.

THE MOST COMMON REFRAIN AMONG FANS OF PM MODI, ESPECIALLY IN STATES LIKE KARNATAKA AND TELANGANA, HAS BEEN A THUMBS UP FOR INDIA'S INFLUENCE ON THE GLOBAL STAGE



One voter in Bengaluru told me that he was a Modi fan and a Hindutva proponent but was not comfortable "with issues that create a religious divide".

All references to Ayodhya have been brought up by me and never by the voters themselves. And when quizzed about it, not one BJP voter has identified it as a reason for voting Modi. It is certainly a departure from the past to have a foreign policy dimension (unconnected from Pakistan) — India's standing in the world order — making its way into election season. In fact, one voter in Bengaluru told me that he was a Modi fan and a Hindutva proponent but was not comfortable "with issues that create a religious divide". He's still voting BJP, but not for the reasons that people might have assumed.

Now you could argue that the responses would have been quite different in states like Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. And you would probably be right. However, given the turnout numbers in the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections, it is evident that the Mandir has so far not created the kind of euphoric upsurge as was anticipated. Either it was a triumphal moment that peaked too early, or it has not been the central issue for voters, not even for those who lean towards the BJP.

This is ironic because as phase 2 of voting

ends, the BJP has, in fact, pivoted the campaign to Hindu-Muslim fault lines, with the PM's invocation of a disputed Manmohan Singh speech from 2006 and aggressive talk of how the Congress wealth distribution schemes will not even spare women and their mangalsutras. The Congress has denied all such plans. But while the Congress manifesto makes no mention of such a redistribution scheme, Rahul Gandhi, in a speech in Telangana did mention a "financial survey" that would follow a "Desh ka X-ray" (his metaphor for a caste census). And long-time family associate Sam Pitroda's throwaway comments on an inheritance tax have further bolstered the BJP narrative on this issue. The waters have been muddied.

Let's be clear: Modi remains in pole position. He is, by miles, the dominant political persona of this election from South to North. But in terms of issues that matter, the BJP may be surprised to hear what its own voters are thinking and feeling.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

Rwanda Bill militates against human rights

The innocuously named Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024 is now an act of Parliament in the United Kingdom (UK). Orwellian in content, the Act seeks to ostensibly deter unlawful migration, particularly by unsafe and illegal routes, by allowing some migrants to be sent to the Republic of Rwanda.

One has to only read the entry in the US State Department Human Rights Report 2023 on Rwanda to give lie to the UK government's claim that Rwanda is a safe option. According to a UK government press release, the new Act "prevents UK courts and tribunals from delaying or preventing a person's removal to Rwanda on matters relating only to the general safety of Rwanda". So much for judicial oversight! The UK Supreme Court ruled in November 2023 that the Rishi Sunak government's asylum policy was unlawful. The Court said it, "allows for an exceptionally narrow route to individual challenge to ensure that the courts will interpret the relevant provisions in accordance with the will of Parliament." Sounds familiar in so many countries! The Sunak government leaves a human right subject to the caprice of the bureaucracy! It also disappals relevant sections of the Human Rights Act 1998. To top it all, "only a Minister of the Crown can decide whether to comply with an interim measure issued by the European Court of Human

Rights." The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has already spoken against the UK government on this issue. But the Tories have threatened to withdraw from the Convention altogether if the ECHR, applying the European Convention on Human Rights to which Britain is a state party to, rules against the Act. International law may be too high a bar, but the British government should at least apply the rules-based order as defined principally by the Anglo-Saxon world and the western hemisphere!

On April 23, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi stated, "It is critical to the protection of the human rights and dignity of refugees and migrants seeking protection that all removals from the UK are carried out after assessing their specific individual circumstances in strict compliance with international human rights and refugee law".

Fortress Europe has been in the making for some time. The most recent of which is an April 10 policy makeover that externalises Europe's refugee problem to countries that even by European Union (EU) human rights standards are neither safe nor secure. Even the not-too-human-rights-friendly French President, Emmanuel Macron, on April 25 took a side swipe at the British initiative as "a betrayal



The UK Supreme Court ruled that the Sunak government's asylum policy was unlawful

of our values". The generally Conservative party-friendly *Daily Telegraph* newspaper termed the move as a "voter distraction". The next UK general elections have to be held in January 2025. However, the word on the street is it may be called as early as in the autumn this year.

The estimated number of refugees from Ukraine recorded in Europe as of March 2024 tells its own story. The numbers are as follows: UK 253,160, Germany 1,139,690, Poland 956,635, Czech Republic 381,400, Spain 192,405, Italy 168,840, Netherlands 149,015, Moldova 116,195, Slovakia 115,875, Ireland 104,315, Austria 84,135, and Romania 78,745. Denmark plans to host up to 100,000 Ukrainians and grant work permits. Clearly, being Black or Brown is not beautiful.

Australia has been sending people who come by boat to Nauru and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea since 2001. It stopped sending people in 2008 but began doing this again in 2012 and

calls it "regional processing". Not surprisingly, Israel has been doing this since 2015. Denmark passed legislation in June 2023 that would allow it to move asylum seekers to third countries outside the EU while their cases were processed.

The safe third country concept has been part of EU asylum law since the adoption of the 2005 Asylum Procedures Directive and features prominently in the European Commission's proposals for the reform of the Asylum Acquis. Since 1999, the EU has adopted laws with the ultimate aim of establishing a Common European Asylum System with harmonised rules, procedures, and conditions. These accumulated laws are known as the Asylum Acquis. The safe third country concept "undermines access to protection in the EU within an overall strategy of containment of refugees in other regions". The safe third country concept is seen as the panacea to Europe's concerns by deterring applicants and allowing for expedited examination and then deflection of asylum claims. Clearly, civil servants and security wonks across the world have their heads in the clouds as far as formulating refugee policy is concerned.

Even if the UK policy stopped all the small boat crossings that PM Sunak says he wants to prevent, it would still barely touch the sides in terms of the UK's net migration figures. In 2022, the number of people arriving by small boats was 45,744, according to the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford. Net migration the same year, according to government figures, was 745,000.

Thereby hangs a tale.

Ravi Nair is with the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre. The views expressed are personal

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



Read food labels, junk false health-gain claims

Why would a giant multinational add sugar to a baby product? Come to think of it, that's the second question to ask after the first: Why is there even a distinction between Nestle's baby products sold in markets in Africa, Latin America and South Asia and the same brands sold across Europe? The revelation that Nestle adds sugar to its various Cerelac cereals by a Swiss NGO, Public Eye and the International Baby Food Action Network has, quite rightly, sparked a storm.

In Europe, the same Cerelac is sold minus any added sugar.

So, why bother to add sugar? Because it makes that bowl of cereal more palatable. When mothers see their babies eat their sugary baby food without a fuss, they are more likely to buy it. They are more likely to even prefer it to simple home-cooked preparations which, minus sugar, are also less palatable.

We know that sugar for anyone is bad. But in infants it has catastrophic implications, creating a palate for sugary food later in life,

ergo our obesity epidemic; ergo our spike in lifestyle-related disease from diabetes to heart disease.

Nestle's sugar scandal dredges up memories of the infamous marketing techniques by the big manufacturers of formula milk in the 1970s, when Nestle and others were accused of pushing formula milk in countries where poor mothers were being convinced that tin milk was better than breast milk.

In 2015, another Nestle top-seller, Maggi noodles, came under fire for its unacceptable levels of MSG and lead. Some 38,000 tonnes of Maggi noodles were withdrawn from retail shelves and destroyed.

How is it that a global conglomerate seems to find itself in controversy multiple times?

Partly it's to do with lax regulations that allow a Patanjali to make ludicrous claims or an MDH and Everest masala to get away with ingredients they would have had to remove in other parts of the world. But apart from regulations is the reality that Nestle is in the business of selling its products not creating health awareness.

Ultimately, it's on us as consumers to demand better products with cleaner ingredients. It's on us to read labels — Cerelac products mention the amount of added sugar — and reject harmful products. And it's on us to know what's bad for us and our children.

In April 2023, social media influencer Revant Himatsingka posted a video rubbishing the health benefits claimed by Bournvita to his 2.1 million followers on Instagram. The video went viral; the manufacturers of Bournvita, sent him a legal notice and the video was pulled down with an apology.

But there's an interesting postscript. In December, Cadbury announced that it had brought down its sugar content by nearly 15%. Claiming victory for the move, Himatsingka posted: "If all Indians started reading food labels companies wouldn't dare falsely market themselves. The fight isn't against Bournvita. The fight is against any company which sells junk food but markets itself healthy."

Namita Bhandare writes on gender and other social issues. The views expressed are personal

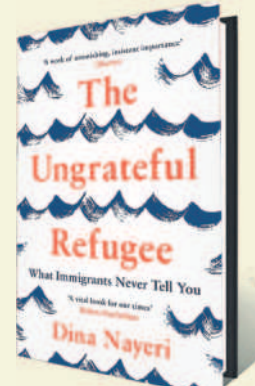
{ EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

THE EXPECTATION OF ASSIMILATION

What explains the xenophobia in the West that finds expression in, among other things, the United Kingdom's Rwanda Bill that was passed by the country's Parliament earlier this week? The underpinnings may be many, but a commonly cited one is the disparity of culture with the "native" population. The sense of "not-like-us" is rooted in the expectation of homogeneity — to be tolerated, immigrants must "assimilate".

In her 2019 book, *The Ungrateful Refugee*, Dina Nayeri explores, within the whole of her migrant experience, this specific part and how it shaped her later day beliefs. Nayeri's mother, a doctor and convert to Christianity from Islam, fled Iran in the late 1980s, along with her two children, and settled in Oklahoma, the United States. Nayeri weaves together her own experiences and those of the refugees she got to know years later to talk about the pain and hope that comes with such transplantation.



The Ungrateful Refugee: Dina Nayeri Year: 2019



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Lessons from the US campus

Student anger, crackdowns signal crises of liberal democracy, university system and anti-war protests



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THE WIDESPREAD PROTESTS against the war in Gaza across dozens of US university campuses, and the unprecedented crackdowns are a sign of a triple crisis: Of liberal democracy, of the university, and paradoxically, of anti-war protests as well.

The protests are a sign of the crisis of liberal democracy in three ways. First, we should not forget that these protests have been occasioned by the fact that the American political system has been virtually immune to the catastrophic horror that is unfolding in Gaza, since Hamas's barbaric attacks on Israel. Both America, which has the greatest leverage on Israel, and the international community, have met the horror of Gaza with moral abdication. The protests are a product of that suffocating sense of thwarted political agency that a lot of young people feel. They are also a consequence of the larger failure of a democratic system that has closed ranks allowing atrocities to unfold in Gaza, often even in the face of public opinion. The students are, perhaps inchoately, attempting that work of moral repair.

Second, it is a crisis of liberal democracy because it has exposed the fact that free speech, even in a country with such strong first amendment protections, can be so easily immobilised or subject to partisan considerations. The US Congress might have humiliated the presidents of universities, but more ominously, it sent out a message on the future of free expression. Third, if the risk in India is political authoritarianism, the risk in the United States is deep polarisation. The reactions and the political use of these protests will deepen that polarisation.

The protests also signal a crisis of the university. Over the last few years, higher education has increasingly become a political target. While universities ought to be accountable in relevant ways, the political attention to universities is not about restoring pedagogical excellence or depoliticising the university. In fact, it is an attempt to hyper politicise the university by attacking its legitimacy from the outside. In particular, the Republican Party's concerted effort to delegitimise the university predates this crisis: Using critical race theory as a pretext to exercise control over universities is of the same piece as using criticism of Israel to make a case for con-

trol. The agenda is to produce an exaggerated moral panic about universities. This is not a universe in which legally correct defences of freedom of expression, academic freedom, or even imagining what it means to be an 18 year old coming to political consciousness cuts any ice. In fact, those arguments are used as fodder to delegitimise the university.

Second, the university itself is now on shakier ground. Having abandoned the principle of institutional neutrality, the university now finds itself in the crossfire of which groups and conflicts command more power and attention. Vocal trustees and visible alumni, whose power was always present in the governance structure, but with less consequence in less divisive times, are now beginning to define the character of the university. Faced with a political assault from outside, and the assertions of a few visible donors from inside, university presidents are panic-responding by violating the basic norms that govern the university, appearing to worry more about their accountability to a small group of donors and the political class than faculty and students. The use of police in so many universities, most visibly Columbia, has been on grounds that are patently absurd and repressive. And it has been counterproductive, because it radicalised the protests.

Third, in many instances, the university's own selective enforcement of "time, manner and place rules of protest" has produced diminishing confidence in the administration's impartiality. The use of indeterminate standards like "safety" has been stretched to a point where even the articulations of political arguments are seen as threatening. It completely immobilises the university from making the necessary distinctions between genuine threats of anti-Semitism and political critique. As teachers, the first thing we tell students is learn to make fine distinctions; the universities seem to revel in blunt instruments. And they are struggling to convert this into a pedagogical moment, rather than a moment they fear and need to manage.

But it is also a crisis for the protests. The students have been, for the most part, restrained and stayed away from aggression or even the scale of disruption you might expect. The administrations have been more threatening. But the larger discourse has made it

into a war of groups: Anti-Semitism versus islamophobia, students seen as threats to other students. Politicians and administrations have an investment in this division. A protest that gets construed not as a protest on principle, but a potential conflict between two groups risks losing its moral lustre. The universalism of the principles underlying the protest gets obscured.

Second, the protests are struggling to find an appropriate target. One of the oddities of the protests is that so many of them are directed against university policies and administration — the pressure to divest, or, for the university, to signal support. At one level, this is understandable: The students are in a university and given an obdurate political climate, think this is an institution they can move. The protests also keep the cause visible. But both in symbolic and real terms, the university is less consequential in stopping the war, or even affecting America or Israel through its actions. Nonetheless, it lets the heat off the political class. The protest, if deemed necessary, ought to be better directed against the state and elected representatives, and ought to be more political in a conventional sense. In an election year, the mobilisation of the young in politics ought to have more leverage.

And finally, there is the predictable consequence — the object of discussion has become the university, not the war in Gaza. Most university students are serious and have at least as good or better a moral compass than the elders who judge them. But, as this column had argued ('The Paradox of Palestine', December 22), the war has become the pretext to litigate every issue (wokeness, donor power, the intellectual excess of academia, freedom of speech, resentment over DEI) but the nature and conduct of the war itself. The discussion that is now dominating the world is the discussion about alleged limits to freedom in American universities, never mind the fact that every university in Gaza has been reduced to rubble. The only one laughing right now is Benjamin Netanyahu — the world where students are seen as a threat is a far safer world for him, than a world that actually cares about stopping a brutal war.

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THE VOTE IS SAFE

The Supreme Court's verdict on VVPAT and its provision for a verification window reinforce trust in the electoral process

ASKED AND ANSWERED. That, in essence, is the message of the Supreme Court verdict in *Association of Democratic Reforms vs Election Commission of India and Anr.* The pleas by the petitioner — a return to paper ballots; printed paper ballots to each voter, placed in a ballot box and counted in full, and/or counting of every vote through a VVPAT slip — all demanded 100 per cent verification of votes. The bench comprising Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta were unequivocal in their rejection of all three pleas in their separate but concurring judgments. The verdict also stated that "while maintaining a balanced perspective is crucial in evaluating systems or institutions, blindly distrusting any aspect of the system can breed unwarranted scepticism and impede progress". It is correct. But the Court has gone beyond merely rejecting the petitioner's pleas and put in place interventions that should put to rest any lingering doubts about India's voting system.

The Court has issued two directions. First, the Symbol Uploading Units (SULs) are to be kept in a strong room for 45 days after the results are declared. Like EVMs, they too can be examined and scrutinised. Second, any candidate in the second or third position can request that EVMs in the constituency are checked. In case of such a request, 5 per cent of machines per assembly segment will be examined. The first measure is a check that illustrates that votes have not been miscounted and the second gives candidates who have concerns a recourse to alleviate their doubts.

Justice Datta is right, of course, when he says in his judgment that the question of returning to ballot papers "does not and cannot arise". That would amount to turning the clock back on a system that has no significant blemishes and, in fact, has been widely lauded across the world. However, his allusion that the petitioner's intentions may be malafide or an attempt to "undermine... the accomplishments of the nation" is unneeded and avoidable. The petitioner has a solid record of tracking the electoral process — it played a key role in the electoral bonds case — and asking questions is never antithetical to a country's progress. Indeed, the case has offered the Court an opportunity to affirm that India's voting process is credible and that the EVM bogey is just that. In fact, since electronic voting was introduced in 2004, the machines have been questioned by political parties across the spectrum (especially when they lose) as well as individuals and civil society actors. The Election Commission of India has assuaged those concerns constantly, including by holding hackathons. In 2012, the Court introduced the VVPAT system to ensure a paper trail to test machines. Now, it has once again given its imprimatur to the sanctity of India's polling system and brought in more measures for verification. Trust in the election system is essential to democracy. Friday's ruling, coming after an enriching and insightful exchange of arguments in the court, reinforces that trust.

HE SAID, SHE SAID

Overturing of Weinstein's conviction by New York court is a setback to MeToo movement and its hard-fought agency

THE OVERTURNING OF the sex-crime conviction of Harvey Weinstein by the New York Court of Appeals, the state's highest court, by a 4-3 majority, points, yet again, at the unevenness of justice and the long, excruciating path that leads up to it — if at all. Based on a technicality — the state's Molineux rule disallows the testimony of those who have not been part of the litigation process and deemed three such accounts as prejudicial — the 72-year-old Hollywood mogul will face a fresh trial in New York. The judgment, however, leaves unchanged his 2022 rape conviction in California, for which he was sentenced to 16 years of imprisonment.

In 2020, Weinstein's conviction had been a moment of powerful affirmation for the MeToo movement and the survivors of sexual abuse at workplace who had come forward to indict their violators — powerful men in high offices, with money, machinery and ease of influence. The sorority it had birthed was honed by anger and sorrow, by experiences of being diminished and disbelieved, abused and silenced. It demanded accountability and, for a while, as the movement gathered steam globally, it seemed like it would get it too. But accountability — at every stage of the process, including even in a court of law — can be a sharp scimitar that turns on the aggrieved, jabbing repeatedly at old wounds, hoping to hit upon an incontrovertible armour of facts. Instead of the accused, it often lays the burden of proof on the survivor. Could concern might have been misread for advances, temptation or mutuality of intentions overturned in the bitterness of the aftermath? Could wavering memory be indecision? The misalignment between law and its interpretations are picked at by the finest legal representation the accused can buy, showing how the power asymmetry continues. Before Weinstein, in 2021, Pennsylvania's highest court threw out comedian and actor Bill Cosby's sexual assault conviction on similar technicality; the US Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal against the decision.

In his judgment, one of the dissenting judges in Weinstein's case wrote that the decision set back "decades of progress in this incredibly complex and nuanced area of law" that had always exhibited a "deeply patriarchal and misogynistic legal tradition." It shows that despite the changes initiated by the MeToo movement and the impetus it gave to female agency, its gains still remain limited and its emotional cost disproportionately high. As in Weinstein's case and that of several other accused around the world, it remains a battle that only the most resilient and often the more privileged can afford to fight. That is a pity.

MORE THAN A NAME

Booker Prize is being asked to change its name to disavow connections with racism. But its story is more layered

THE BOOKER PRIZE has been called out for its unpaid debts to the colonised. Like several cultural artefacts that mark the Anglophone world's kinship with liberal values, one of the most generous purses in the English literary firmament, has inherited the contradictions of an imperial system built on slavery and racism. Earlier this week, popular radio host Richie Brave suggested that Booker should consider changing its name because of its links to exploitation of plantation workers in the Caribbean.

The lineage of the Prize's original sponsor, the wholesale food distributor Booker McConnell goes back to Josias and George Booker who first made a fortune in Guyana and then received a hefty compensation — for 52 slaves — after the British empire abolished slavery in the 1830s. On Tuesday, the Booker's organisers altered the wording of a piece about McConnell's links to slavery after Brave criticised it on X. The radio host who traces his ancestry to a family enslaved by the Booker brothers objected to a sentence which said that George and Josias "managed" nearly 200 enslaved people. "They did not manage. George and Josias enslaved my family... I hope that Booker will start asking themselves some questions around the name," he wrote.

Ritchie was echoing a criticism made frequently in the early years of the Prize's history. In his acceptance speech in 1972, the Prize's fourth winner, John Berger lambasted the sponsor and said that the poverty of the Caribbean was a direct result of the extractive ways of the plantation owners. Since then the Booker story has acquired many layers, including the stinging satire on segregation and racism by its 2016 winner Paul Beatty. The award will, of course, always carry the weight of its past. But, what is history without dialectics? And, what is literature sanitised of contradictions? These are questions those administering one of literature's most prestigious prizes, and their critics, must reckon with.



HITESH JAIN

IN A SIGNIFICANT ruling, the Supreme Court (SC) dismissed the demands for 100 per cent verification of Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips and rejected all the other pleas of the petitioners, including one which would take the country back to the system of paper ballots. Most importantly, the SC reinforced the credibility of the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs).

The Court came to this conclusion after conducting an in detail review of the administrative and technical safeguards of EVMs. It found EVMs to be "simple", "secure" and "user friendly." Further, the inclusion of the VVPAT slips as it stands today (where VVPAT slips of five randomly selected constituencies or segments would be counted to verify with the count of the EVM) was found to fortify the principle of vote verifiability.

The SC's reasoning against returning to the ballot paper system is sound and merits attention. The Court recognised that any return to this archaic system would bring back booth capturing. This issue was eliminated by EVMs as they restrict the rate of vote casting to four votes per minute, which effectively prevents bogus voting. Further, we must understand that paper ballot is an ineffective system, especially in a country like India with almost 97 crore voters.

What is worrying is that this campaign against EVMs is not a fact-driven critique. It is nothing more than a malicious attempt to

Over the last few years, higher education has increasingly become a political target. While universities ought to be accountable in relevant ways, the political attention to universities is not about restoring pedagogical excellence or depoliticising the university. In fact, it is an attempt to hyper politicise the university by attacking its legitimacy from the outside.

ROBUST AND TRANSPARENT

SC affirms credibility of voting machines, punctures Opposition allegations

What is worrying is that this campaign against EVMs is not a fact-driven critique. It is nothing more than a malicious attempt to attack the credibility of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose administration has been marked by tremendous electoral success. In this regard, the allegations made by the petitioners in the courtroom and by Opposition leaders outside the courtroom lack not only consistency but also evidence. Worse, their narrative flips depending on their electoral fortunes.

For example, the Indian National Congress (INC) found no fault with the EVMs when it cruised to victory in the 2004 and 2009 general elections. However, the same INC found faults with EVMs post 2014 when its electoral fortunes started to rapidly decline. Senior Congress leaders such as Digvijaya Singh claimed that votes are being stolen through hacking of EVMs. Weren't INC's claims against EVMs being easy to hack defeated when they emerged victorious in the 2018 Assembly Elections held in states such as Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan? The case of AAP is more intriguing. It emerged victorious in the 2015 Delhi State Assembly Elections in which EVMs were deployed. And it tried to demonstrate the hacking of EVMs within the State Assembly in 2017 and thereafter went on to win the 2020 Delhi State Assembly Elections wherein EVMs were again deployed.

Through all of this, a worrying pattern emerges. At first, one could mistake these aspersions casted by the Opposition as a pattern of selective scepticism. On a closer ex-

amination, a deeper and darker strategy is unveiled. This is focussed on the Opposition undermining the public's trust in the electoral process to cover its repeated failures. Further, as the Opposition gears up for the results of the 2024 general elections, their old playbook of casting aspersions against EVMs is resurfacing. It is clear that they are anticipating a defeat of great proportions and are already laying the ground to dispute the public's verdict by discrediting EVMs. Fortunately, the SC's timely decision negates this argument as the Court correctly reiterated that EVM's supplemented by VVPATs provide a reliable, tamper-proof method of voting.

At this juncture, it might be beneficial for the Opposition to genuinely introspect. It would bode well for them to shift focus from concocting absurd and hopeless narratives and instead turn their energies towards addressing the real issues faced by the Indian electorate. Second, it is high time, the Opposition stops waging political battles in the SC: This case was yet another instance wherein it tried to fire a political bullet from the Court's shoulder.

We can cast our vote through EVMs, pride ourselves in being part of free and fair elections and commend the ECI for the thankless job it has been carrying out.

The writer is Managing Partner Parinam Law Associates and Vice President, Mumbai BJP

APRIL 27, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

LOK DAL-BJP TIES

THE LOK DAL leader, Charan Singh, appears to be drifting away from his party's alliance with the BJP and forging new permutations and combinations. Singh has decided to extend Lok Dal support to the Rashtrya Sanjay Manch candidate in Malihabad in lieu of the latter's support in Jakhania. He has written a letter to the state party president Mulayam Singh Yadav, directing him to extend the party's full support to the RSM.

EXPLOSIONS IN PUNJAB

SIX PERSONS WERE killed in three incidents

in the Faridkot and Amritsar districts of Punjab while terrorists exploded a series of bombs damaging railway tracks and disrupting traffic at three places in Ferozepur. In one of the incidents, four persons were killed and some injured in an exchange of fire with BSF jawans.

BANGLA BORDER FENCE

THE GOVERNMENT CATEGORICALLY declared in both Houses of Parliament that it cannot abandon the work of erecting a fence along the Bangladesh border nor will it yield to any pressure on this score. Home Minister P C Sethi, replying to debates on the recent border skirmishes, said the government was

concerned about the uncontrolled infiltration from across the border.

PM ON SECURITY RISKS

DEFENCE MINISTER R Venkataraman told senior Air Force officers that "the present situation posed great danger to us from across our western border." The thrust of the speeches of PM Indira Gandhi who addressed the IAF and the Defence Minister has been that the security situation around India has worsened. Last week, Home Minister P C Sethi voiced in Parliament concern at reports that extremists had links with Pakistan and there was evidence of arms smuggling into Punjab.



THE IDEAS PAGE

Amir Garib

The binary doesn't work anymore — expropriate-and-redistribute model has lost its political viability. Wealth is more widely dispersed than before



HARISH DAMODARAN

IN THE 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, "wealth redistribution" was kosher. The 1974 Hindi movie *Amir Garib* had Dev Anand play the role of Manmohan, who has a day job as a hotel singer and, at nighttime, transforms into a masked vigilante, Bagula Bhagat, robbing the rich (*amir*) and spreading their ill-gotten wealth among the poor (*garib*).

There was a reason. India, at the time of Independence, was a highly unequal society. Much of the wealth of its people was held in the form of land. About 91.4 per cent of the country's total annual household savings in 1950-51 was in physical assets such as land, dwellings and gold. That share declined to 71.9 per cent in 1970-71 and 60.6 per cent in 1980-81.

Moreover, a lot of this wealth was concentrated in a few hands — mainly absentee/non-cultivating landlords and intermediaries whose primary concern was to extract maximum rent from tenants, who had little surplus left for investing in land improvement or raising farm productivity. There was general political consensus, then, for land reforms. These ranged from abolition of the zamindari system of intermediaries between cultivators and the state to the imposition of land ceilings.

Zamindari abolition resulted in some 25 million erstwhile tenant-cultivators becoming owners with permanent and heritable interests in their holdings. Land ceilings, together with tenancy reforms recognising the cultivation rights of sharecroppers and granting them legal protection against eviction, led to roughly 8.3 million hectares getting effectively redistributed. That was hardly 6 per cent of the country's cultivated area.

The mixed record on land reforms was, however, not due to any absence of political consensus. Successive five-year plan documents emphasised state actions for giving land to the tiller, which were also endorsed at chief ministers' conferences. Their not-so-satisfactory implementation owed more to a lack of political will and administrative zeal than consensus per se. A significant chunk of the declared surplus land being held up in litigation, and not available for distribution, didn't help either.

The point to highlight is that the land reform laws, in effect, infringed upon the right to property. Yet, these legislations — not to speak of nationalisation of banking, insurance, railways, airlines, oil, coal and many other industries — had broad political acceptance. So did the estate duty, the wealth tax, the gift tax and a 97.75 per cent maximum marginal rate of income tax.

Those assaults on private property, unimaginable in today's times, encountered little political resistance. The sole opposition voice came from the Swatantra Party, which won 44 seats in the 1967 Lok Sabha elections within eight years of its founding — far more than the Aam Aadmi Party could or can perhaps ever.

As the economic historian Aditya Basubramanian has shown in his work (*Toward a Free Economy: Swatantra and Opposition Politics in Democratic India*), it was the only party to protest against the 17th amendment of the Constitution (to protect land reform legislation passed in many states from being struck down) and also bank nationalisation and abolition of



CR Sasikumar

privity purse payments to the royal families of the erstwhile princely states. But Swatantra Party received no great support or funding from the business class that was as hesitant to take on the ruling establishment then, as it is now. The once-successful political startup faded into oblivion by the mid-seventies.

Much water has since flown under the bridge — right from the removal of the estate duty ("inheritance tax") in 1985 and, of course, the 1991 economic reforms. Businessmen are no longer Bagula Bhagat's unscrupulous traders and, instead, lauded as wealth creators. Symbolic of the shift in popular culture and attitudes is the 2007 Bollywood blockbuster *Guru*, where Abhishek Bachchan — who acts as Gurukant Desai, the protagonist with shades of Dhirubhai Ambani — bluntly states, "public se kya darna sahab, main khud public hoon (why fear the public Sir, I'm the public myself)".

That shift has to do, firstly, with the increasing financialisation of wealth. Physical assets constituted just 38.6 per cent of gross household savings during the five years ended 2021-22. The balance of 61.4 per cent was accounted for by bank deposits, investments in shares and debentures, small savings, insurance policies and provident and pension funds.

Secondly, this wealth is more widely dispersed than before. The most obvious indicators are the current 150 million-plus demat share-holding and some 84 million SIP (systematic investment plan) mutual fund accounts in the country.

A recent World Inequality Lab working paper on India points to the share of national income going to the top 1 per cent falling from 11.5 to 6.1 per cent between 1951 and 1982 — ostensibly because of socialist policies — and then rising consis-

tently to reach an all-time high of 22.6 per cent in 2022. The top 1 per cent's national wealth share similarly declined somewhat from 12.9 to 12.5 per cent between 1961 and 1981, only to soar — particularly after 1991 — to touch 39.5 per cent in 2023.

What the analysis misses out, though, is that the base itself — both aggregate income and wealth — has expanded now to accommodate many more people in the middle, if not the top. There are some who view India as a Billionaire Raj, comprising 200 or so individuals. The fact is that the country also had around 8,50,000 "dollar millionaires" (those possessing net assets of \$1 million or more) in 2022, according to the Swiss investment bank Credit Suisse. Add to them, the millions of investors and other sections of the propertied middle class, both in urban and rural India.

In absolute terms, these numbers would be large enough to make for a conservative vote bank that can punch much above their weight. The social base of India's capitalist class, too, has widened beyond the traditional Bania-Marwari to incorporate a host of agrarian and provincial mercantile communities.

Simply put, the political economy of India has changed considerably to transcend the simple binaries of *amir-garib*. The old expropriate-and-redistribute model has lost its political viability. The withdrawn 2014 land acquisition act amendments and the 2016 demonetisation were probably the last experiments at expropriation. Income and wealth inequality may have to be addressed through policies focusing more on job generation, universal access to quality education, skill development and progressive taxation than radical redistribution.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The climate transition is seeing wealthier countries attempt active industrial policies at home. Though welcome, this pivot is morally untenable as long as poor nations are prevented from doing the same." — THE GUARDIAN

Providing the Thatcherist heft

Strong Indian leadership can advance the global conservative movement and challenge the recurring disruptive extreme left-liberal politics



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

BRUSSELS, THE SEAT of European Parliament, witnessed a unique tussle between the conservatives and the liberals recently. The rising popularity of conservative political movements in Europe seems to have rattled the overzealous liberals who have an eye on the upcoming elections to the European Parliament in June.

Viktor Orban, Prime Minister of Hungary, leading the revival of the "national conservatism" (NatCon) movement, is joined by a powerful cohort of leaders like Donald Trump in America, Giorgia Meloni as the Prime Minister of Italy and Marine Le Pen in France. As the *Economist* reported recently, in four of the five most populous countries in the European Union — Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Poland — other than Spain, the conservative parties are either in power or leading in popularity with more than 20 per cent vote share.

The latest addition to this list was Geert Wilders, the firebrand conservative leader in the Netherlands, whose Party for Freedom (PVV) shocked the West by emerging far ahead of all other parties in the elections in November last year. Short of a majority, he may or may not succeed in forming the government. But he succeeded in making a strong case for a conservative revival in the liberal bastion, boosting the morale of the conservatives.

Unnerved by this conservative upsurge, liberal zealots resorted to illiberal tantrums when the conservatives planned their ninth National Conservatism Conference in Brussels earlier this month. Yoram Hazony, a Jewish-American leading light of the conservative movement, described the liberal onslaught, a political version of the notorious "cancel culture" in a detailed social media post. The liberal party mayors first denied permission for the conference to be held at a venue near the EU citing fears of so-called "anti-fascist" protests. When the organisers, Edmund Burke Foundation of America, secured the Sofitel Hotel as the alternate venue, the district mayor not only got the permission cancelled just one day before the event, but also boasted about it as a great liberal victory.

The conference went ahead at a nondescript venue in a poorer neighbourhood of Brussels, while Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo decried the shenanigans of his colleagues as "unacceptable". Prominent conservative leaders like Suella Braverman and Nigel Farage from the UK and Eric Zemmour from France were present. But the star attraction was Viktor Orban, who called out the hypocrisy of the EU's so-called liberalism that sought to deny his right to speak.

The rise of conservatism must be seen in the context of what is happening in the liberal wonderland of America. The celebrated Columbia University has announced the closure of its campus this semester and virtual teaching throughout the year after an uncontrollable agitation by Left-wing protestors over the happenings in Gaza engulfed its campus in New York. The New York mayor fumed at the protestors and their threats to the Jewish and other law-

abiding students. Still, the police, sulking over the liberal calls for defunding of their force, showed a lukewarm response to the appeals by the university authorities. Even the metro stations around the campus were forced to shut down due to protests. From Harvard and Yale in the East to Stanford and UC Berkeley in the West, the Left-Liberal anarchy is ruling campuses in America.

The classical liberalism of Thomas Hobbes or John Locke was noble intentioned and stood for the marginalised sections of the society. But the takeover of the movement by the extreme left poses a serious threat to fundamental human values today. Distortion of liberal principles like DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion), propagation of an extreme "woke" version of human identity and rejection of all other ideas leading to "cancel culture" is disheartening to many true liberals too.

Professor Randall Kennedy, an eminent scholar of race and civil rights, published an op-ed in *The Harvard Crimson* denouncing the unscrupulous use of DEI statements in academic hiring. "I am a scholar on the left committed to struggles for social justice," he wrote, adding, "The realities surrounding mandatory DEI statements, however, make me wince." Lamenting that aspiring professors are required to "profess and flaunt" their faith in DEI in a process that "leans heavily and tendentiously towards varieties of academic leftism", Kennedy exhorted that mandatory DEI statements "ought to be abandoned".

The conservative case, on the other hand, is sublime. "God, religion, family, nation and patriotism" was how Orban summed up his conservative ideas in a recent interaction. At Brussels, speakers essentially identified the mainstream media, unbridled immigration, political correctness, global NGOs led by people like George Soros, and "Bolshewokism" as the challenge.

As the conservatives begin to reassert, liberal backlash is also intensifying. Liberals seem to have the upper hand, not necessarily because of the legitimacy of their ideas, but because of their control over instruments like academia and the media. The conservative movement has its own weaknesses that the liberals exploit to demoralise it. It has its demagogues and hate-mongers. But most conservative leaders are decent and sensible. They champion ideas that are the need of the hour.

The global conservative movement faces the challenge of leadership in the face of a determined liberal onslaught. Viktor Orban and Marie Le Pen are popular leaders but still represent small populations. Yes, there is a Trump or a Meloni or a tech tycoon like Elon Musk. Yet, there is no Margaret Thatcher to bring the necessary "Thatcherist" heft to the movement. The ship of conservatism is sailing strong in the face of many vicissitudes, internal and external. A strong Indian leadership can stabilise its journey and succeed in creating "Brand Bharat" as the 21st-century conservative alternative to the disruptive extreme left-liberal politics.

Indian nationalist intellectuals need not worry about plunging into European identity politics and the liberal-conservative divide. On the Indian ideological soil of cultural nationalism, pluralism, democracy, and global family, the conservative movement of the world can find its roots and converge. Many classical liberals too may find traces of their beliefs in that tradition. The challenge, though, is to stand up to the ideals of Indian nationalism and seize the opportunity.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the RSS

MeToo or no MeToo

Overturning of Weinstein's conviction shows change happens only when we do



MANJIRI INDURKAR

DID YOU KNOW that roughly 90 women get raped in India in a day? That in a year there are over 30,000 women who get raped? Did you know that these are registered cases and the actual count is much higher? Did you know that most women don't report rape for fear of stigma, isolation, shame or even because they are afraid for their life? And, finally, did you know I am one such survivor?

The answer to most of my questions is probably yes, yes, yes, yes, and I'm sorry this happened. Why am I telling you any of this? The reasons are two part. One: A rape case against Harvey Weinstein in New York has been overturned and kickstarted the conversation around sexual violence again. Two: I want to understand if we can bring it back to the table, look inwards before we talk about institutions that relentlessly fail us.

Weinstein's case being overturned means there will be another trial; it means that men in positions of power will have found a way of having an upper hand.

When actor Alok Nath was accused by Vinita Nanda of rape, he and his wife filed

a defamation case, demanding Rs 1 for the damage to his reputation. It spoke of his arrogance. The rape case was closed because of a lack of evidence, though several prominent women spoke up about his behaviour. When journalist Priya Ramani won the defamation case against former Union minister M J Akbar, we all celebrated. But, he still wasn't punished. For several months, the Amber Heard and Johnny Depp trial became a public debate on who is right, and has feminism gone too far. These are women who followed due process. What happens when a case like this is overturned? It becomes another reason for women to remain silent. Some might even say that it weakens faith in the due process. But I have come to the belief that nothing matters, not when our critique of institutions yields no results. Do we need to fix our institutions? Without a shred of doubt we do. But does that begin in parliament, or on the public corridors of social media or elsewhere?

Like charity, it also begins at home. Weinstein was one big, creepy, towering

shadow of a whale. But his kind of evil is pervasive. So, the question isn't what this overturning means to the cause of justice. It is what do we, as society, owe to the victims of sexual abuse beyond solidarity on social media and angry platitudes.

There was an endless debate on the problems of "naming and shaming" as the modus operandi of the MeToo movement. We boycotted some men. Some men lost their jobs and wrote angry diatribes questioning the meaning of feminism for the urban woman. And then we got our next work assignment and we got busy.

Because, we said enough with this now, we are tired, overwhelmed, nothing will change, things are back to "normal" — no one is calling out another big name anymore. We have lost our momentum. Men will be men. There will be sexual harassment in the workplace. We will discourse over the real meaning of a sexual encounter, wanted or unwanted. We will feel the disgust, we will swallow the vomit. More women will drop out of the workforce. But the normal will not change. Because

we are used to it. More than rage over Weinstein, we need to rage over the environment that makes it okay for these things to happen. And yet, our rage needs to have the idea of restorative justice at heart. This doesn't Weinstein doesn't belong in jail. He does. So do Nath, and others. But they don't speak for the problem. To return to the idea I began with, we need to bring the discussion back to the table.

MeToo or no MeToo, we need to talk about how we are talking to our boys. How are we addressing acts of sexual aggression? Is it possible to change the face of masculinity? We have to dare to imagine that such a world is possible. Or, every day, one woman will get raped every six minutes.

Justice for these survivors ultimately lies in societal change. When that happens, we will have better institutions. Until then, the cycle of sexual violence will continue.

Indurkar is a writer, editor, and poet from Jabalpur. She is the author of It's All in Your Head, M

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

KARNATAKA POLLS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Stakes in Karnataka' (IE, April 26). The BJP-JD(S) alliance presents a formidable coalition, leveraging the support of Lingayats in the north and Vokkaligas in the south. However, the Congress' efforts to forge a broad-based coalition of caste groups could prove to be a game-changer. Ultimately, the evolving caste dynamics in Karnataka's politics defy simplistic narratives. As voters cast their ballots, they do so against backdrops of complex alliances, shifting loyalties, and the ever-present influence of caste. It is imperative to remember that true progress lies in transcending these divisions.

SS Paul, Nadiya

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Stakes in Karnataka' (IE, April 26). Almost a year since the Siddaramaiah-led Congress came to power in Karnataka, the party will try to encash the appreciation for implementing its five guarantees in this general election. While the polls to the LS are in the backdrop of the cafe blast in Bengaluru on March 1, the incident has had little impact on the ground, with

even the BJP, moving carefully to avoid giving it communal colour. It might have learnt this lesson from its performance in the Assembly elections. Its rule was marked by communally-divisive orders, starting with the hijab ban. This general election will be a direct fight between BJP and Congress.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

LANDMARK VERDICT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A collective responsibility' (IE, April 26). The SC's recent judgment emphasising that Article 15 not only restricts discrimination based on gender but also enables the states to make special provisions for women is laudable. This ruling must act as a precedent for the judiciary across the country, and guide the Union and state governments when it comes to women's issues. Ours is a culture where women work 24x7 on numerous fronts. Traditionally, cooking and childcare are viewed solely as women's duty. The state must ensure that there is infrastructure that supports women's ventures into the public space.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

EXPLAINED LAW

SLU, 'matchbox' that feeds EVM candidate info

Symbol Loading Units ensure EVMs can be used for voting. Underlining the sanctity of the election process, the SC has tightened norms for their use

DAMINI NATH & RITIKA CHOPRA
 NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

WHILE REJECTING the plea for 100% verification of Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips against the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) count, the Supreme Court on Friday directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to "seal and secure" the Symbol Loading Unit (SLU) for 45 days after the declaration of election results.

Currently, only the three components of the EVM — the ballot unit, control unit, and VVPAT — are stored for 45 days after the results. This is the first time that SLUs, used to load candidate symbols onto the VVPATs, will also be available for examination along with the EVMs if a candidate challenges the results by filing an election petition in court.

What is a Symbol Loading Unit (SLU) and how does it work?

Symbol Loading Units (SLUs) were introduced around the same time as VVPATs — a little over a decade ago. VVPATs help voters verify their votes — they see a slip with a printed image of the party symbol they voted for.

But for the VVPAT to print a symbol correctly, information pertaining to the list of candidates and their symbols must be loaded on to the VVPAT machine in the correct order. This is where the Symbol Loading Unit, or SLU, comes in. In fact, the introduction of VVPATs necessitated the use of SLUs.

The SLU is used to load the symbols of the candidates onto the VVPAT. It is a matchbox-sized device that is first connected to a laptop or personal computer, from where a symbol loading application is used to load a bitmap file containing the candidates' names, serial numbers, and symbols.

The SLU is then connected to the VVPAT to transfer that file on to the paper audit machine. This is done under the supervision of a district election officer.

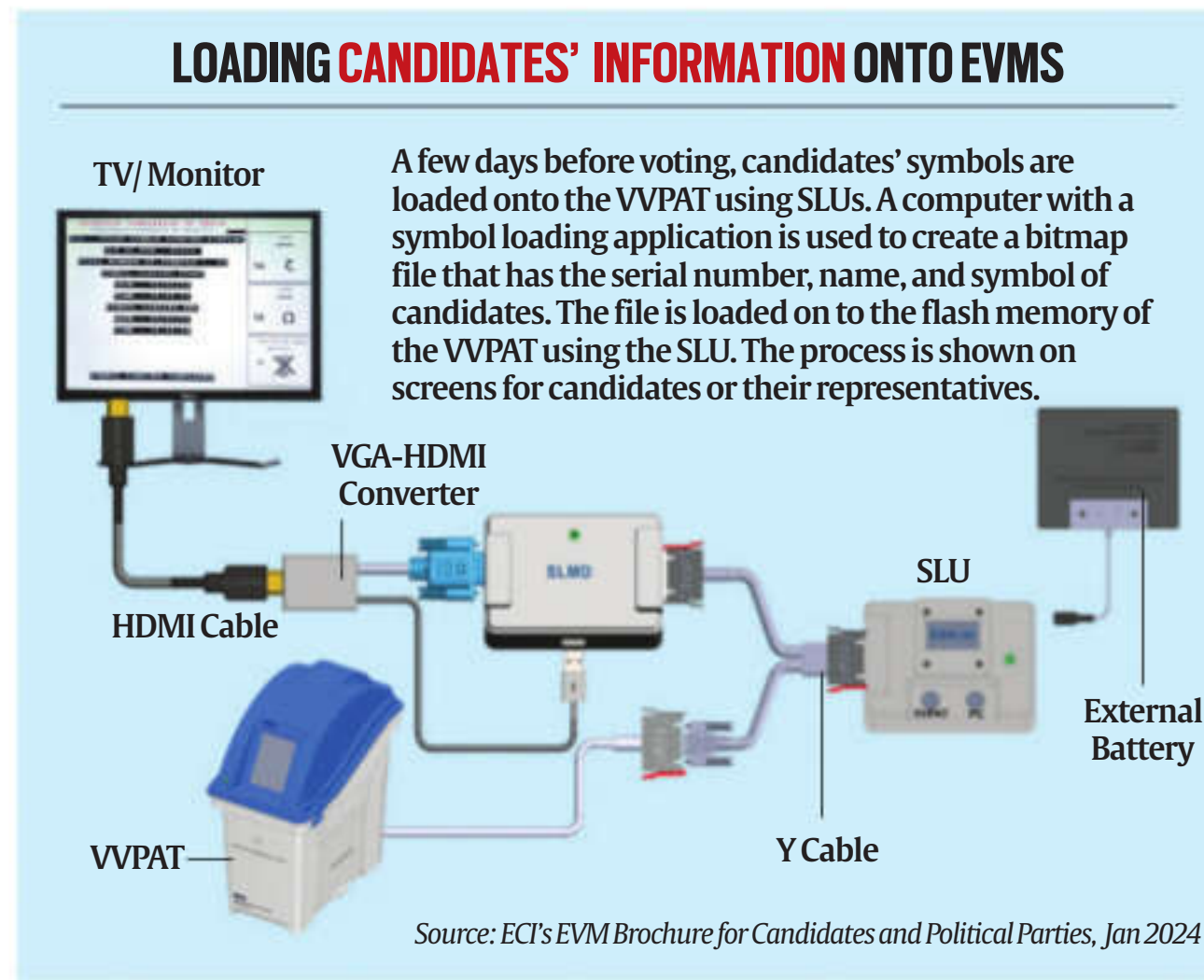
At which point in the election process are SLUs used?

The SLUs come into the picture only a few days before polling in a particular seat, when the EVMs are being commissioned and the list/order of contesting candidates is decided and set on the ballot unit (the machine where you press the button to vote) and the VVPAT (which produces the paper audit trail of your vote).

Candidate-setting can happen at any time from five to two days before voting at a seat. Once the SLU is used to load symbols onto the VVPAT, the EVM is ready for use. After this, the SLU is of no relevance to the actual voting process.

What happens to an SLU after symbols are loaded?

Typically, a small number of SLUs are enough to load symbols onto all VVPATs for a seat. According to EC officials, it takes an SLU two to three minutes to load each VVPAT. Once the symbol-loading is complete, the



SLUs are handed over to the concerned district election officer for safekeeping. They remain in the officer's custody until the day after voting. Afterward, the SLUs are released to the engineers of the two EVM manufacturers, Bharat Electronics Ltd (BEL) or Electronics Corporation of India Ltd (ECL), so they can be used to load symbols onto

VVPATs for other seats in subsequent phases. Thus, in a multi-phase election like the ongoing one for the 18th Lok Sabha, an SLU is typically reused after one phase of polling to load symbols onto VVPATs meant for other seats in subsequent phases.

What has the SC said about the SLUs?

The court has said that the SLUs should be sealed and stored immediately after the symbol-loading process for a seat is complete. It must be stored for a period of 45 days after the declaration of results, so that it can be opened and examined like EVMs in case of an election petition.

This effectively means that an SLU used for loading symbols onto VVPATs for one seat can no longer be reused for other seats. Consequently, the EC will need more SLUs. Sources said the Commission currently has about 5,000 SLUs, and will need an additional 2,000 to implement the SC's direction.

And what has the top court said about microcontrollers?

In an unprecedented move, the court has allowed candidates to seek verification of EVM software. This effectively means that a candidate can ask ECI officials to check the one-time programmable software in the BU (Ballot Unit), CU (Control Unit), and VVPAT for tampering, in case of any doubts regarding the result.

This verification involves inspecting the burnt memory/microcontrollers of these three components. The court has proposed a formula for doing this: engineers from the EVM manufacturers will conduct checks on 5% of the EVMs per Assembly constituency or Assembly segment of a parliamentary constituency. Candidates must submit a written request within seven days of the announcement of results, and will have to bear the ex-

pendence of the process. This right to seek verification, however, is limited to those candidates who come in second or third. Engineers from the manufacturing companies will certify the authenticity and intactness of the memory/microcontroller.

What happens if the microcontrollers, upon verification, are found tampered?

The court has only said that if any tampering is found, the candidate will be refunded the cost of verification. It has not said how the election result will be impacted.

What changes on the ground?

Nothing changes for the voter. However, a lot changes in the way the ECI organises polling. The ECI will now have to store SLUs for 45 days after voting. To reserve one SLU exclusively for one seat, it will need to order more SLUs. It will also have to ensure the verification of EVMs upon request from candidates who finish second or third, which may require additional manpower.

Also, the ECI will have to examine whether the Representation of the People Act of 1951 has to be amended. The election law currently states that an election petition challenging a result can be filed in court by a candidate within 45 days of the declaration of results. During this period, the EC machinery does not touch the EVMs. If these machines now need to be unsealed for verification purposes, the poll panel will have to determine how this can be accomplished.

Full cross-checking, mismatches, return to paper: five arguments SC rejected

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM
 NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

IN REJECTING the petitions seeking 100% cross-verification of votes counted through Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) with the accompanying Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), the Supreme Court on Friday underlined the need to "exercise care and caution" when raising questions about the integrity of the electoral process.

In separate but concurring opinions given on the day of the second phase of polling in the Lok Sabha election, the Supreme Court Bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta reiterated the court's confidence in EVMs and the protocols to ensure they cannot be manipulated.

What concerns did the petitioners raise, and why did the court reject them?

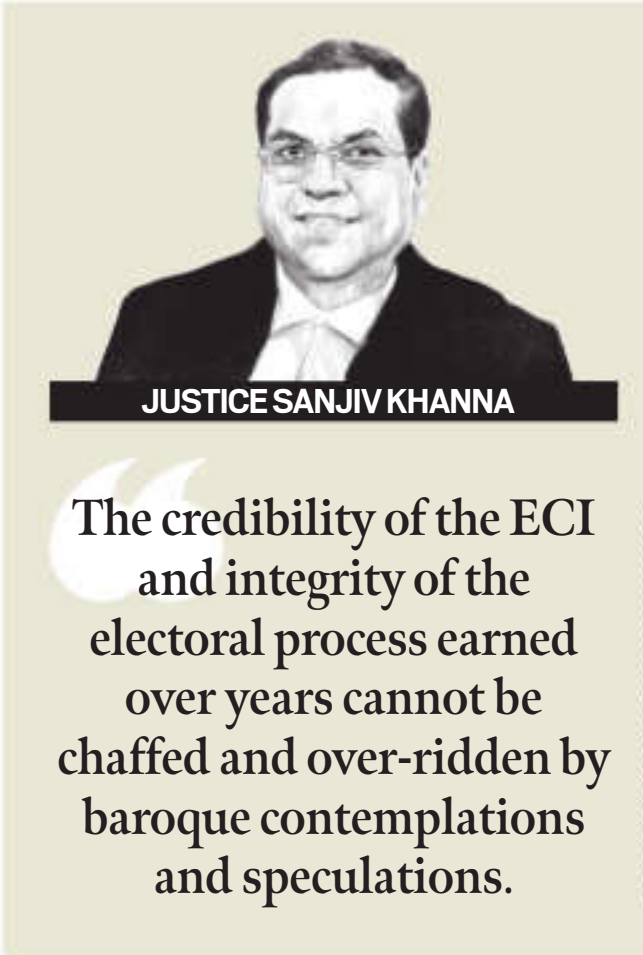
Full cross-verification

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) argued that every voter should be able to verify that their vote has been counted properly after receiving confirmation that it has been cast. Currently, VVPAT slips are counted and matched with the EVM tally only in five randomly selected polling booths per constituency.

Justice Khanna acknowledged the voter's right to know that their vote has been recorded and counted accurately, but said "the same cannot be equated with the right to 100% counting of VVPAT slips, or a right to physical access to the VVPAT slips".

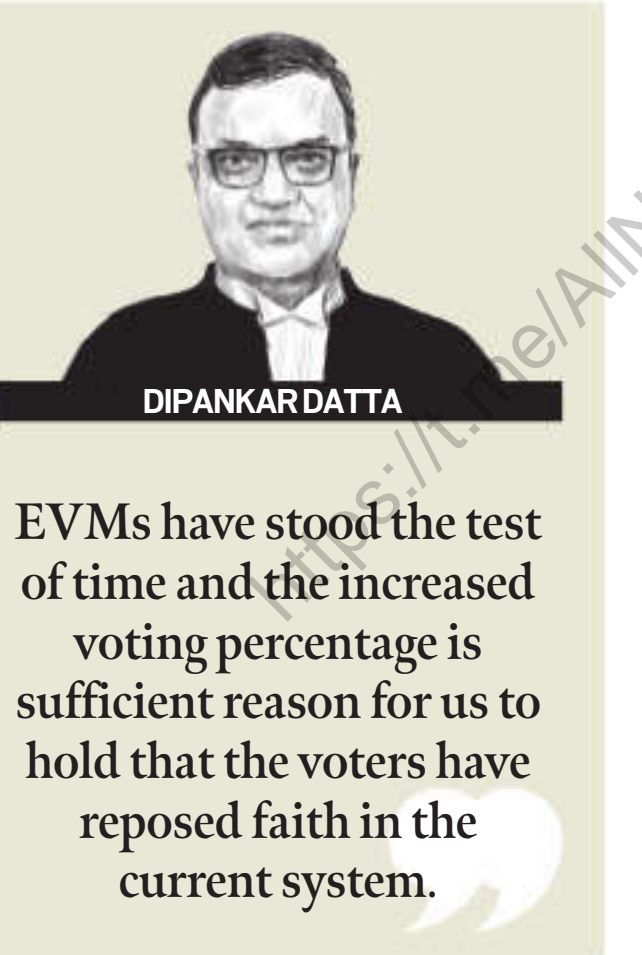
The voter's rights are protected in other ways, including the seven-second display of the VVPAT slip through the glass window, which enables her to know and verify the serial number, the candidate and the symbol for whom she has voted, the court said. After seven seconds, the slip gets cut from the roll and falls into the box/compartment attached to the VVPAT.

Justice Datta held that voters could ap-



JUSTICE SANJIV KHANNA

The credibility of the ECI and integrity of the electoral process earned over years cannot be chaffed and over-ridden by baroque contemplations and speculations.



DIPANKAR DATTA

EVMs have stood the test of time and the increased voting percentage is sufficient reason for us to hold that the voters have reposed faith in the current system.

proach the Presiding Officer in case there is a mismatch as per the Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961, which "suitably satisfies the voter's right...to know that his/her vote has been counted as recorded".

Tampering with EVMs

Relying on a report by the Citizens' Commission on Elections (chaired by the former Supreme Court judge Justice Madan B Lokur), ADR argued there is a possibility of EVMs being tampered with or hacked.

Justice Khanna said this was "unfounded" — the "microcontroller" used in the EVM has a one-time programmable memory that is unalterable once "burned". However, "to only further strengthen the integrity of the election process", he directed that the microcontroller should be checked for tampering upon the request of the second or third highest polling candidate in an Assembly constituency.

Such a request must come within seven

days of the results being declared.

Justice Khanna also directed that the Symbol Loading Units (SLUs) that are used to load candidate names and symbols to the VVPAT unit should be sealed and kept in a strong room with the EVMs for 45 days after the results are declared. Also, they are to be opened, examined, and dealt with in the same manner as EVMs.

EVM-VVPAT discrepancy

ADR submitted that the Election Commission of India had acknowledged instances of variance in the results captured by the EVM and VVPAT. It used the example of a polling station in the Mydukur Assembly seat in Andhra Pradesh during elections in 2019, where the EVM counted 14 more votes than what was recorded by the VVPAT — which the Returning Officer subsequently clarified was because a mock poll conducted earlier had not been cleared.

Justice Khanna provided data on the performance of EVMs and held that aside from that one case in Mydukur, there was not a single case of mismatch or defect in the recording of votes in any EVM that was checked. The same was true in the 26 cases of voter complaints about mismatches, he said.

Giving VVPAT slip to voter

The petitioners said that since the voter can only see the VVPAT slip for seven seconds, there is scope for manipulation of results by maliciously programming the machine to not cut the slip — thus preventing it from being counted. Instead, they said, the slip should be given to the voter who would put it in the ballot box.

Justice Khanna said that the tinted glass above the VVPAT slip is meant to maintain secrecy, and that the voter does have a clear view of the slip for seven seconds. The glass window prevents damage and attempts to deface the VVPAT slip, even as it allows the voter to see essential information about the vote she has cast.

The court also held that giving voters physical access to the slips would lead to misuse, malpractices, and disputes.

Return to paper ballots

During the hearings, ADR suggested (and later withdrew the suggestion) that India should return to a paper ballot system, citing the example of countries like Germany which had moved back to paper. It also suggested putting barcodes on VVPAT slips so that counting machines can be used, and delays in counting can be minimised.

Justice Khanna said turning the clock back to paper ballots would undo the advantages that EVMs offer, such as eliminating booth capturing and invalid votes, providing administrative convenience, and reducing paper usage.

He did not comment on barcodes, holding that they were a technical aspect for the ECI to examine.

A long way from 1984: when SC junked ECI's first EVM experiment

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM
 NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

THE SUPREME Court on Friday put the stamp of its unequivocal approval on electronic voting machines (EVMs). Forty years ago, when a voting machine was first used at the Parur Assembly constituency in Kerala, the court had set aside the election and ordered a re-poll in 50 of the 85 polling stations.

The first experiment

In August 1980, the Electronics Corporation of India Ltd (ECIL) presented political parties with a prototype voting machine.

In 1982, the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced that the machine would be used as a pilot project in 50 out of 84 polling stations in the Parur constituency during that year's Assembly elections in Kerala. The central government had not sanctioned the use of the machines, but the ECI used its constitutional powers under Article 324, which gives it the power of "superintendence, direction, and control" over elections.

In the result declared on May 20, 1982, Sivan Pillai (CPI) beat Ambat Chacko Jose (Cong) by 123 votes. Pillai got 30,450 votes, 19,182 of which were cast using voting machines.

Jose challenged the result in the trial court, which upheld the validity of voting via machines, and the result of the election, Jose appealed to the Supreme Court, where a Bench comprising Justices Murtaga Fazal Ali, Appajee Varadarajan, and Ranganath Misra heard the case.

What top court said

The ECI argued that its powers under Article 324 would supersede any Act of Parliament, and if there was conflict between the law and the ECI's powers, the law would yield to the Commission.

In response, Justice Fazal Ali would write, "This is a very attractive argument but on a

closer scrutiny and deeper deliberation...it is not possible to read into Art. 324 such a wide and uncanalised power". The Bench unanimously held that introducing voting machines was a legislative power that only Parliament and state legislatures could exercise (Articles 326 and 327), not the ECI.

The ECI also relied on Section 59 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and Rule 49 of The Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961. Section 59 says "votes shall be given by ballot in such manner as may be prescribed", and Rule states the ECI can publish a notification to "direct that the method of voting by ballot shall be followed...at such polling stations as may be specified in the notification".

However, the court held that the "manner as may be prescribed" was by using ballot paper, not voting machines. The court also held that the word "ballot" in its "strict sense" would not include voting through voting machines, and noted that the Centre as a rule-making authority "was not prepared to switch over to the system of voting by machines".

The court observed that "if the mechanical process is adopted, full and proper training will have to be given to the voters which will take quite some time".

Aftermath of ruling

A byelection was held on May 22, 1984, which Jose won. But the idea of voting machines would not be abandoned.

In 1988, the election law was amended to insert Section 61A, which allowed the ECI to specify the constituencies where votes would be cast and recorded by voting machines.

A decade later, EVMs were used at 16 Assembly seats in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Delhi. This was expanded to 46 Lok Sabha seats in 1999 and, in 2001, state elections in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry, and West Bengal were entirely conducted using EVMs.

By the 2004 Lok Sabha election, EVMs had completely replaced ballot papers at all 543 seats.

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

How ISRO used satellite remote-sensing to analyse glacial lakes in Himalayas

NIKHIL GHANEKAR
 NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

EARLIER THIS week, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) released satellite-data-based analysis on expansion of glacial lakes in the catchments of Indian Himalayan river basins. This is the latest among a clutch of studies on glacial lakes that have highlighted the risks of glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), and their impact on infrastructure and settlements downstream of such lakes.

What did ISRO's analysis reveal?

ISRO's analysis looked at satellite data archives spanning the past four decades to assess changes in the glaciated environment. Long-term satellite imagery covering the catchments of Indian Himalayan river basins — spread over India, Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan — is available from 1984 onwards, till 2023. ISRO's data has indicated significant expansion in the size of glacial lakes.

Of the 2,431 lakes larger than 10 hectares (identified during 2016-17), 676 glacial lakes had expanded significantly since 1984. Of these 676 lakes, 601 lakes had more than doubled in size, 10 lakes had grown between 1.5 to 2 times, and 65 lakes had grown 1.5 times.

ISRO said that 130 of the 676 lakes are situated in India, in the Indus (65), Ganga (7), and Brahmaputra (58) river basins. These lakes have expanded as glaciers are retreating at an ever faster rate due to global warming.

How are glacial lakes formed?

The movement of glaciers causes erosion and creates depressions in the surrounding topography. When they retreat, meltwater starts to accumulate in such depressions, giving birth to glacial lakes.

ISRO categorised glacial lakes into four broad categories based on how they were formed — moraine-dammed, ice-dammed, erosion-based, and 'others'. Moraine and ice-dammed lakes are formed when water is dammed by moraine — debris such as rocks

and soil left during the movement of glaciers — and ice respectively. Erosion-based lakes are formed when water is dammed by erosion-created depressions.

While glacial lakes are crucial sources of freshwater for rivers, they also pose significant risks, specifically of GLOFs, which can have devastating consequences on communities downstream.

"GLOFs occur when glacial lakes release

large volumes of meltwater due to the failure of natural dams...resulting in sudden and severe flooding downstream. These dam failures can be triggered by various factors, including avalanches of ice or rock," ISRO said.

How is satellite remote-sensing technology used to monitor glacial lakes?

The monitoring of glacial lakes and their expansion in the Himalayan region is challenging

due to the rugged terrain. This is where, according to ISRO, satellite remote-sensing technology "proves to be an excellent tool... monitoring due its wide coverage and revisit capability".

"Satellite-derived long-term change analysis provide valuable insights for understanding glacial lake dynamics, which are essential for assessing environmental impacts and developing strategies for GLOM risk management and climate change adaptation in glacial environments," ISRO said.

Glaciologist Ashim Sattar, Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Bhubaneswar, said: "Most of the glacial lake sites are not accessible by motorable roads. In this scenario, remote sensing tools, which are highly advanced now, can help us monitor the growth of glacial lakes and understand their dynamics".

He also said fieldwork can be carried out at lake sites which have been identified as potentially critical. "Fieldwork is crucial to set up instrumentation for early warning systems. These can include installing motion detection

cameras, water level sensors, discharge meters etc. that can capture anomalous activity in and around glacial lakes," Sattar said.

How can the risks posed by glacial lakes be mitigated?

In 2023, a study published in the Journal of Geophysical Research examined the risks posed by Ghepan Gath lake — located at an elevation of 4,068 m in Himachal Pradesh — to Sissu in Lahaul valley, and modelled the impacts of lowering the water levels in the lake.

It found that lowering of the lake levels by 10 to 30 m significantly reduces the impacts on Sissu town, though not completely eliminating the risks posed by a GLOM event.

One way to siphon off lake water is by using long High Density Polyethylene (HDPE) pipes. In 2016, members of the Sikkim State Disaster Management Authority and Sikkim's Department of Science and Technology and Climate Change, among others, used this method to reduce water levels in Sikkim's South Lhonak Lake.

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Opinion

SATURDAY, APRIL 27, 2024



REELING INTEREST

Union external affairs minister S Jaishankar

“It’s very interesting if you follow reel culture. It has promoted awareness and created interest in a lot of subjects, and in many ways, it is reflective of a sense of pride and aspirations. We typically associate it with the Gen Z...”

Upgrade human capital

This is crucial to India’s objective of becoming an advanced economy by 2047

INDIA SEEKS TO become an advanced economy by 2047 but it is important to address preconditions at the level of human development to realise this aspirational objective. The East Asian miracle economies like South Korea — that made this transition from developing to developed economies — had a high baseline of human development which enabled them to grow rapidly for long periods of time. Before its take-off, South Korea, for instance, saw huge investments in education that improved literacy and schooling. The challenge is indeed daunting as the average Indian worker has less than eight years of education, much less than the 14 years of a typical worker in China.

Only 5% of India’s workforce has received formal skill training as against 80% and 96% in countries like Japan and South Korea. Although India has the advantage of a predominantly youthful labour force, this demographic dividend can turn into a curse if they are not gainfully absorbed in a fast-growing economy. Clearly, the overriding focus must be on improving human capital and enhancing skills as rightly emphasised by former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan in a recent conference at the George Washington University.

The big question is, what must be done to raise the threshold levels of human development? A useful means to integrate the youth into the labour market is through skill development measures like apprenticeships. This meets the requirements of India Inc by utilising existing facilities without entailing additional spending on separate training infrastructure. But despite being cost-effective, this scheme hasn’t taken off although the Apprentices Act was passed in 1961 and the Apprenticeship (Amendment) Rules, 2019, mandated establishments having more than 30 workers to engage apprentices in a band of 2.5 to 15% of their total strength every financial year. Their share is only 0.1% with 600,000 formal apprentices in a workforce of 570 million while it should ideally be raised to 3 to 4% of the workforce. This scheme must therefore be made more effective as urged by Rajan. For starters, it could adopt best practices of countries like Germany which runs the most successful apprenticeship programme that is linked with the higher educational curriculum. In India, it could start even earlier with skilling and vocational training imparted in school education. Interestingly, the Congress manifesto includes a Right to Apprenticeship that promises a post-secondary degree-holder (whether a one-year certificate, two-year diploma or degree holder) a ₹1 lakh annual stipend.

Besides the government, the onus of improving human capital also lies with Indian industry as it is not getting enough skilled labour for its operations despite a growing reserve army of educated unemployed youth. Industry must collaborate with educational institutions so that its requirements form an integral part of the curriculum. What can perhaps nudge industry into taking apprenticeships more seriously is if training and skilling of youth constitute part of corporate social responsibility obligations. This kind of a programme could lower the dropout rate seen in other skilling programmes and improve the employability of the workforce. Unless the baseline of human development improves, this factor seriously threatens the prospects of India reaping the benefits of the demographic dividend and poses a constraint on its ambitions to rapidly grow into a developed nation through a \$1.5-trillion infrastructure-led growth push in roads, railways, seaports, airports, transport, gas and inland waterways and becoming a global manufacturing and exporting hub.

Focus on the right inflation data

MARKETS ARE SUPPOSED to be forward-looking, so it’s a bit of a mystery that bonds sold off as dramatically as they did on evidence that bad first-quarter inflation was worse than previously understood. It’s tempting to brush it off as an over-reaction to old news, but we still don’t know just how outdated it is.

As part of its broader report on gross domestic product, the Bureau of Economic Analysis said Thursday that a gauge of core personal consumption expenditures prices rose at a 3.7% annualised clip, the first quarterly acceleration in a year. That, in turn, sent yields on 10-year Treasury notes as high as 4.74%, the highest since November 2, driven by the narrative that inflation is getting stuck at a level still well above the Federal Reserve’s 2% target.

The number, of course, added insult to injury. The closely watched monthly measures of personal consumption expenditures inflation had already indicated a hot January and February, and most signs suggest that March remained on the warm side (with the report due out Friday; economists forecast it rose 0.3% month-on-month.) But using deductive reasoning, the quarterly price index suggests that either March will come in higher than expected or January and February are due for upward revisions. The answer will matter tremendously for the direction of markets.

Here’s how Inflation Insights LLC President Omair Sharif described the two potential scenarios (emphasis mine):

First [scenario], prior months were unrevised but the March core is likely to be much stronger than the 0.3% reading expected tomorrow. This seems highly unlikely. Second, there were upward revisions to prior months due to new seasonal factors. I think the latter explanation is the main reason today’s quarterly annualised reading beat expectations. *In my view, the upside surprise most likely reflects stronger core services inflation throughout the quarter as opposed to a much stronger-than-expected March core print with no revisions to prior months.*

Here’s hoping Sharif is right, because momentum is everything. Markets should be relatively willing to look past ugly January and February prints, because they reflected a perfect storm of unfavourable dynamics that could now be fading. There were idiosyncrasies affecting housing and financial services; conflict in the Red Sea hit shipping costs; and — perhaps most controversially — there may have been an “excess seasonality” effect, whereby companies frontloaded many of their price hikes in a way that isn’t necessarily indicative of future pricing plans. On the other hand, a hotter-than-expected March could indicate a more durable trend, pouring cold water on these efforts to explain away the January and February numbers.

In essence, it could mean that the past is prologue; that a remarkably strong stock market may have goosed financial conditions; and that elevated bond yields may be poised to stay on the high side for the time being. It might also mean that Fed policy rates remain on hold at 5.25%-5.5% for the rest of the year, instead of the two-three cuts that markets were expecting earlier this year.

I still think there are a lot of reasons to remain optimistic. Friday’s core PCE report is perhaps the most important of the inflation indicators, because it’s the one that the Fed primarily uses to conduct monetary policy. It’s also the last of the inflation reports published during the course of the month, and economists can generally predict it with a high degree of accuracy once they’ve seen the related consumer price index and producer price index.

And since the last CPI data was published, we’ve gotten a lot of good news from high-frequency indicators: used car prices at auction have continued to drift down; the new tenant rent index (which is predictive of future shelter inflation) continued to drop; and container freight rates that surged amid conflict in the Red Sea have begun to normalise. In other words, bad news isn’t so bad if it also proves to be old news. But we’ll have to wait until Friday to find out just how old it is.

PERSONAL VS BUSINESS

VISIONARY FAMILY BUSINESSES SET CLEAR TERMS WHEN ECONOMIC FACTORS OUTWEIGH EMOTION

Are empires crumbling?

THE 127-YEAR-OLD story of the ₹1.76-trillion Godrej business conglomerate as a unified family business that lasted five generations has ended. The group was vertically split across two family branches headed by Adi and Nadir Godrej on one side and cousins Jamsheed and Smita Crishna-Godrej on the other. Not long ago, in 2020, the highly-diversified TVS group, with a ₹70,000 crore revenue, also split branch-wise, ending its 113-year-old legacy built across five generations. In 2016, the Munjal family that built up the ₹35,000-crore Hero two-wheeler company announced a split across family branches, thus ending its 40-year-old history across three generations. These three well-known Indian family businesses practised sound governance and maintained cordial relationships among family members while managing their businesses professionally. They innovated and built multiple businesses competitively. Then why did they all split, making each branch much weaker in several ways? Is this a signal that business empires are no longer stable and are prone to break up? More fundamentally, can’t Indian family businesses be built as lasting institutions or is a split inevitable?

There are several common features across the three cases discussed above. We can draw important lessons from a closer look at some of them.

Strong entrepreneurial leadership

The survival and growth of any venture is a certificate of the entrepreneurial acumen of the founders and their ability to take their start-up through the early growth stage. Many of them build their organisations further and manage the

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later growth stages through professionalisation. That involves not only the introduction of organisational structure, systems and processes, but also building a team to implement the strategies. All along, the founder entrepreneur is committed to the success of the organisation, whether it has one or more businesses. They consider them all equally as their children and give attention and care as they require. As a result, there is a unified and synergistic decision-making at the top across the businesses that may be related or unrelated from a product-market angle. Resource allocation is also balanced with passion shared across businesses.

Operational leadership always with family

Most successful Asian family businesses allow the younger generation to step into the operational leadership of their preceding generation. Alternatively, children are encouraged to pursue their entrepreneurial ideas, often in unrelated areas, partly to make them independent, and partly to avoid possible fights among them. In any case, the next-generation leaders build their own constituency that they fiercely protect. Over a period of time,

their loyalty, commitment, and involvement get restricted to their own fiefdoms. With the younger generation concerned mostly with their “own” businesses, there is none like the founder to think synergistically about the group and its corporate strategy. The challenge gets harder when each family member’s performance is measured against the goals specific to the individual business he or she manages. In many families, next-generation champions do not have goals and targets fixed at the group level. While the founder was a great integrator of the various businesses of the group, later generations do not have a group-level champion to think comprehensively. Slowly, the vacuum thus created grows bigger and individuals fiercely try to protect their operational territories (strategic business units). This is akin to states flexing muscles at the cost of the federal governance entity.

Absence of group-level strategy and governance

The split gains momentum when the third generation ascends and cousin bonding wanes compared to that of siblings. The casualty is the absence of a strong group-level strategy that was the

In some cases, families expect the next generation to drive entrepreneurship by spotting opportunities and initiating ventures

hallmark of the founder leader’s entrepreneurial leadership. The implicit presence of a group and shared family governance principles gradually evaporate, leading to simmering differences among family units that may end up in a gridlock and split. In fact, the need for explicit policies and processes of governance is much greater at this stage to keep the growing flock together and united.

Avoiding the gridlock trap

Visionary family businesses set clear expectations from family members, especially from the second or third generation onwards, when economic factors outweigh emotional bonding. In general, families define themselves as the custodians of the wealth of the entire unit and limit their role to strategy and governance. In some cases, families expect the next generation to drive entrepreneurship by spotting opportunities and initiating ventures with clear policies for funding. Those who join operations never become the CEOs of any one vertical. In any case, family members do not steer operational responsibilities and ensure practice of merit and professionalism. It never becomes an employment exchange or a platform to meet the ego needs of family members. In the process, the individuals do not become myopic. They recognise that their surnames alone do not make them the most competent to manage the business competitively.

Family members always remain custodians of their inherited wealth. Across the world, leaders with stewardship values have built and preserved institutions, business or otherwise. Such families know that several silos do not add up to a great lasting structure.

A bottom-of-the-pyramid climate fortune



JAGJEET SAREEN

The author is principal at Dalberg Advisors and co-leads the firm’s global climate practice

With 2024 expected to be hotter than last year’s record levels, entrepreneurship could be key in addressing the vulnerability of low-income groups

LAST MONTH, THE World Meteorological Organization (WMO) confirmed that 2023 was the hottest year on record. Four other organisations that conducted similar analyses independently arrived at the same conclusion. What is cause for deep concern is the margin by which the average global temperature soared, almost breaching the 1.5°C mark, and news reports suggesting that 2024 could be even warmer.

As the unequal effects of climate change become increasingly clear, it is worth reassessing how we talk about climate change — and who we centre in those conversations. Now more than ever before, we need to reorient our focus to include perspectives of those living under \$2 per day.

It is also key, given the urgent nature of the crisis, that the proposed solutions go beyond incremental measures. We need big, bold ideas on multiple fronts. And while this may seem a daunting task, it does not necessitate reinventing the wheel. There are plenty of bold ideas that we can draw inspiration from, including Indian-American academic and business leader CK Prahalad’s *The Fortune at the Bottom of The Pyramid*. In the 2000s, Prahalad brought a paradigm shift by making a business case for eradicating poverty. If companies focussed on developing products for low-income groups, he professed, they could break into new market segments and raise revenues while also improving the standard of living for millions of people.

It is now widely accepted that the populations at the bottom of the economic pyramid are also often the most

vulnerable to the effects of climate crises. World Bank data, for instance, show that the 74 poorest countries contribute to only one-tenth of global emissions even as they experienced an eight-fold increase in natural disasters over the last decade. Despite this, populations living below the poverty line tend to be under-served and under-represented when it comes to climate solutions. Ask yourself how many slum dwellers, who bear the greatest brunt of our cities’ rising air pollution levels, find it feasible to install air purifiers in their homes. Or how many fishing communities, whose livelihoods are directly impacted by coastal flooding,

have access to weather forecasting technology? If we were to go by Prahalad’s theory, supporting green entrepreneurship and cultivating markets among low-income groups could help us strike a climate fortune at the bottom of the pyramid (BOP).

Such strategies would have to put communities at the centre by sourcing ideas from grassroots actors and assisting them in developing tailored products and services. Climate investors could do this by supporting training in areas such as entrepreneurship, agriculture, or healthcare to help develop livelihood skills. They could also provide resources, mentorship, and market access to boost the entrepreneurial energies of the community members. This includes introducing technologies that align with the communities’ needs and capabilities and providing avenues to

elevate their voices in decision-making and advocacy.

Embedding a BOP approach into climate solutions will help shine a light on novel voices that hold tremendous value. A 2022 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recognises the value of indigenous knowledge in building climate resilience. Smallholder farmers and fishers have, for centuries, developed their systems of production around natural weather patterns and cycles. However, this traditional wisdom tends to be cordoned off from large corporations, civil society organisations, and local governments — those with resources to actually

convert ideas into actions. Strengthening top-down resource flows will allow communities to bring distinctive viewpoints, skills, and lived experiences to the table, and help develop climate solutions that are inclusive and relevant for those at the grassroots.

Cultivating markets within the BOP segment will not only encourage self-designed innovations, but foster ownership of those ideas and solutions, paving the way to surmount behavioural and political obstacles to decarbonisation. For instance, people living in informal settlements or low-resource settings overwhelmingly rely on solid fuels such as wood or charcoal, which are key causes of indoor air pollution. Experience has shown that a switch to cleaner cooking technologies is not just a matter of income and resources, but also mindset shifts

Experience has shown that a switch to cleaner cooking technologies is not just a matter of income and resources, but also mindset shifts

Entrepreneurs championing such clean products within communities can aid this transition more effectively.

Perhaps most importantly, BOP entrepreneurship will give rise to countless grassroots entrepreneurs, including women, participating as distributors and business owners, as well as micro enterprises at the village level. For instance, following 2009’s Cyclone Aila, women in the Sundarbans started running mangrove nurseries. The loss of 778 km of embankments prompted locals in the Bangladeshi village of Padmapukur to begin collecting the fruits of the keora, a mangrove variety that was washed upriver, and began replanting them. From the extra fruit collected, they made jams and pickles, to be sold for additional income. In an adjoining district, a local initiative helped women undertake mangrove-based shrimp farming. The restoration efforts helped locals rebuild their lives and incomes, as well as strengthen climate resilience in the region.

Such self-starting initiatives allow BOP communities to engage as collaborators rather than beneficiaries. In the longer run, it can help shift policy discourse on social safety nets, which so often tends to prioritise compensation and subsidies over innovation and entrepreneurship. Positioning BOP communities as value creators and solution providers is a powerful way to reimagine developmental finance flows by decentralising the decarbonisation process and restoring faith in the century-old wisdom and resilience of local communities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Spotlight on economy track record

As Indians vote in the Lok Sabha elections, the spotlight is on the country’s economic track record. The ruling party and opposition have passionately raised issues such as economic development, inflation, and unemployment, while vying for votes. With the current GDP estimated at approximately \$3.75 trillion, the government has aimed to achieve a

target of \$5 trillion by 2028. However, a closer examination reveals that the average growth rate from 2015 to 2024 was 6%, with the level dragged down by the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Inflation remains a concern, as food prices persistently rise despite overall inflation at 4.85%. Unemployment, particularly affecting the youth, is another pressing issue. While the unemployment rate decreased from 3.6% in 2022 to 3.1% last year, the rise of self-employment

raises concerns about the quality of jobs. Let us hope that a strong economy paves the way for a stronger democracy.

—Jayanthi Subramaniam, Mumbai

Clampdown on Kotak Mahindra

Apropos of “A stitch in time ...”, the RBI’s clampdown on Kotak Mahindra Bank is the outcome of technology concerns raised by the regulator in

the last two years. For Kotak Mahindra, this is a big blow. We are living in a dynamic world where cybersecurity risks are increasing day by day, and Kotak Mahindra cannot afford to be lax on customer safety. To gain a bigger customer base, banks offer online onboarding and transactions but seem to have forgotten that customer safety should be paramount.

—Bal Govind, Noida

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The question is not of right and left; the issue really is democracy versus totalitarianism

Atal Bihari Vajpayee

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Rammath Goenka

US STAGFLATION FEAR MARS POSITIVE MARKET OUTLOOK FOR INDIA

AN unexpected slowdown in US GDP growth delivered a mini shocker for the markets this week. The world's largest economy's first-quarter growth fell behind estimates, rising at an annualised rate of 1.6 percent—lower than the consensus estimate of 2.5 percent and sharply behind the 3.4 percent increase seen in the previous quarter. Textbook theory dictates that such a sharp slowdown in economic activity warrants immediate interest rate cuts, but analysts are not expecting any monetary easing, anticipating a hotter-than-expected inflation number. It is this slow-growth-high-inflation combination—which economists call stagflation—that's a central banker's nightmare, worse than even a recession. But some believe that concerns about stagflation are premature as both the high inflation and slow growth appear to be an anomaly rather than a trend. In other words, even if interim data indicates otherwise, the overall trend is expected to remain positive.

This anticipation has been keeping markets cheerful despite the blips in data. A high inflation scenario is an indication of higher-for-longer rates narrative, but notwithstanding sticky prices, markets are pricing in rate cuts. If at the start of 2024 they expected at least three rate cuts, with the first in June, that prospect is now deferred; the number of expected cuts are down to at least one. Besides delaying monetary easing, high inflation is also causing a spike in US bond yields. On Thursday, the 10-year benchmark yield touched more than a five-month high at 4.72 percent after data showed a particular measure of inflation rose more than expected in the first quarter. Global crude oil prices, one of the key factors that could keep prices elevated, is also on the rise with some predicting it to touch \$100 per barrel amid escalating tensions in the Middle East.

India continues to be the fastest growing emerging economy—economic activity is showing signs of broad-based growth, with the pace of private consumption and investments getting better. While rising bond yields could prompt foreign investors to reallocate their funds from riskier assets, potentially triggering capital outflows from domestic markets, equities are expected to adjust slightly lower but will remain supported by strong economic conditions and company earnings. The fallout of potential capital outflows can be mitigated if domestic growth drivers remain robust and inflation is under control.

WRONG MESSAGE IN L-G'S KERALA CHURCH PARLEYS

DELHI Lieutenant-Governor V K Saxena's sudden visit to Kerala, just ahead of polling in the state, was odd enough to raise suspicions. He sought meetings with the heads of various churches and met a couple of them, triggering speculation that the visit was linked to the elections. Considering how the BJP has been aggressively wooing Christians in a desperate bid to achieve an electoral breakthrough in the state, the suspicion was but natural. The Congress took objection, choosing to call the meetings "intimidation tactics" ahead of the polls. The party then approached the Election Commission, accusing Saxena of violating the model code and seeking action against him for trying to "garner votes for the BJP".

Saxena's office sought to dismiss the speculation with the explanation that it was a personal visit—to participate in a hospital function on an invitation—and that he has been frequently visiting Kerala. It's hardly convincing, mainly for two reasons. One, the timing—he arrived Wednesday just when the Lok Sabha campaign in Kerala was winding up and the last-minute luring of voters was on. Two, he wanted to meet only the heads of Christian churches and, more significantly, all of them. Whatever the nature of his visit, there is no denying that the L-G is an appointee of the Union government and his actions can be linked, loosely or otherwise, to the intentions of the party in power at the Centre.

However, what is admirable is that though Saxena was able to meet some church heads, most refused to give him an audience. The office of the Archbishop of Latin Archdiocese of Thiruvananthapuram, Thomas J Netto, clearly said such a meeting on election eve would send confusing signals. Cardinal Baselios Cleemis, Major Archbishop of Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, also sent out a similar message. The Syro-Malabar Church, whose head Major Archbishop Raphael Thattil and former head Major Archbishop Emeritus George Alencherry met Saxena, clarified that the visit was not political and that the church does not follow the wishes of any political party. It is undeniable that elections should be devoid of interventions that hamper the exercise of the voters' free will. Developments such as this send out the wrong message. The meetings should have been avoided in the interest of preserving the credibility of the ongoing electoral process.

QUICK TAKE

CORRAL RESOURCES FOR FISHERFOLK

THE revelation that half the corals in the Gulf of Mannar biosphere have bleached from heat stress is a major warning. When the water is too warm, corals expel algae and turn white. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association says about a third of bleached corals around the world eventually died over the last decade. This affects marine ecology and the littoral fishers who depend on it. Fisherfolk around the country are facing distress as warmer waters and increasing pollution are eating into their catch. It's time for the government to set up a national mission to help fishers in collaboration with the coastal states.

IN the last four years of my rather long career in the civil services, I had the good fortune, as Cabinet Secretary, to live in a Lutyens bungalow on Prithviraj Road in Delhi.

Occupying the very next bungalow was the redoubtable L K Advani, who played a significant role in the revival of the BJP as a party. I met him invariably on festive occasions, presented him with a bouquet, sat down and conversed over tea. I was always conscious that I was in the presence of a great personality, a man who was a part of Indian history.

In 2011, my tenure ended and I went to Advani's house to bid farewell. As usual, he was the epitome of courtesy. As I left him, he gave me his book, *My Country, My Life*, and said to me, "Main bus itna kehna chahta hoon, aap jahaan bhi raho, swasth raho aur khush raho (I only wish to say, wherever you are, be happy, be healthy)."

Advani's role in the BJP was that of the great organiser. When the party was virtually wiped out by the Rajiv Gandhi electoral tsunami in 1984, it was left to him to rebuild it brick by brick. He was the man who gave it a new aggressive outlook with his Rath Yatra from Somnath to Ayodhya, which gave the party mass appeal that transcended religion.

Advani believes in "genuine secularism", but he does not accept that Indian people can be separated from religion, which plays such a massive part in their lives. The masses who joined his yatra until it was stopped in Bihar taught him the lesson that, no matter how our Constitution is interpreted, religion resides deep in their psyche. He writes in his book, "Recalling what Swami Vivekananda had said about the place of religion in India's national life, I realised that if this religiosity were to be channelled in a positive direction, it could unleash tremendous energy for national reconstruction."

In an appendix to his book, he quotes Vivekananda again. The great Vedantin said in 1898, "We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Veda nor the Bible nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. Mankind ought to be told that religions are the varied expressions of The Religion, which is Oneness, so that each may choose the path that suits him best." In reply to a question asked at a conclave, Advani said he had discussed

L K Advani's hard work made the BJP's rise possible. He recognised religion's place deep in the Indian psyche, but embraced inter-faith harmony in service of the nation

MY NEIGHBOUR WHO ENVISIONED ANOTHER INDIA

K M CHANDRASEKHAR

Former Cabinet Secretary and author of *As Good as My Word: A Memoir*



SOURAV ROY

the Hindu domination question with M S Golwalkar in the distant past. Golwalkar had told him the country would have to accommodate diversity and could never be a theocracy.

This, in short, encapsulates Advani's view of secularism. All religions must be harmoniously brought together for the nation's greater good. It is not distancing government from the reality of religion, for religion plays a significant role in the minds and hearts of humankind. Nor is religion to be used as an instrument of political oppression or to return to the colonial paradigm of 'divide and rule'. Divisions may make it easier to rule or to

gain temporary electoral benefit. But it will cause incalculable harm to the nation, make it more fragile, and lead in time to a dictatorship.

The Ram temple at Ayodhya came upfront in BJP's manifestos only after Advani's hugely successful Rath Yatra. In his book, he wrote, "We in the BJP had all along declared that our goal was to construct the Ram temple at Ram *janmabhoomi* after respectfully relocating the mosque structure, and that we would like to achieve this either by a due process of law or through an amicable settlement between the Hindu and Muslim communities. However, as it turned

WHY AUTHORITARIANISM FAILS TO WORRY THE INDIAN VOTER

IT is generally agreed that the BJP will win the election and the INDIA bloc will be rendered irrelevant. The debate is limited to the margin of the BJP's victory, with supporters claiming a two-thirds majority and detractors conceding a simple majority. Reasonably, the BJP may be expected to lower its tally. But the rise of the party has not been based on reason, so this is just another wild surmise among many enlivening a boring election with a foregone conclusion. Among these is the idea of the opposition fading away. The future of India's unique democracy remains undecided, despite the prowess of the "juggernaut", the term beloved of Modi's hagiographers.

INDIA gets bad press because its seams remain visible. It cannot completely close ranks, as the Opposition did during Jayaprakash Narayan's movement and in the V P Singh era. But is grand unification a reasonable expectation today? The opposition parties are regional and strongly focused on local issues, like the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the TMC in West Bengal. Can parties representing populations that see themselves as culturally or historically unique, and that pointedly stand apart from the north Indian mainstream, be expected to integrate seamlessly? Their strength is that they are agents of diversity united by opposition to BJP, perfect foils to Modi's suffocating promotion of one India, one people, one culture and one election.

The notion of opposition unity is dated. It's from the eighties and nineties, when newspapers used to feature an index of opposition unity. Today, one looks forward to an index of political unity in diversity, as the Modi era taught us yet again that overwhelming superiority of one party or politician is problematic. Monopolies of power inspire suspicion more than ever before.

Besides, criticism of INDIA is not really about the idea of the bloc, but mostly about tactical shortcomings like confusion about seat sharing and lack of an obvious general, a natural and articulate leader focused on winning. Neither Rahul Gandhi nor Mallikarjun Kharge fit the bill. They speak of saving democracy, an abstract goal, without quite being able to explain the implications for the ordinary voter.

Back in 2008, the CPI(M) had withdrawn support to the Manmohan Singh government and then spent the 2009 campaign explaining to bemused rural voters the intricacies of the India-US nuclear deal, over

which the party had parted with the UPA. The present predicament of the Congress is similar. It is preaching to voters who seem to be indifferent to the looming threat of authoritarianism. Perhaps this is because the lower socio-economic strata have



At these polls, opposition leaders are speaking of saving democracy without being able to explain the implications to ordinary folks. Voters seem indifferent to the threat of authoritarianism, perhaps because large sections have always lived under arbitrary authorities with absolute power

always lived under arbitrary authorities with absolute power. It's a novelty only to prosperous people and the upper castes.

But the INDIA bloc also keeps alive issues of mass unease, like the advantages the BJP is giving to large corporations, which are in turn its electoral funders. It is channelling old suspicions about big money. The accumulation of capital is perceived to be sinful in most Indian communities. Businessmen like Ghanshyam Das Birla and Jammalal Bajaj extended crucial support to the freedom movement helmed by Gandhi, but the Nehruvian socialism that followed, the rise of left labour movements and the punitive taxation of the rich by Indira Gandhi made owners of big businesses inimical to politics. The sentiment

PRATIK KANJILAL

For years, the author has been speaking easy to a surprisingly tolerant public

SPEAKEASY

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Equal rights

Ref: *The fraying frame of Muslim political representation* (Apr 26). No law is required to extend preferential treatment to minorities in a democratic country. As the author rightly said, democracy follows the principles of equal individual rights and equal group rights. When one group suppresses another, democracy should support the suppressed by taking necessary action following the principles of equity. **Jayachandran C, Chennai**

Not polarising

'*Sabka saath, sabka vikas*' does not in any way promote polarisation. The prime minister's welfare schemes are for everyone. It was already in practice, but not as effective as it is now. **Ravi Nair, Palakkad**

Consequential promises

Ref: *Heated quota fights will cleave, not heal* (Apr 26). All political parties are making unnecessary proclamations favoring sectoral groups to get votes. But they are unaware of the consequences of implementing these promises. The reservation clause in the Constitution itself was a short-term arrangement considering the social condition prevalent at that time. **Saraneya V, Thrikkunnapuzha**

Card discredit

Ref: *17K credit cards issued to wrong customers: ICICI* (Apr 26). It is really shocking that a premiere private sector bank like the ICICI has issued 17,000 credit cards to undeserving customers, throwing caution to the wind. There seem to be some dishonest intentions for such gross blunders. The culprits must be punished as per law after due investigations. **Katuru Durga Prasad Rao, Hyderabad**

Spice spoilers

Ref: *Masala recall again exposes falling quality control* (Apr 24). India is the world's largest producer of spices. We want this name to be maintained in a healthy way. It is sad that spice producers can do this to their own country and cause damage to the fame of Indian spices around the world. **K Jaya Lakshmi, Tenkasi**

Domestic affairs

The Ministry of External Affairs rightly said we are judged by what we do at home, not what we say abroad. In every democracy, there is a provision for protest, but it depends on the rule of law. It should and will be handled by the governments in place. Commenting on others' internal matters will not only become irrelevant but also obnoxious at times. Let countries sort out their own issues. **SP Murali, Davanagere**

Welcome to the Great Indian Indoors

More care, money being invested in our homes

A new breed of upper middle-class buyers has emerged that is scaling up demand for premium housing across the country. India's housing market remained subdued in a decade till Covid struck, which brought home the need for better living conditions to white-collar workers who had moved ahead in the affordability race. The pandemic underscored the need for larger spaces where family members could get on with their daily routines without getting in each other's way. This trend has endured post-pandemic and houses have become larger in gated communities, with an expanding list of add-on features for work and living.

This changes the country's property market because the feature sets most in demand are unavailable in city centres, and move to the suburbs is adding to the boom in commuter car-buying. The complementary demand for upscale houses and cars soaks up a big chunk of premiumisation of consumption in the country that is driving a retail credit boom and feeding India's economic recovery amidst a turbulent external environment. The trend is catching on in smaller cities that are witnessing a surge in growth as economic activity radiates outwards from India's infrastructure-challenged metropolises. Permanent changes are underway across the country about what middle-class Indians expect from interiors of their homes and their neighbourhoods.

Greater value addition to India's housing stock has favourable multiplier effects. The median age of the population is approaching the point when demand for new housing peaks and the property market seems set for a sustained boom. Rising real income levels in the top consuming classes and an acceleration in urbanisation on improved connectivity are additional drivers. Property developers, too, are seeking better margins through premium features in areas with lower land prices. Premiumisation is actually bringing India's housing market closer to equilibrium by opening up cheap land parcels to urbanisation. The same holds for items and services — such as tech devices, appliances and furnishings — in this new boom in India's burgeoning indoors.

Iran Needs to Mind Its Own Business

Iran's misogynistic political leadership is again doubling down on the personal freedom of its people. Harrowing images of the country's notorious Gasht-e-irshad — morality police — being let loose to detain women flouting Iran's hijab rules underline a society forced to remain closed. Clothing is a potent tool for showcasing oneself. Whether one wishes to wear a hijab, a suit or a sari is, within the realms of agreed-upon decency, the individual's business. Unfortunately, states or groups also use it as an instrument of political/cultural subjugation.

Tehran's campaign, Noor ('light' in Persian), started earlier this month, is regressive, and comes on the heels of the hijab and chastity bill passed in 2023, which dictates that all women must cover their heads in public. Women dressed 'inappropriately' could face up to 10 years in jail. The push for making the hijab mandatory dates back to the 1979 Islamic revolution. Retracting this mandate could signal acknowledging the revolution's unpopularity. The heightened repression can be construed as a growing nervousness among the Iranian leadership in the face of growing disaffection and anger.

One judges countries by the way they treat women. In 2022, India saw protests on the hijab issue — the demand being the opposite. In Karnataka, the state wanted students to do away with hijab, while the latter wanted to keep wearing them. Again, choice is at the core of the issue. There have also been 'non-hijab' instances of khap panchayats issuing diktats on what women should and shouldn't wear, and how they should conduct themselves. It's essential that societies ensure that women — and men — not the state or mobs, have the sole autonomy to decide how they legally conduct themselves.

JUST IN JEST

Delivery services for first-mover advantage of different kinds

Quick Thinking Is Appy Thinking

These days, there's an innovation popping up faster than you can say 'Pehle app'. Take app-based delivery services. After we all fell in love with their convenience, they raised the stakes with 'quick commerce'. Suddenly, items are arriving at our doorstep before we've even had a chance to re-check what we ordered. And it's not just food. Delivery services also double as quick couriers, zipping across the city to deliver all kinds of stuff. Clients of app-based services are taking a leaf out of the app book. In Bengaluru, a job-seeker, instead of sending off his CV and cover letter by email — which would have been faster — sent them by Blinkit. Word spread on X like super delivery agents, and it looks like this candidate has bypassed not just email piles but other candidates for thinking outside the box.

With the ever-evolving landscape of app-based services, there's no telling what ingenious strategies or revenue streams will emerge next from this résumé-delivery case study. Will they tie up with, say, résumé services and job portals to create a seamless experience for job seekers? Or tie up with brick-and-mortar retail shops to deliver a bunch of, say, saris that are not available online? As long as there is desire, we can expect new objects of *désir* to be delivered — not in, say, six days, but in a few minutes or hours the same day.

Oh, let's do embrace inheritance tax — if we want to labour on with no love lost for pvt property

The Other Mannomohonomics



Srijana Mitra Das

Once upon a time, Rahul Gandhi resembled a Prince Hamlet-like figure, perennially brooding over whether to be or not to be (Congress president), shadowed by nanis and par-nanas, and burdened with present-day uncles who'd pop up routinely to express themselves and push his chances at power even farther away. But with the latest debate over Congress musings on wealth redistribution and an inheritance tax, that depressing air has changed — to the madness of a Mannomoh Desai movie.

Redistribution was the central theme in Desai's blockbusters. Recall Amar Akbar Anthony, where three brothers, hailing from stolid petit bourgeois stock, were separated by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. One turns into a swaggering tough. Another becomes a qawali-yodelling tailor, while the third rises in the world as an educated, if boring, police officer. In his Dali-esque manner, Desai turned religious identity on its head. But he also upturned the notion of economic equanimity — which is precisely what wealth redistribution and an inheritance tax seek to do.

Indeed, it is regrettable that these suggested idyllic measures have come under such ire and fire, for there is so much to celebrate in them. Consider the phrase, 'May you be the mother of a hundred sons.' While biologically, this may seem impossible to some of us, an inheritance tax would make it happen, given how, overnight, heirs to our properties,



Which came first? Wealth or redistribution of wealth?

once a modest one or two persons, will multiply to a million. We will be working to fill the pockets of India's vast masses — imagine the motivation that'll bring to our efforts.

The rock of Sisyphus may not seem the best metaphor for a work-life balance. But under an inheritance tax, it is logical that the more we'll strive to produce value for our millions, the more confounded we'll be as the latter turn into billions. Only pessimists would criticise this situation. Optimists, like the many who dot Congress' starry-eyed galaxy, will point to the enhanced inspiration this will varnish our labours with.

There are other benefits, too. Working under an inheritance tax means you'll be working for many more years — to create any meaningful value, uplifting not just those inside your 3 BHK, but also inhabiting Bharat, that is, India, you will have to work well beyond, say, 60 years. So, happily, an inheritance tax will redesign your work-life tenure. Those post-retirement cruises can wait. The nation needs you to keep logging.

However, don't feel low. You might not be able to get to Hawaii, but wealth redistribution usually comes with an invigorating geographic partner.

That's called a Cultural Revolution, which last applied in 1960s China when Mao decided people like doctors, engineers and academics were wastrels who could do with a taste of the bracing rural.

Hence, millions were deported from urban life to rural re-education camps, where they were to toil and share their skills with their pastoral cousins. Of course, this was followed by extraordinary measures to control China's burgeoning population, an essential step for any wealth creation to succeed.

In India, though, over decades of Congress governance, despite avowed admiration for all things left-leaning, that particular horse was allowed to shoot out of its stable. Hence, here, a small handful of wealth-creators will have to tend to the needs of millions, starting with the massive bureaucracy required to oversee the process from surveying to snatching, sorry, reallocating.

All this has its upside, though. Consider today's high property prices. Were these measures to be applied, the soaring costs of bungalows and condos would plummet, driven by a depressed market where we'd all be toiling not to buy ourselves a pastel-shaded nest, but to come to the aid of the party, oops, polity. An apartment

might not even be the only thing to lose value. Economic history shows how a prosperous liberal economy is based fundamentally on stability.

As philosopher Jürgen Habermas writes, Western bourgeois societies emerged only when the untrammelled power of princes was checked and private property, which couldn't be randomly seized, was established. The drive to accumulate, thus, sparked productivity, creating mercantile empires, commercial conglomerates and industrial innovators, shaping a public sphere where people expressed their views in newspapers and sculpting the modern individual,

Western bourgeois societies emerged only when the untrammelled power of princes was checked and private property, which couldn't be randomly seized, was established

driven, as Karl Marx described by 'vita activa', an approach of aspiration and effort.

But all that is boring, yaar. Why should we have the ho-hum stability of, say, Singapore when we can have the vivid, nerve-jangling chaos of a Desai movie underpinning our economy? India's current predictability — over 6% annual growth, constant enhancements in infrastructure, improved welfare schemes, steadily evolving to be the world's third-largest economy, etc — may seem kinda dull to those seeking more radical reform.

Don't forget the governance of Lalu Yadav, a valued member of INDIA, and his canopied revolutionary attempts at wealth redistribution in Bihar: Unkind critics may term all that 'kidnapping'. But it takes an economic genius to discern the pursuit of social betterment, which drove many into the arms of their captors. Such glories perhaps inspire contemporary notions of wealth redistribution.

We should not fear an inheritance tax. So, indeed, go about your daily labours, humming Desai's evergreen ditty celebrating redistribution, 'Anhoni ko honi kar dein/ honi ko anhoni.'

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Relax. They're Secure, Can Be More



Subimal Bhattacharjee

Supreme Court on Friday rejected a series of petitions that sought a direction for cross-verifying every vote cast on EVMs with paper slips generated by VVPATs (voter-verifiable paper audit trail). The top court's decision upholds the current cross-verification system.

The judgment is significant. It reassures voters that they can trust the EVM-based electoral system that has been in existence for more than four decades, with many improvements made towards transparency and efficiency at regular intervals, with or without legal interventions. The whole process, involving technical, management and legal aspects, has been a success story for EC from the days of ballot boxes, when booth-capturing, false voting and manipulation were rampant, apart from improving efficiency of conducting elections.

While EVMs, comprising a ballot unit (BU) and control unit (CU), and

later VVPATs introduced in phases from 2013 to full implementation in 2017, have been a consistent concern for many critics and have faced legal challenges, the poll panel has never wavered from addressing these challenges. Challengers, however, have failed to provide substantial proof to support their claims.

What significant improvement in transparency would expansion to complete cross-verification, as mandated by the top court in April 2019, bring over the current system, which encompasses five polling booths in each assembly segment within a parliamentary constituency? None, really.

In its explanation to the apex court last week, EC mentioned that to date, there have been 41,629 instances of random verifications, with over 4 cr VVPAT paper slips matched without any discrepancies.

In the 'N Chandrababu Naidu vs EC' case in 2019, the poll panel told the top court its efforts to get Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) to answer a key question: 'What would be the reasonable sample size of polling stations where VVPAT slips verification is required to be carried out to achieve the object of establishing the credibility and integrity of the electoral process?'

In its elaborate report, ISI mention-



ed that verification of VVPAT paper trail of 479 randomly selected EVMs would generate over 99% accuracy in the election results. In contrast, the cost and time with the additional engagements to undertake the full cross-verification, like employing more trained staff for counting VVPAT slips — they are thermal papers, not the easiest to count — would have increased significantly with no material advantage.

However, yesterday, Supreme Court gave two directions to EC to further improve on the current practices with EVMs and VVPATs. Both are good suggestions:

● Seal the symbol loading unit (SLU) and secure its storage in containers

after completing the symbol-loading process in VVPAT beginning May 1. These sealed containers containing SLUs will be secured in strong rooms, along with EVMs, for at least 45 days after declaration of results.

● Burnt memory semi-controller in 5% of EVMs — CU, BU and the VVPAT — in every assembly segment of a parliamentary constituency should be verified by a team of engineers from the EVM manufacturers after the announcement of results on a written request made by candidates who are placed No. 2 and No. 3 behind the highest-poll candidate.

Such candidates or their representatives shall identify EVMs by the polling station or serial number. All candidates and their representatives shall have the option to remain present at the time of verification. Moreover, such a request should be made within seven days of declaration of results. After the verification process, the candidate will have to pay the expenses. It will be refunded if EVMs are found to be tampered.

Both these steps also indicate the top court's process of introducing more transparency remains visible, while not allowing unfounded doubts and motivations to undermine a secure process-driven technical system that has optimally improved conduct of elections in India.

How Tech is Being a Good Sport



Anil Nair

The IPL match between Chennai Super Kings and Mumbai Indians on April 14 got 715 mn views. The Indian sports market is relatively small. But it's growing rapidly: revenue grew 11% to ₹15,766 cr, with cricket having the largest share. According to Statista, global sports market revenue was estimated at \$487 bn in 2022, sporting goods market at \$160 bn in 2023, and sports betting at \$242 bn in 2023.

Much of this revenue growth is attributed to technology, which ensures deep fan involvement through convenient, interactive and personalised engagement.

► **Enhancing fan experience** AI-powered chatbots engage fans by providing personalised recommendations for online ticket and merchandise purchases.

► Apps guide paid ticket-holders to their seats, beating queues.

► AR devices enable overlaying player stats and replays, apart from interactive content and real-time information.

► VR transports audiences right into the middle of the action, whether it be a player's view in tennis or a race car driver's perspective in F1.

► Streaming services such as IPL's HeroCam helps to focus the camera on your favourite player.

► Social media platforms allow sports lovers to follow their clubs and favourite players and share opinions and insights in fan communities.

► Fantasy sports help fans leverage their knowledge of the game and players, and their predictive abilities.

► **Improving player and team performances** Sensors in wearables like wrist monitors, micro-sensors in clothes and chips in shoes track pulse, breathing, speed, acceleration, endurance, fatigue and sleep patterns. Wearables can also aid recovery, spotting signs of impact trauma early, including soft tissue injuries.

► Advanced rehab centres focus on nutrition, and body and hydration analysis to detect changes in body fat and mass, enabling corrections to enhance stamina and eliminate



Press play

cramping.

► Advanced treatments train participants to reconceptualise pain as non-threatening brain-generated false alarms and reroute neural pathways to make pain subside.

► Smart workout equipment can correct workout routines in real-time.

Interestingly, increased use of AI is slowly changing power equations, enabling even smaller teams to track individual player performance, craft training programmes, detect subtle game patterns and provide coaching to tackle specific competing teams.

It's also influencing advancements in sports gear, including golf clubs with sensors, GPS-enabled bicycles, smart glasses for cyclists and goggles for swimmers to collect critical metrics on the go. It's also encouraging an era of precision and fairness in sports to call out fouls and identify infringements.

► **Inside stadia experience** Stadium owners are trying to cater to the needs of fans, including biometrics for the entry of regulars, parking assistance, hi-density wi-fi, live match notifications (like offside in football or no balls in cricket), player info and insights, easy ordering and delivery of food and beverages at the seat, real-time information on the shortest queues at washrooms, apart from UHD cameras and digital signage.

► Cisco's connected scarf, created in collaboration with Man City, measures the physiological data of wearers during a match via sensors. Heart

rates, body temperature and emotional arousal help analysts understand fan behaviour and enhance their match experience.

► **Tech in IPL** To help create a stadium-like feel for TV watchers at home, they have invested in Dolby Atmos to direct sound with precision.

► Data-driven insights help coaches and captains make decisions, and help viewers contextualise statistics dynamically as the match unfolds.

► When wickets light up as the balls get dislodged by a wicketkeeper or fielder seeking a run-out, the drama in the moment creates abundant excitement.

► A speed gun shows how fast the ball is hurtling at the batsman or whether the bowler has unleashed a deceptively slower ball with the same bowling action.

► 360° cameras reveal players as they perform.

► Buggy Cam keeps pace with the sprinting players, providing jitter-free low angles that elevate viewing to the next level.

► Hawk-Eye projects the trajectory of the ball in motion in another exemplar of precision.

► Snickometer is attached to the wicket that catches sound frequencies made by the bat hitting the ball or a part of the cricketer's body.

With so much tech, real-time visuals and analytics, predictability is becoming predictable. And, so, defying the odds will get top returns.

The writer is founder, ThinkStreet



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Art of Acceptance

BRAHMA KUMARI ASHA

The art of acceptance gives us the ability to remain calm and flow with life. It helps us to travel light, as it frees us from the extra baggage of expectations, anxieties and anticipations. We learn to accommodate people and situations rather than resist them or judge them as right or wrong. We also do not hold them responsible for our emotions.

Acceptance also carries shades of appreciation, motivation, love and respect. As we experience and practice acceptance, we experience greater acceptance from others.

Acceptance does not mean everything is perfect. It only means that our state of mind is perfect. Acceptance does not mean to let things be the way they are. It means keeping our mind stable and working on the situation. Acceptance of what has happened is the first step to start working towards the solution. We need to accept our own self along with our mistakes or difficult sanskars first, and only then can we focus on corrections. Acceptance allows us to be free from the shackles of denial and move forward creating a new path. Accepting other people means we accept that they are different from us — our mind does not get disturbed, it remains detached from their sanskar.

Art of accepting situations means we understand this is it, rather than question what is this and get into why, where, when, how. As we accept the situation, our mind becomes silent and stable. Our efficiency and decision-making powers rise. Our focus shifts from the problem to the solution.

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LOLLING ON SATURDAY

A Tale of Two Pilots

An Airbus A380 is on its way across the Atlantic. It flies consistently at 800 km/h at 30,000 ft, when suddenly a Mach-2 Eurofighter Typhoon appears. The fighter jet pilot slows down, flies alongside the Airbus

and greets the passenger plane pilot by radio, 'Airbus, boring flight isn't it? Now have a look here!' He rolls his jet on its back, accelerates, breaks through the sound barrier; rises rapidly to a dizzying height, and then swoops down almost to sea level in a breathtaking dive. He loops back next to the Airbus and asks, 'Well, how was that?'

The Airbus pilot answers, 'Very impressive, but watch this!' The jet pilot watches the Airbus. Nothing happens. It continues to fly straight, at the same speed. After 15 mins, the Airbus pilot radios, 'Well, how was that?'

Confused, the jet pilot asks, 'What did you do?'

The Airbus pilot laughs and says, 'I got up, stretched my legs, walked to the back of the aircraft to use the washroom, then got a cup of coffee and chocolate pastry.'

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Educational

A science graduate asks, 'Why does it work?' The engineering graduate asks, 'How does it work?' The BCom graduate asks, 'How much will it cost?' The arts graduate asks, 'Do you want fries with that?'

Chat Room

Family Maketh A Civilisation

Apropos the Edit, 'Talk of Inheritance, Expand the Family' (Apr 26), an individual is already free to bequeath her self-acquired property to anyone outside blood relations other than the family members. However, how can such persons have a claim on inheritance equal to that of 'legal heirs'? What 'the individual' has done for society can be seen in Western countries that have the primacy of individual over the family. It is Indian society's primacy of family over the individual that has saved us from extinction as a civilisation. One understands wokism is the new fad among colonial-minded English-speaking intellectuals. However, such pieces should be signed articles, else, they would be seen as activism that hampers readers' ability to form informed opinions on the subject.

V PRAKASH
Vadodara



A thought for today

You may never know what results will come of your actions but if you do nothing there will be no results

MAHATMA GANDHI

They Need The Elders

Can student protests bring change? Depends

Students are agitating across America's best known campuses, against Israel's attacks in Gaza. US conservatives have called them anti-Semitic, and some college administrations, caught in a power struggle, have come down heavy. More than a few faculty members are joining in solidarity.

Student activism is common across countries. But does it really change outcomes? Depends on what you think change means. In 1989, student-led pro-democracy protests were crushed in Tiananmen Square. Beijing keeps a tight lid on campuses. Think of student protesters in JNU. Some are contending with police and courts, some are trying their luck in electoral politics. There has been no forked lightning of transformation. But student politics is not merely campus rumpus, it occurs in a context of upheaval.

In 1960s, student rebellions broke out in the West, with young people igniting a larger labour strike. In US, young people were at the vanguard of the civil rights movement, protesting the Vietnam war, and fighting for feminism. Even the Navnirman Andolan in Gujarat, which sparked JP's wider agitation and then the Emergency, and where Modi cut his teeth in political action, was sparked by students. Student activism was vital to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. In US, student uprisings fizzled out after the Cold War apparatus scotched their momentum, and radical energies shifted to the right. And yet, the story goes on. Students have led the Black Lives Matter movement in US, and are forcing a confrontation on social justice, which political parties are adjusting to.

Students' activism does not shake the edifice of power by itself, it matters to the extent that they catalyse or connect with allies outside campus. Students can think, organise, and bring their zeal to larger causes, but lasting political change is a feat of collaboration.



Pani, Puri & Polls

What's a meeting without the 'eating'?

Brunch-lunch-munch is the pivot on which elections spin. Serve thirsting crowds water alone, and they may just write you off. Nimbu pani, soft drinks hit the vote-for-me spot better, as does chilled...lassi and buttermilk. Every election, poll officials in districts fix food prices at local rates, for candidates to thumb in their daily expenditure reports.

So, if in Jalandhar, it's ₹15 each for chai and samosa, in MP's Mandla, chai is ₹7, a samosa ₹7.50, all set in good faith though parties rarely bother to stick to the rates. While aloo puri retains its favourite snack status across UP, and Delhi's unimaginatively stuck at bread pakoda, in most other states, voters have long turned up their nose at lame staples—reason why vada pav gave way to 'Indian Chinese' fried rice packs at Mumbai rallies, Chennai's filter coffee-idli combo to biryani and soft drinks, and Bengal's parties switched to biryani or egg/chicken curry. In 2019, Trinamool ensured supporters didn't chicken out of a rally—its graffiti promoted just the date and venue—menu—egg curry-rice; the party reportedly ordered 2 lakh eggs. Then there was the time BJP was livid—accusing TMC workers of wolfing down food meant for BJP cadre.

This year, keeping candidates hydrated has been on top of party workers' to-do lists. And soft drinks for supporters. What's the price for potable water on tap? Ah, that's a bore, not even a poll issue. Voters' dil maange more.

Our Minds Have Turned Against Us

Brain's age-old shortcuts are running amok in the digital age

We're all on a mass head-trip, says *The Age of Magical Overthinking: Notes on Modern Irrationality* by Amanda Montell. Our minds have turned against us. True, magical thinking is an age-old trait and our minds have always been resourceful, using shortcuts to process information. But today, a sudden and extreme info overload, loneliness and a capitalist pressure to know everything are causing our thought-patterns to go haywire. Cognitive biases, which were our ancestor's mental cheat codes, are now causing us to overthink or underthink the wrong things. Here are some examples.

● You can't have missed the way

celebrity worship has acquired a ravenous aspect. That's *halo effect*: our tendency to make positive assumptions about someone's overall character based on impressions of a single trait. Taylor Swift can politically enrage her obsesses with the slightest opinion, and this worship, building up and tearing down, is dehumanising.

● *Proportionality bias* makes us crave big explanations for our lives, like conspiracy theories, or even 'conspiracy', the strange mix of conspiracy theory and alternative mental health approaches like manifestation or the law of attraction. Social media is full of influencers promising you control over your own life. While our beliefs do influence outcomes and spirituality does build resilience, there's a lot of nonsense mixed in with small kernels of truth.

● Social media keeps showing us more people to compare and compete with. That's *zero-sum bias*, that another person's gain means your loss. In fact, when you talk people down, others unwittingly associate that negative trait with you. If you go on about how wonderful someone

else is, people associate those shiny qualities with you too. In other words, make connections, not enemies.

● *Recency illusion* is the tendency to think that something is objectively new and threatening just because you haven't encountered it before. Media outlets are incentivised to frame each event as urgent and hazardous. News algorithms personalise this sense of true and false alarms to your own limbic system. Most of us are in a state of fitful anxiety, because our brains encourage us to see the world through a life or death, black or white filter.

● There is also *illusory truth effect*. We tend to believe something if we've heard it many times. This is why political propaganda spreads so effor-

tlessly. Familiarity not only builds comfort, but also an immunity to unlearning and relearning; we actually build up a resistance to facts.

● *Confirmation bias* is the most well-known cognitive bug. Faced with facts we don't like, reasoning area of our brain goes dark, and it lights up when shown corroborating info. Confirmation bias works overtime in ideologically bound groups, where questioning a tenet means betraying an identity.

All these biases once helped us process a chaotic world, make quick decisions, smooth our inner dissonance. It's just that they're not working for us now.

● Meanwhile, here's a good habit to build: literally, build something. *Ikea effect* is the name of the intrinsic urge to value something we made ourselves, the way people feel about furniture they have to assemble themselves, or instant cake mixes that tell you to add an egg. DIY projects, domestic hacks and so on are wildly popular now, and they actually do help us get out of our heads. Now, that's a way to harness our cognitive bugs, rather than being jerked around by them.

mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



LIVING THE HIGH LIFE

With its clubs, swimming pools, jogging tracks and more, condo gives substance to the idea of a 'good life'. That it also breeds a sense of entitlement among affluent Indians is part of the package

Santosh Desai



About eight years ago, we moved into a condominium in Gurgaon. It was done after a lot of moaning and foot dragging, after having to give up our first-floor home in a South Delhi colony. The idea of moving into a condo felt like moving into a synthetic world, a bubble of manicured sameness.

Much as one wanted to hate the experience, that is not what happened. We found condo living to be above all, extremely convenient, which at a certain stage in life feels disproportionately important. Shared facilities are a boon. While it is everything that we feared it would be—a small island of privilege determined to make itself as self-sufficient as possible—it vastly reduces the burden of managing everyday life that urban living imposes on you.

The condo is a social enclave that stacks people on top of each other, exchanging the fluid interaction of the self with the outside in a regular house, for the contained order of people similarly endowed, bound together by a level of affluence. To those living within it, there is an option of what to plug into and what to opt out of. There is a lot of social interaction for those who wish it, but it is easily possible to be a recluse and have nothing to do with one's neighbours.

In an earlier time, neighbourhoods were like an extended family, with a good measure of dysfunction thrown in. There was an implicit reciprocity in a neighbourhood; we were bound together if by nothing else, then by gossip and ever-intrusive eyes that made your business everyone else's.

Apartment living was the first truly modern version of city life. A place where people didn't know each other and had little in common (notwithstanding the fact even here religion, caste and diet have often played a role). Condos have taken that essential template and added layers of icing to it. The attempt

is to offer its residents a life that borrows in equal part from hotels, clubs, restaurants, supermarkets, chemists, and even hospitals.

With its density of population, it is not that difficult to find like-minded people. Interesting connections are possible to make, and if desired, one can avoid the social isolation that has otherwise become the norm.

As a design, it thrives on



compression. It stuffs a large number of living quarters in a small space and then mitigates the loss of room by adding on facilities that had largely become inaccessible in a city.

The condo offers what so much of the upwardly mobile affluent class seeks—

not just a life, but a lifestyle. It gives substance to the idea of success, translating it into a set of desirable activities, those otherwise the preserve of more developed nations. Hanging out at the club, taking a lazy swim, running on the jogging track, working out at the gym—these provide a graspable handle on what the good life means, a life that normal city living denies.

In some sense, the condo tries to restore to the city everything that has been lost—social interaction, a sense of

community, the ability to engage in leisure activities—but does so by cutting off its connection with the outside world. Condo living gets a bad press in general. It is seen to be elitist; an enclave of privilege that works hard to set itself apart from the other. There is much truth to this.

The mental formulation that this is a

part of a larger shift in the meaning of the home. From a time when it was seen as a place of mooring, the source where we came from, it is now a destination, something we can own for our own edification.

We evaluate homes on more utilitarian grounds. What can it do for me? What does it say about me? What kind of life can I lead here? Who does it place me in the company of? Condos are designed to answer such questions, which is why they are likely to be the future of the city.

More Verification, More Trust, Better Democracy

Explainer on the SC judgment in the EVM case: Court rejected the demand for counting 100% of VVPAT slips but ordered additional safeguards

Jay Vinayak Ojha



Yesterday, a two-judge bench of the Supreme Court, comprising Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta, rendered its judgment in the matter of *Association for Democratic Reforms vs Election Commission of India and Another*, the 'EVM case'. It rejected ADR's petition and upheld the validity of voting by EVM, ordering two additional safeguards.

Who were the petitioners and what were they asking for?

ADR, an NGO, asked that either the system of voting by EVM should be scrapped entirely or altered significantly. If EVMs are to continue, the petitioners argued, the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slip should be given to the voter for him to physically cast it into the ballot box and/or that all VVPAT slips in the country should be counted alongside the electronic tally.

At present, only electronic counts given by five randomly selected EVMs in every assembly segment are subjected to verification against the tally given by VVPAT slips.

Additionally, the petitioners challenged the rule that only permits the voter himself to call for physical verification if he feels there is a discrepancy between his vote as cast and the VVPAT slip. They submitted that any elector, not just such a voter, should be able to request a recount.

Why did the court reject the petition?

Justice Khanna held that while voters have a fundamental right to have their votes recorded and counted, there are different ways of securing this right and that there was no reason to believe that the methods suggested by the petitioners were good ways to do so. He pointed out that the nature of the right to vote is such that it can

only be meaningfully exercised if the entire electoral process is sound. He highlighted the possibility that some of the petitioners' suggestions might in fact reduce the integrity of elections given the possibility of misuse of VVPAT slips and the chequered history of paper ballots in India. He also held that counting 100% of VVPAT slips was unnecessary to secure this right, as



VVPAT ON THE MOVE: Poll officials collect polling material

the voter is already permitted to see the slip in a transparent window and raise a challenge immediately if it's at variance with his vote as cast. Possibility of any elector being able to ask for a physical verification was also rejected as it would cause "confusion and delay".

What additional safeguards did the court order?

Court stressed there was no hint of suspicion on the current electoral process, but in order to "further strengthen the integrity of the election process" it ordered two additional measures. First, that the symbol loading units (SLUs) of VVPATs, which ensure that the

vote printed on the VVPAT slip corresponds with the button pressed by the voter, will be sealed after use and stored in a strongroom with the EVMs themselves for 45 days after the declaration of results. Second, that on a written request the first or second runner up in a constituency may identify 5% of the control units, ballot units, and VVPATs in the parliamentary constituency or any of its assembly segments to be examined by a team of engineers after declaration of results to check for any possible tampering. Candidates and their representatives will have a right to be present for the checking. The candidate must bear the expenses for this exercise, but if tampering is found, her expenses will be refunded.

How did the two judges differ?

Justice Datta agreed with Justice Khanna but issued two additional dicta. First, that mere suspicion of a fundamental right being violated cannot be a ground to move SC. Second, that the judicial principle of *res judicata*, which precludes the same matter being adjudicated again and again, precludes claims about the integrity of EVMs being brought up repeatedly as the security of machines has already been demonstrated.

What did SC say about the electoral process?

Both Justices Khanna and Datta had strong words for those doubting the conduct of elections. Justice Khanna, after an exhaustive review of measures already taken to ensure the integrity of the measures, warned against 'unfounded challenges' that have the 'contrarian impact of creating distrust'. Justice Datta was harsher still, arguing against "blindly distrusting" the system and that the petitioners' prayer for a return to paper ballots revealed their "utter lack of bona fides".

On the whole, the court zeroed in on the impeccable integrity of EVMs as a means of recording an elector's vote as cast and counting it as recorded.

The writer is Project Fellow, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

Calvin & Hobbes



Wisdom Shared On Social Media Is Like A Seed

Bhartendu Sood

Most of us receive messages on ethics, moral values and good conduct on a daily basis on social media platforms. The more we are connected, the more the messages. And they are all free of cost. Looking at the frequency and the quantum of such messages, one would think that by now they would have transformed every reader into a better human being, but somehow that does not seem to be happening.

Does it mean that these messages are not serving any purpose? Here we need to understand that these are only seeds which we need to grow to get the desired fruit. A story goes that a woman once dreamt that she walked into a mall and found God behind one of the counters. "What do you sell?" she asked. "Everything your heart desires," answered God.

The woman decided to ask for the best things she could think of. "I want peace of mind, love, happiness, wisdom, and freedom from fear."

God smiled and said, "My dear, you have got me wrong. We don't sell fruits here, only seeds. You must be well aware that if the seed sprouts, grows, becomes a tree or a shrub, only then does it bear fruit which you want to have. Therefore, these seeds which I give you will have to be planted and nourished with your labour, dedication, spirit of service and love to yield fruit at the right time. It involves exploring love, compassion, empathy, altruism, and truth. Most importantly, you ought to have a lot of patience, forbearance and capacity to face pains and absorb unanticipated problems. Even noble souls who have reached me, underwent self-cleansing

and led lives of austerity and self-discipline. Always remember, no pain, no gain."

Two factors that come into play after we have obtained the seeds to become better human beings are: Tapas and Abhyas. Our scriptures say that tapas helps in destroying our impurities; it removes our shortcomings by following austerity at the levels of body, speech and mind. According to Sage Patanjali's Ashtanga Yog, this can be achieved by following Yamas, such as non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy and non-covetousness; and Niyams, including cleanliness, contentment, austerity, self-study, and surrender to God. These involve tapas, to control one's desires and practise. The Bhagwad Gita also speaks of tapas by austerity of body, speech and mind.

Last and the most important thing in the journey to obtain the fruit from seeds is abhyas, a spiritual practice which is to be performed regularly for a long period of time with a sense of discipline, until one has obtained perfection in the form of the desired fruit. Both the Bhagwad Gita and Sage Patanjali are on the same page when it comes to exploring the importance of abhyas. It involves control of the mind with detachment. And as they say, 'Practice makes one perfect'.

This is not to undermine the good these social media messages do, but the choice is ours, momentary happiness or eternal bliss. We have a spiritual guru who is delivering messages without charging anything. Nothing wrong, if we simply read them, get momentary happiness and forward them to many more. Even through this practice, goodness is reaching others like the fragrance of flowers.

Sacredspace



The more open we become, the less fear is present. Fear...fills us with thoughts about what might happen in the future...what seemed to have happened in the past. But in this present moment, fear is nowhere to be found.

Margaret Wheatley



THE SPEAKING TREE



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PAPER WITH PASSION

All is well

India shows the mirror to the US, rejects its report on rights violations in Manipur as 'deeply biased'

Soon after the US pointed the finger at India for alleged incidents of human rights violations, particularly in Manipur, India has vehemently criticised the State Department report. The Indian Government has denounced the report as "deeply biased" and asserted that it reflects a "significant misunderstanding of the ground realities". Seeking to show the mirror to the US instead, it questioned the US administration's response to the recent killing of Indian students on its soil. The MEA emphasised the "deeply biased" nature of the report, saying the report misrepresents the situation in Manipur and demonstrates a "lack of comprehension" regarding India's efforts to address human rights issues within its borders. The report, which is not limited only to Manipur, talks about other issues too that have apparently undermined Indian democracy in the recent past. One of the key points raised in the State Department's report pertains to the raids conducted by the Indian Income Tax authorities on the offices

of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), alleging that the raids extended to journalists not involved in the organisation's financial affairs. Furthermore, the US report claims that the Indian Government used emergency powers to ban the screening of a BBC-produced documentary. The report highlights the concerns of local human rights organisations, minority political parties and affected communities regarding the Government's alleged "delayed response" to violence and its failure to provide adequate humanitarian assistance in Manipur.



It also cites instances of disinformation tactics being employed against civil society organisations, religious minorities such as Sikhs and Muslims, and political opposition groups. The Indian reaction to the US report is laudable as it defends and protects the boundaries of Indian sovereignty and sends across the message that no country has any business to meddle in India's domestic affairs. The Government must also ensure that foreign powers do not get a chance to sermonise India on human rights. It is an established maxim that human rights issues transcend political boundaries. Besides, the Government should be mindful of criticism by the Indian civil society, which has been airing similar sentiments. They should not be summarily rejected and branded as anti-national and harassed, a routine thing in autocratic systems. Indeed, India's reaction to the State Department's report underscores its commitment to safeguarding its sovereignty and ensuring that international assessments accurately reflect the country's efforts to uphold human rights. India has consistently maintained that it is committed to addressing any legitimate concerns regarding human rights violations through its robust legal framework and democratic processes. In light of these developments, it is imperative for the international stakeholders to engage with India in a constructive dialogue based on mutual respect and understanding.

PICTALK



A man bathes an elephant at the Veermata Jijabai Bhosale Botanical Udyan and Zoo, in Mumbai

PTI

Robotics: Predictable and optimal surgical success

Today, India is leading globally with advancements in robotic surgery and making a difference in critical surgical procedures

Robotic surgery, also known as robot-assisted surgery, has revolutionised the field of surgical procedures by offering increased precision, flexibility and control compared to conventional techniques. Typically associated with minimally invasive surgery, robotic surgery utilises a system consisting of a camera arm and mechanical arms with surgical instruments attached, all controlled by the surgeon seated at a computer console. This setup provides high-definition, magnified, 3D views of the surgical site, enhancing the surgeon's ability to perform delicate and complex procedures. Minimally invasive surgery is now the standard of care across various surgical specialties. Introduced four decades ago, Laparoscopy changed our approach and outcome in surgical patients. Robotic surgery introduced two decades ago, was the next step in the evolution of minimally invasive surgery. Now, the time has come when a surgeon avoids leaving anything on chance. Advanced, stable and predictable robotic surgery can ensure success



in each case. The primary motivation for opting for robotic surgery is the enhanced precision, flexibility and control it offers to surgeons during operations. The precision and minimally invasive nature of robotic procedures contribute to a lower risk of infection and other complications. In India, the Da Vinci system is commonly used for robotic surgery across various specialties, including urology, gynaecology, cardiothoracic and general surgery. In urology, robotic surgery has emerged as a significant advancement, offering several advantages over open or laparoscopic procedures. These advantages include reduced blood loss, decreased patient discomfort, minimised use of painkillers, shorter hospital stays and faster healing times. Urological surgeries com-

monly performed using robotic technology include robotic prostatectomy, robotic cystectomy, robotic partial nephrectomy, robotic pyeloplasty and other procedures such as nephroureterectomy, adrenalectomy, uterine reimplantation and kidney transplantation. Even in the case of frequently performed non-cancerous gastrointestinal surgery like cholecystectomy gall bladder removal or hernia, innumerable challenges can be countered including some very serious injuries, which may result in longer hospital stays or life-threatening situations. Robotic surgery filters out the struggle happening at the surgeon's end while ensuring smooth outcomes with ultimate safety for the patients. Our understanding of robotic surgery benefits originated from cancer patients in urology and onco-surgery. Today non-cancerous surgeries deserve and demand equal precision and safety. Prevention of complications and quick recovery are the new points. Due to the sheer number, improvement of outcome in benign surgeries would translate into a large

number of healthier and happier patients. While technology remains premium, the health insurance companies do understand and approve of such advanced technology. For instance, Narayana Health offers robotic-assisted procedures for various gastrointestinal conditions. The robotic surgery program has an experienced team specialising in using the da Vinci surgical system for minimally invasive general surgeries. With the surgeon controlling robotic arms from a console while watching the operative field through a video camera, patients experience shorter recovery times, with most returning to normal activities within two to three weeks instead of the six to eight weeks typically associated with standard open surgery. Indeed, constant innovation and development in the field of robotic surgery will result in lowering the cost with wider applications.

(The writer is a consultant-general, Robotic and Renal Transplant Surgery at Narayana Hospital - RN Tagore Hospital, Mukundapur, Kolkata; views are personal)



FORQAN BABU SHAIKH

Artificial Intelligence, a game-changer in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, has revolutionised traditional campaign strategies. The era of candidates personally visiting voters' homes and engaging in conversations over tea, even after a five-year hiatus, has given way to a more technologically advanced approach. Social media played a pivotal role in the 2014 election. However, the advent of AI and the potential use of deepfake videos in India's 2024 elections could be game-changers. These videos, capable of blurring the lines between truth and falsehood, have the potential to significantly impact the trust and integrity of the electoral process.

Political parties and candidates have understood the power of AI in the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. They use AI to analyse voter data, enabling them to develop effective campaign strategies. Additionally, AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants have been deployed to engage with voters on social media, providing real-time responses to their queries and concerns.

The use of AI technology can help with election processes in several ways:

AI can predict election outcomes. AI chatbots and virtual assistants can communicate with virtual media.

AI can prevent election fraud and regulate political advertising campaign finance violations.

Political parties can now customise their calls to individual voters, potentially harming their opponents' reputations. In India, more than 50% of the population uses the internet, which may increase to 900 million by 2025. The upcoming election in India is expected to generate a market worth Rs 500 crore.

Political parties are using AI to reach voters via social media. Congress and BJP used AI in last year's State elections, the first time false videos and parodies were used in political campaigning. Parties like BJP, Congress, AAP, DMK and AIADMK use AI technology to engage with their supporters. For example, the BJP used AI to translate PM Modi's speech-



es into eight regional languages. However, some campaigners misuse AI-generated videos, including deepfakes, to spread misinformation. These videos are targeted at the 18-25 age group and are being shared on platforms like WhatsApp.

Parties in India use various tools to influence voters. They share fake images and videos on social media platforms. For example, the Congress party shared a phony photo of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. At the same time, the BJP posted a false video of Rahul Gandhi on Instagram.

In Tamil Nadu, the DMK and AIADMK parties used recordings of their deceased leaders for voter support in this election. The Communist parties have also employed AI technology in their campaigns. One video shows Asaduddin Owaisi, the leader of the AIMIM party, singing Hindu devotional songs. Regional leaders like Akhilesh Yadav, Naveen Patnaik and Mamata Banerjee also applied similar tools to influence voters.

The use of AI for malicious purposes is a significant concern. With advanced AI, it has become possible to impersonate anyone, including voters or candidates, which can lead to identity theft and manipulation of the electoral process. This underscores the

POLITICAL PARTIES ARE USING AI TO REACH VOTERS VIA SOCIAL MEDIA. THE CONGRESS AND THE BJP USED AI IN LAST YEAR'S STATE ELECTIONS

need for clear regulations to ensure a fair and transparent electoral process, making the audience more aware of the potential risks and the importance of addressing them, fostering a sense of vigilance.

The use of AI in political campaigns raises valid concerns about privacy and the potential for unfair competition and misinformation. Therefore, it's imperative that clear regulations are implemented to ensure a transparent electoral process. Governments must take the lead in regulating AI use to promote fairness.

The IT Minister has already issued warnings to social media companies, instilling confidence in the audience about the security and integrity of the electoral process. The Election Commission must issue clear guidelines to regulate AI-generated information for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. These guidelines should address ethical AI use in campaigns and voter data analysis. Strict rules are necessary to maintain the integrity of the electoral process, protect voters' rights and ensure fairness and transparency. Without these regulations, there could be doubts about the legitimacy of the election results.

While there are valid concerns about AI, it's crucial to recog-

nise its potential for positive change. Certain AI-generated technologies have the power to revolutionise how we conduct free and fair elections. As these technologies gain wider acceptance, they could pave the way for e-elections, a future where elections are conducted online, ensuring a more transparent and accountable electoral process. This potential for positive change should inspire optimism and hope, reassuring the audience about the future of elections.

During the Bihar elections, the Election Commission used an AI-powered system to ensure transparency and prevent manipulation. The system detected and flagged misinformation and hate speech cases, expediting the counting process and curbing hate speech during the election. This demonstrates how AI can be used effectively and instills confidence in the electorate.

Presidents, prime ministers, or legislators could win or lose based mainly on the success or failure of their AI campaign. Gullible voters can be fooled easily. Technological advancements can bring about significant changes and AI is no exception.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

REVIVAL OF EDUCATION IN BIHAR

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Bihar's educational reforms cock a snook at private players", published on April 26, this is my response. The narrative underscores Bihar's struggle with governance failures, notably in areas like liquor laws and rural migration. However, amidst this backdrop of challenges, the Government's focus on education emerges as a beacon of hope. In a landscape where education is increasingly commodified, Bihar's commitment to public education stands out as a bold counterforce to market forces.

By prioritising education, the Government aims to address deep-rooted social and economic inequalities. The recruitment of teachers and infrastructural improvements demonstrate tangible progress. Yet, sustaining these reforms remains a concern, particularly regarding the absence of a robust mechanism. Additionally, while efforts to combat corruption and enhance accountability are commendable, ensuring the continuity of initiatives like the Mid-Day Meal program is crucial. Ultimately, Bihar's journey towards educational reform signifies a vital step towards empowering marginalised communities and challenging the dominance of private institutions driven by profit motives.

Rajiv Mishra | Lucknow

PERSPECTIVES ON CONSCIOUSNESS

Madam — Apropos the news article, "The Essence of Consciousness", published on April 26, this is my response. The journey of understanding consciousness is a profound one, intricately woven with the fabric of human existence. In the hustle of modern life, terms like consciousness often float around without genuine comprehension. Yet, beneath this veneer lies a profound truth: consciousness is the essence of our being, the awareness that shapes our reality. In a world bombarded with information, it's easy to overlook the depth of our existence. From the wisdom of Buddha to the revelations of quantum physics, consciousness permeates every aspect of our lives. Like Arjuna on the bat-

Ensure representation of the disabled



Apropos the news article, "The marginalisation of disabled in politics", published on April 26, this is my response. The stark absence of political representation for persons with disabilities in India's democratic landscape is a glaring issue. Despite a substantial population, their needs are sidelined, reflecting a systemic failure. Political parties overlook their demands, perpetuating exclusion and reinforcing stereotypes.

Physical barriers at polling stations compound their challenges, stripping away dignity and agency. Anitha's experience exemplifies this neglect. Moreover, those with lesser-known disabilities face additional hurdles, such as a lack of sign language interpreters during campaigns. The dearth of accurate data further complicates policy formulation and budget allocations. However, amidst these challenges lies an opportunity for transformation. A shift towards a rights-based approach is imperative, with persons with disabilities actively involved in policy development. Integration across governance facets is essential for true inclusivity. Respecting their fundamental rights and ensuring their participation in civil and political systems is crucial as India celebrates 75 years of independence. Only then can the nation progress towards its economic aspirations while truly embracing diversity in a democracy.

Aarav Patel | Mumbai

tlefield or King Janaka in his kingdom, we grapple with doubts and fears until a moment of awakening shifts our perception.

True consciousness is not merely being awake but being truly alive, attuned to both internal thoughts and external surroundings. It's the clarity that arises when we shed the layers of ignorance and embrace the purity of our being. In this journey towards enlightenment, let us not merely skim the surface but dive deep into the ocean of consciousness, where every wave carries the promise of a profound revelation.

Vikram Singh | Delhi

THE INDIAN PARADOX

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Why do Indians excel abroad and fail back home?", published on April 26, this is my response. India's global footprint shines brightly across diverse fields, yet a puzzling paradox persists: why do Indians thrive abroad while facing challenges at home? This conundrum demands urgent attention and a deep dive into the complexities

at play. The link between India's international success and domestic hurdles lies largely in the shortcomings of the public education system. Insightful analyses pinpoint the dire State of education as the root cause, a truth echoed by credible sources. Education stands as the linchpin connecting governance, socio-economic stability and prosperity. The nation's future hinges on the quality of primary and secondary education, a reality starkly revealed by surveys.

Moreover, the disconnect between higher education and employability exacerbates the brain drain dilemma. To reverse this trend, India must foster an environment that retains talent and promotes innovation. Embracing change is paramount. Reimagining education to nurture creativity and entrepreneurship can steer India towards global competitiveness. It's time to forge a path towards a brighter, more inclusive future.

Nandini Rao | Bengaluru

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

WORK WITH ALLIES FOR SEMICONDUCTORS

It is time to let go of the regulatory bottlenecks to make a mark



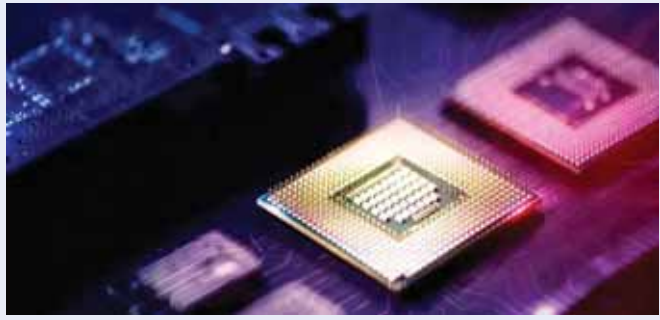
KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

One of the most common reasons cited by foreign investors, against investing in India is too complex regulatory processes and multiplicity of overlapping compliances. The latest to join the bandwagon is Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu. The minister was responding to questions from a journalist on the reason for Taiwanese companies not warming up to India's constant welcome mat for attracting investments in the new age technology, building block and semiconductors space.

To be sure Taiwan is home to the largest chip manufacturing facilities in the world, a key component of the digital economy, ranging from mobile phones to satellites. Wu during his interaction with the journalist quoted "India is cumbersome in its administrative structure and it would require for Indian Government to look at that too, to streamline all kinds of laws and regulations to help semiconductor investors coming to the country". He has further in the same interview talked about the lack of skilled engineers to work in the chip-making factories, even though India doesn't fall short of chip-designing talent.

What Mr Wu highlighted, isn't something new, as it is a similar caution from many other potential investors interested in India. This author spoke with several high-ranking officials in several new and emerging technology manufacturing companies, who complained about complex time-consuming administrative processes in India and echoed that, when compared to competing economies such as Singapore, Vietnam etc.

A new department called Invest India (a public-private joint venture) was created, early on in the current Government's regime, to assist potential investors through the difficult, regulatory regime. Even for semiconductors, where, India is the preferred potential partner, a dedicated business division has been created in the Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, in the form of India Semiconductor Mission (ISM).



The recent trade policy agenda 2024 released by the Biden administration highlighted "Since announcing the negotiating mandate in August 2022, the two sides have pursued an ambitious schedule of meetings to make progress as quickly as possible. In June 2023, AIT and TECRO signed the first agreement under the Initiative. This agreement includes high-standard commitments and economically meaningful outcomes in a number of trade areas, including customs administration and trade facilitation, good regulatory practices, services domestic regulation, anticorruption and small and medium-sized enterprises", underscoring the importance of the partnership between the two countries.

The US supports India's ambitions to develop into a significant player in semiconductor design and manufacturing space, as an alternative to China. India US trade relationship, which has been in limbo has been energised in the last two years after a formal Trade policy forum came into existence, which has had regular meetings on several bilateral issues. In the 2024 trade policy agenda document, US mentions, "We committed to pursue enhanced engagement leading to mutually beneficial outcomes in several areas, with a view to deepening the trade relationship for the benefit of working people. We identified certain areas, including critical minerals, customs and trade facilitation, supply chains and trade in high technology products, in which our Governments intend to develop an ambitious and forward-looking roadmap for enhanced cooperation in order to achieve economically meaningful outcomes."

Given the convergence of interests and the willingness of like-minded partners and allies to invest and support India in the race of semiconductors, the next Government could do well to include removing regulatory bottlenecks in its 100-day agenda. It would be a good start towards a Stated Vikist Bharat target.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Sri Lanka's Easter attack revisited

As the island nation grapples with the aftermath of the attack, the intricate web of extremism and intelligence failures continues to haunt it even five years later



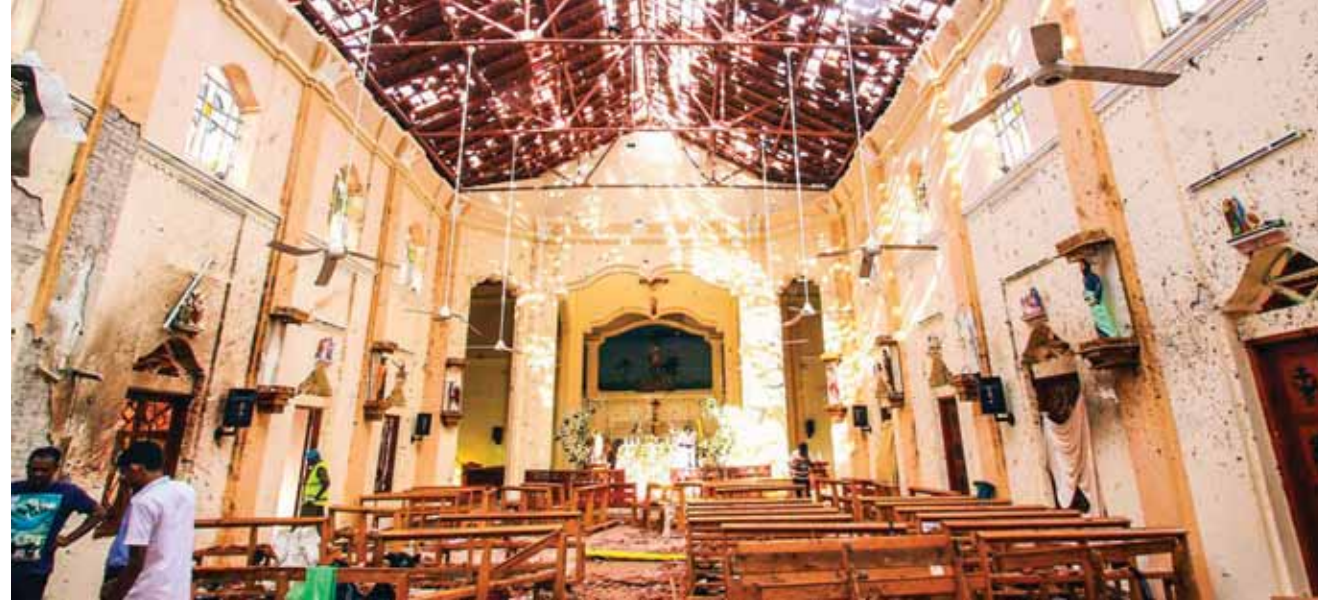
NILANTHA LANGAMUWA

When conspiracy theories gain traction and permeate the public consciousness, they inevitably taint the discourse surrounding the event in question. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in politically charged contexts. Five years ago, amidst the Easter attack on tourist hotels, two Catholic churches and a Zion church in Western and Eastern provinces, a plethora of conspiracy theories surfaced. Initially, speculation swirled suggesting the involvement of a powerful Western nation, followed by theories positing the attack as a ploy to consolidate political power. More recently, local politicians and various social groups have propagated the notion that India orchestrated the attack. Yet, none of these claims have been substantiated with credible evidence. Meanwhile, the culpability of the investigating officers' negligence, which played a role in the tragedy, has been overshadowed by these baseless allegations. Instead of being held accountable, those partially responsible have reshaped the narrative to deflect blame onto others.

However, in the aftermath of the attack, public media reports surfaced alleging that prominent politicians and Government officials were aware of the impending threat. Some even openly discussed this matter. Additionally, a leaked classified document from the police indicated forewarning of an imminent attack. What followed was not just the proliferation of various interpretations but also the dissemination of misconceptions. For instance, blame was swiftly pinned on the State Intelligence Service, the country's premier intelligence agency, extending to judicial indictments. However, a more rational examination, grounded in verifiable data, reveals a different societal reality. It uncovers a systemic failure across institutions tasked with national security and a disregard for prior warnings. Furthermore, it exposes concerted efforts to downplay this negligence for political gain. In a nation scarred by nearly four decades of internal conflict and widespread devastation, such institutional negligence sadly becomes almost unsurprising. It's crucial to highlight overlooked facts concerning the attack in question.

Leading up to the incident in question, there was a noticeable proliferation of extremist factions advocating violence across Sri Lanka. This surge wasn't limited to Muslim extremist groups but encompassed various ideological factions, each pursuing distinct political agendas. The emergence of the Islamic State in West Asia particularly bolstered the prospects of extremists across different nations, with Sri Lanka serving as a pivotal transit hub.

Investigations have revealed a significant influx of extremists from regions like Kerala, as well as countries such as the Maldives, into Sri Lanka. It's evident that intelligence agencies within the region, including those of Sri Lanka and Western nations, amassed substantial intelligence on these activities and collaborated in information sharing. Testimony from the wife of Zahran Hashim, a ringleader of the carnage, attests to the financial backing he received from a Singaporean national to establish his initial mosque. She further detailed Zahran's extensive involvement in extremist endeavours, including recruiting adherents and garnering financial and logistical support throughout the country. This revelation sheds light on the proliferation of extremism in Sri Lanka, culminating



in the Easter attack and subsequent incidents like the suicidal blast at the Sainthamaruthu house, where Zahran's family last resided. Zahran and his cohorts have exhibited affiliations with extremist ideologies and have been inspired by the Islamic State. Moreover, Sri Lankan nationals who joined the organisation's ranks in Syria have been observed exerting influence on local activities. Between 2014 and 2018, a staggering 41,490 individuals from 91 nations travelled to Syria to support the Islamic State, including 32 Sri Lankans.

Exploiting this influx, organisations espousing extremist ideologies, under various guises, began proliferating throughout Sri Lanka. Additionally, individuals of Sri Lankan origin who attempted to travel to Syria via Turkey but were unsuccessful have returned home and aligned themselves with figures like Zahran. Simultaneously, the ideological backing of Mohamed Naufar, known as the "second emir" and a close relative—specifically, the husband of Zahran's maternal aunt—played a pivotal role. Naufar, identified by the FBI as the mastermind behind the attack, exerted significant influence on the events.

Since March 2017, there have been eleven significant incidents leading up to the Easter attack, yet none have undergone thorough investigation. This failure on the part of investigative agencies, which were supposed to act on precious intelligence passed on to them, has been perceived as a deliberate effort to conceal the underlying truth of the entire episode from society, thereby impeding the crucial lessons to be gleaned from this tragedy. The series of events began with a clash at Kattankudy Aliyar junction on March 10, 2017. Following this conflict, police attempted to arrest Zahran, but their efforts proved unsuccessful. Subsequently, on May 17, 2017, a member of National Thowheeth Jamaath was shot. This was followed by a bomb thrown at the National Front for Good Governance (NFGG) Mohammad Farzan's house on February 06, 2018 and another bomb thrown at

the NFGG Kattankudy office on February 12, 2018.

Further escalations occurred with the shooting of Palani Bawa in Kattankudy on June 08, 2018 and the detonation of a bomb by Zahran's brother Rilwan in Arayampathy on August 26, 2018, resulting in injuries and fatalities at Wavnathiv police post on November 30, 2018. The incidents continued with the vandalism of religious statues in Mawanella on December 23, 2018 and further vandalism on January 16, 2019, related to providing information about the destruction of statues and concealment of explosive materials in Vanathavilluwa of Puttalam District. The situation intensified with the discovery of material and the shooting of informant Raziq Mohammad Taslim on March 08, 2019, resulting in permanent disability. Finally, a motorcycle explosion in Thalankudah on April 16, 2019, just five days before the Easter attack, marked the culmination of these incidents. Numerous intelligence reports concerning these events have been received by the commissions tasked with investigating them, shedding light on the negligence of the officers responsible for the criminal investigation.

One of the most significant incidents out of these eleven took place in August 2018, involving Rilwan, who mishandled explosives, resulting in an accident. After the explosions in the Arayampathy area, Rilwan was taken to Colombo National Hospital and admitted under the name Zaheed on 26 August 2018. Investigations have confirmed that Zahran, conducting a training camp in the Hambantota area at the time, visited his brother in Colombo. The following day, 27 August 2018, Rilwan was admitted to the National Eye Hospital. Subsequently, he visited the clinics of the National Hospital on 27.09.2018, 04.10.2018, 11.18.26 and 15.03.2019. This incident occurred eight months prior to the attack, yet neither the training camps nor the incident itself were reported to any police or intelligence agencies.

Remarkably, the individual managed to conceal his identity from the National Hospital and Eye Hospital for several days. The doctor suspected of aiding in this matter has later fled the country.

Later, there was another incident identified as a dry run, which the State Intelligence Service formally reported to the Inspector General of Police as well as the head of CID, stating that the incident on 2019.04.18 was an explosive test. However, due to the lack of proper investigation into the incident until the Easter Sunday attack, a key opportunity to apprehend the perpetrators was missed.

Upon examination of the intelligence reports submitted to the investigative commissions regarding the attack, it becomes evident that not only did the local intelligence agency provide information, but also the Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB), India's internal security and counter-intelligence agency under the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, accurately foresaw the impending attacks. This information was disseminated not only to the then Inspector General of Police and the Secretary of the Ministry of Defense but also to the officers responsible for crime and investigation.

Their acknowledgement of receiving this crucial information is documented. Despite being forewarned, no preventive measures were taken to thwart the attack. This apparent failure to act raises serious questions about accountability and highlights a disturbing trend of negligence. That was a collective failure.

The balance sheet of five years since this tragedy is that there has been a concerted effort to obscure the truth by proliferating conspiracy theories, thereby masking this dereliction of duty. This deliberate attempt to deflect attention from institutional failures through the propagation of unfounded narratives not only undermines public trust but also obstructs the implementation of preventive mechanisms to ensure non-recurrence.

(The writer is a Sri Lankan journalist. Views are personal)

SINCE MARCH 2017, THERE HAVE BEEN 11 SIGNIFICANT INCIDENTS LEADING UP TO THE EASTER ATTACK, YET NONE HAS UNDERGONE THOROUGH INVESTIGATION

The U-turns and contradictions in Antony's political journey

From advocating communal harmony to his stance on Hindu-Muslim relations, Antony's journey reflects his love for courting controversies

The year was 1993. The Kerala Press Academy (since renamed as Kerala Media Academy) under the ownership of the Kerala Government was having the Mathai Manjooran Memorial Day. Mathai Manjooran was a socialist party leader and was a member of the EMS Namboodiripad-led coalition Government during the 1967-69. He was also a trade union leader who never hesitated to speak his mind. It is unfortunate that he passed away in 1970 at the age of 58.

A K Antony, the quintessential Congress leader was the speaker who delivered the Manjooran Memorial speech and as a journalist, I was there to cover the event. The country was yet to come out of the impact of the demolition of the



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

disputed structure at Ayodhya and the entire secularist forces were up in arms against the Hindus for the "barbaric" act. Not a single day passed in Kerala without communal harmony meetings and all speakers were vying with one another in blaming the Sanatanis for the heinous act and praising Islam as the religion of peace. But Antony chose a different approach in his 45 minutes. He warned the minority com-

munities (read Christians and Muslims) from attacking the Hindus and reminded the two communities that they should be grateful to the Sanatanis for their magnanimity in offering the minorities more than what the Hindus themselves enjoyed. "The minorities have been given more rights and privileges to run their own educational institutions and hospitals while the Hindus were denied the same. We should always bear in mind the truth that the minorities in India enjoy unique rights and privileges that the Hindus do not have and we should be grateful to them for their broad-mindedness," said Antony, which made the next day's headlines. Antony became the chief minister of Kerala for the third

time in 2001 but he quit in 2004 for reasons best known to him, the then Congress president Sonia Gandhi and the then Muslim League boss Mohammed Shihab Ali Thangal. Eight Hindu fishermen were butchered by members of a Muslim extremist organisation at Maradu in Kozhikode district in May 2003 and there was a demand for a CBI probe into the massacre. A prominent Muslim League leader, who later on became a Union Minister in the Manmohan Singh Government played a significant role in offering shelter in a mosque to the assassins. When the issue of the CBI probe came for consideration in the liaison committee meeting of the UDF, the Muslim League leaders warned Antony



who was the then Chief Minister against an investigation by the Central agency. The UDF had won 99 out of the 140 seats at stake and was in a comfortable position. The Muslim League ultimatum against the CBI probe angered Antony and he announced in a public meeting the next day

that political parties, especially the caste and community-based outfits, should not make the Government dance to their tunes with organised bargaining power. That turned out to be the nemesis for Antony as the Gods in Malappuram asked Sonia Gandhi to remove him from the post of chief minister. Despite Antony tendering an apology, the chieftains of the Muslim League, controlling Kerala politics from the Kudappanakkal castle in Panakkad, were not humoured and they insisted on the former's ouster. That was how Antony resigned as the Chief Minister and shifted camp to Delhi. The Sulthans of Malappuram had the last laugh.

Antony knows very well that his shirt and dhoti should be

more secular than that of the CPI(M) and other outfits to stay in the reckoning. That is why the person who wanted the minority communities to be grateful to the Hindus wants the Sanatan Dharma to be demolished. There is nothing surprising in Antony's stance as he was always against the Hindus even as the president of Kerala Students Union, the feeder organisation of the Congress. The group in the Congress party in Kerala has its roots in Antony's grievances over the status enjoyed by Hindu leaders like K Karunakaran and their clout in the High Command. The group in Congress has nothing to do with ideology and Antony's hatred towards Hindus is reflected in his cursing his son Anil Antony join-

ing the BJP. What Antony should have done is to give freedom to 38-year-old Anil to select the party of his choice and wish him all success. Instead of that what Antony has done is to demand the Nehru-Gandhi clan to field candidates for the Lok Saba election from Amethi and Rae Bareilly. He also declared that the Congress party cannot exist without the Nehru-Gandhi family. Isn't this another way of telling that India is India and India is India? Remember, this is the same Antony who ridiculed Indira Gandhi cast his lot with the CPI(M) in 1980 and formed a Government with the Marxists during 1980-1982.

(The writer is special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

EVMs get SC backing

Room for improvement to make them tamper-proof

THE Supreme Court has rejected all petitions seeking 100 per cent verification of Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) votes with their Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips, even as it has ruled out a return to the paper ballot voting system. The court has rightly observed that blindly distrusting any aspect of the system can breed unwarranted scepticism. 'Instead, a critical yet constructive approach guided by evidence and reason should be followed... to ensure the system's credibility and effectiveness,' said Justice Dipankar Datta.

The court has given candidates the option of making a request for an inspection of 5 per cent of the EVMs per Assembly segment in each parliamentary constituency within seven days of the declaration of the result. The expenses for conducting the exercise are to be borne by the candidates themselves; in case any EVM is found to be tampered with, they will get a refund. Even though Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar asserted last month that EVMs were 100 per cent safe, doubts persist about their robustness and reliability.

The court has done well to turn down the demand for tallying all VVPAT slips with EVM votes as this is a potentially cumbersome and time-consuming process that could inordinately delay the poll result. The need of the hour is to ensure that the machines have inbuilt safeguards to make them tamper-proof. It is worrisome that polling was impacted in Marathwada and Vidarbha districts of Maharashtra on Friday due to technical snags in EVMs. Such glitches, though rare, raise doubts about the functioning of the machines and spark allegations of foul play. Electronic voting has been an unqualified success in India. The key now is to improve the efficacy of EVMs through suitable technological interventions.

Water crisis worsens

Reservoir levels plummet to alarming extent

THE latest data from the Central Water Commission paints a stark picture of India's water crisis, with reservoirs across the country registering an alarming decline in their levels. As of April 25, the water available in major reservoirs has plummeted to a mere 30 per cent of their storage capacity. This represents a significant drop compared to the previous year. Insufficient rainfall, compounded by the El Nino phenomenon, has resulted in drought-like conditions. The prolonged dry spell has depleted water reserves, leaving many regions parched and vulnerable.

The eastern and southern regions are bearing the brunt of this crisis as the rapid fall in water levels is exacerbated by a relentless heatwave. The consequences are dire, particularly for Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, where water shortage has assumed critical proportions. Bengaluru is grappling with severe water scarcity, which is impacting everyday life and agricultural activities. The ramifications extend beyond the immediate concerns. Agriculture, a cornerstone of India's economy, is facing major disruptions, with an adverse effect on various crops. With nearly half of India's arable land dependent on monsoon rain, the upcoming rainy season can play a key role in alleviating the situation.

The forecast of above-normal rainfall offers only cautious optimism. Water conservation efforts must be intensified at all levels, from households to agricultural practices and industrial operations. Investments in water infrastructure and management systems are urgently needed to improve storage and distribution efficiency. Sustainable agricultural practices and crop diversification can help reduce water consumption and enhance resilience to droughts. Awareness campaigns to promote water conservation practices and prudent use of this precious resource must be stepped up. Swift and decisive action must be taken to avert a looming catastrophe and ensure a secure future for all.

ON THIS DAY... 100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, APRIL 27, 1924

Parties in India

BETWEEN the no-changer, who refuses to see any difference between the Swarajists and the Liberals either in their programme or policy, and the Liberal who refuses to make any difference between the Swarajists and the no-changers, the party so ably led by Chittaranjan Das and Motilal Nehru is verily between the devil and the deep sea. One tells us in season and out of season that the Swarajists have completely adopted the Liberal principle and programme of constitutional opposition and that it is only a lack of courage and candour that makes them still call themselves non-co-operators. The other is equally unwearied in telling us that however the Swarajists may have concealed their real purpose in the Legislative Assembly, they and the orthodox non-co-operators have still everything in common. The first forgets or affects to forget that to say that the Swarajists are only Liberals differently writ is to leave entirely unexplained the tremendous difference between the achievements of the two in the Legislature, and between the situations they have respectively created by their activities. What man of ordinary intelligence and sense of fairness can be blind to this difference? The second forgets that if the Swarajists and no-changers were, indeed, interchangeable terms, public life in India today would not be what it is, whether in its strength or its weakness. And yet there is a sense in which both are right; and this is only too clearly seen by a fourth party to whom the no-changer, the Swarajist and the Liberal are all one and the same thing. We refer to the representatives of vested interests, both official and unofficial.

Infiltrators, inheritance and desperation

The BJP is back to its polarising tricks, while the Opposition is again tying itself in knots

NOUS INDICA
RAJESH RAMACHANDRAN

AS the second phase of this long-drawn-out election gets over, there is a feeling of déjà vu. The BJP is back to its polarising tricks and the Opposition, as usual, is tying itself in knots — a very familiar but distressing poll-time show. The question that begs an answer is: Why did PM Narendra Modi bring in the Muslim factor at the Banswara rally in Rajasthan on April 21? And what a way to do that — *Ghaspaiti* (infiltrators), *mangalsutra* and 'those with more children' were all references made in the same speech.

Now, this election speech is being dissected and analysed to understand the reasons for the detour from development to disharmony, from spaceships to sectarian schisms, from grand aspirations to *gali galauji*. Is it poll-time panic? Is the Opposition gaining ground and the BJP in an existential crisis? It is but normal for any political outfit to step back into its safety zone when the going gets tough.

So, the easy assessment is that the first-round turnout on April 19 and its response have made the BJP and the Sangh Parivar leadership worried, leaving them with the sole option of using the religion card. PM Modi was supposed to have made a stopover in Nagpur on April 20. Did the RSS leadership offer him negative feedback? Such questions are being bandied about while trying to understand the lay of the poll land: is the going getting tough for the BJP?

This writer happened to be in Udhampur on April 20, where the BJP's Dr Jitendra Singh is



RELIGION CARD: If the Muslim consolidation against the BJP is complete and the Hindu response is lukewarm, PM Modi's Banswara speech can be analysed better. ❧

facing a much tougher contest this time than earlier. The Muslim consolidation against the BJP appeared to be strong. One needs to wait till the results to be sure about the role of Ghulam Nabi Azad's Democratic Progressive Azad Party in splitting Muslim votes there.

If the Muslim consolidation against the BJP is complete and the Hindu response is lukewarm, Modi's Banswara speech can be analysed better. It simply means the warning bells are going off. Then the surveys showing unemployment and price rise as dominant poll-time discussion points may actually be influencing non-communal Hindus. If not a tidal wave of anger against the Centre, at least a lack of enthusiasm is on display.

This is all that is needed for a regime change in a regular election; hence, it necessitates the incumbent to make the polls irregular by bringing in the Muslim factor. While critics may term it a dog whistle by the BJP to polarise the voting pattern on religious lines, it is undoubtedly an attempt at communal signalling during electioneering. And the message *Hindu khatre*

Communal signalling is what the cadre terms as an emotional pitch. But even going by this argument, it is clear that the BJP cannot afford to be complacent.

mein hai renders itself for easy translation into the electoral signal of the BJP being in trouble.

Well, BJP insiders insist that the PM's Banswara speech is not about the party being in trouble but about tackling the cadre's complacency by turning on the 'emotional pitch'. Communal signalling is what the cadre terms as an emotional pitch. But even going by this argument, it is clear that the BJP

cannot afford to be complacent and would have to fight hard to clinch every seat.

The imponderable in such a situation is whether communal signalling is enough, whether it is all that a party can do to transcend complacency or even apathy arising out of economic distress. If the people's mood is influenced by inflation and joblessness, it is a case of anti-incumbency, which cannot be overcome merely by communal signalling. Beyond the Muslim factor, there ought to be a pro-incumbency 'Modi factor' to win these elections. And that is being put to the test.

While the BJP is getting tested, the Congress is confusing the voter instead of happily waiting to let the anti-incumbency votes accrue. Rahul Gandhi is talking about an X-ray to find out which community has gained what. But this X-ray, of course, does not show which community has gained what within the Congress elite. This attempt at a caste-based scrutiny of empowerment can become counterproductive if it alienates the intermediary castes.

Meanwhile, Sam Pitroda, the adviser to the father, mother

and children, is talking about inheritance tax — a wonderful idea, only to be rejected by the Congress' rich supporters and then by the party itself. When the Congress claims to be focusing entirely on the poor, the idea of inheritance tax sits well within the framework of a pro-poor agenda. Why shouldn't the filthy rich be taxed, particularly those who have amassed wealth through dubious means? They should be taxed as their laundered wealth is inherited by the next generation.

The Congress and its supporters have rejected the idea straightaway because inheritance is all that the party and the Nehru-Gandhi family can boast of. While there ought to be a tax on any inheritance above Rs 15-20 crore (the tax could be as little as 15 per cent, just to make the inheritors understand the value of undeserved windfall), there should also be a political inheritance tax. No son or daughter should become an Assembly or parliament poll candidate without spending 15 years in a constituency working for the party and the people. That would make the inheritance tax of 15 per cent and 15 years seem reasonable.

Rahul talks about revolution as if he is some Mao or Stalin. Delusions of grandeur apart, he could not make his X-ray of injustice function in Amethi or Rae Bareilly or the rest of Uttar Pradesh when he was the second-most powerful Congress parliamentarian (the first being the Rae Bareilly MP) for 10 years. After all, Uttar Pradesh had elected 21 Congress MPs as late as in 2009. If the election is turning out to be a contest over economic distress, even a debate on inheritance tax will work wonders in a poor country with billionaires who spend thousands of crores on their children's weddings. But for that, Modi should have expended all his pro-incumbency advantage, which does not seem to be the case.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

It is a travesty of true religion to consider one's own religion as superior and other's as inferior. — Mahatma Gandhi

Daughters here today, gone tomorrow

Wg CDR DPS BAJWA (RETD)

A few days after his daughter got married, my close friend called me up, thanking me for attending the wedding. I chided him: 'What is there to thank me for? It was my moral obligation to be with you on this sacred occasion.' There was a pause, and then he became emotional, saying that he and his wife were missing their daughter and could not reconcile themselves to the fact that she had gone to her new home for good. I guess he called me to express his feelings, and felt lighter after shedding a few tears. This made me emotional too, and memories of my daughter's departure after her wedding were rekindled.

As the Punjabi adage goes, '*Dheeyan paraya dhan hundiyan ne*' (daughters are someone else's wealth), but when a daughter is born, parents can barely imagine that one day she will become part of another family.

I recalled how happy we were when our daughter came into our lives. I used to put her to sleep with the music on. From rides in a perambulator, she graduated to a walker, and then started running around the house. When she joined school, she loved it from the beginning and became a confident child.

Seeing a spark of music in her, I hired a tutor who not only taught her how to play the harmonium, but also trained her in classical vocal singing. As she grew up, she started reciting *shabads*. On the way to Hemkunt Sahib, she gave a recital at the base camp, the Gobind Ghat Gurdwara. I was perhaps even more tense and nervous than her as she performed in front of a big congregation. At the end of it, I felt like any father whose daughter makes him proud.

We barely realised when she grew from a teenager to an adult. And then the day came when she got married and left us to live in her new home with her life partner.

It was beyond reconciliation that we had to virtually sever a part of our body to let it flourish in a new family. Initially, the void in our lives was painful, but parents always pray that their daughter remains happy wherever she goes. The news that she was doing well in her new world kept us going. Some of her clothes, books and embroidered table covers/bed covers/cushion covers give us the impression that she is around. Thus, a daughter gets transplanted from her parental home to a new home, adapts to new relations and ultimately becomes an integral part of her husband's family. The reality is that daughters, whom we always thought to be ours, actually belong somewhere else. However, the bonds connecting them with their parents do not weaken, even as they assume a different identity.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PM's remarks unwarranted

Apropos of 'Anxiety in the saffron camp', it was a thought-provoking article. The writer has aptly pointed out that there was palpable anxiety in Prime Minister Modi's voice when he accused the Congress of preparing to take away gold and silver jewellery collected over the years by BJP supporters and distributing it among the minorities, especially Muslims. He could have easily avoided these observations, which have, directly or indirectly, created a gulf between communities. However, voters are well aware of our leaders and their political agendas.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM

Whose mistake?

Apropos of the news report 'EC notice to BJP on PM's Rajasthan rally; Rahul puts Cong in trouble too', in a complete departure from the past, the ECI has refrained from naming PM Modi and Congress star campaigner Rahul Gandhi in separate notices to rival parties. The notices have been sent to the respective party presidents. It is like reprimanding a father when the son has committed a folly. Is the ECI scared of naming the Prime Minister, who has repeatedly violated the model code of conduct? What example has he set for others? It is up to the people now to decide who is wrong or right. What signals is the Election Commission sending out to the masses? Can we expect a free and fair election?

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Tesla in India

Referring to the article, 'Tesla's troubles and Musk's delayed tryst with India', investment and production of Tesla electric vehicles (EVs) will give a much-needed push to the EV ecosystem in the country. Perhaps it was one of the reasons the Indian government announced the e-vehicle policy before the model code of conduct came into effect. High-profile billionaire Elon Musk has already acknowledged that India is the world's fastest-growing car market as it is the most populous country. An affordable car is critical to Tesla's success in India. Tesla is looking for fresh markets after its sales dwindled in the US and China, as is evident in the price cut it has implemented there.

SK SINGH, BY MAIL

Banks' casual attitude

With reference to the editorial, 'RBI cracks the whip', private banks usually have a very casual attitude towards instructions of the Reserve Bank of India. Kotak Mahindra Bank was found guilty of deficiencies in its online and digital operating procedures leading to frequent inconvenience to customers. The bank has been asked to stop issuing new credit cards and opening online accounts. The RBI is fully justified in taking such steps to protect the economy as well as the people from digital fraud. This should serve as a lesson to other banks not to indulge in practices which erode the trust of the common man.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

Political masters of police

Apropos of the article 'Police accountability beset by myriad challenges', it is a fact that the police force is tormented by problems that affect its performance. The biggest problem is acquiescing to the political masters, who force it to violate laws to carry out their unlawful orders. The police force finds itself in a bind and suffers unnecessarily. It earns the wrath of the common man. There is latent frustration in cops that ultimately finds expression in indirect ways. All problems faced by the police need to be studied and resolved. The police should never remain understaffed. Modern techniques of investigation need modern equipment. All efforts should be made to bridge the public-police gap.

SUDESH KUMAR SHARMA, KAPURTHALA

'Indifferent' farmers

Refer to the news report 'Ambala: Farmers' agitation hits porters, shopkeepers'; it is intriguing and frustrating to learn that the farmers' agitation has hit the public hard, taking away people's livelihoods. The protesting farmers are solely acting according to their whims and fancies. They should have taken legal recourse to get their grievance addressed instead of finding ways to inconvenience the public. The Railways must approach the courts to seek immediate intervention to bring much-needed relief to thousands of people affected by the agitation.

KUMAR GUPT, BY MAIL

Develop border villages to counter Chinese designs



LT GEN PRADEEP BALI (RETD)
MILITARY COMMENTATOR

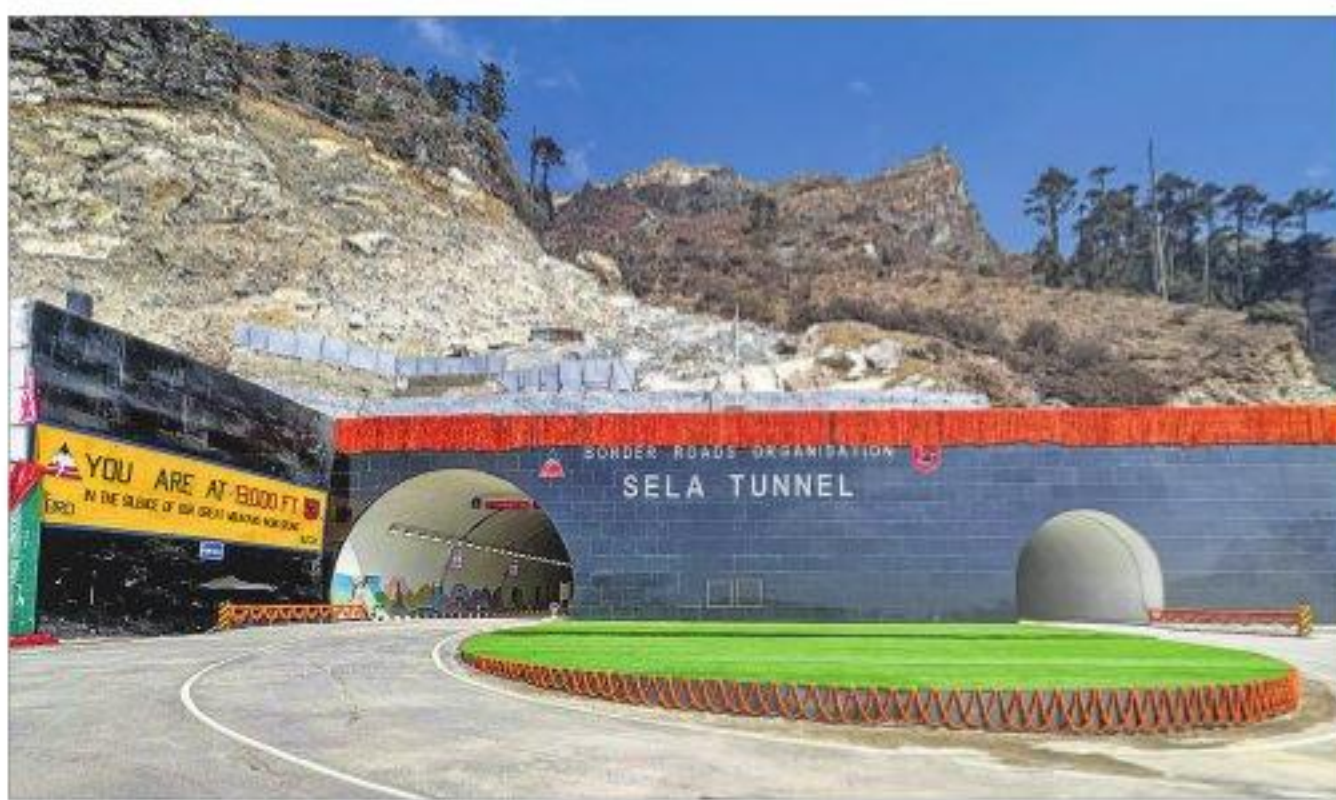
CHINA has a penchant for reinventing history and tweaking geographic realities as this suits its hegemonic interests and designs. This takes the shape of manufacturing 'facts on the ground'. While the Chinese have often staked their claims to vast swathes of Indian territory, they have been on a spree of renaming habitations and terrain features in Arunachal Pradesh in recent years. The Chinese Civil Affairs Ministry released the first list of such newly invented names in 2017, mentioning six places. The second list, renaming 15 locations, was brought out in 2021, followed by 11 new names in 2023. The fourth and the latest list under this geographical name game, covering 30 places in Arunachal, which the Chinese refer to as Zangnan, came out on April 1, 2024. As expected, India has strongly objected to and rejected this gimmickry.

Parallel to this exercise, in the garb of developing border areas north of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), China has been establishing settlements called Xiaokang or

'prosperous villages'. While over 600 of these border habitations have come up in recent years, 175 more such villages are planned for development. This entire process is ostensibly being carried out to bolster its territorial claims and serve the purpose of creating infrastructure for dual use by its People's Liberation Army (PLA). Here, the Chinese stratagem of legal warfare is in play as settled populations are not to be disturbed as and when the LAC is finally demarcated, as per the 2005 Border Defence Cooperation Agreement with India.

Similar shades of this Chinese strategy can be seen in its disputes with other nations. The Senkaku islands, administered by Japan, are claimed by Beijing with a Chinese name — Diaoyu. It is also well known that China's nine-dash line to buttress its territorial claims over the entire South China Sea (SCS) is against international laws, particularly the United Nations Convention of the Laws of the Sea. This claim line overlaps the Exclusive Economic Zones of Brunei, Indonesia, Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. China has been pouring concrete into the seas, converting shoals and rocky outcrops into 'islands'. The objective behind this manufactured geography is securing military advantage and presenting its neighbours with a fait accompli.

This proclivity of taking geo-



BULWARK: The recently inaugurated Sela tunnel, the all-weather link to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, is aimed at bolstering India's operational preparedness along the LAC. PH

graphical and historical liberties was in ample display in western Bhutan in 2017, when the PLA tried to occupy the Doklam plateau right up to the Jhampheri ridge. This riled India as it would have impinged upon its security concerns, and had to be physically stopped by the Army.

An interesting case of geographical emasculation is that of the Tibet region, occupied by China in 1951 and taken under complete control in 1959. Chinese rulers created the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), which roughly corresponds to what may be called 'Political Tibet' and is much smaller in size than the actual Tibet. Historically, 'Ethnic Tibet' consisted of three major areas — U-Tsang,

India needs to emphatically call out any changes, historical or geographical, which China tries to engineer.

Kham and Amdo. Amdo was amalgamated into the Qinghai province in 1955 and the Kham area into the Ganze Autonomous Prefecture in 1957. Similarly, other areas with Tibetan ethnicity were merged with Gansu and Yunnan. The TAR consists only of U-Tsang out of the original Tibetan homeland. Between 1911 and 1951, Tibet was free of the paramourncy of the Republic of China. The 14th Dalai Lama was born in Amdo and his bodyguards are from the Kham area, renowned for the warrior traits of its ethnic Tibetans.

China has also engineered an internal migration from the overcrowded Han homeland in the east to various parts of Tibet, and most of the border vil-

lages coming up across the LAC have ethnic Hans living in them. These Chinese migrants are incentivised with major economic benefits — a key element in the Sincisation of Tibet.

India's response to China's Machiavellian strategies has varied from indifference to jingoism. The latest renaming game has elicited a very measured response from Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. Addressing a public gathering in eastern Arunachal on April 9, he said: "I want to tell our neighbours that changing names will not achieve anything. Tomorrow, if we change the names of places or states in China, will it make them ours?"

Our border issue with China has largely remained a bilateral concern. However, the US, of late, has been throwing its weight behind India. The recent statement by its Ambassador in India Eric Garcetti, that "China has no business renaming places that are part of India's territory," was a welcome step. Further east, the Chinese perfidy in the SCS has invoked strong international reactions. The Quad alignment, which includes India, Australia, the US and Japan, the AUKUS grouping (Australia, UK and US) — which Japan is likely to join soon — and the trilateral alignment among the US, Japan and the Philippines are all focused on a rules-based world order in the SCS

to counter Chinese hegemonic designs.

India needs to emphatically and repeatedly call out any changes, historical or geographical, which China tries to engineer. We need to strongly raise these issues and place our objections on record to counter manufactured claims, lest they should become accepted facts.

We suffer from a terrain disadvantage across the borders, for the area on our side is geographically hostile with steep mountainous terrain and thick forests in most parts, right up to the LAC. Our own area and infrastructure development has to stay the course, whatever the cost, and the Border Roads Organisation has been trying to meet this challenge. The recently inaugurated Sela tunnel in Arunachal is aimed at bolstering India's operational preparedness along the LAC. However, the enormity of the task requires capability enhancement for operating in high altitudes.

We need to encourage settlement in border villages in order to check migration. Economic opportunities and faster communication are stepping stones in this regard. While the Army can lend a helping hand, the policy formulation to facilitate all this is the domain of the political leadership. Furthermore, the sensitivities of the Indian citizens who populate these border areas need to be always kept in mind.

Punjab must prioritise employment, employability to turn the tide



BS GHUMAN
FORMER VICE CHANCELLOR,
PUNJABI UNIVERSITY, PATIALA

THE India Employment Report 2024: Youth Employment, Education and Skills, published recently by the International Labour Organisation and the Institute for Human Development, has reignited the debate on employment and unemployment. Much of the discourse has focused on the national scenario. A perusal of the report reveals wide state-wise variations.

State differentials have been highlighted by constructing an employment condition index based on seven indicators: percentage of workers employed in regular formal work; worker-population ratio; proportion of casual workers; proportion of self-employed workers with income below poverty line; average monthly earnings of casual workers; unemployment rate of the youth with secondary or higher level of education; and youth not in employment, education or training. The index ranges

from 0 to 1, with '1' depicting the best scenario and '0' the worst.

In the case of Punjab, the index was 0.45 in 2005; it improved to 0.54 in 2012, fell to 0.48 in 2019 and rose to 0.53 in 2022. States like Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Telangana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh have fared better than Punjab. The state's position has worsened over time. Punjab was ranked 13th in 2005 and 16th in 2022. Its performance fell below the national average in 2019 (0.5) and 2022 (0.65). The decline in the index ranking of Punjab is due to overall deterioration of employment conditions, particularly among men. For example, the male employment index was 0.52 in 2005 (the state's rank was seventh); it dropped to 0.5 in 2022, pushing the state to the 18th position.

In Punjab, the rate of unemployment among educated youth (aged 15-29) has increased over the years. From 22.95 per cent in 2005, it jumped to 26.33 per cent in 2022. The rate among the male youth witnessed a considerable increase from 13.95 per cent in 2005 to 22.63 per cent during this period, while in the case of females, it declined from 52.94 per cent in 2005 to 39 per cent in 2022. The unemployment rate among the



CONCERN: The rate of unemployment among educated youth in Punjab has gone up over the years. FILE PHOTO

educated youth is likely to increase due to stringent conditions imposed by the Canadian Government on international students and fixing of students' quota province-wise.

Factors pertinent to the demand and supply sides are causing unemployment. On the demand side, the situation is not very buoyant as Punjab's economy grew at a moderate rate of 5 per cent per annum between 2011-12 and 2021-22, which was lower than that of Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Haryana, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and the all-India average.

The state govt should prepare a comprehensive employment policy for reaping benefits of the demographic dividend.

In the agriculture sector, the demand for labour is declining as the employment opportunities are shrinking, mainly due to mechanisation. The industrial sector is dominated by small units, which offers mediocre jobs at low wages much below the expectations of the local youth. In the service sector, wages are slightly better, but still below the aspirations of the educated youth. In distress, the youth either migrate to other parts of the country or abroad for jobs; in the latter case, they sometimes become victims of unscrupulous travel agents.

On the supply side, each year, a large number of young people are entering

the workforce. Punjab had 79 lakh youth in 2021, constituting 39 per cent of the working population. Around 36 lakh students were enrolled in senior secondary schools, higher learning institutions, polytechnic and industrial training institutes during the 2022-23 session. The employability rate of the students, however, is very low. According to an estimate, around 10 per cent of the general graduates and 25 per cent of the technical graduates are employable. The remaining are added to the pool of unemployment.

What is the way out? In Punjab, the youth account for 39 per cent of the working population; this will decline to 30 per cent by 2036. Thus, for reaping benefits of the demographic dividend, the government should prepare a comprehensive employment policy in consultation with experts, professionals and stakeholders. The policy should have short-, medium- and long-term employment generation targets with a provision for a monitoring mechanism. Yearly progress should be put in the public domain for social auditing. Also, the government should explore the possibility of exporting skilled human resources to labour-deficient countries by signing memoranda of understanding (MoUs). The

MoUs should be implemented by the Department of Employment Generation and Training. This route, being economical and secure, will provide opportunities to talented youth from poor families for overseas jobs. In the light of the growing number of technical graduates and their aspirations for high-quality jobs, the government should incentivise setting up of industries in the fields of smart technologies, knowledge and high-value services. Educational institutions should introduce courses in the sunrise sectors, particularly relating to emerging technologies. For improving the employability of the graduates, the institutions should integrate general education with vocational education, as recommended by the National Education Policy, 2020. Finally, the youth should come out of their comfort zone and participate actively in the Startup India Programme, along with the Startup Punjab Programme and self-employment policy initiatives. Notably, Punjab was among the top-performing states in the fourth edition of the states' startup rankings, covering the period from August 1, 2021, to December 31, 2022, suggesting huge potential of this mode of employment generation.

QUICK CROSSWORD

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9			10				
11			12			13	14
15			16			17	18
19			20			21	22
23			24			25	
26			27			28	
29			30			31	

- ACROSS**
- Pavilion on elephant's back (6)
 - Unwavering supporter (8)
 - Show silent resentment (6)
 - Evade (8)
 - A skirt for ballerina (4)
 - Sand-coloured (5)
 - Spend time in idleness (4)
 - Breathtaking (3-9)
 - In case of special future need (3,1,5,3)
 - A stone fruit (4)
 - Sprang (5)
 - Forbid authoritatively (4)
 - Elated (8)
 - Exceptional creative ability (6)
 - Publicity (8)
 - If not (6)
- DOWN**
- Wanted (8)
 - Europe-based US painter (8)
 - Competent (4)
 - Too ready to shoot (7-5)
 - Vegetable of onion genus (4)
 - Lawsuit (6)
 - Confidential warning (3-3)
 - Go as fast as (4,4,4)
 - Take pleasure in (5)
 - Vacuous (5)
 - Sticky (8)
 - A summary (8)
 - Affix (6)
 - Provide (6)
 - East Asian desert (4)
 - Contemptible (4)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Cider, 4 Leaflet, 8 Nil, 9 Bona fides, 10 Ascetic, 11 Rugby, 13 Trophy, 15 Aspire, 18 Fixed, 19 Ambient, 21 Come of age, 23 Pea, 24 Symptom, 25 Tight.

Down: 1 Contact, 2 Delacroix, 3 Rebut, 4 Lunacy, 5 As far as, 6 Lid, 7 Tasty, 12 Guinea pig, 14 Hideout, 16 Extract, 17 Napalm, 18 Focus, 20 Bleat, 22 Mum.

SU DO KU

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

V. HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

APRIL 27, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Vaishakh Shaka 7
- Vaishakh Parvishite 15
- Hijri 1445
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 3, up to 8.19 am
- Parigha Yoga up to 3.23 am
- Jyeshtha Nakshatra up to 4.28 am
- Moon enters Sagittarius sign 4.28 am

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	34	23
New Delhi	39	24
Amritsar	38	22
Bathinda	38	22
Jalandhar	36	22
Ludhiana	37	22
Bhiwani	36	23
Hisar	38	22
Sirsa	38	23
Dharamsala	32	14
Manali	23	05
Shimla	22	12
Srinagar	19	11
Jammu	32	21
Kargil	17	06
Leh	13	03
Dehradun	35	19
Mussoorie	23	15

TEMPERATURE IN °C