

WhatsApp, Take It Easy, Seek the Law

Right to conduct business may be easier route

WhatsApp cannot issue GoI — or any government, for that matter — a fait accompli over encryption. The right to privacy is by no means absolute in any system of law, and governments are well within their rights to seek with due process information for law enforcement. There can be debate over what constitutes due process, and how to go about satisfying its requirements. In these pursuits, law and technology need to come closer on the art of the possible. But absolute positions, such as threatening to stop services if forced to dilute encryption on occasion, can end up badly. Indian courts, unfortunately, have a long list of precedents that fetter fundamental rights. So, it would be better for everyone that things don't come to such a pass.

On the matter of what it will take for WhatsApp to comply with the requirements of law enforcement in India, it may find a more sympathetic legal view on its right to conduct business. If data storage and retrieval compliances become unsustainable, a case can be made out. However, the new data privacy law applies to a wide range of businesses, including financial services. Social media platforms should find it difficult to make the argument for a carveout, either due to the nature of their business, or due to its scale. The case weakens when monetisation of user data becomes a key component of the business plan of social media.

WhatsApp may find it fruitless to go freedom-shopping in a quest for absolutism. This question cannot be answered through economic negotiation, but by legal remedy to power, be that of the individual or of the state. The instant-messaging service would serve freedom of speech by testing its limits in the jurisdictions it operates in, and not by trying to arm-twist lawmakers through vague threats of service denial. As any global business, it needs to adapt to local conditions, particularly with countries trying to harmonise privacy protection. That process is in its infancy and will take a while to mature.

Quality Matters in the Knowledge Factory

Earlier this month, UGC announced that students with 4-year undergrad degrees and 75% aggregate marks or equivalent grades can now sit for the National Eligibility Test (NET) to qualify for a PhD programme. Earlier, NET candidates were required to hold a master's degree with a minimum of 55% marks. Two reasons have been cited for this change: the new system will simplify the process for students and open many research opportunities. 'We will have a lot of young people getting into research at a very young age and they're really creative,' explained UGC chairman M Jagadesh Kumar.

On the face of it, the decision seems alright, ostensibly 'democratising' access to research opportunities. But there could be a problem. The rush to incorporate undergrads into PhD programmes could undermine research quality. Pursuit of a doctoral degree demands more than 'creativity'. It requires rigorous critical thinking, methodological thoroughness and originality of thought. This requires going through a certain experiential period. A 2-year MA degree — MPhil was scrapped earlier — is an excellent time to prep for a PhD. Besides, completing a PhD is not just about writing a thesis but also about making a meaningful contribution to a field. Absence of empirical data to substantiate supposed benefits of the new policy doesn't help. Transparent communication about expected outcomes and potential challenges is essential to build trust in any education system.

India wants to be a knowledge economy. The focus should not be solely on quantity — more PhD holders — but also on nurturing a culture of quality and intellectual inquiry without cutting corners. Quality needs to be paramount, even as efforts are made to enhance accessibility and inclusivity.



JUST IN JEST

Alejandra Marisa Rodriguez shows that beauty is not always a casualty of time

Age, Thou Hast Not Lost Thy Labour

No, sorry, Keats old chap. A thing of beauty is not a joy forever. Cellular degradation — a.k.a. age — is something the poet didn't really factor in, possibly because he died at 25. But, rarely, there comes someone who tells you, far more effectively than rising life expectancy figures, how far we've progressed to age better. Beauty, especially of the feminine kind, is considered to have a correlation with age. After a certain point, there is usually a de-beautification process. Exceptions are usually termed as 'graceful'. But Alejandra Marisa Rodriguez has bucked the trend in a context that holds beauty to strict, albeit malleable, standards: Miss Universe contest.

At the not-so-tender age of 60, the ex-journalist and legal adviser from La Plata in Argentina was crowned Miss Universe for the Buenos Aires province. This is no 'woke' gesture of giving a senior citizen an ego boost and spreading the (dodgy) message that 'age is just a number'. Alejandra is a stunner — beauty, indeed, being skin-deep, you can't fudge it. Two things have got her the title: the Miss Universe contest allowing people beyond the earlier 18-28 age band to participate in 2023; and, in Alejandra's words, 'living a healthy life, eating well, and physical activity'. The point she proved — very strikingly — is living longer isn't the point. Living longer better is.

In today's tech-driven landscape, we need new economic thinking on equity and sustainability

Think of Inequality Control



Sam Pitroda

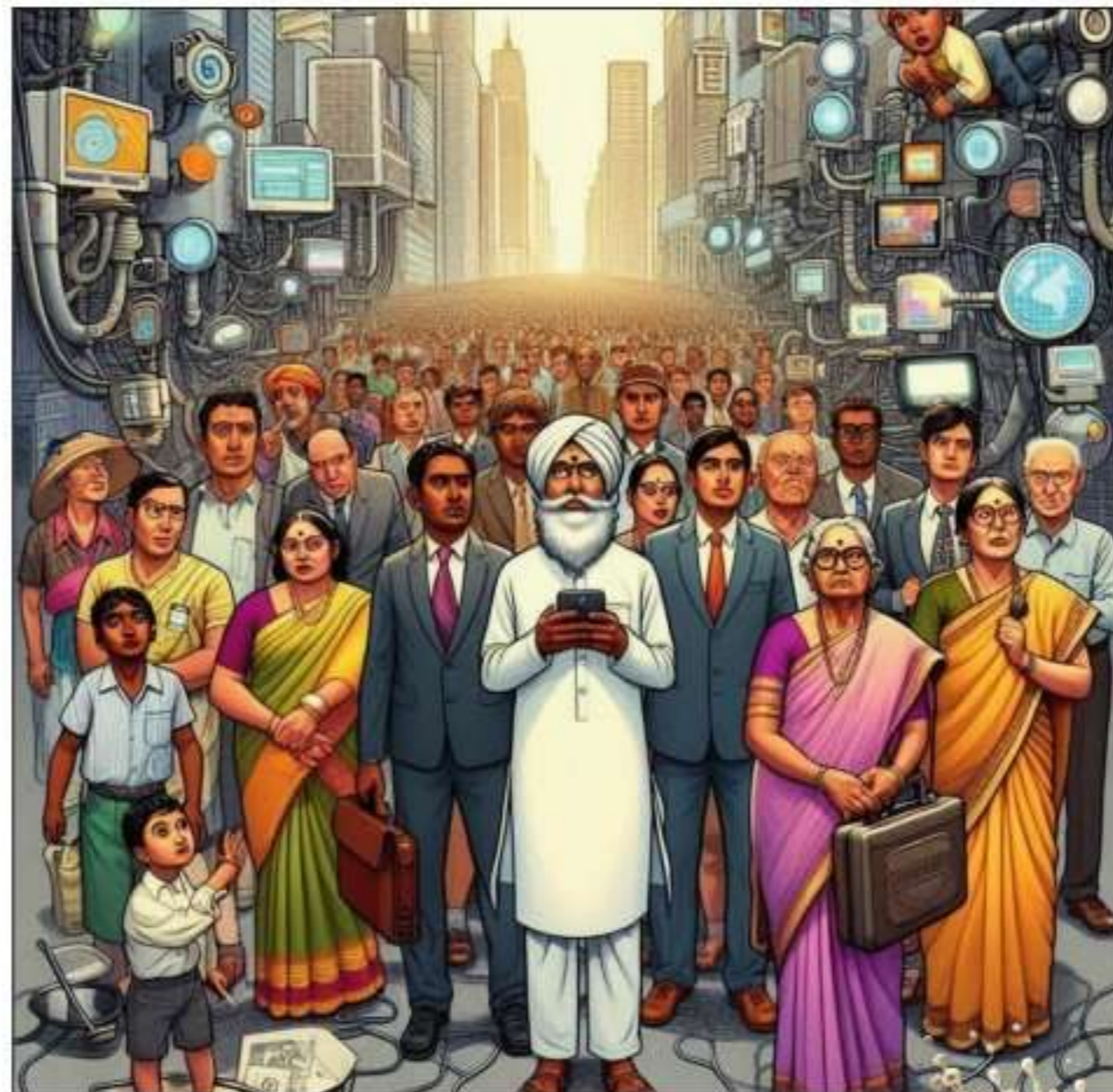
For the first time in history, all 8 bn people on our planet are essentially connected with super-speed networks of voice, data and video. This has transformed government processes, businesses and personal lives in a way never imagined before. It has transformed products, services and financial systems to a point we need a totally new approach and thinking to understand, appreciate and expand our economies.

So, do we use hyper-connectivity to do the same things we have been doing? Or do we do things we have never done before to take humanity and economies to the next level?

The first tech revolution started with the invention of transistor in 1947. It ended with internet, smartphones and applications around 2020 when the pandemic put our world on a long pause. It was a message from Nature that we're all interconnected, interrelated and interdependent in the world. It also exposed inequality and injustice to the poor and marginalised, and economic migrants across the globe. It forced people to look inward and ask fundamental questions about life, livelihoods, relationships, community, work, business, globalisation, government,...

Unfortunately, we still feel that huge stimuli and relief packages will bring us back on track. But debt in every country

Today's model optimises only shareholder value, not stakeholder value where labour, supplier and community are at the core for optimisation of human development



Fix it for real viksit

has increased substantially, with the financial burden shifting to the next generation.

Today, the six largest tech companies — Microsoft, Apple, Nvidia, Google, Amazon and Meta — without any traditional production infrastructure, are worth \$15 tn. In this new reality, businesses are valued in billions without any products or revenues. How do we explain all this?

Global income inequality, visible in vast disparities in earnings and wealth distribution, has increased in an era of rapid tech and economic growth. AI-related new technologies will further exacerbate the situation. The chasm between the affluent and people at large continues to widen posing complex social cohesion, economic instability, political polarisation, potential violence and unsustainable development that require urgent innovative, multi-prong strategies, policies and programmes.

According to Oxfam, since 2020, 5 bn people have become poorer, while the world's five richest men have more than doubled their fortune at the rate of \$14 mn an hour. Billionaires are \$3.3 tn richer than they were in 2020. The richest 1% own 43% of all global financial

assets. India is no exception.

India's top 40 richest own more wealth than over 700 mn people. This disparity is visible in our streets, shops, farms, factories and villages. Reasons for income inequality include a corporate attitude towards labour wages, gender inequality, tax loopholes, gov licensing, incentives, monopolies, financial engineering, globalisation and a business-politics nexus. This has given rise to a new type of colonisation of the old MNC, East India Company variety.

This model optimises only shareholder value, as opposed to stakeholder value where labour, supplier and community are at the core for the optimisation of human development. Business schools also teach more about 'extracting values rather than creating values' through optimisation of productivity, efficiency, cost and capital to ultimately deliver and reward maximum profits.

Today's emphasis is on centralised management with command and control, as opposed to decentralisation with

cooperation, collaboration and cocreation. The present model is also based on a top-down approach with the hope of 'trickle down', something that hasn't materialised. As a result, a few are super-busy, and most have nothing meaningful to do.

There is another organisational architecture followed by cooperatives in which shareholders isn't just with investors but with workers and producers. Milk cooperatives are an excellent example of this. Mohandas Gandhi proposed trusteeship based on the principle that wealth and resources aren't owned by individuals, but are held in trust for the benefit of all members of society.

The idea of trusteeship has not received due recognition in capitalist systems, primarily because it runs counter to its traditional focus on maximising profits for shareholders. Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement was one such idea and experiment.

Today, we live in an economy of surplus, not scarcity. We can produce anything, but wind up producing only for those who can afford to buy, not for people who need it. The world spends \$2 tn a year on the military-industrial complex while knowing we can eliminate hunger for \$200 bn a year. The best brains are busy solving problems of the rich who don't have problems to solve. As a result, problems of the poor don't get the needed talent. Tech that's supposed to connect is dividing us through amplification of misinformation and hate on social media.

All of this undermines social mobility, stifles human potential, and fosters a sense of injustice and resentment among marginalised communities. There is a new world in the making. It's difficult to explain or sustain our future with old economic theories related to GDP, GNP, per-capita income, trade deficit, capital investments, forex reserve, employment, etc.

The old model doesn't make sense any more. We need to shed the colonial mindset that only focuses on profit and power play. We need new economic thinking on equity, inclusion, justice and sustainability.

The writer is former adviser to PM



THE SPEAKING TREE

Power of Perception

ANANDMURTI GURUMAA

Insults often stir up feelings of hurt, anger or indignation. Yet, the question arises: do insults truly have the power to wound us, or is it our perception of those words that determines their impact?

When someone directs an insult towards us, it may stem from various reasons: perhaps they're upset, frustrated or expressing their own insecurities. However, the crux of the matter lies in how we interpret these words. Our minds play a pivotal role in defining the significance of verbal interactions.

Indeed, our dependency on others' opinions runs deep. We give weight to both harsh criticisms and heartfelt compliments, allowing them to shape our self-image. But is this reliance justified? Words, in essence, are merely vehicles of expression; it's the meaning we attach to them that holds sway over our emotions.

Central to feeling insulted is the expectation of respect. When we anticipate acknowledgement and admiration from others, any deviation from this ideal can feel like a blow to our self-worth. However, adopting a mindset of non-expectation can serve as a powerful shield against insults.

The key lies in self-respect and self-assurance. Ultimately, no one can insult us without our consent. By reframing our perspective and nurturing our self-respect, we transcend the grasp of external judgement, and are able to navigate interpersonal interactions with grace and resilience.

Chat Room

Food Truisms In a Capsule

Apropos 'Beat Heat by What You Eat' by KumKum Dasgupta (Apr 29), the older generation always consumed natural, seasonal and fresh foods, and did not suffer from diseases such as cancer and neurological and heart ailments that are on the rise now. The chemicals used for pest control today can have toxic effects and cause serious health hazards. Chemicals used to ripen fruit too can cause many ailments. Nature produces fruit and vegetables according to the season. In winter, we have crops and root vegetables that give heat to the body. In summer, we have cooling foods with high water content like cucumber, melon and coconut water. Food becomes medicine when we choose seasonal, locally grown items, and eat according to the cycles of nature.

INDIRA SATYANARAYAN
By email

Leverage Realty For Growth

The Edit, 'Welcome to the Great Indian Indoors' (Apr 27), indicates the realty sector, particularly when geared to HNI and middle classes, has a multiplier effect. The focus should be on middle-class housing needs in areas near industrial clusters. Over-

laying jobs with housing needs will result in shifting urban bases, which is the need of the hour. Governments should respond by focusing on infrastructural development of roads, education, health and security to facilitate this shift. Synergies between governments and the corporate sector will make the smart cities beacons of opportunities.

VINOD JOHRI
Delhi

Weather Plays Spoilsport

Apropos 'Maharashtra, UP Kerala, MP, Bihar See Fall in Voting' by Anubhuti Vishnoi (Apr 27), the heatwave is a major factor for the low turnout. With schools and colleges already observing summer vacations in some states, many voting families are off on a holiday. Considering the weather, the general election is ill-timed and stretches over a long period. Summers will get progressively warmer, and it would make sense to hold the elections during cooler months and over a shorter span of time. It is time to reset the election calendar.

S N KABRA
Mumbai

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

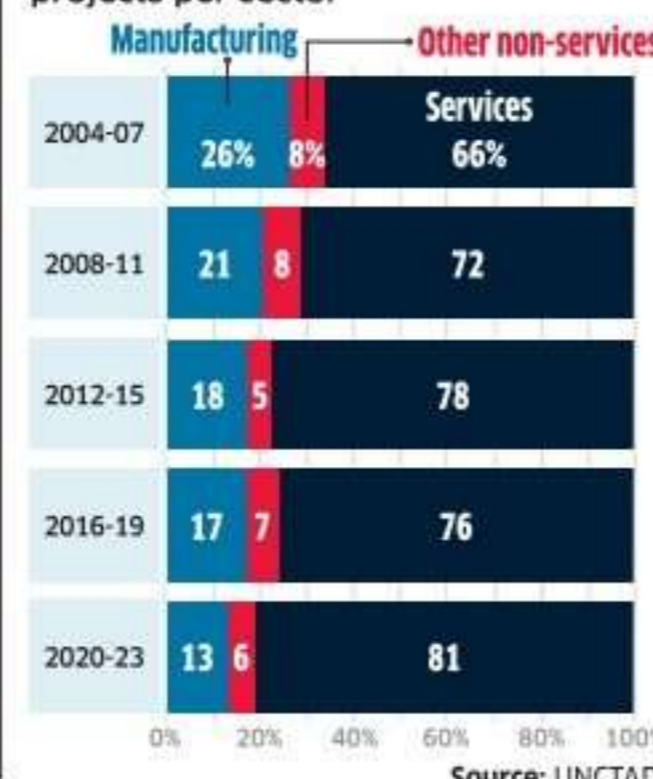
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There were politicians on a spree,
Who decried votebank politics with glee.
But come election day,
They'd beg in dismay,
For each vote like a desperate plea!

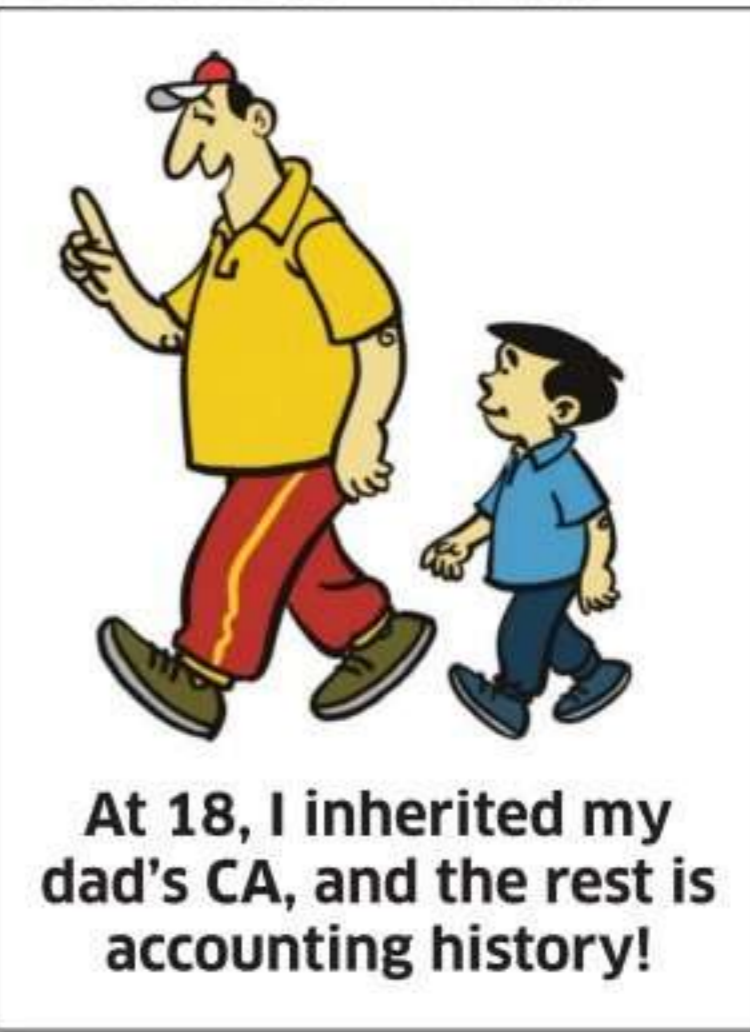
FDI: Shift to Services

FDI is increasingly favouring services over manufacturing. According to a report, Global economic fracturing and shifting investment patterns, from 2004 to 2023, the share of cross-border greenfield projects in the services sector jumped from 66% to 81%. Simultaneously, investment in services within manufacturing industries nearly doubled to about 70%. In contrast, FDI in manufacturing stagnated for two decades before experiencing a significant downturn, with a negative compound annual growth rate of -12% in the three years after the COVID-19 outbreak...

Services increase their weight in foreign direct investment



Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



At 18, I inherited my dad's CA, and the rest is accounting history!

Careful With the Cycles



Dhiraj Nim

A long-term financial cycle has coincided with, and bolstered, the current investment cycle. That's good and bad news for India's growing economy. The outcome is a higher investment-to-GDP ratio. But there is need for caution. If the financial cycle runs ahead of the business cycle unchecked, eventual stresses could be severe, worsening the inevitable downturn.

Financial cycles reflect a co-movement of variables, such as bank credit and asset prices. Booms and busts in a financial cycle influence consumption and investment, which can accentuate the business cycle.

An econometric exercise to extract cyclical behaviour of five variables — bank credit, equity prices, house prices, bank credit-to-GDP ratio and real effective exchange rate — shows a long-term financial cycle in India is currently in its expansionary phase, after troughing in 2017-18. Over the last 20 years, India's financial and investment cycles have closely followed each other, with their peaks and troughs virtually coinciding. Other observations reinforce the role of a financial cycle behind the ongoing investment recovery.

► **Construction focus** The current capex boom has been heavy on construction. Construction-related capex generally makes up half of India's total investments. The next biggest component is industrial capex, with around 40% share, which has recovered much less impressively.

Many high-frequency indicators highlight this split. The gap between indus-

trial production of construction goods vs capital goods has been widening, the recovery in the share of capital goods imports has been meek, and real estate and housing loans have grown at a much faster clip than industrial loans.

GoI's strong support for infra has helped the construction sector. But this is not the whole story. General government capex is usually about 15% of the total investment in the economy, which is not large enough to deliver consistently strong growth. This leads to the second attribute that reinforces the financial cycle.

► **Rise in housing demand** There has been a significant rise in private real estate and housing demand. Housing and real estate loans are growing at their fastest pace on record at over 20% y-o-y. House prices have risen, especially for costlier homes. Unconventional indicators, such as Google searches for premium sanitary fixtures, also show a surge in the last few years.

An upswing in the construction sector, supported by private real estate demand, reflects a classic expansion in the financial cycle. A financial cycle expansion buoy real estate prices, which virtuously feeds into construction activity, mainly when fuelled by credit. Industrial capex, in contrast, is not self-feeding. It requires persistently strong demand to warrant capacity expansion. This dynamic begs caution on three fronts:

● All cycles peak. A financial cycle in India typically expands for 7-8 years and falls for about nine. The last two times financial cycle peaked in India was around the 1991 balance-of-payments crisis

and global financial crisis of 2007-08.

When financial cycles peak, they have an unravelling effect, revealing the stresses that build up during the expansion stage. Irrational exuberance in lending and asset prices typically forms the root of these stresses. If history repeats itself, the current cycle could peak around 2025-26, and investment cycle may follow suit. If industrial capex remains lacklustre, investment rate may not exceed 34% of GDP by 2025-26. If it does, the peak could be delayed at over 35% of GDP.

● Financial cycle expansions can lead to overestimation of potential growth. India is expected to record average growth of above 7% for the three years ending 2024-25 without stoking macro imbalances like core inflation or CAD. Along with a higher investment rate, this has led many to believe India's potential growth is in the 8% ballpark, which is quite optimistic.

A bottom-up analysis shows India's potential growth has likely risen to 6.5-7% from 6% or below before the pandemic, on the back of improving export ecosystem, tech diffusion, infra build-up and policy focus on manufacturing. The acceleration in growth delivered by the expanding financial cycle, primarily via real estate, is cyclical and not structural.

● A financial cycle expansion calls for strict regulatory oversight. The memory of large non-performing loans burdening the banking system during the last decade is still fresh. In that vein,

recent regulatory tightening via macro-prudential measures by RBI and Sebi is a prudent pre-emptive step to ensure long-term economic stability.



Turns can be a challenge

The writer is economist, ANZ Research

Opinion

TUESDAY, APRIL 30, 2024



FINANCING CLIMATE ACTION
UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres

Many developing countries are suffocating in debt & paying outlandish rates for capital. That makes it virtually impossible for them to take sufficient climate action. Developed countries must deliver on their finance commitments & enable a surge in climate ambition

Trading with Pakistan

The big question is whether the preconditions for normalising bilateral commerce exist

HOW SHOULD INDIA respond to the flurry of signals from Pakistan regarding the resumption of bilateral trade which has been in deep freeze since 2019? Obviously, any response is likely only after a new government is in office in June. Businessmen have urged Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to initiate bilateral talks to promote commerce which would benefit its cash-strapped economy. Earlier this month, Maryam Sharif, chief minister of Punjab, while addressing 3,000 Sikh pilgrims at Kartarpur Sahib, made an even stronger pitch for the improvement of ties with India and quoted her father, Nawaz Sharif, who was three times PM, as saying don't fight wars with neighbours, open the doors of friendship and open the doors of your hearts. She also talked about plans to develop the area around Kartarpur Sahib and called for investments from Sikhs around the world. The Punjab CM's views were positively received in New Delhi. In March, foreign minister (now the deputy Prime Minister) Muhammad Ishaq Dar stated that Pakistan may "seriously examine" the question of resuming trade with India as businessmen felt that while imports were ongoing from India, this was via Dubai and Singapore, resulting in higher freight and transshipment costs.

The big question is whether the preconditions for normalising trade exist. From our point of view, the neighbour's continuing sponsorship of cross-border terrorism stands in the way of more commerce. Pakistan, for its part, considers the restoration of the pre-August 5, 2019, status of Jammu and Kashmir as the core issue bedevilling bilateral relations. Islamabad has for long denied most-favoured-nation status to India's goods. MFN status ensures non-discriminatory trade between partner countries. India, too, withdrew MFN status to Pakistan in February 2019 after the Pulwama terror attacks. Unless there is an improvement in this regard, the prospect for normalising commerce is only wishful thinking. India is also mindful of different voices within the Pakistan government on trading with India.

In March 2021, the Economic Coordination Committee announced that it would allow the private sector to import white cotton and sugar from India via the Wagah border. But this decision was swiftly reversed following severe criticism from the political opposition. Dar's remarks on the resumption of trade with India were later denied by the foreign office spokesperson. For such reasons, India has consistently taken the position that the onus is on Pakistan for trade to resume. Interestingly, however, bilateral frictions have not come in the way of some trade. Despite Islamabad's ban on commerce with India, it imports mineral oils and fuels, bituminous substances, sugar and sugar confectionery, organic chemicals, and pharmaceutical products.

There is also no reason why India cannot significantly step up its negligible imports from that country beyond ships, boats, and floating structures, and project goods for special uses. India's trade with Pakistan almost doubled to \$1.1 billion in FY24 (April-February) from \$594.6 million a year earlier. For perspective, our bilateral trade with Bangladesh is 10 times larger at \$11.6 billion in FY24 (April-February). It is also a well-established fact that the scale of informal trade is several multiples larger than formal trade. Clearly, there are interdependencies between India and Pakistan that must be seized on the trade front. Otherwise there will be a huge loss in potential opportunities, contrary to economic theory which states that neighbours often tend to trade more with each other. The upshot is that India must respond to Pakistan's overtures.

UNCERTAIN TIMES
GEOPLITICS AND NATIONAL POLITICS WILL HAVE A MUCH BIGGER IMPACT ON ECONOMIES NOW

Navigating major transitions

ONCE AGAIN, US economic and market forecasters are having a difficult time. Worse, while 2023 surprised on the upside, the deviation from projections in 2024 could be much less favourable.

Recall the start of 2023. Forecasters had overwhelmingly anticipated a difficult year for economic growth, and that this would translate into even more losses for the diversified-portfolio investors who had already suffered one of the worst years on record in 2022. In a now famous October 2022 headline, *Bloomberg* warned: "Forecast for US Recession Within Year Hits 100% in Blow to Biden."

The prediction of a 2023 recession proved correct, but only for Germany and the United Kingdom, not the United States. The contrast was stunning. While the first two countries experienced two quarters of negative growth in the second half of the year, the US economy grew at an annualised rate of around 4%. Meanwhile, the worrisome investment losses incurred earlier in the year yielded to handsome gains overall, owing to the dramatic turnaround in October for both stocks and bonds.

Chastened by that experience, most forecasters entered 2024 with quite a rosy outlook, anticipating that America's growth exceptionalism would continue, as would solid investment returns. Yet the growth data for the first quarter came below the consensus forecast, and inflation has proved stickier than many expected.

The difficulties facing forecasters are complicated by two broader phenomena that could last for years. These can be placed in two categories: transitions and divergences. Many advanced economies have embarked on a transition from a world of deregulation, liberalisation, and fiscal prudence to one oriented around industrial policy, renewed regulation, and sustained budget deficits on a scale that would have been unthinkable previously. Moreover, these economies' policies

MOHAMED A EL-ERIAN

President, Queens' College, University of Cambridge, and professor, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania



are becoming more differentiated, whereas previously they represented common responses to common shocks. Internationally, globalisation is giving way to fragmentation. All this is happening at a time when economies around the world will have different sensitivities to transformational innovations in artificial intelligence, life sciences, sustainable energy, and other fields, as well as to geopolitical conflicts and trends. Moreover, some countries are much more flexible than others when it comes to adjusting factors of production and introducing policy measures to enhance productivity in the face of changing circumstances.

In the absence of common policy commitments and external sources of convergence, the world will be subject to a much wider range of outcomes, on top of potentially more frequent and violent shocks. But this is also a world that, if navigated well, could deliver better long-term productivity-driven growth outcomes that are also more inclusive of planetary limits.

Three issues are key to deciphering what 2024-25 will hold for the US economy, which is now the sole major engine of global growth: the Federal Reserve's reaction function; the resilience of lower-income consumers; and the balance between productivity-boosting innovations and political/social/geopolitical headwinds.

Sticky inflation combined with slower growth will put the Fed between a rock and a hard place. Faced with

growth uncertainties and the new global paradigm of insufficiently flexible aggregate supply, the Fed will need to decide whether to stick with its 2% inflation target or allow for a slightly higher one, at least for now.

The future of American growth exceptionalism also will depend to a considerable degree on lower-income consumers. These households' balance sheets have been deteriorating as pandemic-era savings and stimulus payments have been drawn down, and as credit-card debt has risen. Given high interest rates and some creditors' loss of enthusiasm, this cohort's willingness to consume will hinge on whether the labour market remains tight.

The third factor relates to the tensions between exciting innovations and a fragile political and geopolitical landscape, which makes this the most difficult area in which to offer high-confidence forecasts.

While technological advances promise a new favourable supply shock that could unlock higher growth and drive down inflation, geopolitical developments could do the opposite, as well as limit the scope for macroeconomic policy. Just consider the stagflationary consequences of a geopolitical shock that sends oil above \$100 per barrel, or of a further deterioration in China-US relations. It is easy to imagine how today's "stable disequilibrium" could give way to a more volatile disequilibrium, which would then fuel financial instability.

Growth for the next few years will be driven mainly by technological innovations and the economic, social, and political forces they engender

Say goodbye to potatoes being as cheap as chips

LAST YEAR, THE word to describe much of the spike in food prices would have been "heatflation", as drought and high temperatures affected crop yields around the world, from olive oil in Spain to cabbage in South Korea.

This year we're facing a different concept, still undeniably linked to the climate crisis. Let's call it "sogflation". If heatflation refers to price increases as a result of excessively high temperatures, sogflation is borne out of extreme precipitation.

A report published on Monday, by the EU's Copernicus climate monitoring service and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), showed that while Europe experienced the highest number of days with extreme heat stress, it was also one of the wettest periods on record for many places. The continent received 7% more precipitation than the 1991-2020 average, with 1.6 million people affected by flooding.

Potatoes are at the forefront of sogflation. With just one planting and one harvest per year, the conditions have to be just right. But last autumn, poor weather conditions forced harvesting to stop in Europe after just three weeks, as sodden soil meant farmers couldn't get crops out of the ground. North-Western Europe Potato Growers, a market exchange platform for the potato supply chain, estimates that 650,000 metric tonnes didn't make it to market — with many spuds succumbing to rot in anaerobic conditions — and has warned about a 20% decrease in seed availability for 2024.

What farmers were able to retrieve was compromised in quality, meaning they couldn't be stored as long. Sellers rushed to move that limited stock, and prices are now rising as packers and processors are competing over it. Potato shortages for the continent look like a real risk, a problem for one of our staple foods. Meanwhile, planting of the new crop may be delayed thanks to waterlogged soil and rain, suggesting that sogflation will bite all year.

English white potato prices are up 81% year-over-year, an all-time high according to Mintec Ltd. Market players expect further price increases before the new crop arrives in 2024. In Europe, the Netherlands and Belgium — two key regions that grow processing potatoes for fries — were the worst affected, with Dutch processing potato prices at their highest level recorded for April at \$397 per metric tonne.

Food production has always been at the mercy of the elements. But, given our global food network, we're in a much better place to weather the weather. We are causing our current woes with our fossil fuel emissions, leading to pervasive extreme weather. Harry Campbell, a commodity market analyst at Mintec, told me that, as consecutive years of bad weather stack up, it's increasingly hard to recover from a poor season, while in some locations, farmers lurch from dealing with drought to flooding.

Facing a lot of risk and uncertainty, Campbell tells me that commodity purchasers are contracting more — agreeing on a price and amount in advance of the harvest — to reduce their exposure to volatile price swings, as well as increasing the numbers of growers or countries they're sourcing from.

You might remember the empty shelves and rations on tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers in early 2023, after Spain and Morocco — the UK's main sources of produce in the winter months — were hit by adverse weather conditions. Supply chains will need to be more flexible, and ultimately more complex, to keep food supplies secure at a time where one supplier could be facing floods and another a serious drought. Farmers in the meantime are left with the short straw, fighting poor weather to try and fulfill their contracts — some of which won't be met — while facing other rising costs and pressures.

Changes do need to happen in agriculture to reduce emissions — food systems are responsible for about 26% of greenhouse gas emissions — but clearly more support is needed as food production is only going to become more risky, expensive, and stressful.

As sogflation pushes up potato prices further, we may have to rethink the phrase: "As cheap as chips."



NITIN ZAMRE

COO, The Infravision Foundation

Rooftop solar: Chasing the sun

The PM Surya Ghar Yojana is an excellent opportunity to scale up the adoption of clean energy as well as create local entrepreneurs and jobs

THE LAST FEW months have seen a flurry of activities in the rooftop solar space in India. In early January, the ministry of new and renewable energy (MNRE) announced an increase in the subsidy for solar rooftops from ₹18,000 per kilowatt (Kw) to ₹20,000 per Kw. On January 21, the MNRE announced simplification of rules for implementing rooftop solar. And on January 22, the Prime Minister announced the PM Suryodaya Yojana to enable one crore households to set up solar panels on their rooftops.

In 2014, the government had launched the Rooftop Solar Programme with a cumulative installed target of 40 gigawatts (Gw) by 2022. This target wasn't achieved; only about 10 Gw of rooftop capacity had been installed by December 2023. Most of this capacity is by industrial and commercial establishments with the residential category contributing to only about 3 Gw. The PM Suryodaya Yojana is another attempt to accelerate efforts to reach the target of 40 Gw.

On February 13, the PM gave the scheme a new name, PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, and some more specifics — an investment of over ₹75,000 crore to light up one crore households and provide up to 300 units of free electricity per month.

On February 29, the Union Cabinet approved the scheme with a total outlay of ₹75,021 crore. The yojana incentivises rooftop solar installation by providing increased subsidy of up to ₹30,000/Kw for

up to 2 Kw and ₹78,000 for 3 Kw or higher, granting loans at 7% interest per annum, development of a model solar village for rural areas, payment security for renewable energy service companies (RESCOs), a fund for innovative projects, and a dedicated portal for online registration and availing benefits.

This aggressive push bodes well for everyone with its multiple benefits — scaling up the adoption of clean energy, reducing energy import bills, lower electricity bills for households, reducing the subsidy bill for state governments, strengthening the distribution grid, providing additional income to households, etc. It ticks almost all the boxes!

While the government has begun to spread awareness about the scheme, and rightly so, a few more steps must be taken to make it more effective and ensure early implementation.

One of the biggest challenges is the capacity of the individual household to navigate the maze of steps for rooftop solar installation — finding and negotiating with an installer/developer, obtaining clearances from the discom, maintaining the panels and the system, etc. While some of the rules have been simplified, an average household still feels overwhelmed by these activities, especially in peri-urban and rural areas.

This challenge is well recognised. In fact, on January 25, the MNRE itself allocated states to eight central public sector enterprises (CPSEs) for implementing the rooftop solar targets as RESCOs. REC Limited will be the monitoring, tracking, and financing agency. The CPSEs are to set up the project and provide free electricity to the households as needed, and sell the surplus to the respective power discoms that can be used to pay off the loan, if any. The solar rooftop system's ownership will be transferred to consumers once the loan is repaid. They will keep earning money from the surplus electricity. However, it is not clear whether the CPSEs continue to have any role in the scheme approved by the Union Cabinet.

Another important aspect is economies of scale. Such large-scale deployment must be leveraged to bring down costs. A centralised bulk procurement from one of the entities mentioned above could enable that.

While procurement and financing happen centrally, implementation is done locally. The interest of local stakeholders and the development of a local ecosystem becomes critical. The RESCOs can play a central role in developing such an ecosystem by encouraging the creation of local 'developers'. Developers should be responsible for marketing the programme's ben-

efits to consumers, sourcing consumer interest, and approaching the RESCOs for necessary modules and infrastructure. The RESCOs help stitch the project together for implementation. The developers then install the solar panels on the consumers' household premises and are responsible for long-term maintenance. RESCOs pay the developer a fixed installation fee and yearly maintenance fees. This naturally creates local energy entrepreneurs, aligned with the government's vision of creating such opportunities at the district level.

Consumers can agree upon their share of self-use of the electricity so generated and sell the balance to RESCOs (unless bought by the discom), for adequate compensation. The RESCOs can aggregate all such additional electricity and maximise revenue by selling this to other discoms, large consumers, and power exchanges. Price arbitrage opportunities — the difference between compensation paid to consumers and the realised sale price for electricity — can be used to partially offset the financial assistance provided by the central government. The RESCOs also get an incentive to actively participate in the implementation of the programme.

The PM Surya Ghar Yojana is an excellent opportunity to scale up the adoption of clean energy as well as create local entrepreneurs and jobs. A suitable implementation structure on the lines suggested above can go a long way in achieving the desired results.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

UPI and digital inclusion

In FY24, India witnessed a remarkable milestone with 131 billion Unified Payments Interface transactions totalling ₹200 trillion, as highlighted by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, underscoring the widespread adoption of UPI, especially in rural areas. UPI has seen a substantial increase in usage over the years, from 1.8 crore transactions in FY17 to 8,375 crore transactions in

FY23, becoming the preferred mode of payment, accounting for 73% of total digital payments in the country. Notably, 60% of UPI transactions originate from semi-urban and rural areas, challenging the notion that digital payments are confined to metro cities. The government aims to further enhance technology adoption, targeting 1 billion transactions a day by 2027, extending its reach to tier-2, tier-3 cities, and rural areas, reflecting India's progress towards a more

digitally inclusive economy. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Widening gap between the wealthy and poor

Propos of 'Don't tax progress' (FE, April 29), since 1990, the economic and industrial policies being pursued in India has resulted in widening the gap between the poor and the unprivileged further. Addressing poverty is not prioritised by

successive leaders, resulting in unemployment. We need to re-evaluate that even salt, garments, rice, pens, and notebooks are already taxed, which even the colonial ruler could not venture to do. In such a situation, there is no further scope to squeeze the poor, who form the vast majority of the population. Thus, a thorough revamping of policies is necessary. —AG Rajmohan, Anantapur



OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

When arithmetic trips chemistry

Dissonance in Delhi Congress reflects the complicated nature of building alliances

The resignation of Arvinder Singh Lovely as Delhi Congress chief days ahead of polling is bad optics for the INDIA bloc. The delay on the part of the Congress in finalising candidates for its share of three seats in the national Capital had hinted at the unease within the party. But beyond the bitterness among local leaders over their failure to land a seat, there are deeper undercurrents triggered by the contradictions in the alliance. Lovely, in fact, spoke about them to explain his decision. Such friction is inevitable when arithmetic overrides chemistry in the making of an alliance. Lovely told reporters that the Congress's Delhi unit was uncomfortable with the alliance, which was forced on it by the central leadership.

The AAP was built a decade ago on the debris of the Delhi Congress — the former ran for office by demonising the party that had been in office in Delhi for three consecutive terms. Congress leaders now eyeing the opening of the political space in Delhi following AAP leaders being embroiled in alleged corruption scandals and their subsequent arrests, are discomfited by the push from the top to yield space to the same party they were fighting an existential battle against. In Punjab, the state unit held out against a similar alliance — the Congress could not have embraced the ruling AAP when it is the chief opposition in the state. Interestingly, Delhi's poll data for the 2019 general elections reveals a different story — the Congress is a distant third force, and together, the parties lack the numbers to bridge the gap in votes between the winners and runners-up in the seven parliamentary constituencies in 2019.

The demands of national elections are such that the big picture takes precedence over local details. This can cause immense heartburn in parties and extract a cost. For instance, the PV Narasimha Rao-led Congress imposed a tie-up with the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu ahead of the 1996 general elections overruling local objections. The Congress split over the issue and the alliance was a washout. The fact is that despite politics becoming transactional, chemistry on the ground, which is the outcome of party legacies, ideology, and the nature of support bases, does matter in the making and unmaking of electoral alliances. The dissonance in the AAP-Congress alliance in Delhi, despite their common goal of defeating the BJP, highlights this tricky aspect of coalition-building.

Dousing the summer fire in Uttarakhand

Unusually high local temperatures and other natural factors have contributed to the massive forest fires in Uttarakhand's Kumaon region. Forest fires typically shoot up in March-May, with the large buildup of dry foliage and other biomass during the preceding winter months getting exacerbated by the onset of the summer heat. This year, the risk was compounded by a deficiency of winter precipitation. That said, negligence by the authorities and residents of the areas abutting the forest is as much to blame for the crisis in Uttarakhand.

The forest administration in the state has reported several incidents of delinquent fire-starting by individuals as well as negligent incineration to clear farmlands for sowing in certain areas. The authorities have promised strict action against such individuals. However, the scale of the crisis — fires have been raging for three days now, and, in terms of forest acreage affected, account for a large chunk of the total since last November — points to administrative failure. If clearing of fire lines took a backseat in an election year, the administration doesn't come out of the embers looking clean.

While dousing operations are being conducted by Indian Air Force helicopters, and the National Disaster Response Force has been rushed in to mount control measures, the reasons behind the high vulnerability of the state's forests are too well known for mitigation measures to be still lacking. The Uttarakhand fires, which are mostly ground fires caused by fallen leaves, especially of *chir* pines, can be kept in check if protocols regarding fire lines are followed. There are no shortcuts here. In the long term, there should also be efforts to restore the geography to its traditional species that are less of a fire hazard.

Tracking 'heat health' in summer of heat waves

India needs to adopt a decentralised model to deal with extreme events, drawing on the planning and communitisation models enshrined in the National Health Mission and leveraging community-derived knowledge

The political heat that the ongoing Lok Sabha polls have generated aside, the effect of the impending weeks of summer on the campaign and the actual polling process is part of the current discussion. Union minister Nitin Gadhkar fainted during an election rally in Maharashtra's Yavatmal district on April 24, but recovered soon. On Sunday, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said a severe heat wave has swept over east and south peninsular India and will continue for the next five days, spiking temperatures in Gangetic West Bengal, Odisha and Bihar, parts of Jharkhand, pockets of Rayalaseema, interior Karnataka, and Telangana.

Recognising the importance of heat health, the single largest cause of weather-related deaths in the United States (US), the US National Weather Service (NWS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) introduced a new category of heat risk

on April 22 (Earth Day) — Magenta. In the US, 1,200 recorded deaths were attributed to heat last year and 120,000 people were taken to the emergency room. The US has a new online heat-risk system that combines meteorological and medical risk factors with a seven-day forecast. The NWS HeatRisk is a colour-numeric-based index that provides a risk forecast of heat-related impacts over a 24-hour period. It factors in three parameters: How unusual the heat is for the time of the year; the duration of the heat, including both daytime and nighttime temperatures; and whether those temperatures pose an elevated risk of heat-related impacts (based on data from the CDC). Magenta is the highest level and deadliest of the five heat threat categories, "rare and/or long-duration extreme heat with little to no overnight relief."

The Heat Index is a measure of how hot it really feels when relative humidity is factored in with the actual air temperature. At present, IMD and the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) jointly issue colour-coded impact-based heat warnings. The current classification issued on April 4 is as follows: Green (Heat Index less than 40 degrees Celsius), normal day; Yellow Alert (40-50 degrees Celsius), heat alert; Orange Alert (50-60 degrees Celsius), severe heat alert for the day; and Red Alert (higher than 60 degrees Celsius), that is extreme heat alert. The Indian classification was experimentally introduced in 2023, when Red signified higher than 55 degrees Celsius; all the

categories have been reset in 2024 for correspondingly higher temperatures. The US Magenta begins at about 53 degrees Celsius and therefore, corresponds to the Indian Red.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 20,615 heat-related deaths between 2000 and 2020, though other databases report somewhat lower figures. Both national and state governments as well as major cities have formulated heat action plans to combat heat-related illnesses (HRIs) and reduce mortality and morbidity.

The National Programme on Climate Change and Human Health (NPCCHH) is working towards creating awareness among vulnerable communities, health care providers, and policymakers, strengthening the capacity of health care system and preparedness, and enabling partnerships and synergy to ensure that health is adequately represented in the climate crisis agenda.

HRIs are currently approached through an acute disaster management lens, from the standpoint of the precautionary principle. Framing it as a health emergency often places it in a response framework that is too immediate while overlooking more gradual effects and impacts. The concept of slow disaster has emerged from a more nuanced understanding of the Covid-19 response and may help build a climate-resilient health system that India needs. Magenta of the NWS-CDC classification characteristically deals with "long-duration heat" rather than a single day's temperature, and that is a refinement India



Rajib Dasgupta



On Sunday, the India Meteorological Department said a severe heat wave has swept over east and south peninsular India

HT PHOTO

may need to consider.

Heat health is generally addressed through the meteorological or medical lens and receives little attention in terms of its social determinants. Granular analyses have revealed higher ambient temperatures among communities and neighbourhoods that have lower income and are under-resourced, including densely populated urban dwellings, and housing characteristics with a lack of access to air cooling or air conditioning. Individuals living in these disproportionately hotter settings are at higher risk, especially when it comes to vulnerable groups such as the elderly, infants and young children, pregnant women, those with chronic morbidities and outdoor workers.

There is an emerging consensus that while national, state or city plans provide overall guidance and lay down the foundations, the last mile challenges lie in identifying and locating communities at high risk for heat health hazards. There has been considerable progress in several countries on mapping heat vulnerability by

including environmental and socio-demographic indicators with adverse health outcomes during extreme heat events. These need to be overlaid with vulnerability information obtained through health surveys, analysis of mortality data, chronic disease databases (if available) and records of ambulance calls. The need to map microclimatic zones has been advocated by Indian experts too.

The path ahead lies in shifting from the traditional top-down command-and-control disaster management model to a decentralised one, drawing upon bottom-up planning and communitisation models enshrined in the National Health Mission (NHM), and leveraging and strengthening community-derived knowledge about practices to limit mortality and morbidity during extreme heat events.

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China in mind, Japan set for defence rehaul

It's easy to start a war, but it is difficult to predict the consequences. The invasion of Ukraine has already caused a blowback for Russia with the Nordic enlargement of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Equally consequential has been its impact in the Indo-Pacific where Japan has made the most dramatic changes to its foreign and security policy since World War II. Tokyo has abandoned its erstwhile pacifist policy and is set to re-emerge as a "traditional" military power that seeks to enhance the containment of China. The catalyst has been the "no limit partnership" announced on the eve of the Ukraine invasion by China and Russia, Japan's historic adversaries.

Recently, United States (US) President Joe Biden met Japanese Prime Minister (PM) Fumio Kishida at a summit meeting in Washington DC to discuss a "new era" for the alliance between the two countries. Later, the two leaders held a trilateral summit with the Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The goal of the unprecedented trilateral meeting was to send a warning to Beijing against its aggressive tactics in the South China Sea.

The US and Japan laid out plans to upgrade their military alliance, increase interoperability between their forces and undertake more joint development of military equipment. Japan plans to bring its own armed forces under a new joint command structure by March 2025. The US plans to upgrade the forces commander in Japan to a four-star general, who will liaise with the new Japanese joint commander. Thereafter, there are plans for a unified Japan-US command.

They also announced plans to upgrade defence communications networks and to network air defence capabilities involving Japan, the US and Australia to jointly deal with air and missile threats. The two sides will establish a council to identify areas for the co-development and co-production of missiles and maintenance of US warships and aircraft. They will also set up a working group for fighter-pilot training, advanced simulators and co-development and production of jet trainers.

Among the more important discussions between Biden and Kishida related to Japan joining pillar II of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) alliance. Pillar II will not confer primary membership to Japan, but will involve developing and sharing advanced capabilities in areas like hypersonics, anti-submarine warfare, cyber weapons as well as quantum computing and AI.

It was at the Quad summit in Tokyo in May 2022, three months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine that PM Kishida had set the new tone for his country, declaring that the invasion "had fundamentally shaken the rule of law based international order". His reference was to a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan. But the context was his own declaration a few weeks earlier in London that such a development could directly threaten Japan's survival and international security. The Japanese believe that if Taiwan fell, China could constrict Japan's key trade routes and increase pressure on the Senkaku islands to coerce Japan. Beijing and

Tokyo have a significant dispute over their maritime boundary in the sea between Japan and Taiwan.

In December 2022, the Kishida government issued its new National Security Strategy (NSS), along with a National Defence Strategy (NDS) and the Defence Buildup Programme. The new NSS said Japan was "facing the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II". Tokyo did not quite yet designate Beijing as a "threat", but spoke about the rise of China as "the greatest strategic challenge that Japan has ever faced".

However, the most dramatic shift was Tokyo's decision to create a counter-strike capability based on long-range missiles that could take out enemy bases and command and control nodes. Till now its posture was wholly defensive, reliant on anti-ballistic missile capability to shoot down missiles targeting Japan. As part of this new strategy, Japan began enhancing the range of its own Type 12 missiles and in January 2024, signed a deal to buy 400 US-made Tomahawk missiles with a range of 1,600 kms. Japan has also abandoned its restraint on exporting armaments and is agreeable to the foreign sales of a sixth-generation fighter that it plans to develop with the UK and Italy. Tokyo also plans to augment its cyberwarfare capability by recruiting thousands of cyber specialists to the self-defence forces.

The Kishida government has made it clear that it is no longer bound by the traditional restriction of keeping its defence spending at 1% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Japanese officials have been asked to obtain a budget equal to 2% of the GDP by 2027. Kishida has ordered the five-year defence plan to be hiked by 60% to some \$315 billion. Not only would this bring Japan in line with the NATO defence spending standard, but enable Japan to get ahead of India and become the third largest defence spender in the world after the US and China.

The US traditionally operated on a hub-and-spoke system of alliances that linked with Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines through bilateral agreements. Now the effort is to create trilateral and quadrilateral linkages through military exercises, intelligence-sharing, force posture agreements, industrial integration and defence technology development agreements. 2025 will see a new trilateral arrangement when the UK joins the US and Japan in regular military exercises.

President Biden has systematically built up the US's Indo-Pacific posture by strengthening alliances not just with South Korea and Japan, but also the Philippines and India. In 2023, he joined PM Narendra Modi in a major elevation of the US-India defence and security relationship, at one end of the Indo-Pacific; now, he has sharply upgraded the northern tier with Japan.

These developments show, that far from being a distraction, the wars in Europe and Gaza have actually worked to strengthen the determination of Indo-Pacific states to deter adventurism by China



Manoj Joshi

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SIMON STELL | UN CLIMATE CHIEF

G7 leading from the front, particularly through emissions cuts, and better climate finance this year, is essential if we are to avoid a global economic disaster

Good teachers are key to the making of great universities

Former United States (US) president Barack Obama once remarked, "If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life." It is a sentiment universally acknowledged — teaching is more than just a profession; it is a noble calling. Aswath Damodaran, professor of finance at Stern School of Business, popularly known as the "Valuation Guru", once said in an interview, "If there is an epitaph that I would like on my tombstone, it would be, 'He was a great teacher.'" Yet, despite reverence, the academic world often seems to undervalue good teaching.

Is good teaching adequately incentivised? When it comes to career trajectory, universities tend to prioritise research over teaching. So, are universities doing enough to reward good teaching? Not by a long shot.

The impetus that compels good teachers to persevere is the profound joy they derive from the vocation. Ask any skilled educator, and they'll likely tell you that teaching is not just a job, it's a source of therapeutic fulfilment. It is about the rapture they find in helping students navigate problems, it is about visages in the classroom reflecting dawning comprehension, it is being told years later — by unrecognisable former pupils — how much they benefited from their classes.

Universities sometimes undervalue quality instruction, prioritising research to improve their rankings. In many institutions, positions often favour candidates with extensive publication records, overlooking teaching abilities. It is time to address the elephant in the institution. Universities must reward the core teaching role, bestowing on it a distinct hiring and promotion track.

This is not to remotely suggest that listing research as a priority is flawed. However, prioritising research at the expense of teaching devalues the core mission of universities. Teaching quality, student engagement, mentorship, and support services are all vital components of a well-rounded educational experience. Yet, traditional rankings often favour research over teaching, reflected in citations, funding, and academic reputation. To address this imbalance, ranking bodies should consider recalibrating and increasing the weight for teaching quality. They can do this by incorporating unbiased student opinions and even considering publishing separate ranking lists focused solely on teaching quality. To achieve this, they will need to appropriately define what constitutes teaching quality and develop robust assessment methodologies that account for diverse teaching approaches and learning outcomes.

Does being a good researcher mean one is automatically good at instruction? Not all good researchers are good teachers. Good researchers

might have deep knowledge of their niche area of study. Good teachers possess a blend of technical proficiency and strong interpersonal skills, including passion, patience, adaptability, empathy, and creativity and are excellent communicators. Having faculty with industry work experience and the ability to teach well is the most desirable situation, especially for undergraduate students, most of whom enrol in universities with the goal of working in companies or venture into entrepreneurship. The UGC's decision to make PhDs optional for assistant professors acknowledges this reality.

Many institutions expect their faculty to juggle multiple responsibilities, including generating journal articles, teaching, grading assessments, and contributing to administrative tasks. However, the law of comparative advantage suggests a more strategic and beneficial approach. Universities should allocate teaching-focused roles to faculty members who excel in instruction and mentoring while assigning research-focused roles to those with strong research skills. By relieving good teachers from the burden of generating numerous journal articles, their teaching potential can be unleashed. Additionally, this approach facilitates some introverted researchers who may lack the communication skills or patience for teaching but enjoy spending hours on researching to excel in that sphere.

What can be the way forward? Incentivising good teaching, of course, will sustain excellence in education and encourage more individuals with teaching prowess to pursue academic careers. The declining appeal of certain MBA programmes, as students increasingly favour industry certifications, could signal a broader trend affecting other fields like accounting. However, universities offer unique advantages that certifications cannot match. With their meticulously crafted degree programmes, universities promote academic rigour and analytical skills. University life encompasses a vibrant environment where students access a plethora of opportunities for personal growth, academic exploration, and social engagement.

To truly fulfil their mission, universities must invest in the right people — faculty who can teach well and inspire, guide, and empower students to reach their full potential. The time has come for universities to recalibrate their priorities, shifting the focus from pursuing research accolades to simultaneously nurturing teaching excellence. Distinct teaching-focused and research-focused roles would best serve both students and the industry.



Sherwin Fernandes

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WORDLY WISE
 WE ARE STUCK WITH TECHNOLOGY WHEN WHAT WE REALLY WANT IS JUST STUFF THAT WORKS.
 — DOUGLAS ADAMS

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

HOLD TO ACCOUNT

Allegations of sexual abuse against MP Prajwal Revanna must be probed. BJP should lean on ally JD(S) to take exemplary action

THE ALLEGATIONS OF sexual abuse against Prajwal Revanna, the JD(S) candidate from the Lok Sabha constituency of Hassan, Karnataka, which went to polls on April 26, bring fresh urgency to a question that has long haunted politics: What makes it possible for political leaders to wield their clout like a weapon over the very people who have propelled them to power? Any attempt to answer this question in Revanna's case — who has been accused of abusing several women, with videos of the assaults being widely circulated for at least a week — must also respond to the problem of the deeply masculinised nature of power in India, as it must in other cases that have come to light over the last few years, such as that of the former chief of Indian wrestling and BJP MP, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. In a society that, despite the progress of the last seven decades, remains deeply patriarchal, where women — even as they carve out spaces to assert their autonomy and pursue their ambitions — continue to have their wings clipped by centuries-old strictures, is it possible to make the political "boys' club" take this skewed power equation seriously?

Even as women voters are being more aggressively wooed by parties — women's rising turnout, in fact, is seen as decisive factor in poll results — they remain poorly represented not only among elected representatives, but also in leadership roles at the party level. While women have had one-third reservation in panchayats and local urban bodies since the early 1990s, representation in Parliament has been woefully poor — less than 15 per cent in the current one — as well as state assemblies. This has been sought to be corrected by the passing of the women's reservation bill in a special session of Parliament last year. However, the fact is that long-lasting change requires not just the top-down implementation of a law. If democracy is to be deepened, if women are to be ensured not only of power but also of justice and equity, there needs to be transformation at every level. This would require a commitment from all parties to involve more women in decision-making, greater parity in ticket distribution and allowing more women leaders to emerge. It would also require stronger action against all forms of gendered abuse.

That's why the allegations against Revanna must be probed with uncompromising rigour. It's time that women's dignity and autonomy — not just welfare schemes that view women primarily as beneficiaries of state largesse — get the attention they need. Campaign politics isn't a natural ally of due process but in this case, the state government needs to probe all aspects of the allegations: the alleged victims, the accused, the network of the accused, the apparent immunity and impunity. As the irreversible force of women's empowerment pushes against the wall of male privilege, ensuring that more women are in the public sphere, where they have as much at stake as their male counterparts, they need to be assured that the law shall follow their course.

SHORT ON SAFETY

Frequent controversies over food products in India show the country's regulator in poor light. FSSAI must step up

IN THE PAST few weeks, questions have been raised about India's food safety regime in the wake of allegations against products as varied as infant food, "health drinks" and spices. The country's food business regulator, FSSAI, is probing charges of unhealthy sugar content in Nestle's baby food products. The agency has also begun collecting samples of powdered spices of several brands, including market leaders MDH and Everest, after regulatory authorities in Singapore and Hong Kong raised concerns over carcinogenic additives. The authorities in the Southeast Asian countries are not the first to raise red flags. A report in this newspaper has revealed that over the past six months, US customs declined entry to 31 per cent spice-related shipments of MDH over salmonella contamination. Data obtained by this newspaper from the US FDA shows that the refusal rate has doubled in the past one year. The EU too has, reportedly, placed food items originating from India under the scanner. The contaminants in question are different. But the brands in question are amongst the most well-known. The controversies have raised fears that a large section of the Indian market could be bypassing the regulatory radar.

The FSSAI came into being in 2008, two years after the enactment of the Food Safety and Standards Act. Its remit extends to multinationals like Nestle and Cadbury, established Indian companies like MDH and Everest and thousands of small and medium-sized food businesses who have razor-thin profit margins. The agency has had a chequered record. It has consistently been hamstrung by staff and infrastructure shortage. This has meant that a large section of the market views regulation as paperwork rather than regular inspections followed by expert guidance. The FSSAI is mandated to educate businesses and consumers on food safety. It is also tasked to "collect and collate data regarding food consumption, incidence and prevalence of biological risk, contaminants in food, residues of various contaminants in foods products, and identify risks". The frequent controversies around food items indicate that the agency has done scarce justice to its remit. In instances such as the Vital Nutraceuticals case in 2015, the food authority's actions have been struck down by courts for procedural shortcomings.

Regulations must contend with scientific uncertainty and the variance in rules amongst nations. That's why the food authority must regularly update standards, and handhold exporters. The FSSAI has fallen short on both counts. The failure of MDH's plants to meet the USFDA sanitary standards shows the Indian regulator in poor light. A country with a growing food market and an aspiration to increase its footprint in the global market needs a more proactive regulator.

BORING AND FINE

A new device in the market seems to be responding to Gen Z's call for a simpler time

GEN Z, IT seems, wants to turn back the clock. Half a century after the first handheld phone — the "zero generation" phones — was launched by Motorola in 1973, the Milan Design Design Week paid an ode to the retro for the unveiling of the Boring Phone. Created by Heineken Beer in collaboration with fashion retailer Bodega, the Boring Phone is not "smart". It doesn't have apps or maps. No calorie trackers or cameras with enough megapixels to pick out the smallest pimple. The tagline at the launch read, "There's more to social life when there's less on your phone".

The Boring Phone is a response to the yearning for a simpler time. Many GenZers want to revert to a romantic idea (the reality notwithstanding) of the 1990s-2000s. In 2017, HMD Global brought back the Nokia 3310, popularly referred to in India as the "dabba" phone. In 2018, the "newtro" trend — "new" and "retro" — kicked off in South Korea: Old tech, snacks, TV shows, etc, were modernised and brought back. In India, Campa Cola — the cold drink of the pre-liberalisation era — was rebooted in 2023. Around the world, fashion from eras gone by has made a comeback with companies reporting massive hikes in sales of Y2K cargo pants, intermittently trendy bell-bottom denims and the self-consciously kitschy butterfly clips.

The appeal of the "boring" phone makes sense in the tech-first world of today. It taps into the allure of an ever-evasive nostalgia by co-opting the aesthetics of an era gone by. One doesn't need the latest, most updated phone every year, or even the newest model of the car or the playstation, whatever might be one's poison. For a generation which has grown up with shouts of "the future is AI" and the "next big thing in tech", going backwards instead of forward may be the language of rebellion.



ASHOK LAVASA

Mind the gap

Election Commission's Model Code needs reform, model leadership will also help

"I DID NOT take kindly to the usual methods and devices that accompany electioneering. Elections were an essential and inseparable part of the democratic process and there was no way of doing away with them. Yet, often enough, elections brought out the evil side of man, and it was obvious that they did not always lead to the success of the better man. Sensitive persons, and those who were not prepared to adopt rough-and-ready methods to push themselves forward, were at a disadvantage and preferred to avoid these contests. Was democracy then to be a close preserve of those possessing thick skins and loud voices and accommodating consciences?"

This passage occurs in *The Discovery of India*, written by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, when the Election Commission of India (EC) did not exist, nor did the Model Code of Conduct (MCC).

The MCC, a unique consensual arrangement that evolved over many years, comes under stress as soon as it comes into force with the announcement of elections. It tests political parties, their leaders, the candidates, and the EC itself. All this is under the piercing gaze of the media and the critical oversight of the judiciary.

The MCC started as a small set of dos and don'ts for the Assembly election in Kerala. It covered the conduct of election meetings/processions, speeches, slogans, posters and placards in 1960 when K V K Sundaram was the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC).

In 1968, under CEC S P Sen Verma, the EC consulted with political parties and circulated the Code to observe minimum standards of behaviour to ensure free and fair elections. Whereas it became a practice for the EC to circulate the Code before every General Election in 1979 with S L Shakhdar at the helm, the EC in consultation with the political parties further amplified the code, adding a new section that placed restrictions on the "party in power" to prevent abuse of position to get undue advantage over other parties and candidates. In 1991, the MCC was consolidated and re-issued and the redoubtable T N Seshan used it as a weapon of mass destruction.

The political environment in the country has since sharpened, blunting the efficacy of the MCC. Instances of violations are becom-

ing rampant and rabid. Political leaders are deploying their prestige, firepower and demagoguery like never before and finding ingenious ways to remain in the shadow zone between the letter and the spirit of MCC. Money has replaced muscle; technology has provided a shining armour. Chicanery in dodging the MCC has a higher premium than the inclination to adhere.

While the MCC draws its strength and sanctity from the strict, prompt and non-discriminatory enforcement by EC, there is a need to remodel it by imposing more reasonable restrictions in a non-discriminatory manner. This is essential to restore a certain degree of decorum and discipline in public discourse.

A significant gap in the present framework is that the MCC has not clearly spelt out the consequences of defaults, thus diluting its deterrent effect. It is necessary to specify punitive measures in a fair, transparent and predictable manner, especially with respect to serious violations such as hate speech invoking communal and caste feelings to secure votes, offering inducements for garnering votes, using foul, filthy and abusive language against political opponents, indulging in political propaganda by invoking, praising, questioning or criticising the Indian armed forces, etc.

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Such violations should attract severe consequences that could be graded and made known publicly. For example, the first case of any such violations could attract a ban on campaigning for a specified period; the second could entail a ban for a longer period and the third would debar the concerned candidate or political functionary for the entire period while the MCC is in force. Such a ban would mean a complete prohibition on all public appearances and interactions on all forms of media; those found in repeated violation would not be eligible to be categorised as star campaigners in subsequent elections for a certain length of time.

In a rather deft (some felt it was "droll") move, the EC has taken the unprecedented step of serving political parties notice for violations alleged to be committed by individuals. Whereas a traffic violation is the responsibility of the driver, issuing a notice to the party introduces the principle of vicarious liability as notices are served only after *prima*

facie satisfaction by the EC. Perhaps the time has come for the MCC to initiate punitive action against political parties if its functionaries or star campaigners are involved in proven cases of MCC violation. This action could be a fine and/or action under The Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, if warranted. The mechanics of this should also be suitably incorporated into the revamped MCC without absolving individual offenders.

The procedure for dealing with such cases should be streamlined such that punitive action is taken within 72 hours of the violation. A standard procedure must be laid down. Delayed responses dilute the impact of penalties and diminish public confidence in the credibility of the EC.

A list of all cases of reported violations should be compiled, a statement of their disposal/pendency should be displayed on the EC website and a database needs to be created for public information.

In MCC violations directly connected with specific provisions of extant law under various Acts, it ought to be the responsibility of the law enforcement machinery to initiate legal action. If that has not been done and a complaint is received and action is taken by the EC, it should be mandatory that legal action by the law enforcement machinery should automatically follow even if there is no specific direction by the EC.

Whether all this will deter potential violators and instil an element of self-regulation in the conduct of political parties depends on the character of the political leaders. However, it would certainly limit the referee's discretion in decision-making, thereby sparing him allegations of bias or discrimination. The EC would also bind itself publicly to proceed against cases of transgression in a time-bound and credible manner, which will inspire greater public confidence in its commitment to conducting free and fair elections.

But more than anything, what can inspire popular trust is model leadership, not model codes. Demosthenes said, "You cannot have a proud and chivalrous spirit if your conduct is mean and paltry; for whatever a man's actions are, such must be his spirit."

The writer is a former Election Commissioner



SHASHI SHEKHAR VEMPATI

IN THE NAME OF EQUALITY

Rahul Gandhi's call for a social 'X-ray' is divisive and based on outdated ideas

AS INDIA STANDS at the cusp of significant socio-economic transformations, Rahul Gandhi's recent speeches and the Congress's manifesto suggest a turn towards an era many thought had passed. They echo the grand socialist experiments of the 20th century that promised much but delivered little. Rahul Gandhi's approach, which envisages extensive socio-economic surveys and caste censuses, seems less about fostering unity and more about seeking fault lines and sowing division.

During the Congress manifesto launch rally in Hyderabad, he advocated for an intrusive socio-economic and caste census to dissect society for resource redistribution. This approach dangerously aligns with Maoist doctrines of "struggle and transformation", which historically led to catastrophic outcomes such as China's Great Leap Forward and the economic disarray in Venezuela under socialist policies. The manifesto pledges to implement nationwide socio-economic re-engineering based on caste data — similarly social engineering experiments have repeatedly failed across the globe. Such measures threaten to push India into economic and social chaos, driven by an ideological zeal that ignores the complex array of factors at play within a modern economy. By relying on bureaucratic diktats to realise social outcomes, such measures end up exacerbating the problem. Rahul Gandhi's emphasis on redistributing institutional power during his appearances in Biaoira and

Bhandara risk embedding economic policy within a narrow communal context.

At the heart of Rahul Gandhi's agenda is the call for an "X-ray" of Indian society — to expose and redistribute wealth. This seemingly progressive rhetoric mirrors dangerous historical precedents. These strategies are not just about wealth distribution; they are about reallocating power along caste lines, a move that could trench divisions rather than erase them. To repeatedly tout a societal X-ray reflects the scorched earth politics of the Congress that seeks to expose Indian voters to political radioactivity. The purported targets of this "X-ray" are India's myriad wealth creators. In their eagerness to demonise wealth creators and to weaponise wealth redistribution, the Congress and Rahul Gandhi seem to have forgotten the basic tenets of economics.

With irresponsible talk of a societal X-ray, Congress and Rahul Gandhi are willing to fritter away India's demographic dividend by sacrificing and jeopardising the economic prospects of an entire generation. This radioactive politics of redistribution goes beyond merely scorching the political ground, for its fallout will scar an entire generation, breeding lingering discontent. Early indicators are already visible with irresponsible promises being made by Rahul Gandhi and the Congress on cash transfers to the youth who spend their time "watching reels on Instagram and YouTube". Rather than motivate India's youth towards acquiring skills, building ca-

capacity and aspiring to create value through their industry and entrepreneurial spirit, the redistributive mindset of the Congress and its scion seems set on scarring this generation with entitlements.

One must not be surprised if the radioactive logic of India's principal opposition party one day seeks to even "X-ray" the social media activities of India's youth in its toxic pursuit of vulnerable entitlement seekers. The wisest course for India would be to shield the society from this kind of radioactivity before societal "X-rays" are weaponised and competitive politics indulges in a nuclear arms race of sorts.

India needs policies that foster inclusive growth, not those that gamble with its future by stirring up societal divisions. It is crucial for voters to critically examine these regressive proposals, which flirt dangerously with outdated and failed economic doctrines. This scrutiny is essential to prevent the scorching of our society along economic and caste lines — a scenario detrimental to our national ethos of unity in diversity. As we debate the path forward, let us choose strategies that build, not those that break. India's strength lies in its diversity, and its future should be built on policies that recognise and harness this, rather than those that attempt to redistribute it through the lens of outdated ideologies rooted in politics of "X-ray" surveys and a radioactive census.

The writer is former CEO of Prasar Bharati

APRIL 30, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

A CONGRESS WIN

THE CONGRESS-I ENDED the five-year rule of the Peoples Conference in the Union territory of Mizoram when it achieved absolute majority in the 30-member Assembly. The Congress-I trounced the Peoples Conference by capturing 18 of the 28 seats. The election from North Vanlaphai constituency has been countermanded because of the assassination of a candidate.

TAIWAN STALEMATE

CHINA TOLD THE US that arms sales to Taiwan remained an urgent problem, despite

the results achieved by President Ronald Reagan's visit to Beijing. He said this was emphasised during talks between the US Secretary of State George Shultz and the Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqiang. They met after President Reagan's discussions with China's top leader Deng Xiaoping when the Taiwan issue was discussed. No breakthrough was achieved.

A THIRSTY SUMMER

DESPITE THE MARGINAL improvement in water supply as compared to last year, Delhiites will continue to crave for water this summer because the extra supply has been

nullified by an increase in demand. If power breakdowns and low voltage conditions continue to prevail, distorting water supply, then a thirsty summer is in store for the citizens.

EMERGENCY IN SUDAN

THE PRESIDENT OF Sudan, Gaafar Nimeiry, proclaimed an indefinite state of emergency in Sudan, banning all meetings and demonstrations and mobilising public services. In a nation-wide speech on radio and television, he said he had taken the action "to enable authorities to achieve maximum stability and security".



THE IDEAS PAGE

Mom, baby and us

Constitutional rights of working mothers will only be realised by investing in care economy and emphasising that childcare is a social need, not an individual burden



ASHWINI DESHPANDE

WHICH PARENT IS primarily responsible for the hands-on work that goes into raising children until they are adults? In India, like elsewhere in the world, it is typically the mother. The central government has a childcare leave (CCL) policy which allows for 730 days of paid leave to female employees during their entire service period, for taking care of a maximum of two children under 18 years. This is over and above maternity leave.

The explicit mention of female employees as beneficiaries could be viewed as a valid recognition of the fact that it is primarily mothers who do the heavy lifting of raising children that extends beyond the first six months after birth (the period considered under maternity leave). Men are eligible for CCL only if they are single fathers.

While one can justify this gendered policy targeted towards mothers on pragmatic grounds — mothers are direct caregivers much more so than fathers are — we can legitimately ask if the law should be putting a seal of legitimacy on inequitable norms. This is a genuine conundrum because if the inequitable gendered norms are firmly entrenched, offering CCL to fathers might result in a situation where they avail of paid leave, but don't actually contribute to the multitude of daily tasks that constitute childcare, including providing the emotional and logistical anchoring during stressful periods, like the board exams.

If women are the ones bearing this responsibility, over and above their multiple other contributions to the household, their workplace needs to recognise this and provide some accommodation for this extra work, which presumably is the intention behind the CCL. This is a central government provision that is not binding on the states. Recently, a government employee in Himachal Pradesh was denied the CCL. The Supreme Court declared this denial as a violation of working women's "constitutional right".

There are several questions that this episode raises which highlight the complications inherent in this policy. If this is a constitutional right, should this central provision not be binding on the states? And why is this provision applicable only to government employment, unlike maternity leave? Would making this mandatory in the private corporate sector worsen employer bias against women, i.e., would they be less likely to hire women? Finally, how many establishments have the bandwidth to implement this?

Let's look at the last question first. Provisions of the Maternity Benefit Act, or the POSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) Act are applicable to establishments with 10 or more employees. We need to note that the overwhelming majority of firms in India are not covered by any of these benefits because they are too small. The Economic Census reveals that 98 per cent firms are "micro", i.e., they have less than 10 employees.

Official data from the Unincorporated Enterprises Survey for 2015-16 reveals that the average number of people working in an



CR Sasikumar

enterprise is 1.78, i.e., less than two. 61.8 per cent of these enterprises have one worker; 35.6 per cent have 2-5 workers; 1.9 have 6-10 workers. Only 0.8 per cent of all unincorporated enterprises have more than 10 workers.

Even in the registered manufacturing sector covered by the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), where one would expect individual firms to be large, data reveals that 30 per cent of such establishments have less than 10 employees.

The ground reality is that the pro-women laws, which are meant to ensure constitutional rights, are applicable to a small minority of employed women. In the larger establishments (i.e., private establishments with more than 10 workers) where POSH and maternity laws are applicable, research hints at perverse consequences, such that in the short run, these have the potential to worsen employer bias against women.

This doesn't mean that there should not be pro-women laws, even if applicable to a tiny proportion of workers. Wherever possible, legal structure needs to guarantee women's rights.

However, we also need to think more broadly about how to effectively ameliorate the burden of childcare that is seen as essentially the mothers' responsibility. This would require several elements, of which the CCL could be one part, with the recognition that it is genuinely difficult for smaller establishments to implement.

The 3Rs framework shows the way for-

The 3Rs framework shows the way forward: recognise, reduce, and redistribute the responsibility of childcare. Today's children are tomorrow's workforce and therefore childcare is a social responsibility. We need to recognise that childcare consists of a set of multiple, complex, daily, repetitive, physical and emotional tasks that mothers perform, over and above all their myriad other daily tasks. Recognition will make the issue visible.

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How can this load be reduced? Through redistribution, both within the household and outside. Within the household, the redistribution will occur through sharing among household members, most importantly by fathers pitching in, not as occasional babysitters, but by being a part of the daily journey. At the moment, sharing outside the household happens mainly through expensive private childcare, which very few can afford. Both in urban and rural areas, we need good quality, affordable, reliable and safe childcare in our neighbourhoods. This can be provided both by government and private players.

To sum up, we need to invest in the care economy. That is the only way the constitutional rights of mothers will be realised, which not only entitles them to respite from the individualised burden of childcare and enshrines the principle that childcare is a social need.

The writer is professor of economics and founder director, CEDA, Ashoka University. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"For Pakistan, and Asia at large, building resilience is no longer a matter of choice but a necessity for survival in an era marked by unprecedented climatic upheaval. As we advance through 2024, let this be the year when we all proactively ensure that our communities are safeguarded." — DAWN, PAKISTAN

Why the bull runs

Across segments, stocks have been trading at multiples that seem difficult to justify. Domestic investors, though, are confident and growing



ISHAN BAKSHI

IT'S INDICATIVE OF the changes in the Indian economy: The number of stock market investors is now inching closer to the number of land-owning farmers in the country. And with greed trumping fear, investors — who now flock to the markets from most of the pin codes in the country — have thrown caution to the wind, shrugging off concerns over valuation. In certain pockets, stocks have been trading at multiples that seem difficult to justify. It took a conflict between Iran and Israel, the threat of it escalating, to take some of the sheen off the markets.

In April, the BSE Sensex traded at a price-to-earnings (PE) ratio of 25. In comparison, the PE ratio averaged 18.61 between 2003-04 and 2007-08 and 23.81 between 2014-15 and 2023-24. In the case of the small- and mid-cap segments, the exuberance has been even more euphoric. While both small- and mid-cap indices did witness a steep fall following concerns over "froth" in certain segments, and the possibility of price manipulation, they have recovered since. This despite the fact that several small- and mid-cap funds had restricted fresh inflows, indicating their inability to allocate funds efficiently, which suggests that stock prices may not be anchored in fundamentals.

This exuberance, rational or irrational, is backed by an appealing narrative with several cross-cutting themes. At its core is a belief in India's growth trajectory — the view that the political, policy and economic environment are perfectly aligned to deliver relatively high growth over a sustained period is now widely held. There are, after all, strong reasons to be optimistic about the economy's prospects. A growth rate of 7-8 per cent — notwithstanding uncomfortable questions over its estimation, the distribution of growth or job creation — is nothing to scoff at. Nor are the medium-term growth projections by institutions such as the IMF, which only underline the robustness of the country's growth trajectory. Strong corporate and bank balance sheets have only raised expectations that the economy is on the cusp of a private investment cycle. And then there are favourable demographics. At a time when there is uncertainty over China's growth prospects, the Indian economy stands out. There aren't many countries that have the ingredients for sustaining relatively high growth over a long period, and can offer opportunities at this scale.

And it's not just the foreign investors who have been pouring in money, enlivened about the economy's prospects. Indian households, too, have been increasingly turning towards the stock markets in their search for yield. As per reports, the total number of demat accounts in the

country has recently crossed 150 million. As per NSE, the number of unique investors (based on PAN) now exceeds 90 million, which translates to upwards of 50 million families, or more than 17 per cent of all households in the country. And then there are those who invest indirectly via mutual funds. As per the Association of Mutual Funds in India's estimates, there are now more than 40 million unique mutual fund investors (there will obviously be some overlap).

To put these numbers in perspective, consider the following statistics. In 2019, the total number of agricultural households in the country was pegged at 93.09 million by a survey carried out by the National Statistical Office. In 2022-23, the number of farmer beneficiaries under PM-Kisan stood at 107.3 million, while in 2023-24, it was 92.1 million (as of January 2024). In 2022-23, 74 million persons filed income tax returns (this includes individuals, firms, etc). And, as per the National Family Health Survey, 7.5 per cent of households in the country have cars.

Investors now are not just limited to the larger cities. In 2023, an SBI dividend yield fund drew applications from 70 per cent of the pin codes in the country. As per other estimates, investors now come from every nine out of 10 pin codes in the country. One can quibble over the amounts invested by the smaller retail investors, but all this only points towards the culture of equity spreading rapidly across the country, while also indicating the growing financialisation of household savings. And the heft of these investors is growing. In 2016-17, contributions through systematic investment plans (SIPs) stood at Rs 43,921 crore. By 2023-24, they had risen more than four-and-a-half times to touch Rs 1.99 lakh crore. In comparison, net investments by foreign portfolio investors last year stood at Rs 2.08 lakh crore.

Some are now expecting a period of digesting the extraordinary gains that the markets have witnessed. But, a continuing surge in domestic flows could help maintain current valuations. Investors, though, are not showing any signs of nervousness — the India VIX, a fear gauge, witnessed a steep fall last Tuesday, and remains well below recent highs. However, if at all they are worried, perhaps words from the stock market regulator, who has been commenting quite often on valuations, could assuage their concerns. "Yes, at 22.2 (PE multiple), some people say we have an expensive market, but still why is the investment coming (in)? This is a reflection of the optimism and the trust and faith that the world has in India today that we are commanding these kinds of multiples in our markets," said the SEBI chairperson at a corporate governance summit.

Investors, though, especially the foreign ones, can be a fickle lot. As per a recent report, some funds are undoing their "buy India, sell China" strategy as Beijing's support for the economy and depressed valuations prompt a rethink. On balance, however, India remains the preferred investment destination. After all, it does seem to offer a more compelling story.

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Manifesto and the world

Congress's Nyay Patra has a clear vision to restore India's voice on the global stage



SALMAN KHURSHID

INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH the world needs a reset. Our neighbours are drifting away from us, and our proud reputation as a robust democracy is under question, even as our sovereignty is threatened by an increasingly aggressive China. Unfortunately, over the last decade, India's foreign policy has been defined by more chest-thumping and myopia, and a reduced focus on sharp and effective diplomacy. Our government is more preoccupied with image management and projecting the Prime Minister as a self-styled Vishwaguru than with improving relations with allies and containing our rivals.

The Congress party's recently unveiled Nyay Patra or manifesto has a clear vision to restore India's voice on the global stage. It crafts a strategy that carefully blends soft power with hard power to enhance India's role as a trusted, respected, powerful voice on the world stage. The Nyay Patra aims to strengthen four critical pieces that build India's soft power.

The first is India's status as perhaps the only strong, sustained democracy across the postcolonial world. In the polarised decades of the Cold War, India carved out a middle path for itself, characterised by our unique combination of social welfare and democratic freedoms. When Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru spoke, he summoned the moral authority of India's unique democratic fabric, and his own legitimacy as a committed democrat. And the world listened in awe. This proud tradition continued to Manmohan Singh. As memorably stated by

then-US President Barack Obama, when Dr Singh spoke, "the whole world listened."

Unfortunately, over the last decade, PM Modi's intolerance of dissent and attack on democratic rights has tarnished India's image abroad. The Congress manifesto promises a full restoration, as well as an enhancement, of our democratic rights and freedoms. We will protect artistic freedom and independent journalism, stop arbitrary internet shutdowns, and not interfere in the Indian people's personal choices in food, dress, love and marriage.

Second, the Congress promises to restore India's global reputation as a voice for peace, moderation, and co-existence in world affairs, in line with our historical conception of the world as one family (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam). India used to have the courage to take a principled stance on international issues, even when this required confrontation with the West. Under Congress, India will once again be a clear, unflinching voice for global peace. The Mahatma's India must be reborn.

Third, we will revive the Neighbourhood First policy pioneered by Manmohan Singh's government in 2008. Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal have drifted towards China. To succeed, our neighbours must be accorded respect, a sentiment which has been markedly missing under the Modi government. Only then can we restore and repair our special relationships with our neighbours. An India that its neighbours don't trust is an India that will find itself isolated on the global stage.

The defining challenge for Indian foreign policy in the 21st century is to maintain our sovereignty amidst periodic incursions by China. Unfortunately, the PM and Home Minister have denied China's occupation of Indian territory. This has deeply compromised India's national interest. The first step is to acknowledge the status quo, as Congress has consistently and unfailingly done.

Our commitment is to restore the pre-Modi status quo at the border with China. To achieve this and other objectives, we will develop an integrated national defence strategy — one vision that will underpin all our actions, across national defence, external affairs, and infrastructure development. The major points of this vision are clear: We will reverse the decline in defence expenditure as a proportion of total expenditure, will restore the integrity of our armed forces by scrapping Agnipath, and work with our neighbours and our allies abroad to strengthen our position vis-a-vis China. The Congress will provide direction to our policymaking.

Our manifesto repeats our enduring and unwavering opposition to terrorism, and our commitment to work with allied nations to eliminate terrorism everywhere. We also repeat our long-standing position that any engagement with Pakistan depends fundamentally on its willingness and ability to end cross-border terrorism. Without clear evidence of progress on this front, we cannot engage with Pakistan constructively.

Finally, we will restore alignment between our economic and foreign policy. After

a wave of trade deals signed under Manmohan Singh, our economic engagement with the world has faltered under the Modi government, limited to deals of insignificant value. Meanwhile, China and ASEAN have signed RCEP and our industrial competitors like Vietnam are securing access to European markets. Partly as a result of the Modi government's failed trade policy, our net inbound FDI has collapsed, as foreign investors do not see India as an attractive destination for industrial investment without reliable access to export markets.

The Congress will re-engage, make every effort to conclude long-pending trade negotiations with other countries in the interests of Indian producers and consumers. We reiterate a commitment to rule-based international trade.

The Congress manifesto promises a powerful reset in our engagement with the world. We promise to restore India's moral legitimacy as a country that stands for sovereignty and peace and to regain the country's leadership in our neighbourhood. We will simultaneously ensure the integrity of our borders, work against the threat of global terror, and facilitate India's economic growth through foreign trade and investment. The Nyay Patra's vision for India is that of a country with a voice, one that will be heard and respected across the world, and one that 140 crore Indians can be proud of.

The writer is former Union Minister for External Affairs

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A 'SWEETENED' BILL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A fragile consensus' (IE, April 29). The Republicans are especially opposed to aid packages, which they consider a threat to their isolationist vision for the US. House Speaker Mike Johnson had to introduce a "sweetener" into the Bill to win their vote. This "sweetener" was a promise to ban TikTok if it did not divest itself of Chinese ownership within a year — thus opening the door to helping Ukraine push back against Russian aggression, providing wartime assistance to Israel and humanitarian aid to Gaza, and countering territorial threats in the Indo-Pacific that are linked to China. That the far-right segment was able to exert its influence on the agenda of Congress to this extent is remarkable.

SS Paul, Nadia

MOUNTING PRESSURE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Cries for help' (IE, April 29). It's shocking that in less than a week of the results of the Telangana state Intermediate public examination being announced, at least seven students died by suicide. The series of suicides has led to questions regarding the mental well-being and the pressure that students go through during and after examinations. Failure to meet expectations is one of the major causes of youngsters taking the extreme step of ending their lives. This spate of preventable deaths calls for

urgent corrective measures and suggests deeper structural impediments: The relentless pressure exerted by families and institutions to excel, shrinking employment opportunities and fierce competition. The recent string of suicides must serve as a wake-up call. Ensuring the mental well-being of students through counselling must be a short-term goal. But can society rid itself of the habit of demanding excellence from young minds?

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

AN UNHOLY NEXUS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Robin hood economics' (IE, April 28). In her article, Tavleen Singh vehemently criticises Rahul Gandhi's agenda of taking money from the rich and distributing it to the poor. She wants us to believe that the wealth that is owned and created by Adani and Ambani is not given to them by the government or any politician. She wants us to believe that it is Modi's economic policies that have paved the way for the creation of wealth in our country. But the allotments of various ports and airports to the Adani group are a testimony of the conspicuous favours done to this group. And is she not aware of the inequality in India, which has skyrocketed in 2023, with the income and wealth share of the top one per cent of the population holding 40 per cent of the country's wealth?

Arun Francis, New Delhi



OUR VIEW



Making sense of equity markets is a challenge

A recent RBI working paper is a welcome addition to the literature on this subject even if it doesn't explain markets entirely. It's not an easy task, as a review of Nobel wins can testify

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) working paper, *Equity Markets and Monetary Policy Surprises*, March 2024, is yet another attempt to make sense of the unfathomable ways of equity markets. This time, from the perspective of monetary policy; in particular, market expectations of the future path of policy and the impact of central bank communication and surprises on markets. Over the years, economists, financial wizards and others have tried to explain why stock markets behave the way they do. With limited success, or worse. We have a range of theories, from the Efficient Market Hypothesis and Random Walk Theory to Modern Portfolio Theory, Capital Asset Pricing Model and the Arbitrage Pricing Theory, among others. Unfortunately, not one of these theories—some of which even won their theorists Nobel prizes—has stood the test of time. Markets, almost invariably, seem to have the last laugh. What can possibly explain the dizzying speed at which markets—whether in India or the US—have run up in the post-covid years, a period marked by a global slowdown in economic growth? Remember, India's quarterly GDP contracted by nearly 24% in the first quarter of 2020-21, while the US was expected to tip into recession.

Sure, both economies have recorded sterling recoveries since, with the US appearing to defy attempts of the US Federal Reserve to slow it down. And India is expected to be one of the world's fastest growing major economies, even as China struggles to regain its eminence as an engine of growth. But that alone does not quite explain why the S&P BSE Sensex was up 68% in covid year 2020-21 (it is up 25% in the period from 1 March 2022 to 26 April 2024). One can

point to surplus liquidity, thanks to quantitative easing by central banks trying to tackle the pandemic's fallout. Never mind that they have shifted to quantitative tightening, starting some two years ago. But can liquidity alone explain markets? Sadly, no. Which is why RBI's new working paper is a welcome addition to the literature on this subject. It is true that "financial markets tend to react instantaneously with the release of new information and market prices reflect expectations about future economic and monetary developments." It is also true that market participants "typically extract information from the central bank's monetary policy communication." Further, their reactions are coloured by whether policy actions were anticipated and incorporated into their decisions or not, with unanticipated changes more likely to impact markets. Using data on overnight indexed swaps, an interest-rate swap whose floating leg is linked to an overnight index, compounded every day over the payment period, the study concludes that "equity returns on policy announcement days are impacted only by the market's expectations of the future monetary policy trajectory." Also, volatility in equity prices is affected by the surprise element of monetary policy and central bank messaging. Overall, equity markets are affected more by changes in market expectations of future monetary policy than by policy rate surprises.

Whether all this leaves us any wiser in our grasp of equity markets remains to be seen. For now, the party seems endless. Sure, we've seen corrections from time to time. But as Citigroup's former CEO Chuck Prince once put it, "As long as the music is playing, you've got to get up and dance." Dance, many surely will. But don't bet on an endless party.

MY VIEW | TIGHTROPE WALK

Diffused accountability sets the stage for organizational failure

Leaders must take responsibility for what happens on their watch instead of trying to pass the buck



RAGHU RAMAM

is former CEO of the National Intelligence Grid, distinguished fellow at Observer Research Foundation and author of 'Everyman's War'.

Death by firing squad is a sentence usually meted out in the military for heinous crimes like murder or desertion. The condemned prisoner is tied to a post or stood against a wall. A group of five or more soldiers aim at him, and on command, fire their rifles simultaneously. Notably, one of the soldiers is randomly and anonymously given a rifle loaded with a blank round, thus allowing each one to find solace in the chance they weren't personally responsible for taking a life. This idea of deliberate diffusion of accountability is used by several US states where executions are done by lethal injection. There are two syringes and two buttons pressed by two different individuals simultaneously and a computer chooses which syringe is to be injected into the prisoner, thus absolving both executioners of absolute certainty of whose action caused the death. While the concept may offer psychological comfort in macabre tasks such as executions, it also leads to ethical lapses and decision-making failures in other circumstances, including in the day-to-day operations of businesses and governments.

On 20 April 2010, an oil rig off the Gulf of Mexico named Deepwater Horizon had a massive blowout. The disaster killed 11 people and was considered one of the worst environmental catastrophes, causing severe damage to marine ecosystems and several regional

economies. It was a classic case of diffused accountability gone horribly wrong. The rig was operated by Transocean, but it was drilling on behalf of BP, and a third company, Haliburton, was responsible for cementing the borewell. The involvement of multiple entities in various aspects of operations had blurred the lines of accountability and responsibility. Critical information on operational safety and equipment malfunction were held in silos, some of it withheld in power games between the three companies. Further, regulatory bodies like the Minerals Management Services failed in their responsibility to enforce regulations, thus creating a culture where safety got short-shrift because accountability for it was spread over several companies and the regulator.

Similarly, on 2 December 1984, a catastrophic gas leak occurred at Union Carbide India Ltd's (UCIL) pesticide plant in Bhopal. The disaster released methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas into the air, exposing over 500,000 people to deadly gas. Responsibility in this case also had multiple layers. The plant was owned and operated by UCIL, which was an Indian company, but a majority stake in it was held by US-based Union Carbide. In the aftermath of the MIC gas disaster, both entities blamed each other for poor safety and maintenance standards. They even withheld the true nature of toxin exposure, which further delayed appropriate treatment for victims. Like in the Deepwater case, the regulator had failed, resulting in deaths and permanent impairment for tens of thousands of innocent people. And like almost every other disaster or financial scam (IL&FS or Satyam, for example), Bhopal too was a tragedy waiting to happen, as people working in the organization knew that they were skating on thin ice but the structure of diffused accountability enabled risks to worsen without being addressed by anyone.

Large organizations have a penchant for diffused accountability. Almost

every major decision, ranging from the hiring of key personnel to operationalizing strategic projects, are routinely decided by panels of leaders who have a lot of say in planning and implementation, but none of them seems to step up during failures. Diffused accountability can also lead to inaction on account of the 'bystander effect': critical tasks get ignored because everyone assumes someone else will take responsibility. Even auditors and regulatory watchdogs appear to wriggle out. As former US president John Kennedy remarked after America's Bay of Pigs debacle, "Success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan."

Organizations have to make a choice. If they believe that good governance is a prerequisite for sustainable growth, then they mustn't allow unaccountable leadership or a coterie of sycophants to emerge. Thankfully, there are some exceptional examples of how leaders step up to the plate and accept accountability instead of shirking it.

Recall, for example, Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson's response to a racially charged incident in 2018, when he not only publicly apologized, but also shut down stores, insisting on employee education about racial biases. Or that of E. Sreedharan, Delhi's 'Metro Man' who offered his resignation in 2007 after a section of a bridge collapsed, citing moral responsibility. Or the response of Admiral D.K. Joshi, a Navy chief who resigned, taking moral and personal responsibility for the sinking of the submarine *Sindhurakshak*. Or of Major General Aharon Haliva, chief of the Israeli military intelligence, who resigned over last October's failure to anticipate Hamas attacks. These leaders—who weren't personally responsible for these failures—set a culture of accountability by reinforcing the cardinal principle of leadership: that if it happens on your watch, you are responsible. It is an irony, however, that most leaders who preach accountability often fire blank rounds themselves.

10 YEARS AGO



MINT METRIC

by Bibek Debroy

A Belgian man has auto brewery disease.
The cops never left him at ease.
Accused of driving with drink
He was driven to the brink,
Until the court listened to his pleas.

MY VIEW | TRUTH, LIES AND STATISTICS

India needs a reliable database for its welfare schemes

PRAMIT BHATTACHARYA



is a Chennai-based journalist.

Every rupee spent in the name of the poor, only 15 paise goes to poor households, former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi once observed, drawing attention to widespread leakages in India's welfare programmes. The Indian state's welfare delivery apparatus has improved a lot since then, much of it over the past decade. Even critics of Prime Minister Narendra Modi acknowledge his government's ability to aim welfare spending towards the deserving.

How did the government learn to identify deserving beneficiaries better? The answer lies in a caste census conducted by the Manmohan Singh government. Almost all of the Modi government's flagship welfare schemes derive their list of beneficiaries from the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) conducted in 2011. Beyond caste, the SECC contains a vast trove of data on household earnings, assets and amenities. So, depending on the state of your house in 2011 (for instance, whether it had a *kuchcha* or *pucca* wall), your occupational category, or

your caste (Scheduled Caste or general category), your family may be automatically included or excluded from certain schemes.

In the pre-SECC era, welfare schemes were run on the basis of below-poverty-line (BPL) lists compiled by local authorities. Inclusion or exclusion from these lists was often influenced by local political activists who could get you enlisted if you paid the right price (a bribe). Hence, both inclusion errors (non-deserving households that became beneficiaries) and exclusion errors (poor households that could not become beneficiaries) were very high. While the Planning Commission would compute state-level poverty numbers using a nationally representative survey conducted by the ministry of statistics and programme implementation (Mospil), the actual identification of beneficiaries in each state was based on controversial BPL lists.

The SECC was conducted jointly by the Union and state governments, and the rural data was published online during the early phase of the exercise. Greater transparency and a more vigilant set of officials ensured that the database was robust in comparison with the old BPL lists. To be sure, the SECC had its share of problems. But everyone in the policy ecosystem—politicians, bureau-

crats and policy wonks—agreed that the SECC database was a huge improvement over the old system based on problematic BPL lists. No wonder then that SECC-based welfare schemes have been more popular than their leaky predecessors.

However, the very success of the SECC has created hurdles in updating the database. Any attempt at updating it might lead respondents to overstate their deprivation levels now. Government officials are not sure they will be able to collect accurate data on the same parameters as before. This is one reason (apart from the postponement of the 2021 census) why the government has continued to use out-of-date SECC numbers even in 2024.

Even in 2011, the SECC may have overstated deprivation levels to some extent. A *Mint* analysis ("The targeting challenge in India's welfare programs", 8 May 2019) showed that the 2011 census and SECC produced very different rankings of districts based on asset deprivation. The census-

based deprivation rankings were far closer to deprivation rankings based on the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2015-16, even though the NFHS and census were conducted five years apart. Government officials fear that SECC 2.0 could end up being much less accurate than SECC 1.0.

While the Union government has dragged its feet on updating its main welfare database, state governments have gone ahead with their own socio-economic (and caste) surveys. They are facing their own share of problems. Within a few years, their databases become unreliable, and it gets difficult to identify deserving beneficiaries solely on the basis of their surveys. Attempts at using administrative data-sets to update the beneficiary databases haven't been successful, according to a policy consultant advising state governments.

Some state governments have turned to party activists to help fill the gaps in their beneficiary database. These booth-level workers run quick-and-dirty surveys to

update the official database. This 'jugaad' or workarounds brings back the same problems that afflicted BPL lists: political biases and corruption in beneficiary selection. Others have tried to hide behind 'algorithms.' These run on flawed and incomplete data-sets, and also end up with biased results.

India's welfare delivery model stands at a crossroads today. The public debate on poverty tends to centre on the poverty line and ways to measure it accurately. But we need to start paying more attention to how poor beneficiaries get identified. Even with a universally-agreed definition of poverty, governments will still need granular data on household characteristics to be able to reach poor households. They will also need to find a way to update such data regularly, so that a household that escapes poverty is eased out of the social security net, while one that becomes poor is included.

Without a reliable and dynamic database, governments will find it hard to reach the poorest of households in need of state support. They will have to either rely on extra-official agents to help identify the poorest lot, or devise quasi-universal schemes to cut down exclusion errors. After a decade of rapid progress in welfare delivery, India may be headed back to the pre-SECC era.

Official schemes are much better aimed now but we need fresh socio-economic data to identify the poorest



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

There's much ado about a decline in India's household savings rate

It shouldn't worry us as the money is merely shifting to other assets and isn't as stark a phenomenon as some critics suggest



V. ANANTHA NAGESWARAN is the chief economic advisor to the Government of India.

On 21 April, *The Hindu* carried an opinion piece on the decline in household savings in India (bit.ly/3vPFx0R). There are several aspects to this. One is whether households are reducing their savings in absolute rupee terms. Is it declining as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP)? If households are not drawing down their overall savings, but are adding to it slower than before, what are they doing with the money? Is it a sign of financial distress? What are the macroeconomic implications of it?

India's household savings rate has declined from 22.7% of GDP in 2020-21 to 18.4% in 2022-23. The 73-year average rate is 14.8%. The post-1991 average is 20.5%. The new millennium's average is 21.5%. The savings-rate decline happened in the two years after the pandemic shock, which caused economic activity to contract in 2020-21.

Has this happened before? Between 2004 and 2008, an economic-boom period that had neither a shock like the pandemic, nor balance-sheet problems at banks, non-banks and corporations, and when employment and household incomes had supposedly surged, India's household savings rate dropped from 23.6% of GDP in March 2004 to 20.6% in March 2008. The private corporate savings rate shot up from 4.3% to 12.2% during this period. Back then, the corporate sector was raking it in, as households spent more and saved less. So, what we are witnessing is not a new phenomenon and has been seen before, even when there was no major shock to contend with.

Now, let us look at household savings in absolute rupee terms. Between 2018-19 (pre-pandemic) and 2022-23, household net financial savings have declined from ₹14.92 trillion to ₹14.16 trillion because households' financial liabilities doubled. In rupee terms, the rise in financial liabilities was ₹7.86 trillion. But the physical savings of households in this period (including gold and silver ornaments) increased from ₹23.52 trillion to ₹35.47 trillion, an increase of ₹11.95 trillion. Thus, the rise in households' physical savings has far outstripped the decline in financial savings—so much so that their overall household savings went up from ₹38.45 trillion to ₹49.63 trillion.

The picture is the same if we narrow our lens to 2020-21 and 2022-23, a period that includes the pandemic years. Households' net financial savings declined from ₹23.3 trillion to ₹14.16 trillion. But physical savings rose significantly to ₹35.47 trillion in 2022-23 from ₹21.76 trillion in 2020-21. So, overall household savings have gone up by nearly ₹4.6 trillion. It is clear that household savings have not declined; they have shifted a lot more towards physical savings.

Peer closely and one notices that households' financial savings jumped by ₹8.37 trillion between



2018-19 and 2020-21. In the same period, households' physical savings dropped ₹1.76 trillion, for a net swing of ₹10.1 trillion in favour of financial savings. In the next two years, households did the opposite with a vengeance. Their financial savings declined by ₹9.13 trillion, and physical savings increased by ₹13.71 trillion. The volatility over the last four years, which included the covid phase, should settle down in the coming years.

Between 2004 and 2008, household savings—both physical and financial—rose in rupee terms, no doubt. But the household savings rate (share of GDP) dropped nearly three percentage points between March 2004 and March 2008. Furthermore, their share in the gross savings of the economy plunged. Household financial savings/gross savings of the economy cratered from 37.9% to 24.3%, a drop of 13.6 percentage points. Physical savings of households/gross national savings dropped from 41.7% to 30.2%. So, as a result, household share of overall gross savings in the economy dropped a whopping 25 percentage points from 79.6% to 54.5% in the period 2003-04 to 2007-08. In contrast, the private corporate sector's share of gross savings climbed nearly 18 percentage points, from 14.5% to 32.3%. The private corporate sector gained significantly more than households during the economic boom of that era.

Is the household sector in distress now, having had to withstand the effects of balance-sheet problems in the financial sector (banks and non-banks) as well as the corporate sector in the second decade of the century followed by the impact of a once-in-a-century pandemic in the early 2020s?

A major public-sector bank notes that the

default rate on loans of less than ₹1 lakh made mainly to those with salary accounts is less than 1% (0.99%, to be precise). The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development tracks the default rates of self-help-group loans annually. Non-performing assets among loans to self-help groups (below poverty line) have declined from 4.73% in 2020-21 to 2.79% in 2022-23.

Among microfinance institutions, portfolio-at-risk, or PAR 31-90 (denoting repayment overdue for 31-90 days), was 1.1% in December 2023. Its recent peak was 6.7% in September 2021. PAR 91-180 is 0.9%. Its recent peak was 3.9% in March 2021. PAR 180-plus is 7.3%, and its recent peak was 10% in September 2022. It has been falling since.

What about macroeconomic consequences? Households' lower financial savings in the last two years have not leaked outside the economy. India's current account deficit has been trending lower. The trailing four-quarter current account deficit to GDP ratio decreased from 1.98% in March 2023 to 0.93% in December 2023.

In sum, the hysteria being whipped up about a decline in household savings appears excessive, especially considering that the fall was more precipitous in the boom period of 2003-2008, when there was a big rise in private corporate savings.

With strong private as well as banking sector balance sheets, private sector capital formation is picking up. The manufacturing sector has begun to hire in large numbers, as evident in the RBI-KLEMS data for 2021-22. With household employment and income growth in the coming years, we can expect household financial saving rates and absolute amounts to increase.

FTC non-compete-clause ban is a victory for the US economy

Workers must be free to take their skills where they're valued more



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Labour market dynamism is better served if switching jobs is easy. ISTOCKPHOTO

It's easy to understand why the US Chamber of Commerce is so upset about the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) decision to ban non-compete agreements. The problem for businesses is not that they will lose trade secrets or valuable investments in workers to competitors. It's that they just lost bargaining power to workers—and that's exactly what the FTC intended.

Despite the common perception that non-compete clauses are relevant only for employees with access to critical trade secrets, the reality is that they are often imposed across various industries on a wide spectrum of workers, many of whom do not handle any sensitive information. It's also the case that most hiring in the US involves people leaving one job for another, a critical factor shaping labour market dynamics. To see why non-compete deals matter, it's important to understand the value of the right to quit one job and take another. The question is: Who should hold that right?

When parties can negotiate without cost and rights are clearly defined, noted the Nobel laureate Ronald Coase, they will reach agreements that result in efficient outcomes. The FTC's ban shifts the bargaining power from employers to workers: Employers must make more competitive counteroffers to retain talent.

Previously, if you were governed by a non-compete agreement, you could pay your employer to let you out of it. Now, according to Coase's theory, even though the number of workers switching jobs might not change, the ban will have a distributional effect: Workers with more bargaining power could get higher wages.

But wouldn't workers simply have negotiated higher wages to compensate them for signing non-compete agreements in the first place? If this is true, then a ban on them would have little effect on wages. The evidence suggests that most workers don't have such negotiations and many sign such clauses without realizing that they may not even be legally enforceable.

Workers often face significant challenges in negotiating terms, especially when they lack information about their options and the job market. The process of understanding and negotiating non-compete agreements can be daunting without legal assistance, leading to a negotiation that is cheaper for—and favours—employers.

Moreover, non-compete clauses exploit behavioural biases that lead workers to underestimate their future cost. Some workers are shown that cause only after they say they're set to leave. In comments

received by the FTC, many workers noted that they weren't aware of such clauses until the last minute.

These arguments imply that banning non-compete clauses might be important not just for higher wages, but for greater labour competition as workers become more mobile and make more job transitions. Research suggests such agreements can restrict economic activity and personal career growth. And it's not just labour market competition that suffers. By restricting labour supply, existing businesses can prevent new rivals from entering their markets and driving down prices.

Non-compete-clause supporters argue that they are necessary to protect business secrets and justify investments in employee training. But existing laws already protect confidential information. And businesses can adopt alternative strategies such as training-repayment deals, which are more directly tied to the specific investments made in employees. Coase's work shows no difference in these outcomes if payments are made to retain workers, as businesses can offer to pay workers not to take jobs with competitors.

The FTC's ban on non-compete agreements will help enhance labour market efficiency and economic growth. The US needs a competitive economy to stay strong in the global marketplace. And that requires workers who are able to take their skills where they are most valued—and new businesses that have access to the full talent of the US labor force.

In most other advanced economies, workers have rights to keep a job. The US, however, does not require employers to give reasons for terminating jobs, provide performance-improvement plans before such terminations, or offer a sufficient paid notice period before it is done.

The argument against those policies is that they would make it hard for the US to have a dynamic labour market. But the same logic applies to non-compete agreements: If it should be easy for employers to fire workers, then it should also be easy for employees to quit. And that requires US workers to have the right to take a better job. By allowing workers to move freely to roles where they are most valued, the FTC is fostering a competitive and fair labour market. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

Can IT service firms close their gap with GenAI rivals?

SIDDHARTH PAI



is co-founder of Siana Capital, a venture fund manager.

As earnings announcements from Indian and other information technology (IT) service providers have been making headlines, people who have seen their dismal figures have been asking why generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) companies seem like an existential threat to Indian IT services firms. It's simple. They 'know' more.

Along with OpenAI, giants like Google, Meta and Microsoft lead the AI development race and thus shape the discourse and access to these technologies. This starkly contrasts with traditional IT service companies such as IBM, Infosys and Wipro, which appear to be playing catch-up. This information asymmetry has significant implications and is highlighted by classic economic theories.

Information asymmetry occurs when one party in a transaction has more or superior information than another. This concept was vividly captured in seminal work by George Akerlof, Michael Spence and Joseph Stiglitz, who shared the 2001 Nobel Prize in Eco-

nomics for their analyses of markets with asymmetric information. In their view, such asymmetries can lead to adverse selection, moral hazard and market inefficiencies. As the chief buy-side negotiator for global clients seeking to dole out billion-dollar contracts to these service providers, I made a living straightening out such asymmetries for many years. Back then, IT firms with specialized knowledge could withhold information from buyers, leading to an unfairly negotiated deal that benefited the service provider. With a specialized sourcing negotiator on the buyer's side (who has been a service provider before), the client would no longer be at a disadvantage.

In today's context, firms like Microsoft, OpenAI and Google have amassed vast datasets and advanced algorithms, bolstered by substantial R&D budgets and strategic partnerships. Their rapid progress in developing GenAI, machine learning models and neural networks is already well-documented.

Conversely, despite their formidable tech prowess and client networks, traditional IT service companies need help in accessing cutting-edge AI technologies and methodologies. This gap is not just technological. There is also a knowledge gap. And so an information asymmetry now exists between

these two types of IT firms. The pioneers of AI operate in a milieu where the latest breakthroughs, be they in natural language processing or robotics, are part of their internal discourse well before they reach the broader market (including IT service providers).

This asymmetry can skew the innovation capabilities of IT service companies. Let's not forget that the latter often rely on established technologies. An SAP or Oracle creates a software product such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), and a Wipro or an Infosys provides the services needed to integrate and maintain it. Now companies like Google or OpenAI are creating new technologies, positioning themselves at the forefront of innovation and defining the direction of the AI market. The difference between those ERP solution providers and GenAI providers is that at the end of the tech integration, they need little maintenance from service providers going forward. Like the praying mantis, they would likely devour their mate—the IT services pro-

grammers, i.e., who integrated their systems into their clients' technology portfolio.

Separately, with superior AI capabilities, companies like Microsoft can offer more advanced solutions to clients, attracting business that might have gone to traditional IT service providers. I would not be surprised to see a Google or an OpenAI consulting arm bloom. This would consolidate power and market share among firms leading the AI revolution. As a result, investors are more likely to place their bets on companies at the cutting edge, exacerbating the disparity between AI innovators and traditional IT service providers. The effect of information asymmetry can already be seen in their diverging valuations.

There is also a stark difference in the attraction of talent. Top AI researchers and engineers are more inclined to work with companies at the cutting edge. This often means choosing companies like OpenAI or Google over traditional IT firms. Meanwhile, most low-cost service providers look to hire

fresh graduates, especially in India, where we have far more engineers graduating each year than there is demand for. This has granted Indian IT services firms the luxury of paying abysmally low wages, but at some point, these businesses need to realize that they get what they pay for. At current wages, what they get is a bunch of young employees who, though armed with shiny new degrees, need prolonged training before they can be of any use to clients.

Drawing lessons from economics, it is clear that this disparity could widen without strategic interventions, affecting not just individual companies, but the broader economic landscape. Bridging this gap is essential for fostering a competitive and inclusive AI market. The hope is that IT service companies can form strategic alliances with AI leaders to gain access to advanced technologies and expertise. Partnerships for the development of specific AI applications or research-sharing will probably help.

Enhancing the skills and knowledge base of existing employees through continuous AI training and machine learning can improve the capacity of IT service companies to compete on a more equal footing. As the field evolves, so must the strategies of companies looking to stay relevant in the AI era.

Indian IT service providers must strive to reduce information asymmetry vis-a-vis GenAI companies



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PAPER WITH PASSION

North by Northeast

Internal strife, insurgency and a sense of alienation plague the Seven Sisters, much like the Kashmir of yore

India's Northeastern region has for long experienced insurgency, internal conflict and unrest and the challenges have often been exacerbated by its complex history, geographical isolation and perceived neglect by the Central Government. One of the most prominent facets of the restive Northeast is the internecine wars within its borders, fuelled by a variety of factors ranging from ethnic tensions to resource disputes, leading to cycles of violence and displacement. The region's strategic importance, owing to its proximity to China and Southeast Asia, has made it a battleground for competing geopolitical interests, thus complicating the situation. Traditionally, the conflict in the Northeast has been fuelled by a lack of identity with the Indian mainland, the role of external powers like China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, tribal/communal differences among its inhabitants and fault lines in the subdivision of Assam which led to the creation of other Northeastern states. Indeed, the region's woes stem from several factors, which are reflected in its turmoil. Economic underdevelopment and lack of infrastructure exacerbate feelings of marginalisation and deprivation, providing fertile ground for insurgent movements to recruit disaffected youth. Moreover, the region's porous borders, particularly with Myanmar and Bangladesh, help insurgent groups set up base and launch attacks on our security personnel. Cross-border infiltration and support to insurgent groups by external actors have been persistent challenges for India's security establishment.



The Army's long presence in the region Delhi's apathy has been a recurring theme in the Northeast. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), enacted in 1958 amidst the Naga Hills 'uprising', is a constant irritant that the locals feel reflects New Delhi's deliberate attempt to strip them of their rights and dignity. It is one of the most despised Acts in the region and stands between the Centre's goodwill and the Northeastern people. Currently, the AFSPA is enforced fully in 31 districts across four Northeastern states and partially in 12 districts. The alienation has manifested in various forms, including widespread boycott of elections, as communities express their disillusionment with the political process. The latest manifestation has been in Manipur, bordering Myanmar, where violence began on May 3 last year when hill tribal groups clashed with the ethnic majority Meitei over economic benefits and job and education quotas. Regrettably, since Independence, this area has not been fully integrated into the mainstream. Not only have many insurgent groups representing various communities been waging war against the Indian Union, internal strife and communal differences have also not been reconciled. The lack of inclusive approach to addressing the root causes of the unrest, coupled with sporadic attempts at peace talks and development initiatives, has led to instability that shows little sign of abating. Only through sustained efforts and genuine political will can the region hope to achieve peace and stability.

PICTALK



Members of a dance group perform on a road on International Dance Day, in Nadia

Why are the young not joining politics?

A large number of voters belongs to the younger generation; their apathy towards the electoral process is a cause of concern



PRAFULL GORADIA

The country belongs more and more to its younger citizens. It is, therefore, all the more disturbing that the youth who have lately crossed the age of 18 and have registered themselves as voters in fewer numbers. The country belongs more to the younger ones who're 18, on an average, the country for say, sixty years more, or probably twelve general elections. To a fifty-year-old, in terms of time, he might get to see five, possibly six more general elections.

In Uttar Pradesh, our largest state only 25 per cent of the eligible youth have registered themselves as voters. What could be the reasons for this lack of desire to have a say in the running of their country? Do most young people expect Government representatives to approach them in the old maibaap fashion? Or do they feel that there isn't likely to be much competition among the political parties for their votes? Could it also be that the younger generation has come to nurse an indifference towards the entire political process and the institution of democracy itself? Over the years, a large body of the youth of the country has come to believe that whoever comes to power, won't make any difference to their lives, as the country's politicians are perceived to be a class that acts only in its interest. However, in this cynicism, the youth forget that by their indifference, they abdicate their right to have a say in the running of their nation.

At the other of the age spectrum, the necessary interest in entering the political arena and playing a meaningful role in the life of the country has not been there to the extent required. Public life of a political nature had existed for some fifty years before independence. It began with the founding of the Congress by a retired British bureaucrat, Allan Octavian Hume, in 1885. The Muslim League was founded in the year 1906, the Hindu Mahasabha in 1916 and the Communist Party in 1925. Indians, therefore had the opportunity to have a feel of political



public life. The motivation wasn't power, but an idealism-driven desire for the country's freedom. Soon thereafter, there might have been disillusion; the earlier idealism began declining rapidly. With the decline was seen a fall in ethical and social values in the country.

Could the disillusionment have been due to disappointment with the quality of politicians? Not all parties indeed have members hailing from the most educated or knowledgeable sections of society. Although the current central Government is not a rough and tumble of the hitherto political dispensations that have ruled the country, it has still not been able to overcome the cynicism about politicians and politics in general, which continues to hold sway in the minds of a large section of the people. This is not to say that good people are disinterested in politics.

We have in recent years, seen many academically and professionally qualified people enter politics; some of them have even become ministers. But clearly, there is a long way to go in this regard.



ANOTHER REASON WHY WEALTHY CANDIDATES ARE ATTRACTED TO POLITICS IS THE TRADITIONAL BELIEF THAT ONCE ELECTED, THE CANDIDATE WOULD BE ABLE TO EARN BACK THE MONEY SPENT ON ELECTIONEERING AND THEREAFTER GENERATE MUCH MONEY

One great discouragement is the number of people in a constituency, as well as the high cost of electioneering. Hopefully, some answer to this problem should emerge from the delimitation of electoral constituencies, which would be set to increase, by (approximately) 50 per cent. No ordinary entrant can afford to spend astronomical sums of money to cultivate nearly two million voters per seat.

Delimitation and increased seats alone will not solve the problem of election expenses. Another reason why wealthy candidates are attracted to politics is the traditional belief that once elected, the candidate would be able to earn back the money spent on electioneering and thereafter generate much money. Once the doors are closed to corruption, the attraction for opportunists to become candidates would be much diminished. This also applies equally to any new avenue for making money.

Compulsory voting is a way of not only upgrading the system but also reducing the cost of electioneering. It would also eliminate the perpetuation of

vote-bank politics. For example, there was a time when the total voting used to be 50 per cent or less. Therefore, if the candidate had a secure vote bank, it wasn't difficult for him to win.

With the rise in the percentage of voting, the power and effect of a committed vote-bank is reduced. For instance, in an electorate of a lakh people, a committed vote-bank of a particular candidate is say, 25 per cent, i.e., 25,000 voters out of a population of one lakh. If the normal voting is no more than 50 to 55 per cent for that seat, this captive vote bank is assured victory for that candidate. However, if the voting percentage is 100 per cent, such a vote-bank will be of no decisive advantage. The role of freebies has to be curbed for any meaningful participation in the political process. Freebies reduce the exercise of elections in a democracy to nothing more than bribing voters. It is then futile to talk of democracy, or why the young don't participate in it in greater numbers.

(The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PAKISTAN'S AFGHAN DEBACLE

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Pakistan buying for its misplaced priorities," published on April 29, this is my response. Ambassador Asif Durrani's acknowledgement of Pakistan's failures in Afghanistan reveals a stark reality: the cost of tensions along the Durand Line surpasses all wars with India combined. The fixation on India as the primary adversary stems from historical wounds and institutional agendas. However, the Afghan debacle exposes the fallacy of such fixations and challenges the 'two-nation theory'. The resurgence of Taliban attacks and Afghan nationals participating in strikes against Pakistan signal a seismic shift in regional dynamics. Pakistan's strategic ambitions in Afghanistan have backfired, eroding trust and isolating it on the global stage. Despite efforts to rewrite the narrative, Pakistan remains entangled in its past missteps, with Afghanistan looming as a permanent fixture in its regional calculus.

As the world watches with scepticism, Pakistan's plight underscores a fundamental truth: religion alone cannot sustain a nation. Bangladesh and Afghanistan stand as testaments to the folly of such notions. It's a sobering lesson for Pakistan to reassess its identity and recalibrate its foreign policy away from religious rhetoric towards pragmatic diplomacy.

Rohit Kapoor | Kolkata

ENVIRONMENTAL MANIFESTO

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Political parties must prioritise environmental preservation," published on April 29, this is my response. As an avid reader of daily news, it's disheartening to witness India's political landscape during election time fail to address pressing environmental concerns. Despite lip service in manifestos, concrete actions are conspicuously absent. The proliferation of plastic waste during political campaigns exacerbates the crisis. Plastic pollution poses a grave threat to ecosystems and human health, with marine life suffering the brunt.

Bihar on progress path



Apropos the news article, "Chronicle of Bihar, Beyond Elections," published on April 28, this is my response. Deepak Kumar Jha's narrative in The Pioneer paints a vivid picture of Bihar's rural landscape, where traditional thatched homes have given way to brick dwellings amidst agricultural abundance. Yet, glaring issues persist: healthcare and education

lag, despite decades of political promises. The narrative exposes the complexity of Bihar's socio-political fabric.

While leaders tout progress, caste-driven politics remain entrenched. Migration continues, disillusioning locals with governance. Jha's storytelling captures the essence of Bihar's electoral fervour, where political discourse blends with everyday life. Amidst discussions over leaders, the grassroots yearns for tangible change. The article's depth extends beyond politics, delving into healthcare woes. The anecdote of the patient's struggle highlights systemic failures, contrasting with Bihar's rich cultural tapestry. Ultimately, Jha's piece is a poignant portrayal of Bihar's struggles and resilience. It underscores the urgent need for holistic development and the preservation of its cultural heritage amidst the political clamour.

Vishal Kumar | Delhi

Political parties wield considerable influence and should champion sustainable practices to combat plastic pollution. Yet the lack of urgency is alarming. With the planet reaching critical thresholds, we can't afford complacency. The need for immediate action to safeguard our only home, Earth, is paramount. It's high time political will transcended rhetoric to enact meaningful change. We must remember that there's no Plan B for our planet.

Aditya Mehta | Mumbai

CULINARY ESCAPADES

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Feast of hot summer menus," published on April 27, this is my response. Reading through these descriptions feels like leafing through a gourmet guidebook. Each venue promises not just a meal but an experience, a journey through flavours and cultures. Olly offers a tranquil haven from urban chaos, serving up classics with a twist amidst a serene ambience. The China Kitchen tantalizes with its immersive dining experience, bringing Chinese culinary traditions to life. Viet: nom adds

a modern flair to Vietnamese classics, while L'Opera delights with French finesse, especially with its seasonal mango collection. Café Delhi Heights, ever-evolving, captures the essence of Delhi's vibrancy through its diverse offerings.

The must-try dishes read like poetry, each a symphony of flavours designed to tantalize taste buds. From crispy sweet potato skins to succulent Peking duck, from vibrant summer rolls to creamy Alfredo pasta, there's something to suit every palate. Akanksha Dean's culinary journey adds a personal touch, showcasing a deep passion for food and an impressive resume. Her influence undoubtedly enhances the richness of each dining experience. As a regular newspaper reader, these culinary adventures beckon, promising not just a meal but a story to savour, making the dining experience more than just a necessity but a delightful escape.

Sneha Patel | Ahmedabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Reflections on rituals from around the world

From the tranquil Nyepi Day in Bali to the vibrant street celebrations in Japan, rituals surrounding life's milestones offer glimpses into cultures

We had lunch in the resort restaurant during a vacation to Thailand a few months back. There was a slight drizzle as we walked along a narrow walkway hemmed in by walls and tastefully planted beds of flowers, vines and shrubs. I remember a late evening in our beach resort in Bali a few years back. The day after our arrival was Nyepi Day, a public holiday. It is a day of silence, fasting and meditation. No lights are lit in the evening. It is believed that spirits roam in the evening on this day. Any loud sound or bright light may attract them to come down to explore and some of them may cause harm. We had walked to the resort restaurant along walkways at the back, which were lit up with muted lamps placed along the path to guide the guests. Even the lighting in the restaurant was subdued. We were also caught up in the spirit of the local folklore and walked silently along the dimly lit narrow path, surrounded by flowers, vines and shrubs,



apprehensive of catching the fancy of an evil spirit. A few decades back, I was in Japan for a study tour. There was a public holiday, which was celebrated as the day of the ancestors. Groups of people were out dancing on the streets, moving from one house to the other. Each household had set up a table in the front, loaded with beer and other alcohol and savouries to be partaken by the dancing people. I also joined the celebrations. We have a fortnight-long annual ritual, called Pitru Paksha, to honour our

ancestors. Prayers are offered, followed by meals specially prepared. What surprises me, though, is the fact that these 15 days, in honour of our ancestors are considered inauspicious for any new purchases, or any other auspicious work, even though we are because they were. A very close Parsi friend passed away a few years back. The family invited us for a celebration of her life a few days later. There was laughter all around as we all recounted the happy times that we had spent with the lady over drinks and food.

The gracious hostess, her daughter, had prepared a special Parsi-style chicken dish, which had been both a speciality and a favourite of the departed soul. We also have the thirteenth-day ceremony in our Hindu religion which is formally the close of the mourning period. Guests are invited to join prayers and then partake of our special food prepared for the occasion. Though sometimes teary-eyed, everyone remembers the time spent with the person who has joined the supreme being. Why mourn death, which is only the passing away to another life? When my time comes, I hope my near and dear ones remember me, not for my beliefs, but for the happiness that I gave them.

A life led to spreading happiness all around is to be celebrated. Thomas Campbell rightly said, "To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die!" (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA



Matters of heartland

Livelihood issues compete with caste and religious identities in campaigning

The Hindi heartland, more often than not, decides who forms the government in Delhi. Of the 189 Lok Sabha seats in the six States of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, U.P. and Uttar Pradesh that make up the very core of this territory, votes have been cast for 71 seats, in the first two phases. In Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan — where the BJP won the Assembly polls last year — the two principal national parties are in a direct contest which could determine who gets to lead the next government. For the BJP, the general election had begun on a high note with Prime Minister Narendra Modi setting the target of 400 seats for the party and its allies to win, even before the poll notification on March 16. The very next day, he even asked the Cabinet to draft the plan for the first 100 days of the government. The BJP is confident of forming. The Opposition on the other hand, began its campaign from a position of relative weakness and far less enthusiasm. The constituents of the INDIA bloc were still fighting among themselves on the seat-sharing formula. Developments since then have led to fresh questions. The Supreme Court-dictated disclosure of electoral bond data, and the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal by the ED, were two events that energised the Opposition's low-key campaign and highlighted the issues of economic downside, inflation and unemployment.

The BJP is trying to counter this with a far sharper cry on nationalism, and Hindu consolidation. It terms the Opposition as being 'anti-Santana dharma', and is targeting the Congress and labelling its manifesto as having an "imprint of the Muslim League". An apparent fear among Hindu subaltern segments with regard to the '400-plus' slogan has now put the BJP on the defensive. Statements by BJP leaders that a massive majority will enable it to rewrite the Constitution have been read as a threat by OBCs, Dalits and tribal communities. The BJP, with its ears to the ground, heard the fear, reflected in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speeches ahead of polling for the first phase, where he assured voters that the Constitution would not be tampered with. The BJP campaign is focused on explaining that there is no threat to caste reservations from it. And it accuses the Opposition of planning reservations for Muslims. In the heartland where caste and communal identities are locked in a complex interplay, the BJP's success is determined by religious mobilisation that overwhelms caste. The Congress's promise of policies that advance economic and social justice are also at the centre of the campaign. While the Congress's hope is to galvanise the poor and the subaltern castes, the BJP is trying to instigate fear of a socialist dictatorship. That is to address the deepest fear of the country with the fear of redistribution of wealth is a particularly striking paradox of the heartland.

Trying for a repeat

India is looking to defend its astonishing title win in men's badminton

In an Olympic year, the quadrennial extravaganza dwarfs every other competition. This is especially true in a sport like badminton where the Olympic gold is the holy grail. Yet, events that lead up to the marquee sporting festival do carry importance, and the ongoing Thomas & Uber Cup in Chengdu, China, is one such tournament. The de facto 'World Cup' of badminton, the biennial championship became an indelible part of the national consciousness when the Indian men's outfit won its maiden Thomas Cup crown in 2022. While a repeat is very much in the realm of possibility, the strong Indian side (H.S. Prannoy, Lakshya Sen, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty among others) will look at it as a great opportunity to test their competitive mettle ahead of the Paris Olympics. Two years ago, the triumph had acted as a springboard for Satwiksairaj and Chirag, who went on to clinch the coveted Asian Games doubles gold in 2023 and help secure a historic team silver before becoming the first Indians to be ranked No.1 in doubles. Prannoy, India's No.1 singles player and an Asian Games bronze medalist, will be looking for similar inspiration after a not-so-good year while Lakshya will be keen to sharpen his skills ahead of his first-ever Olympics.

The women's Uber Cup roster does not include the Olympics-bound trio of singles star P.V. Sindhu and doubles practitioners Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Khanna. The three have prioritised a solid training block — a luxury in a choke-block tournament calendar — while an inexperienced side gets a taste of elite-level badminton. The focus will be on 17-year-old Anmol Kharb, who played a stellar role in India winning the Badminton Asia Team Championship in February, and Isharani Baruah, 20. There is also an expectation for Ashmita Chahala, 24, long marked out for success, to make good on her promise. The tournament comes at a time when India is looking to restock its women's singles cupboard. As Saina Nehwal inches closer to retirement, the cabiner, barring two-time Olympic medalist Sindhu, has appeared bare in recent times. But going by the results in Chengdu, there is optimism that the next generation of stars could emerge from this lot. They have beaten Canada and Singapore back to back — by convincing 4-1 scorelines — to qualify for the quarterfinals, and further progress will confirm the green shoots. Even as all eyes are on the Thomas Cup destiny, the three have preparation, the women in the Uber Cup can well make it a week to remember.

The EVM-VVPAT case judgment is disappointing

Statistical thinking will one day be as necessary for efficient citizenship as the ability to read and write." — H.G. Wells

In February 1897, the House of Representatives of the U.S. State of Indiana passed Bill no. 246 that sought to legislatively establish the "true value" of pi (π) as 3.20. This strange Bill was introduced at the behest of a certain Edward Goodwin who claimed to have solved the ancient geometrical problem of "squaring the circle" thanks to a revelation from god, but it required changing the value of pi to 3.20! Fortunately, the Bill was stilled by Indiana's Senate due to the efforts of a mathematician called C.A. Waldo, and Indiana was saved from embarrassment.

My point in narrating this anecdote is that in the fields of science, mathematics and statistics, truths cannot be established by fiat of the executive, parliament or the judiciary. Just as Parliament cannot legislate water to run uphill, the Supreme Court of India cannot arbitrarily mandate that a uniform sample size of "5 EVMs per Assembly Constituency" is good enough for Voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT)-based audit of electronic voting machines (EVMs) for all Assembly Constituencies across the country. With due respect, its sample size does not conform to fundamental principles of statistical sampling theory.

Voter verification of VVPAT slips ensures that the votes have been "recorded as cast" but it is no guarantee that they have been "counted as recorded". There is always some risk, however small, of EVM malfunction or manipulation. To ensure "counted as recorded", we should tally the EVM count with the manual count of VVPAT slips for a statistically significant sample size of EVMs drawn from a randomly defined "population" of EVMs.

A typical case

The VVPAT-based audit of EVMs is a typical case of "hot acceptance sampling", a statistical quality control technique widely used in industry and



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India needs a statistically sound VVPAT-based system of EVM audit which can detect instances of mismatch with 99% or 99.9% accuracy; and done at the beginning of counting day

trade. If the number of defectives found in a randomly drawn, statistical sample is less than or equal to a specified 'acceptance number', the entire lot (or 'population') is accepted; otherwise, the entire lot is rejected. We define a 'defective EVM' as one which has a mismatch between the EVM count and the VVPAT count due to EVM malfunction or manipulation. We specify the acceptance number as 'zero defective EVM'.

The Supreme Court did not specify the 'population' of EVMs to which its sample size relates and the 'next steps' in the event of a 'defective EVM' turning up in a sample. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has also chosen to leave them vague. Both these are important because in the event of one or more 'defective EVMs' turning up in a sample, the entire 'population' from which that sample was drawn should be 'rejected'. In other words, manual counting of VVPAT slips should be done for all the remaining EVMs of that particular 'population' and its results declared based on VVPAT count only.

Statistical sampling theory tells us that the probability that the Court-mandated sample size will fail to detect a 'defective EVM' is 95% if EVMs deployed in an Assembly Constituency are defined as the 'population', and 70% if EVMs deployed in a Parliamentary Constituency are defined as the 'population'. This defeats the very purpose of introducing VVPAT.

Reasons behind the ECI's claim

The ECI has claimed that there was not a single instance of mismatch between the EVM count and the VVPAT count in all these years. Leaving aside the fact that this is not true, there could be three possible reasons for the very few mismatches: the EVMs are in fine fettle; the prescribed sample size is erroneous and fails to detect a 'defective EVM' most of the time; both. The correct answer is the last one — both. The ECI and the Supreme Court cannot proclaim "all is well" with the present egregiously wrong sample size and opaque audit protocol.

The Court's judgment in the Association for Democratic Reforms vs Election Commission of India and Another (2024) is disappointing because it did not compel the ECI to make public how it has defined the 'population' to which its sample size relates and its 'next steps' in the event of a mismatch.

The Court also did not clarify these points on its own after seeking expert opinion. Even more disappointing was the ADR not pressing for these vital clarifications. Instead, it demanded a return to paper ballots or 100% verification of VVPAT slips. The Court was right in rejecting both these demands.

Other critics of the ECI have been guilty of demanding arbitrary, non-statistical "percentage samples" for EVM audit under the mistaken belief that a bigger "percentage sample" guarantees greater accuracy of results. Congress leader Kamal Nath secured a "10% sample" and lost (2018). Then Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu sought a "50% sample" and lost (2019).

The Supreme Court rightly rejected these demands but the uniform sample size prescribed by it in 2019 was equally arbitrary, non-statistical and wrong.

What needs to be done

We do not know and we do not need to know the various ways in which an EVM may fail or be manipulated. What we need to do is implement a statistically sound VVPAT-based system of EVM audit which can detect instances of mismatch with 99% or 99.9% accuracy. The matching exercise should be done at the beginning of the counting day. Not at the end. Where there is a perfect match, the results should be declared based on the EVM count. Only where there is a mismatch, should manual counting of VVPAT slips for all the remaining EVMs of the particular 'population' be done and its results declared based on the VVPAT count. This statistical sampling-based, 'management by exception' approach represents the golden mean.

Court's nudge on hospital charges, a reform opportunity

The Supreme Court of India, while hearing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in February of this year, directed the central government to find ways to regulate the rates of hospital procedures in the private sector. The trigger for the PIL and directive were the high procedure rates and their large variations. The Court highlighted the problem using the procedure costs of cataract surgeries that cost only around ₹10,000 in a government set-up and between ₹30,000 to ₹1,40,000 in private hospitals. It invoked Rule 9 of the Clinical Establishments (Registration and Regulation) Act, 2010, of which Clause 2 requires that "clinical establishments shall charge the rates for each type of procedures and services within the range of rates determined and issued by the Central Government from time to time, in consultation with State Governments". The Court ruled the Central Government Health Scheme rates as an interim measure if the government failed to find ways to regulate rates.

In India, care delivery is predominantly through private providers, with market-determined prices. Health-care markets are imperfect, leading to inefficiencies and inequities and require regulation. While a problem does exist, the proposed solution oversimplifies the complex issue. However, it is the right step if it aims to spark debate and spur action. Here, we outline key considerations for addressing these challenges.

Benchmark for pricing

In an unregulated market-driven scenario, health-care providers focus on profit through higher prices and overprovision of care (supplier-induced demand). One potential solution, "yardstick competition", involves regulatory authorities setting benchmark prices based on market observations. However, this approach faces challenges in India due to diverse patient profiles, unreliable price data, and weak regulatory frameworks. Relying solely on competition from government hospitals is insufficient due to long wait times, perceived service quality issues, and patient information gaps, perpetuating the risk of supplier-induced demand.

As the Court observed, pricing-related

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Affordable hospital care requires health-care financing reforms that go beyond price regulations

discussions must start with a benchmark for price determination. Standard treatment guidelines, or STGs, can help establish relevant clinical needs, the nature and extent of care, and the costs of total inputs required. STGs can address confounders that account for varying levels of care for various hospital procedures while ensuring clinical autonomy to respond to individual needs. Consequently, it enables valuing health-care resources consumed for the precise cost of multiple procedures.

Given limited regulatory capacity, STG formulation and adoption require that providers' revenues are tied to fewer payers. Providers must rely on reimbursements from pooled payments, covering most of the population with low out-of-pocket (OOP) payment levels. With government support, payers and providers could agree on pricing that provides a reasonable and sustainable surplus over and above the input costs.

However, this would be hindered if providers can access markets through OOP payments as an alternative or add-on to reimbursement payments. Several countries have accomplished this difficult feat through coordinated health-care purchasing reforms, highlighting that pricing issues are health systems challenges rather than law-and-order problems.

In India, over half the total health expenditure is OOP. The other half comes from a multitude of publicly and privately pooled resources. The private sector is predominantly composed of small-scale providers. Even if rates are standardised, their implementation will be uncertain. Enforcement mechanisms for adherence to prescribed rates remain unclear, raising questions about the feasibility of such regulatory measures. What if providers do not adhere to the prescribed procedure rates, much like they have resisted the rates in various health schemes?

Weak implementation

Command-and-control regulations through pecuniary measures such as price caps can swiftly influence actors' behaviour by making them follow the pronouncements. However, when enforcement mechanisms are weak, these effects are temporary because the overall

environment remains unchanged. The suggested measures face enormous enforcement challenges. Only 11 States and seven Union Territories have notified the Clinical Establishment Act, and its implementation remains weak, with little or no evidence about the impact on affordability, care quality, and provider behaviour.

Similar design and implementation capacity constraints have hampered the effective adoption of the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority's decision to cap the prices of stents and implants since 2017 and of the many directives that mandate doctors to prescribe generic medicines.

Rate standardisation, through capped prices, may not address the fundamental problem of stakeholders' misaligned incentives. A comprehensive health financing reform strategy informed by robust and ongoing research on appropriate processes for formulating and adopting STGs must be in place, without which the actual pricing can be manipulated and justified in any manner. For example, hospitals with lower average revenue per bed can push their rates higher by appealing to their better care quality. Without STGs, it will be nearly impossible to verify such claims objectively.

Limited data

The Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana and the Department of Health Research have made significant strides in developing STGs for common conditions and adopting a comprehensive costing framework. Efforts are also ongoing to create an Indian version of Diagnostic-Related Groups (DRGs). Although the insurance industry initiated STGs for hospitals in 2010, progress was hindered by a lack of representative and accurate costing data due to limited participation from private hospitals.

This judgment is an opportunity to create effective processes to solve a major health system problem. Rate standardisation policies must be feasible, easily implementable, and follow established price discovery practices. Future efforts must build on previous and ongoing health financing reforms, address anticipated challenges, and ensure broader stakeholder participation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

On the campaign trail

It is unfortunate that there is no let-up in bringing up unrelated issues in the speeches being made by the Prime Minister of India during his election campaigns (inside pages, "Rahul insulted great kings, queens of this country," Modi, April 29). It is undeniable that the rulers of the bygone era, irrespective of their religious identities, have made sterling contributions to society in multiple spheres. However, nothing will accrue if encomiums are showered on one band of kings or queens and mudslinging on the other. When a particular religion

becomes a pawn in the hands of the Prime Minister, how could his own partymen be expected to keep a low profile on public platforms? It is hoped that the utterances by the leaders of all political parties in India are confined to the norms of etiquette and decorum, lest it will lead to distrust and misgivings among the people.

V. Jhan Dhanakumar,
Chennai

The Prime Minister's latest speech, in Belagavi, has touched a new point. Day by day, the tone and tenor of his speeches seem to be getting more and more

communal in content, which the Election Commission of India cannot easily ignore. The top leader's references to the role of nawabs, sultans, and particularly Aurangzeb, were neither warranted nor relevant. Raking up memories of the painful past is only going to result in bickering and will have a far-reaching impact on the communal front. His speeches are unattractively and unbecomingly of his status. Let him not sacrifice communal unity at the altar of short-term political gains.

response from the Prime Minister?

S.V. Venkatakrishnan,
Bengaluru

Import bill

The sorry state is that China is the top supplier to India in eight major industrial sectors, particularly in pharmaceuticals, textiles and electronic goods (inside pages, "India's Chinese import bill up 2.3 times in 15 years", April 29). One wonders what happened to the 'Make in India' projects which were more laudably launched by the government of the day. We boasted of sending Covaxin and Covishield vaccines. Ironically, the Indian textile

industry saw glory under the phase of history that the Prime Minister highlights in a critical way in his campaign speeches. Who can forget the quality of textiles like the muslin and linen of those days? Now, we look to China for textiles. The match-stick industry is heading to the end of cigarette lighters from China. The BJP's election manifesto has nothing about industrial development or alarming imports from China.

Kiruba Arul,
Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu

On a leather hunt

If the massive scores being

achieved by several teams in the current edition of the IPL are any indication it is becoming abundantly clear that the bowlers are being sent on a leather hunt and are being battered black and blue in every single match.

Full marks, however, to these bowlers who are still good enough to take five wickets in the four overs allotted to them. The shortest format is really a bonanza for batters.

C.W. Aravind,
Bengaluru

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

The poultry industry needs urgent reforms

The current outbreak of H5N1 was a disaster waiting to happen, as experts have been sounding alarm bells on the unsafe conditions at industrial livestock production for more than 10 years now. There has never been a more pressing time to discuss the welfare of farmed animals in the Indian enviro-legal perspective. India's environmental laws and regulations must reflect what the public health crisis is showing us: that animal welfare is closely intertwined with public health, ecosystem health and biodiversity conservation – the One Health principle.

Scale of the biosecurity issue

The first H5N1 infection split over to humans directly from chickens in Hong Kong in 1997. In India, the first H5N1 patient was reported in Maharashtra in 2006. An outbreak in December 2020 and early 2021 spread across 15 States. This pathogen has crossed many species barriers, causing mortality among the polar bears in the Arctic and seals and seagulls in Antarctica. With humans, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates the fatality rate for H5N1 at 52%, based on the 463 deaths recorded since 2003 among the 888 people diagnosed with the virus. Almost all cases of human infection with avian influenza A (H5N1) have been linked to close contact with infected birds, or contaminated environments.

These contaminated environments are created by cramming chickens in wired cages, or 'battery cages', in high densities. The resultant air quality and waste problem has a significant footprint in India due to the odour, particulate matter, and other greenhouse gas emissions. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has classified poultry units with more than 5,000 birds as a polluting industry that requires compliance and regulatory consent to establish and operate. Some poultry industrial units have been



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India's environmental laws and regulations must reflect what the public health crisis is showing us: that animal welfare is closely intertwined with public health, ecosystem health and biodiversity conservation

issues closure notices by the CPCB for being in violation of the law.

Due to contract farming, large debts and a very specialised skill set, poultry farmers often find it difficult to exit the industry, despite the losses. However, the myriad problems faced by these farmers often push them out of business. The farmers suffer due to market volatility and the prevalent practices pushed by industry giants. For instance, antibiotics are regularly given to birds as a prophylactic and as growth promoters so that more animals can be grown for greater profit. Experts predict the rising demand for protein will cause a surge in antibiotic use in livestock.

Several antibiotics classified as critically important and highly important by the WHO are widely sold to farmers for preventive use. Prescribed to day-old chicks to reduce the likelihood of disease and mortality, this practice is still being commonly recommended, according to an investigation by The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, reported in *The Hindu*.

Animals are heavily stocked in unsanitary conditions. Not only does this have a detrimental effect on the welfare of animals and the health of those who consume the food derived, but also on the people working at these facilities and residing in the vicinity. The impact of the emissions in the atmosphere, effluents in the water systems, and solid wastes in the soil generated by these industries is felt by humans, other animals, and the environment. There is an urgent need for monitoring as well as enforcement of legal and regulatory mechanisms.

The faecal matter generated at these facilities is collected periodically by local farmers for use as fertilizer. The amount of piled-up manure exceeds the carrying capacity of the land and becomes a pollutant. Farmers complain of their crops getting damaged and piles of waste becoming a breeding ground for disease vectors such as flies. Residents are compelled to adopt

measures such as spraying insecticides inside homes, leading to breathlessness and a nauseating smell.

Keeping animals in intensive confinement constitutes a crime under the provisions of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act, 1960. Moreover, the operational activities at these industrial facilities cause unnecessary pain and suffering to the animals because of mutilation, starvation, thirst, overcrowding, and other ill-treatment, which is also a violation of the PCA Act.

Path to legal reform

The 26th Law Commission of India Report in 2017 placed on record a representation by the Tata Memorial Centre that contained evidence that non-therapeutic antibiotics given to poultry cause antibiotic resistance since living conditions are unhygienic. It further said that with more open, cleaner, and ventilated living spaces, animals are less likely to need constant antibiotics, making their eggs and meat safer for consumption. Finally, it made recommendations for a set of two draft rules for the welfare of chickens in the meat and egg industries, noting that improved animal welfare results in better and safer food. These rules laid down guidelines as per existing laws and international best practices for animal care, waste management, and antibiotic use, among others.

However, the Draft Rules for the egg industry released by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare in 2019 are weak and tokenistic. They must meet the recommendations of the Law Commission. Strict oversight for compliance and enforcement of environmental regulations is the need of the hour, given the CPCB's reclassification of the poultry industry as a highly polluting and a 'category 1' industry. In light of the bird flu public health crisis and the climate emergency, it is crucial for the situation to be addressed.

Pulling out all the stops in Kerala

The BJP intensified its campaign this time, but remains unsure of winning seats

STATE OF PLAY

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There were key takeaways from the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections in Kerala. The first was the fact that Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the State five times in just four months. This is an unprecedented number for Mr. Modi, who did not make such efforts in Kerala during Lok Sabha or Assembly elections in the past.

The second was that the two main rival parties – the Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – approached these polls with a political fervour usually seen only in Assembly elections. However, given that the voter turnout was only 71.27%, much lower than the 77.84% recorded in the 2019 polls, both the parties are now cautiously awaiting the outcome.

With lofty electoral ambitions and a strategic push in the south to establish the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a pan-India party, Mr. Modi deftly navigated the rivalry between the Congress and the CPI(M) and their alleged appeasement politics. He also leveraged the perceived anti-incumbency against the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government. During his campaign in north India, he made it a point to mention the bitter exchange between Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, who is seeking re-election from Wayanad, and Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. While Mr. Gandhi alleged that a CPI(M)-BJP nexus shielded Mr. Vijayan from Central agencies, the Chief Minister retaliated with indirect references to the 'Pappu' jibe.



At the same time, both the Congress and the CPI(M) failed to effectively capitalise on Mr. Modi's anti-Muslim rhetoric at a rally in Rajasthan.

Since the BJP-led government came to power at the Centre in 2014, the party has tentatively attempted to make advances in Kerala. Through its campaign during the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, it also seemed to be preparing for the 2026 Assembly elections. The BJP leadership has attempted to cement its relationship to some extent with the leadership of the Nair Service Society and the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogyam, two of Kerala's two dominant Hindu communities – the Nairs and the Ezhavas/Thiyyas.

Unlike in the past, the BJP central leadership decided not to involve the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh during electioneering, perhaps under the belief that the heightened activism of the organisation may mar the chances of its candidates in Thiruvananthapuram and Thirissur, i.e., Union Minister of State for Electronics and Information Technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar and actor-politician Suresh Gopi, respectively.

Simultaneously, the controversial movie, *The Kerala Story*, was aired on the national broadcaster Doordarshan. It was aimed at reigniting the so-called 'love jihad' conspiracy theory propagated by both Hindutva outfits and radical

Christian groups. Soon afterwards, the Idikalil Diocese, under the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, screened the movie for students. The Kerala Catholic Youth Movement unit of the Thamarassery Diocese of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kozhikode also decided to screen the movie. However, the organisers later postponed the screening for a date after the general elections, as they felt that the issue was getting overly politicised. Many believe that the timing of the decision to screen the movie was part of a wider game plan of a section of the laity and the clergy within the Catholic Church to help the BJP win over the Christian community.

The party also fielded Anil K. Antony, son of Congress Working Committee member A.K. Antony, in Pathanamthitta.

During the polls, Delhi Lieutenant Governor V.K. Saxena visited Kerala to have an audience with the heads of the Syro Malabar Church, the Jagannathan Orthodox community, and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. This sparked a controversy, though he clarified that his visit was without any political motive.

The BJP also actively poached disgruntled leaders from the Congress and CPI(M) and tried to engineer defections from other parties. The admission of JDF convenor and CPI(M) Central Committee member E.P. Jayarajan on polling day that he had met BJP Kerala in-charge Prakash Jayadev caused embarrassment to the CPI(M).

It was clear that the BJP intensified its campaign in Kerala this time. It seems confident of increasing its vote share in nearly all the 20 out of 20 seats where it contested banking on the Modi factor. But it remains uncertain on winning any seats.

The rising share of personal income tax and indirect tax is a concern

Recent data show that personal income tax collections have increased, while collections from corporate taxes have reduced

DATA POINT

Vijesh Radhakrishnan, Rebecca Rose Varghese & Rachita Rabboni

Over the last week, during the election campaign, the Congress' manifesto and the party's emphasis on social justice and welfare were suddenly thrust into the limelight. Prime Minister Narendra Modi sought to give the Congress' demand for a caste census and its plans to study distribution of surplus government land to the poor, among others, a communal turn. The Congress defended its manifesto saying the rising wealth inequality in the country needs to be addressed and dismissed Mr. Modi's claims that its plans intended to favour a particular religious group. In the midst of this political controversy, the Chairman of the Indian Overseas Congress, Sam Pitroda, floated the idea of an inheritance tax, which is not in place in India and is also not mentioned in the Congress' manifesto.

Almost concurrently, the Finance Ministry released provisional data that showed an uptick in net tax collections. This is mostly driven by an increase in personal income tax and securities transaction tax collections. On the other hand, net corporate tax collections have reduced marginally. The data also show that revenues from personal income tax and securities transaction tax grew at almost double the pace compared to revenues from corporate tax last year.

We look at some numbers to provide context to the ongoing debate and the recent release of tax data. **Chart 1** shows corporate tax and personal income tax as a share of gross tax revenue, as of February every year. As can be seen from the chart, the share of corporate tax has been on a decreasing trend, while that of personal income tax has been increasing. As

of February 2024, the gap between the two tax shares further increased, with income tax forming 28% of the gross tax – a new peak. The sharp fall in corporate tax after FY19 can be attributed to the deep corporate tax cuts introduced by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government in September 2019.

The data also show that the share of direct taxes has been decreasing, while that of indirect taxes has been increasing. Direct taxes, which include taxes levied directly on the incomes of corporations and individuals, are said to be "progressive" because those who earn less are taxed less and vice-versa. On the other hand, indirect taxes, which include union excise duties and the Goods and Services Tax, are considered "regressive" as all consumers, regardless of their income levels, pay the same amount.

Chart 2 shows the share of direct and indirect taxes in the combined tax revenue receipts of the Centre and the States across years. As can be seen from the chart, the share of indirect taxes, which had been falling steadily since the 1980s, has increased in the past decade. On the other hand, the share of direct taxes, which had been increasing, has consistently recorded a downturn in recent years.

Importantly, **Chart 3** shows that a bulk of those who file personal income tax earn an annual income of ₹1 lakh-₹5 lakh. Richer individuals who earn more than ₹50 lakh are few and far between.

Moreover, a comparison with BRICS economies, for which data are available, shows that the effective personal income tax rate in India is among the highest (**Chart 4**).

Put together, the data show that poorer citizens and those in the middle-class category are increasingly shouldering a higher share of the tax burden. This is due to the combination of the rising share of personal income tax and indirect taxes in total revenue.

Taxing times

The data for the charts were sourced from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, the Controller General of Accounts, and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC)



Chart 1: The chart shows corporate tax and personal income tax as a share of gross tax revenue, as of February every year

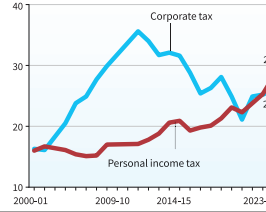


Chart 2: The chart shows the share of direct and indirect taxes in the combined tax revenue receipts of the Centre and the States across years

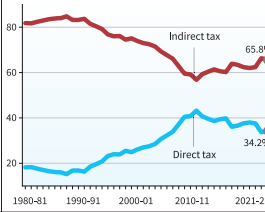


Chart 3: The chart shows the annual income bracket-wise share in total income tax returns filed and the share in total amount of income tax paid

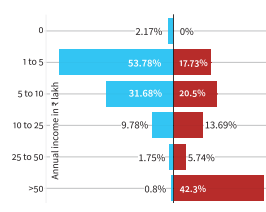
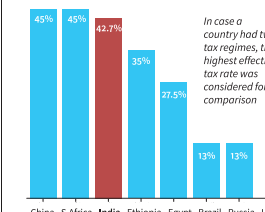


Chart 4: The chart compares the effective personal income tax rate in India with other BRICS countries which had data



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 30, 1974

Presidential polls: Supreme Court's opinion to be got

New Delhi, April 29: The Union Government has decided to seek the opinion of the Supreme Court on whether the Presidential election due before August 24, could be held despite the dissolution of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly. An announcement to this effect was made in Parliament today.

The following is the text of the Law Minister's statement: "The House is aware that the term of office of the present President of India expires on August 24, 1974. Under Article 62(b) of the Constitution an election to fill a vacancy caused by the expiration of the term of office of the President is required to be completed before the expiry of the term. This House is also aware that the Gujarat State Legislative Assembly was dissolved on March 15, 1974. A question has been raised whether the election to the office of the President can be held notwithstanding the dissolution of the Gujarat Assembly. The Government is prima facie of the view that on a true and correct interpretation of Article 54, 55, 56 and 62 and 71 of the Constitution, the electoral college consists only of the elected members of such of the Legislative Assemblies of States as are in existence at or before the expiry of the term of office of the President. However, a contrary view has been expressed both inside and outside this House. Questions of far-reaching importance have arisen as to the composition of the electoral college where the Legislative Assemblies of one or more States stand dissolved and in view of the fact that a question of great public importance has arisen, the Government has decided to recommend to the President to obtain the opinion of the Supreme Court under Article 143 of the Constitution as regards the true and correct interpretation of Articles 54, 62, 71 and the relevant provisions of the Constitution so far as they concern the election of the President to fill the vacancy caused by the expiration of the term of office of the President."

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 30, 1924

Swedish match co

Stockholm, April 29: The Swedish Match Manufacturing Company has doubled its share capital to 190 million crowns. It will use the new capital to complete its factories in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and Karachi.



A thought for today
Voting rights are preservative
for all other rights
RAPHAEL WARNOCK

Turnout Talk

Lot of chatter & questions about lower voter participation. Remember, electorate is bigger this time

Two phases of elections are behind us. Turnout's lower than 2019's so far. So, the Indian poll punditry is having a ball.

Why they vote | Knowhow hangs heavy, as hot as the air - in living rooms and workplaces, in college canteens and academic deep-dives, among random surveyors and reporters, local party workers, cabbies and autowallahs, and of course the chatterati, who may not necessarily be the voterati.



Why they don't vote | This year, there's an overdrive to get the voter out. Is the relentless pressure to vote off-putting? Is there too much song and dance about your 'duty' to vote?

Low vote? | There are very many strands to why voters vote. Famously for caste, creed, and religion too, of late. If 2014 was pitted as the call for 'development', 2019's turnout was an inspired mobilisation of voters.

But is even that a fact? The size of the electorate is bigger: 968.8m compared to 896m in 2019 - up by 72.8m electors.

The X Factor

Politicians love social media. For voters, and for democracy, the waters are more muddied

BRS president K Chandrasekhar Rao on Saturday joined the long list of politicians who are using social media platform X.

Frictionless communication | Politicians across the world have been quick to identify the potential of social media platforms. It offers an effective way to reach out to the electorate without having to give up control on how the message is put out.



Special features | Recent research on social media identified features that make them different from older communication modes. Entry barriers are negligible for politicians who want to reach out.

Downsides aplenty | Social media's attraction comes from the near absence of checks and balances on users. Also, the platforms have been largely spared legal accountability for content they host.

2024 is the year when most major democracies have elections. Common to all elections is anxiety about social media's potential negative impact.

Happiness from subsidy

It's complicated by factors such as neighbour's envy

Anupam Manur

I am a relatively poor man. Govt does a lot for me. Or at least in my name. In Bengaluru, for example, govt has kept the price of water low, so that I can afford it.

Though it costs them roughly ₹100 a kilolitre to provide, they charge everybody only about ₹10 and give a subsidy to cover the rest. Honourable intentions, no doubt, for which I am sincerely grateful.

Worse, because of all this subsidy, I'm told that the water agency (BWSSB) is more broke than I am and in severe debt.

Interestingly, though the agency is broke, some of its employees are not. There's an unofficial BWSSB Employees Vikas Yojana, to which many of us have contributed in exchange for a piped connection.

While the water is affordable, its supply is notoriously unreliable. We are increasing the durability of the pipes by using them sparingly.

Finally, as our water agency is broke, it struggles to carry out maintenance. More than 30% of the water meant for our homes is lost in leakages.

All of these contributions take a heavier toll on my limited wallet than on my neighbours. So, with gratitude, I request respected govt not to punish us any more with its good intentions.

What's worse, the water that does end up coming through our underused pipes is often contaminated with gutter water.

Ruchir Sharma



US economic growth has defied the once universal expectation that Federal Reserve rate hikes would trigger a recession.

Conventional forecasting models have been more off the mark than usual in this post-pandemic recovery. But why? Perhaps the most overlooked explanation for American resilience is that, far more than other countries, developed and developing, US kept stimulating its economy well after the recession of 2020 was over.

Trump and Biden, both bountiful | Some of that fiscal and monetary stimulus is still coursing through the system, keeping growth artificially high, and making inflation for both consumer and asset prices significantly more persistent in US than in its peers.

After the pandemic struck, presidents Trump and Biden unleashed around \$10 trillion in new spending, \$8 trillion of that after the brief, lockdown-induced recession of early 2020 was over.

Meanwhile, the rest of the developed world has been heading in a different direction. In the years since the start of the pandemic, rising deficits amounted to a cumulative 40% of GDP in US, twice the average in Europe, and a third higher than in UK.

By some estimates, fiscal stimulus accounted for more than a third of US growth in 2023; without it, US would not look like such a marvel compared to other developed economies - and to developing economies as well.

India's fiscal stimulus, more calibrated | GOI raised spending during the pandemic to address some of the health needs created by the virus, and to help businesses through a hard lockdown - but not beyond.

One result is that India's public debt is up by about 8 points as a share of GDP - half the increase in US.

Another is that, while swings in inflation have barely widened in large emerging economies including India, they have grown roughly fivefold in US.

Even more under-appreciated than the boost from runaway govt spending is the way monetary growth has been supercharging the economy and the financial markets.

Liquidity hangover | The broad measure of money supply known as M2, which includes cash held in money market accounts and bank deposits, as well

odd combination - higher stock valuations despite higher rates - has not happened in any period of Fed rate hikes going back to the late 1950s.

Housing party | A similar levitation act is visible in the US housing market; despite higher mortgage rates, prices have risen steadily, and faster than in other developed nations.

For the better off, this "wealth effect" is a happy turn. A recent poll showed that more Americans plan to vacation abroad this summer than at any time since records began in the 1960s.

There are of course other reasonable explanations for US resilience, including the surge in immigration and the AI boom. Moreover, many American debtors are paying fixed rates and won't get hit by hikes until they need to refinance their loans.

Heat is on, who's melting? | But this much seems clear: with both consumer prices and asset prices more elevated in US than its peers, the economy is overheated and the Fed has less room to cut rates than expected.

higher for longer, US will be asking for worse trouble if it keeps running deficits close to 6% of GDP; that is twice the pre-pandemic average for US, and six times the median for western Europe.

Economics though is far from an exact science, and it is hard to know when exactly the sugar rush from the past stimulus will wear off.

The writer is an author and global investor

America's Sugar Rush

US govt pumped in more stimulus during Covid than other countries. That's still keeping American economy looking strong. But when the effect wears off, the landing may come fast



What We Lose When Words Become Weapons

We argue to wound others and win, rather than to learn together. This is as true in TV debates or social media as in social settings. Our sages and scholars knew better

Prasoon Joshi



Legend has it that an erudite sage travelled through a village where a respected scholar resided. Their disciples planned a debate to establish who had the better mind.

This episode remains relevant even now. Much has been written about the art and science of debate in ancient India, taking the forms of samvada, vada, jalpa and vitanda.

In our world, winning an argument and defeating the other is highly prized. "I decimated him/ I killed it/ destroyed his premise/ udaa ke phenk diya" - are oft-heard phrases, be it in a boardroom, on broadcast media or social media or a casual gathering.

Let's explore a few aspects of such argumentation, where the aim is pure domination.

Thought violence | Most of our interactions now occur at the level of thought and speech. The brain increasingly governs the world.

Examining an argument can give you an insight into its construct. Are the words sharp? Do they attack, cut or wound? Do they demean the other?



brutality of arguments. Take the fascinating ideas of anekantavada and syat in Jain philosophy. Scholars translate anekantavada as the principle of 'many-sidedness or non-onesidedness'.

Virtual violence | The virtual world makes it easier to indulge in violence of words and thoughts. In virtual interactions, physical separation allows for greater expression of verbal violence.

Silence as violence | Interestingly, there can even be violence in silence and inaction. When someone is expectantly waiting for a response and the other hard-heartedly restrains from responding, this can be maun hinsa.

Reflecting and seeking | All this takes us deeper into where the intention is born. If we search for the truth at all levels of intention, thought, and expression, we must evaluate the line between debate and discussion.

The increasing weaponisation of thought and speech in our public and private universes needs to be acknowledged, to resolve it. Our ahankara or ego bloats because we are not in touch with our true side, which can't be violent.

Calvin & Hobbes



Unlocking The Masterclass On Spirituality

Jaya Row

Spirituality has become a buzzword. But, it is the most misunderstood concept. Spirituality has nothing to do with your lifestyle, vocation or location.

Your body, mind, and intellect are your matter layers. It is like wearing a vest, shirt, and jacket. The real you is Spirit. Atman. You are spiritual when you identify with Spirit and not the matter components.

The formula is human - desire = God. We all have desires. But the more desires you fulfil, the more you create.

you deserve, not what you desire. Spirituality helps you gain merit. You become more deserving when you tap into your potential.

Even a talented footballer needs to learn the rules of the game to become an outstanding player. Similarly, Vedanta teaches you the rules of the game.

In modern life, we have become selfish and self-centred. Life revolves around my goals, my needs, my dreams.

cheque and profit? Then you will be mediocre. The greatest achievers were dedicated to a higher goal. Don Bradman did not play cricket for money.

Vedanta helps achieve self-sufficiency, which results in wonderful relationships. You cease to live like a creeper; dependent and miserable.

no frustration and no bitterness. Vedanta develops the intellect and gives clarity of thought. You understand your purpose in life and move towards it with determination and consistency.

Everything in the world passes. The body ages and dies. All the wealth you accumulate so painstakingly can go in an instant.

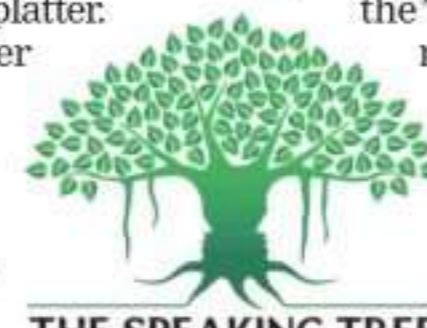
As you identify with Spirit and find your anchor in the permanent, the fluctuations in the world do not affect you. You enjoy the changes as you are no longer dependent on the world.

Sacredspace



I, not events, have the power to make me happy or unhappy today. I can choose which it shall be.

Groucho Marx



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

China's trade edge

Delhi must reduce dependence on wily Beijing

In its 2024 election manifesto, the BJP has stated that the Make in India programme, which was launched in September 2014, has contributed significantly to increasing manufacturing activity in the country. The ruling party has promised to make India a 'trusted global manufacturing hub'. However, a report by economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) suggests that the country has a long way to go before it can achieve the grand goal of *atmanirbharta* (self-reliance). According to the report, India's imports from China jumped from about \$70 billion in 2018-19 to over \$101 billion in 2023-24, resulting in a cumulative trade deficit exceeding \$387 billion over a five-year period. Beijing's share in New Delhi's imports of industrial goods — telecom, machinery and electronics — has risen to 30 per cent from 21 per cent in the past 15 years, underlining India's increasing dependence on the Dragon for these items. No less dismal is the fact that India's exports to China have stagnated at around \$16 billion annually from 2019 to 2024.

Even as India has stood firm against China on the diplomatic and military fronts after the Galwan clash of June 2020, it has not been able to stall the Chinese march in the economic arena. China continues to have the upper hand in bilateral trade despite India's repeated insistence that the resolution of the boundary dispute is a prerequisite for the restoration of normal relations. It is apparent that Beijing's ploy of delinking the border standoff from trade and business ties is paying rich dividends.

Ominously, the GTRI has estimated that Chinese imports will rise in the coming years. The huge trade deficit has strategic, economic and geopolitical implications for India. New Delhi needs to plug the gaps in the Make in India programme in order to make the manufacturing sector more productive and resilient. The dream of becoming a global manufacturing hub will remain just a dream unless India manages to shake off China's overbearing presence.

Heroin seizure

Stem the tide of maritime drug trafficking

THE seizure of 86-kg heroin worth Rs 600 crore from a Pakistani vessel is a reminder of the scourge of the international drug trade. It is not an isolated incident but part of a larger pattern of narco-terrorism that threatens national security. Last May, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) and the Navy had seized a staggering 2,500 kg of methamphetamine off the Kerala coast. Valued at around Rs 15,000 crore, this haul was the largest of its kind in the country. Last month, a boat carrying 60 packets of drugs was intercepted off the Gujarat coast and its six Pakistani crew members were arrested. In February, five foreign nationals were nabbed with 3,300 kg of narcotics, including charas and methamphetamine, off the Porbandar coast. These incidents emphasise the scale and complexity of the challenge.

The source of these narcotics is often traced to Afghanistan, a major hub of opium and heroin production. The surge in methamphetamine production in the region was highlighted by a report of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime last year. The developments underscore the gravity of the situation and the urgent need for comprehensive measures to combat drug trafficking in the maritime domain.

The persistent menace of drug trafficking necessitates enhanced coordination among law enforcement agencies, efficient intelligence-sharing mechanisms and robust maritime surveillance by the Navy, Coast Guard, Anti-Terrorist Squad and the NCB to effectively rein in the drug cartels. Addressing the demand side is equally crucial. Investments in drug prevention and rehabilitation programmes, coupled with awareness initiatives, are essential to steer individuals away from the path of addiction.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 30, 1924

Protection for steel industry

GENERAL satisfaction will be felt with the first report of the Indian Tariff Board, appointed in July last in conformity with the recommendation made by the Fiscal Commission, for the purpose of considering and reporting on applications made by Indian industrialists for the grant of protection in the form of bounties and tariff duties on imported goods. The report has just been published and, as was anticipated, has unanimously recommended varying protection for five out of the eight steel products that applied for protection. It is impossible to conceive of a stronger case for protection than that of the steel industry, which not only satisfies the conditions laid down by the commission but is also an industry essential for the purpose of self-defence, besides being of great importance on national grounds. It must be admitted that the whole of the mechanical industry of today depends almost entirely upon iron and steel, and it may rightly be said that modernism itself stands on a steel pedestal. The present age of steel is the most modern phase of a long process in which stone, bronze and iron have each played in succession an important part. This being so, it remained for the board only to see if the steel industry was suited to India and, if so, whether it was placed in India, at the present time, in a disadvantageous position as compared with that in foreign countries. The board received 103 written statements and examined 41 witnesses and has come to the conclusion that India possesses great natural advantages for the manufacture of steel.

The abominable stigma of 'failure'

We fail to acknowledge the intensity of psychic & intellectual damage caused by the coaching enterprise



AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

AS the results of the UPSC civil services exam capture the attention of the media and the public, the smiling faces of the IAS 'toppers' are seen everywhere — from the billboards in our cities to the front-page ads of branded coaching centres in leading newspapers. Or, for that matter, as the results of exams of various school boards have begun to come, we see yet another process of constructing the images of 'toppers' — youngsters with their miraculous performance in physics, chemistry, mathematics and biology!

I am getting increasingly tired of hearing these success stories; rather, I am interested in understanding the pathology of the system that manufactures 'failures' amid the spectacular demonstration of select success stories.

Take, for instance, the lucrative business of India's Rs 3,000-crore UPSC coaching industry. Move around the lanes and bylanes of Mukherjee Nagar and Karol Bagh in Delhi; converse with the crowd of young aspirants — engineers, doctors, PhD holders, university students; and feel the power of the dream of 'success' through which the celebrity 'gurus' of these coaching centres with their notes, lectures, guide books, interview strategies and even motivational speeches trap these aspirants. Well, this dream sells because we live in a society that worships power — not necessarily the power of knowledge and wisdom, but the politico-administrative and economic power. And for innumerable middle-



UPHILL TASK: The civil services myth is hypnotising, even though the success ratio is extremely low. TRIBUNE PHOTO

class parents in small towns and villages, it matters a lot if their sons/daughters can manage to become a district collector or a superintendent of police with visible signs of official power, privilege and glamour. This elevates their status and position in the local community. Yes, the UPSC myth is hypnotising. Although the success ratio is extremely low (for instance, in 2023, 13 lakh candidates appeared in the UPSC preliminary exam; eventually, 1,016 were selected), the business goes on. While we worship the success stories, we fail to acknowledge the intensity of psychic and intellectual damage the coaching enterprise causes to those who fail. Imagine the fate of most of these aspirants spending five to six years repeatedly trying to achieve the mythical success, consuming the 'notes' of history/geography/sociology/psychology/general studies day and night, investing a huge amount of money, and failing time and again! Yes, this dehumanised and mechanised system finishes them — psychologically and intellectually. For many of them, it becomes exceedingly difficult to overcome this wounded self-

esteem, and redefine life with hope and creativity. Furthermore, the entire system causes severe harm to the fundamental objectives of higher learning. Certainly, it is not a matter of glory if an engineering graduate from IIT-Kanpur or a MBBS doctor from AIIMS, New Delhi, becomes a police officer or an income tax commissioner. Likewise, if a student of history from a leading university misses his classes regularly, forgets the likes of Eric Hobsbawm and

It is sad that this hyper-competitive ethos of social Darwinism is altering the self-perception of even school students.

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Irfan Habib, and concentrates primarily on the 'notes' or 'success manuals' supplied by coaching centre strategists (yes, many of them have millions of YouTube subscribers), it indicates the intensity of the damage the coaching enterprise is causing to the growth of innovative teaching and research in our universities. Have we forgotten that a vibrant nation needs great physicists, political philosophers, social scientists and literary critics — not just a bunch of district collectors and police commissioners?

It is sad that this sort of hyper-competitive ethos of social Darwinism is altering the self-perception of even school students. See the way the images of the 'toppers' of board exams, or standardised tests like JEE and NEET are constructed — the way these girls and boys are transformed into instant 'stars' and led to believe that they are 'special'. Again, with this sort of glorification of 'success', we tend to forget the intensity of pain and humiliation that wounds the mental landscape of thousands of youngsters who have 'failed'. When will we under-

stand that not everything is fine with our school education? When will we realise that schools with their regimentation, technologies of surveillance and one-dimensional/exam-centric/boorish learning often alienate those who are imaginative and 'mad' enough to strive for something more exciting than what schools can offer? Possibly, they are endowed with the kind of aptitude and skills that do not fit well into the parameters of the typical official curriculum. In their path-breaking studies, educationists like John Holt (*How Children Fail*) and Kirsten Olson (*Wounded by School*) have reminded us of the devastating consequences of an educational approach that values conformity over creativity, flattens students' interests and dampens down differences among learners. Indeed, here is a system that tends to shame, disable and bore many learners.

For many of these vulnerable young minds, it is not easy to overcome the stigma of 'failure'. It is sad that we fail to tap their creative potential. A sense of fatigue, boredom and loneliness tends to diminish their zeal for a creative and meaningful living. But then, in this 'success-obsessed' world, who bothers to understand their pain? Meanwhile, our 'successful' youngsters love to become conformists; no wonder it is exceedingly difficult for them to see their life trajectories beyond 'safe' and 'secure' careers — techno-managers working day and night for the expansion of the neoliberal market, or administrators/bureaucrats saying 'yes' to a mode of governance that retains the status quo. Meanwhile, from Kota in Rajasthan to Mukherjee Nagar in Delhi, the coaching factories expand their lucrative business, sell the dream of 'success', seduce the anxiety-ridden middle class and destroy the creative rebelliousness of young minds.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

It's fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure. — Bill Gates

The hubbub at the polling station

SHANKAR GOPALKRISHNAN

IT'S polling day. An enormous crowd greets us at the polling station. We thought we could beat everyone by reaching early. Others have thought likewise. There are multiple lines, multiple rooms and the invariable confusion. Self-styled leaders step forward to keep the flock together: 'I repeat, this is the line to room number 4!'

'Oh, I thought this was the line to room number 2!' someone shouts. Call it Murphy's law — anything that can go wrong will go wrong — the room we have been assigned to has the longest line. Some give up too soon: 'I think I will come back at noon. I am certain there will be no crowd at that time!' You have half a mind to interject: 'Sir, if you go home now, you will never come back!'

Waiting is not easy. Though the morning is young, the sun is harsh. A motley crowd mills all around — the young, the old and the overly old. Some are bent with age and can barely walk. They are escorted by their caregivers to the polling room directly. Friends, acquaintances, colleagues — we get a chance to meet everyone. Meeting once in five years isn't too bad after all.

The serpentine queue moves slowly but surely. Observing people, their body language, their conversation keeps you busy. You are now at the threshold of the room.

The din and clatter of the world are left behind the moment you step in. There is a hush, like the silence in an examination hall. There is one presiding officer and a few poll officers seated behind tables. Another officer waits with the indelible ink swab. You now wait for your turn to step into the EVM counter.

Standing in front of the machine, I look at the options. In a momentary lapse of concentration, my finger may stray, and I may inadvertently press the wrong button. That's what happened to Kumbhakarna. After enormous tapas, Lord Brahma appeared before him. A moment of indiscretion cost Kumbhakarna dearly. He wanted to seek '*nirdevatvam*' as a boon — 'May no *deva* have lordship over me.' Suddenly, his tongue slurred and he blurted out '*nidraavatvam*' — 'May I enjoy sleep!'

The Kumbhakarna story is so mesmerising that I almost doze off, right in front of the EVM. 'Sir! What are you doing? Press the button!' an impatient polling officer wakes me up. I make the selection decisively. The EVM beeps, the candidate's visual appears on the tiny screen and finally, I am done.

Once out of the polling booth, I cannot contain my smile. It is time for a round of selfies with the indelible ink on the finger prominently displayed.

A great sense of pride and achievement runs through the being. It is a feeling of being 'part of the process', a feeling that I am an 'active member' of the world's largest democracy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Meant to rein in tainted leaders

With reference to 'Reviewing NOTA', the concept of NOTA initially faced resistance from political parties. But fortunately, the Supreme Court upheld the voter's right to reject all candidates. By selecting the NOTA option, a voter expresses his disapproval of the contenders. The NOTA was, therefore, meant to deter parties from fielding tainted candidates. But though it was introduced a decade ago, it has failed to check the criminalisation of politics. Parties are usually concerned only with the electability of a candidate. Unfortunately, NOTA has remained toothless. In order to make it more effective, certain steps need to be taken. For example, if the winner in a poll bags fewer votes than the NOTA option, it should call for a repoll.

KR BHARTI, SHIMLA

Review of NOTA unwarranted

Apropos of the editorial 'Reviewing NOTA', the electoral no-show in Surat, where the BJP's Mukesh Dalal was declared the winner unopposed, has sparked a discussion about the NOTA option. However, the debate is unwarranted. The whole point of the introduction of NOTA was to encourage greater participation in the electoral process. It was meant to bring those people to the polling booth who were not drawn to any candidate and would have otherwise stayed home. An election is a long, expensive and time-consuming exercise. Suggestions like a repoll in case the winning candidate receives fewer votes than NOTA are not justified.

KRISHAN BHATIA, HANSI

Spread awareness about NOTA

Refer to 'Reviewing NOTA', the arguments made in the editorial are on point. Concerted efforts should be made to spread awareness among the public, especially first-time voters, about the significance of the NOTA option. A low voter turnout at polling booths shows that a significant number of voters have no faith in any party or candidate. Instead of expressing their dissatisfaction by abstaining from voting, they should select the NOTA option and send a message. Until NOTA is made more effective through the law, it will at least

continue to act as a check on parties and candidates, highlighting how the voters feel.

RAVINDER MITTAL, BY MAIL

Mitigate woes of refugees

Refer to the editorial 'UK's Rwanda plan'; the UK Government is trying to wash its hands of its international obligations. Asylum-seekers, even when they enter the country illegally, should be treated humanely and accommodated once their applications are processed. Most refugees have a difficult past, filled with traumatic experiences in their home countries. The decision to deport 75,000 refugees is out of sync with the UK's status as a leading European power and its commitment to upholding human rights. The step reeks of small-mindedness. Even Third World countries like Colombia, Uganda and Pakistan have a better track record in this respect. Humanitarian crises are mounting amid global turbulence. All nations should come forward to mitigate the woes of displaced people.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

New hope for India-Pak ties

With reference to the news report 'Change of heart — India gives Karachi teen new lease of life'; the story of the 19-year-old Pakistani girl getting a heart transplant in Chennai is symbolic of the new India. Besides, the quality of medical treatment and the generosity of doctors are commendable. Further, it sends out a positive message to our neighbour, Pakistan, to write a new chapter of friendship. Given the present circumstances, Islamabad cannot afford to continue treating New Delhi like an enemy. It must stop harbouring terrorists and quit supporting anti-India activities on its soil.

JAGDISH CHANDER, JALANDHAR

Humanity transcends all borders

Apropos of 'Change of heart — India gives Karachi teen new lease of life'; the story of Pakistani girl Ayesha Rashan getting a heart transplant in India is heartwarming. The fact that she had battled heart-related problems for years and did not belong to a well-off family makes it even more emotional. It is yet another reminder that humanity is not dead. Borders are just man-made creations that hinder the free movement of people.

DEEPAK TAAK, PANCHKULA

Vital to ensure we are not caught off guard again



AIR VICE MARSHAL MANMOHAN BAHADUR (RETD)
FORMER ADDL DIRECTOR GENERAL, CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

THERE is a famous maxim: Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. These words have come true many times in the world of geopolitics, the latest being the failure of Israeli intelligence to anticipate the Hamas attack on October 7 last year, resulting in the Gaza flare-up. In India, the words never rang truer than in May 1999. If only the people whose job it was to monitor events and discern the adversary's intentions had not been found wanting, the Kargil War would not have been thrust on us. As the 25th anniversary of Operation Vijay approaches, three macro points merit discussion.

First, how did intelligence agencies, both civilian — such as the RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) and the Aviation Research Centre — and military, miss the glaringly visible signs that something was openly cooking across the Line of Control (LoC), especially at

the Skardu airfield? None other than the Director of Operations of the Pakistan Air Force, Air Cmde Kaiser Tufail, who visited the area, has written: "Helicopter-flying activity was feverishly high as Army Aviation's Mi-17s were busy moving artillery guns and ammunition to the mountaintops. Troops in battle gear were to be seen all over the city. Interestingly, messes were abuzz with war chatter amongst young officers. In retrospect, one wonders how Indian intelligence agencies failed to read any such signs, many weeks before the operation unfolded." Yes, one really wonders, how?

Second, even when tell-tale indicators started appearing, the assessment that something serious was happening took considerable time, even in our service headquarters. The first warning came as early as May 3 from a shepherd, Tashi Namgyal, who reported to the Army about Pakistani intruders near the border village of Batalik. Initially dismissed as small-scale intrusions, these were attempted to be addressed at a tactical level. Air Marshal Narayan ('Nana') Menon, who was the air officer commanding the J&K region, has written that on May 8 that year, the Army's Northern Command briefed him about "a few intruders



DEFENCE: Operation Vijay was launched in May 1999 to evict intruders from Indian territory. ISTOCK

who had come across the LoC and were interfering with the vital Srinagar-Leh road and interdicting supplies." The IAF was requested for strikes by Mi-35 attack helicopters. The urgency of the request increased by May 10, and the Army was briefed that the Mi-35s could not operate at those high altitudes. In New Delhi, a similar story was playing out. The then Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), Air Chief Marshal AY Tipnis, has written that the Vice Chief of Army Staff (VCOAS) had



In the end, we came out victorious, but we lost 559 brave men and a lot of prestige for being found napping.

put in a similar request around that time. I was the staff officer to the Air Chief and remember that on May 14, the VCOAS had requested an urgent meeting with the CAS, in which the use of helicopters was discussed. The scene in the Air Chief's office is still fresh in my mind — the CAS and the VCOAS studying an Army map depicting the ground position of troops in the Kargil area with colourful legends and flags. Joint Director (Helicopters) Gp Capt 'Tan' Antony, who had been summoned, and

I (having extensively operated helicopters in the area) were grilled on the payload-carrying and slithering capability of Mi-17 helicopters at those altitudes.

The Army Chief was still abroad and the Northern Army Commander later moved to Pune on the 16th. That the situation was worrying was finally driven home when two patrols of the Army were ambushed and an IAF Canberra aircraft on a photographic reconnaissance mission was hit on May 21 by a surface-to-air missile fired from the mountaintops. The pilot skillfully landed in Srinagar.

It was action stations thereafter, with the Army assets being moved, air force airfields activated, the transport aircraft fleet of the IAF beginning its humongous logistics support missions, political leadership being brought into the loop, meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Security taking place and the go-ahead to evict the Pakistanis being given on May 25. The Air Chief then went on his famous incognito visit to Srinagar that afternoon to 'meet the boys' — a trip that was straight out of the movies.

Third, in the end, we came out victorious for sure, but we lost 559 brave men and a lot of prestige for being found napping. The Kargil Review Com-

mittee (KRC) was thoughtfully instituted, and it made far-reaching recommendations, followed by the Group of Ministers' report that was generated through the four task forces that were created. It is ironic that some of the recommendations are still in the process of being implemented. The intelligence structure, especially the civil-military and inter-agency fusion, was revamped. And one is told that it is functioning as planned. But then why were we clueless about the 2008 Mumbai attack, the 2019 Pulwama terror strike and what happened in eastern Ladakh in 2020? Even though intelligence can never be foolproof, have we truthfully analysed, ala the KRC, where our revamped intelligence structure was found lacking in these incidents?

Two-and-a-half millennia back, Kautilya had said that "intelligence should underpin all aspects of governance". So, while we commemorate the sheer grit of the Indian jawan and the airman, a true tribute to those brave Indian lads who charged up those peaks and flew there, never to return, would be to give due importance to Kautilya's reflection in our challenging security environment so that we are not caught off guard again — never again!

Police must do course correction to regain credibility



MP NATHANAEL
FORMER IIG, CRPF

THE Kerala High Court has asked the state government to respond to a plea alleging that the police used excessive force and imposed illegal restrictions recently during Thiruvananthapuram. The Pinarayi Vijayan government has ordered a probe and announced the transfer of the Thiruvananthapuram city police commissioner and the assistant commissioner.

This incident comes less than two months after a case of police brutality. On March 8, a congregation was offering namaz at a mosque near Inderpuri Metro Station in New Delhi. The rush of devotees spilled over to the main road outside the mosque, where they spread mats and worshipped. Unconcerned and insensitive to the fact that it was a religious congregation, Sub-Inspector (SI) Manoj Kumar Tomar of the nearby police post arrived with other policemen and started kicking worshippers, telling them to clear the road. According to witnesses, the worshippers were not block-

ing the road and the traffic was moving smoothly. A video showing the SI on the rampage went viral, drawing the ire of the public. The SI was suspended, after which the people who had surrounded the police post dispersed.

An IPS officer, Balveer Singh, was suspended in March last year for using third-degree methods on suspects in police custody when he was posted as Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) in Ambasamudram subdivision in Tirunelveli district (Tamil Nadu). He is known to have extracted the teeth of 10 suspects using jelly rock; in two cases, he crushed the testicles, leading to a public outrage across the state. He would change into civvies and wear gloves before torturing suspects with specialised implements. An investigation done by an IAS officer concluded that the victims had been tortured in police stations in Vikramsinghapuram, Ambasamudram and Kallidaikurichi. The crime branch of the Criminal Investigation Department filed a chargesheet against the officer and 10 others, including inspectors, sub-inspectors and constables. The IPS officer was reinstated in service in January, while the case is pending in the court.

On October 4, 2022, five men from the Muslim community were tied to a pole in the Undhela village of Kheda



SHOCKING: Subinspector Manoj Kumar Tomar was caught on camera kicking a worshipper in March. PTI

district (Gujarat) and publicly flogged by policemen, even as the gathering cheered them. Their alleged crime was that they had disrupted a garba event in the village. A video of the flogging went viral, leading to the conviction of four policemen. They were awarded 14 days' imprisonment by the Gujarat High Court, which observed that flogging in public was an 'act against humanity'.

Hearing an appeal against the High Court judgment, the Bench of Justices Bhushan R Gavai and Sandeep Mehta observed that the police not only misused their power but also violated the guidelines laid

down in the Supreme Court's 1997 verdict in the DK Basu case, which strictly warned against custodial torture.

The misconduct or brutality of police personnel has become a common occurrence. Such acts have dented the image of the police, thereby alienating them from the public.

According to data of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), as many as 75 people died in police custody across the country in 2022, but just nine cops — eight from Uttar Pradesh and one from Madhya Pradesh — were arrested. In 2021, 88 people died in police custody; 12

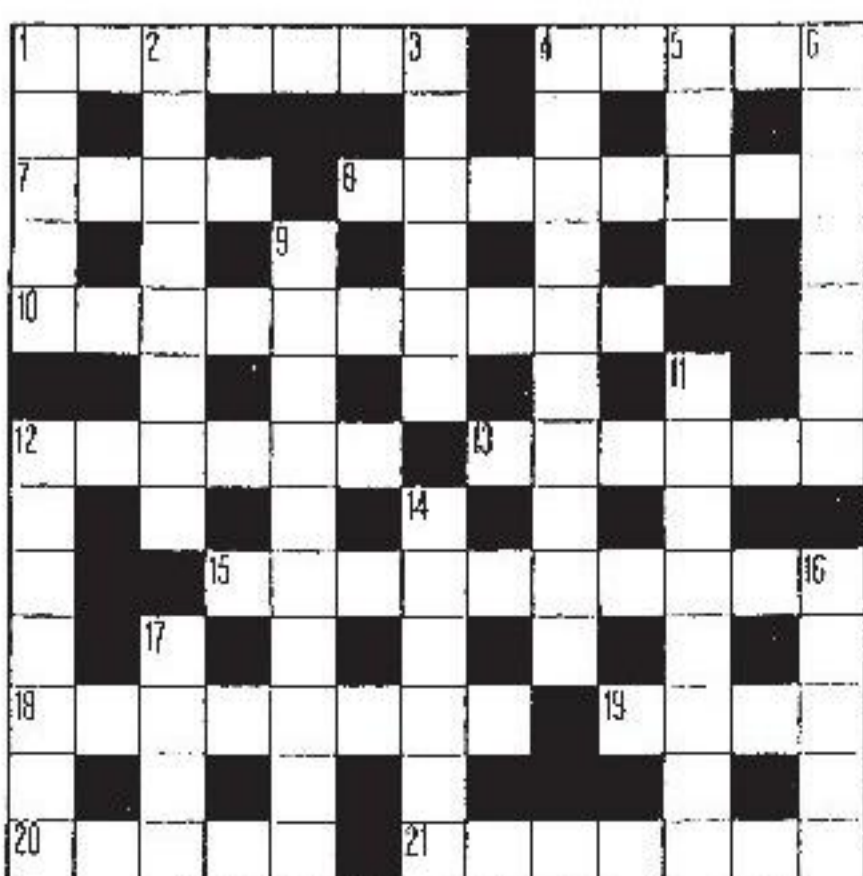
instead of reprimanding him for blatant violation of the law. The Tamil Nadu government ought to have taken action against him for lack of supervision over his subordinates. When subordinates resort to third-degree methods, the superiors — generally SPs — ought to reprimand them. Otherwise, the message that goes out to the public is that the SPs are hand in glove with perpetrators of brutality.

While the superiors are taken to task for the misconduct of their subordinates in the defence and paramilitary forces, it is rarely so in the police force. A Brigadier and a Battalion Commander of 48 Rashtriya Rifles had to face disciplinary action when three residents of a village in Surankote died in custody in December last year. The action was taken despite the fact that both were not present on the unit premises when the incident happened.

In *DK Basu and Ashok Johri versus State of West Bengal*, the Supreme Court had rightly stated: "The police are no doubt under a legal duty and have the legitimate right to arrest a criminal and to interrogate him during the investigation of an offence, but it must be remembered that the law does not permit the use of third-degree methods or torture of accused in custody during interrogation and investigation with a view to solving the crime."

Many policemen prefer to adopt third-degree methods to extract a confession from suspects in custody.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Small amount (7)
- 4 Stringed musical instrument (5)
- 7 Complain pettily (4)
- 8 Be conspicuous (5,3)
- 10 Occupation, calling (4,2,4)
- 12 Summon by gesture (6)
- 13 Split in church unity (6)
- 15 Physically fit and strong (4,6)
- 18 Pass away without effect (4,4)
- 19 Put into common fund (4)
- 20 Put special care to (5)
- 21 Frugal (7)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Lead balloon, 9 Instant, 10 Pluto, 11 Veer, 12 Dividend, 14 Recant, 16 Beaten, 18 Protocol, 19 Undo, 22 Opium, 23 Non-plus, 24 Iron rations.

Down: 2 Ensur, 3 Drab, 4 Attain, 5 Lopsided, 6 Opulent, 7 Silver spoon, 8 Golden goose, 13 Uncommon, 15 Crosier, 17 Cornea, 20 Nylon, 21 Anti.

DOWN

- 1 A long-tailed parrot (5)
- 2 Run-down and abandoned (8)
- 3 Natural ardour (6)
- 4 Provider of financial support (10)
- 5 Secluded corner (4)
- 6 Most favourable (7)
- 9 Risk all in single effort (2,3,5)
- 11 Get on well together (3,2,3)
- 12 An American whiskey (7)
- 14 Flaw (6)
- 16 Waste time (5)
- 17 A round of visits (4)

SU DO KU



EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

- APRIL 30, 2024, TUESDAY**
- Shaka Samvat 1946
 - Vaishakh Shaka 10
 - Vaishakh Parvishite 18
 - Hijari 1445
 - Krishna Paksha Tithi 6, up to 7.06 am
 - Krishna Paksha Tithi 7, up to 5.46 am
 - Sadhya Yoga up to 10.24 pm
 - Ultrashadha Nakshatra up to 4.09 am
 - Moon enters Capricorn sign 10.37 am

FORECAST

CITY	TUESDAY WEDNESDAY		18:59 HRS 05:40 HRS
	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	34	22	
New Delhi	37	22	
Amritsar	33	18	
Bathinda	36	21	
Jalandhar	35	20	
Ludhiana	35	23	
Bhivani	38	22	
Hisar	38	22	
Sirsa	38	22	
Dharamsala	25	15	
Manali	20	05	
Shimla	22	10	
Srinagar	18	06	
Jammu	32	18	
Kargil	16	06	
Leh	12	03	
Dehradun	35	18	
Mussoorie	23	13	

TEMPERATURE IN °C