



## The big fight

Uttar Pradesh is critical as a battleground at the national level

With 80 Lok Sabha seats, Uttar Pradesh is critical in all political calculations, and more so for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which on its own won 71 seats from the State in 2014 and 62 in 2019. Fronts led by the BJP and the Samajwadi Party (SP) are the principal poles in the elections spread over all seven phases. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) led by four-time U.P. Chief Minister Mayawati is going solo, even as it battles decline. The All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) is trying to make its presence felt, in alliance with another regional outfit. Several sub-regional outfits that largely draw their support from a single caste group in a confined area are vying for autonomous space in alliances with other parties. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) got a shot in the arm with the induction of the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) which commands a considerable following among the agrarian Jat community in western U.P. that had been agitated against the Centre's farm laws. The Apna Dal (Somelal) led by Anupriya Patel, Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP) led by Om Prakash Rajbhar and Nirbal Indian Shoshit Hamara Aam Dal (NISHAD) party of Sanjay Nishad are other platforms that enable the BJP's outreach to specific subaltern communities.

The SP and the Congress, which are constituents of the INDIA bloc, have roped in the Mahan Dal led by Keshav Dev Maurya. The outfit enjoys the support of some sections of Other Backward Classes such as Mauryas, Shakyas and Kushwhas in central and eastern Uttar Pradesh. The broader rainbow coalition that the SP formed with multiple sub-regional parties in the 2022 Assembly polls is missing this time and two of its former allies, the SBSP and the RLD, have crossed over to the NDA. One faction of the Apna Dal is in alliance with the AIMIM. This front and the SP-Congress axis are both pivoting around a social coalition of backward, Dalits and Muslims to counter the Hindutva consolidation behind the BJP, but similar efforts in the recent past have been largely ineffective. The BSP is staring at a dead end, with its leaders joining other parties, and its social base massively eroded. Despite the consolidation that the BJP has achieved in the last decade, U.P. politics remains fragmented along caste, religious and regional fault lines. The State also happens to be home to the most strident form of BJP politics and the party expects to make gains from the opening of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and win more seats in the State than it did in 2019. The Opposition needs to win a substantial number of seats in U.P. to be viable as an alternative at the national level.

## Escalation ladder

The U.S. must rein in Israel, and Iran must show restraint

The April 1 attack on an annex of the Iranian embassy in Damascus was a major point of escalation in the multifaceted conflict that has been spreading across West Asia since October 7, 2023. Iran blamed Israel for the strike, in which 13 Iranians, including Mohammed Reza Zahedi, a top commander who was in charge of the Quds Force's Syria operations, were killed. Israel neither confirms nor denies claims that it was behind such attacks, but it is an open secret that it has been carrying out operations across the region targeting Iranian military and nuclear figures. On December 25, a suspected Israeli strike killed Razi Mousavi, senior adviser in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in Syria. What makes the April 1 attack different from Israel's past strikes is that an embassy complex was targeted this time. Embassy and other diplomatic premises have a protected status under international law. Even during the Second World War, diplomatic premises were spared by hostile powers. When the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was bombed in May 1999 by the U.S., the then U.S. President Bill Clinton issued a public apology, stating it to be an accident. But in the case of Damascus, the attacker's precision strike was aimed at killing a group of IRGC figures. Many in Iran see this as an act of war.

Even before the October 7 Hamas attack in Israel, there was a shadow war going on between Israel and Iran in West Asia. After October 7, Israel launched a two-pronged offensive – a full-throttled invasion of Gaza, the tiny Palestinian enclave of 2.3 million people on the one side, and dozens of air strikes in Syria and Lebanon against Iran and its network of militias on the other. Israel sees Iran as the lynchpin of all the non-state militias of the region, be it Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and seems determined to roll back their influence in its immediate neighbourhood. Israel's war on Gaza is not proceeding as planned. Six months of fighting has turned Gaza into an open graveyard with a death toll of over 33,000, a majority of them women and children. As Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister, under whose watch the October 7 attack unfolded, is coming under increased pressure at home and abroad to cease fire and resign, he appears to be more eager to escalate the regional crisis. This is a dangerous slope. An open war between Israel and Iran, which could drag the U.S. in, would be a security disaster for the whole region and an economic nightmare for the wider world. Iran should not walk into the trap set by Israel. It should show strategic patience and restraint and the U.S., Israel's most important diplomatic and military supporter, should restrain its closest ally from acting rogue again.

In an atypical departure from its usual five-day working schedule, the 17th Lok Sabha (2019-2024) concluded its proceedings on a Saturday, marking the culmination of a journey with unexpected twists and turns. Echoing a historical parallel, the previous Lok Sabha too also concluded with an extended parliamentary session. As the nation gets ready for the general election, the question arises: will history repeat itself? Or, will a new precedent be set? This prompts us, as citizens of India, to reflect on the performance of our Parliament in recent years as we wait to usher in the 18th Lok Sabha.

### How Ministries fared

Reflecting on legislative activity so far it was apparent that the polity of the nation was in a state of flux. The Office of the Prime Minister found itself inundated with 1,146 questions from Rajya Sabha Members of Parliament, of which only 28 were answered. Interestingly, just as in the House of Elders, the notices directed at the Prime Minister's Office witnessed a sharp decline also in the House of the People – from 5,000 during the 15th and 16th Lok Sabhas to a mere 1,700 in the 17th Lok Sabha – underscoring waning interest in seeking answers from the apex executive office.

In the bustling corridors of Parliament, where policy debates and national concerns intersect, a notable shift in parliamentary focus has been quietly underway. Over the past three Lok Sabhas, a discernible trend has emerged, shedding light on the evolving interests and priorities of our elected representatives.

At the forefront of this transformation are the Ministries of Health and Family and Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare. These portfolios have ascended to prominence, becoming the top two Ministries with the highest number of questions. Notably, scrutiny of the country's health-care system preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting consistent monitoring by our representatives. But despite being the Ministries with the most number of questions, where farmers to former Ministers seek answers, the number of questions in the House of the People was noticed to be declining marginally.

Yet, the most startling revelation is in a declining interest in matters of national security and internal affairs. The Ministry of Home Affairs, which was the Ministry with the second most number of questions directed towards it till the 15th Lok Sabha, has now faded into near obscurity. It is conspicuously absent from the list of the top five most questioned Ministries in the Upper House, with a decline in notices by 32%. This shift raises questions about the nation's priorities, particularly as the implementation of pivotal legislation looms on the horizon.

Meanwhile, as India charts its course towards economic resurgence from being one of the fragile five economies to aspiring to be one of the top five economies of the world, another



**Priyank Nagpal**

is a Legislative Assistant to Members of Parliament (LAMP) Fellow, 2023-2024

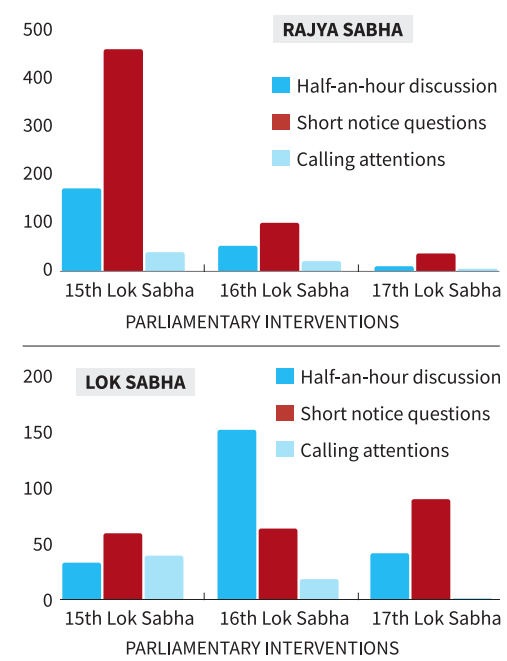


**Nehal Sharma**

is a Legislative Assistant to Members of Parliament (LAMP) Fellow, 2023-2024

### Trends of parliamentary interventions filed in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

The Lok Sabha has seen a decrease in the filing of Calling Attention motions, while the Rajya Sabha has seen a decreased filing of all parliamentary interventions



SOURCE: LOK SABHA AND RAJYA SABHA STATISTICAL STATEMENTS

narrative unfolds within the Ministry of Finance. Tasked with steering the nation's fiscal destiny, the Ministry has witnessed a gradual erosion of parliamentary interest, declining to the fourth and fifth position in the Rajya Sabha and the Lok Sabha, respectively. Yet, amidst this apparent disengagement, a glimmer of hope emerges with an increasing rate of questions being admitted for deliberation, signalling a newfound commitment to transparency and accountability in financial matters.

In addition to the profound impact on health, the COVID-19 pandemic has gravely disrupted India's educational landscape. Nevertheless, amidst these challenges, a steadfast commitment to accountability and transparency has endured. Education remains entrenched among the top five Ministries that are subject to rigorous questioning, reflecting its enduring significance in parliamentary discourse. However, regrettably, there has been a notable uptick in the number of questions disallowed, casting a shadow on the efficacy of oversight in this vital sector.

Delving deeper into the statistics, a pattern becomes apparent. In the Lok Sabha, the percentage of disallowed questions has shown a downward trajectory across successive Lok Sabhas.

The trend is significantly reversed for the Upper House where the percentage of disallowed questions is growing consistently. In the 17th Lok Sabha, Ministries such as Health and Family

The conduct of business in both Houses so far only points to the need for a revitalisation of legislative engagement and more constructive debate

Welfare, Home Affairs, Defence, Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, and Finance, made up 36.6% of all disallowed questions in Rajya Sabha, while in the Lok Sabha, they made up 37.8% of the disallowed questions, underscoring systemic challenges in parliamentary oversight.

### The use of interventions

As the landscape of Indian parliamentary proceedings undergoes a metamorphosis, it is not only ministerial priorities that are in flux but also the utilisation of various interventions available to lawmakers (as shown in the Graph). Amidst these interventions, there is one aspect that stands out in terms of soaring usage: Zero Hour.

Over 15 years, the Rajya Sabha has witnessed a remarkable 62% in this, while the Lok Sabha has seen a significant rise of 34%. This surge reflects a positive signal, indicating heightened focus in addressing pressing issues and grievances, and also seeking clarifications from the government. This coincides with a dwindling usage of interventions such as 'Half-an-Hour Discussions', 'Short Notice Questions', 'Calling Attention', 'Short Duration Discussions', and 'Special Mentions'.

Despite its popularity and usage in addressing key issues, Zero Hour has its inherent limitations. To strike a balance, it is imperative to leverage other interventions such as the 'Calling Attention', 'Short Duration' and 'Half and Hour' discussions which provide a platform for other members to participate in, enhancing the quality of debate and reaching amicable solutions.

In summary, the 16th Lok Sabha demonstrated a relatively higher level of proactivity compared to the other sessions. It displayed notable performance in the admission of questions and the discussions on various interventions within the House.

However, a closer look at the functioning of the House also unveiled a series of overlooked opportunities. Instances of oversight, such as the failure to raise privilege motions against misleading remarks, underscore a larger narrative urging accountability from the government. The Winter Session, 2023 of the Rajya Sabha missed a crucial discussion on the sensitive and key issue of 'Suicides among students due to competitive exams'. Despite the Chairman's readiness to have legislative nuances on the topic, our representatives let slip the opportunity to file for a half-hour discussion. It marked a failure to address societal concerns through parliamentary channels.

There was a time when a strong Opposition could ensure the withdrawal of Bills such as the Communal Violence Bill, 2014. Changing parliamentary dynamics only point to the need to revitalise legislative engagement, where every opportunity should be seized to ensure accountability, foster constructive debate, and enact policies that prioritise the welfare of the nation and its citizens.

## There will be no independent, sovereign Palestine

In today's Middle East, one thing is certain and another, highly probable. The certainty is that there will be no independent, sovereign Palestinian state, 'living side by side with Israel', as the cliché goes. Before October 7, 2023, there was some possibility of a Palestinian state emerging at some time, even with several caveats. Many rounds of negotiations took place between the two sides to work out a detailed road map of how the two-state solution would look. In January, 2001, in Taba, they came close to reaching an agreement.

### Hamas versus the Palestinian Authority

Post October 7, governments around the world have resurrected the two-state formula and are repeating it parrot-like. However, the formula is as good as dead. As of today, there is hardly anyone in Israel supporting a Palestinian state. Their reasoning is logical from their point of view. Hamas today is more popular in the West Bank than it ever was. This means that if and when the war ends on whatever terms, elections will have to be held in the Palestinian territories to elect a government. Even before October 7, Hamas had a good following among West Bank Palestinians. Now, support for Hamas has grown many fold. No Israeli is prepared to countenance that eventuality.

What about the Palestinian Authority based in Ramallah? It is a much more moderate group and has in fact been cooperating or collaborating with Israel. The Palestinian Authority is thoroughly discredited among Israelis and Palestinians as being corrupt and ineffective. In even a reasonably open election, Hamas is sure to emerge as the party with a majority. Only if Hamas is totally and effectively eradicated would Israelis be willing to consider the possibility of a Palestinian state. And, the eradication of Hamas is just not going to happen.



**Chinmaya R. Gharekhan**

served as India's Ambassador to the United Nations and as India's Special Envoy to the Middle East, 2005-09

Governments across the world may be backing the two-state formula, but it is as good as dead

This means that the war will go on. Rafah will be razed in the process of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) destroying the remaining four battalions of Hamas militia. Even respectable revisionist Israeli scholars and historians support the invasion of Rafah.

But what about the 80 or 90 Israeli hostages that Hamas still holds? On this, the Israeli public seems divided. Nearly an equal number give priority to the return of hostages just as there are those who consider the eradication of Hamas to be of higher priority. Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu assures his people that he will secure both these objectives and affirms his determination to proceed with the attack on Rafah, despite a public warning by Israel's strongest supporter, United States President Joe Biden.

### The danger of wider conflict

The probability is of the Gaza war escalating into a wider, regional conflict. Mr. Biden is very concerned about this possibility and his Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, has been travelling in the region to prevent such an escalation and to secure some sort of a cease-fire. The much-delayed United Nations Security Council resolution of an immediate ceasefire, adopted on March 25, and made possible because of American abstention and supported by all the other 14 members, does not amount to much. It demands a pause in fighting only until the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Thereafter, the resolution, in effect, expresses the hope that the ceasefire will be extended and become lasting and comprehensive. Mr. Biden was forced to take this step out of domestic political considerations. Domestic politics everywhere increasingly guides and determines foreign policy.

Hamas does not seem to care about the huge loss of innocent lives and the destruction of

infrastructure and housing. It might either underestimate Mr. Netanyahu's determination to proceed with the Rafah operation or to agree to its terms for a ceasefire such as the permanent withdrawal of Israeli forces and so on. Hamas is banking on the continued support of the international community for a quick and lasting ceasefire. For his part, Mr. Netanyahu will not stop the war until he accomplishes his objectives.

Already, Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon have been going at one another for some time now, causing casualties on both sides. Hezbollah has thousands of rockets and missiles aimed at Israel. It might see the Gaza war as an ideal opportunity to launch a more deadly attack on Israel in support of Hamas.

Wars make strange bedfellows. Here, a staunchly Shia movement is supporting an equally staunch Sunni group! Tens of thousands of Israeli citizens have been evacuated from northern Israel. Given Israel's deadly attacks on Syrian territory including on the Iranian embassy, Syria and Iran will surely retaliate, leading to another strong response by Israel. If that were to happen, there would be tremendous pressure on Egypt to join the fray. Egypt is under pressure to permit the people from Rafah to enter Egyptian territory when the IDF invades there. That, combined with the pressure of other Arab states, might make it difficult or even impossible for Egypt to stay out. Iran has missiles with a range that is long enough to hit Israel. All these actors might feel that such a 'golden' opportunity to eradicate Israel might not come again.

If this were to happen, the U.S. will go to Israel's help with whatever it might take. If this happens, can Russia be far behind?

Such a frightening scenario should scare everyone, everywhere. It might appear far-fetched at present, but we would be disregarding its probability at our own peril.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Bonds, reflections

Opinion and impressions may vary, but not facts and data (Opinion page, 'Data Point', April 5). Political donation is not a problem but *quid pro quo* is. The larger issue in the electoral bonds scheme is social insensitivity and the 'mute mode' of large sections of the population to a big

government legalised scam. Unfortunately, our countrymen seem to digest news on corruption and inequality as destiny. We need to wake up and respond or else this termite of a 'lethargy of destiny' will destroy the integrity of India's democratic fabric. **Buddha Jagdiah Rao**, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh

### Fali S. Nariman

The glowing tribute paid by the Chief Justice of India (CJI) to senior advocate Fali S. Nariman before a packed court hall is indeed moving (Inside pages, "Fali Nariman was a pillar of the community, says CJI", April 5). Fali Nariman's role during the Emergency is noteworthy. He did not bat

an eyelid when he resigned as the Additional Solicitor General of India, unmindful of the consequences. When the lease of the *Indian Express* newspaper building in India was terminated and the Government decided to take possession forcibly, it was Mr. Nariman who, true to his spirit, fought to the finish and ensured, in

*Express Newspapers Pvt Ltd vs Union of India*, that the press' right to freedom of speech reached the people. Fali Nariman was a great libertarian who led an inspiring life. **N.G.R. Prasad**, Chennai

By invoking Martin Luther King Jr. in his tribute, the

CJI has posed an excellent question that each one of us has to ask in difficult times. If one were able to answer to one's conscience, as and when the opportunity presents itself, the world would be free of conflicts and moral degradation. **Saurabh Sinha**, Kolkata



# GROUND ZERO



The rubble beyond the milestone is what remains of one of the properties that was burned down by a mob, allegedly led by the All-Yobin Students' Union, which wanted to drive away all the settlers from Vijaynagar, in December 2020. RAHUL KARMAKAR

## The unsettled settlers of Arunachal Pradesh

Tensions between the settlers, who are primarily families of Gurkhas who served in the Army and the Assam Rifles, and the Yobins, a trans-border community that was given Scheduled Tribe status, have been rising since 2020 in Vijaynagar. **Rahul Karmakar** reports on how the settlers, whose families once guarded the borders, now live in fear of being ejected as some of them have been asked to show permits to travel elsewhere in the State

Uncertainty for Katak Bahadur Chhetri begins where India's longest road under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, the Miao-Vijaynagar Road, ends near the border with Myanmar. While the 1,57.56 kilometre-long road connecting Vijaynagar on the border to inland Miao in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh has improved connectivity since it was opened in 2022, the work to elevate it from a 157.56 km dirt track coincided with a push for ejecting the 'settlers', who, like the local residents, were off the 'mainstream radar' for almost six decades due to the remoteness of the terrain.

Katak Bahadur Chhetri, 84, is one such settler. He has been worried about the rising tensions between his community, who are primarily families of Gurkhas who served in the Army and the paramilitary Assam Rifles, and the Yobins, a trans-border community known as Lisu in Myanmar and China and given Scheduled Tribe status in India, since 2020. Both the settlers and the Yobin consider each other as "foreigners".

Katak Bahadur is one of the last surviving members of the first 23 families of soldiers of the Assam Rifles who were settled by the Indian government in 1967-68 in the Vijaynagar valley. The government's plan was to settle armed forces personnel and their families in a strategically important "vacant" land in the North-East Frontier Agency, which became Arunachal Pradesh in January 1972. A total of 200 families were settled in nine villages of this valley in three more batches.

Now, Katak Bahadur is worried for his future. In 2020, a mob, allegedly led by the All Yobin Students' Union (AYSU), attacked properties near his house as they wanted all the settlers to be driven out of Vijaynagar. It also wanted them to be barred from participating in the panchayat elections on December 22 that year. The AYSU argued that the State's rules did not allow former servicemen who are not Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribes (APST) to contest the panchayat polls. It also said that the 30-year lease on the land on which they had settled had ended in 2020. The AYSU supports the Yobin. A majority of some 5,000 Yobin people live in Vijaynagar.

Following this violence, panchayat elections were not held in Vijaynagar. The upcoming Assembly elections in Arunachal Pradesh are the first since the violence. The ex-servicemen fear that the denial of land documents and the demand to scrap residential certificates to them could eventually impact their voting rights.

Katak Bahadur says settlers are now sometimes being asked to show the inner-line permit (ILP) whenever they move out of Vijaynagar, even to visit other parts of Arunachal. The ILP is a travel document for non-residents who visit the State for a limited period of time. "An atmosphere of distrust prevails here," he says.

### Litany of woes

The need to demarcate the boundary with Burma, now Myanmar, was felt after India attained independence. It took until 1960 to initiate such an exercise when a 7th Assam Rifles team mount-

**We are not against the Gurkhas or the ex-servicemen. We are just going by State law**

**NGWAZOSA YOBIN**  
President,  
All Yobin Students' Union

ed an unsuccessful expedition to present-day Vijaynagar from Miao. The next expedition led by Major Sumer Singh in February 1961 was partly successful; the team returned from a place now called Gandhigram, about 22 km short of Vijaynagar. A third team led by Major General A.S. Gauraya reached the targeted place in October 1961 and named it Vijaynagar after his son. An Assam Rifles camp was established and a scheme to populate an "unprotected" part of India was worked out.

The Ministry of Home Affairs' settlement plan entailed 10 standard acres of non-transferable land for each family for farming and an additional acre for a homestead and kitchen garden, and full free ration for the settlers at government-approved rates for the first year, at 50% or more for the second year, and up to 50% for the third year as the "settlers would be expected to be self-sufficient" from the fourth year.

According to the plan, the proposed settlers would be transported by air to the destination and provided ₹2,500 per family for necessary household equipment apart from farm tools, implements, seeds, fertilizers, and livestock worth ₹3,000 per family as one-time grants. The other proposals included a one-room tenement per family, machinery to make the land suitable for farming, and construction of inter- and intra-colony link roads.

About 95% of the settlers were Gurkhas, mostly from Nepal. A few were Kumaoni and Garhwali from Uttarakhand, Mizos from Mizoram, and Koch-Rajbongshis from Assam. After the last of the families were flown in, no settlers were allowed to move out of Vijaynagar without escort.

"For 10 years thereafter, the settlers were not provided with any rights like land-holding certificates and permanent residence certificates (PRCs) as promised during the settlement. In 1980, the settlers filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court, which issued an order seven years later seeking the visit of a Central team to Vijaynagar to hear the grievances of the people," says Bhagat Chhetri, a spokesperson of the Gorkha Welfare Society.

The issue dragged on until the State government issued a land allotment order for the ex-servicemen in April 1990 but on lease for 30 years. In its compliance report before the Supreme Court in August 1990, the government did not



A statue of Mahatma Gandhi. Shidi village, about 22 km inland from Vijaynagar, is now Gandhigram. RAHUL KARMAKAR



What pained the settlers most was that a lease for any specific period was not discussed at the time of the settlement process. Otherwise, the Assam Rifles personnel would not have agreed to quit their jobs and settle in such a remote area.

**CHET NARAYAN UPADHYAY**  
Buddha Mandir village

mention that 164 land allotment orders were issued to the settlers on a 30-year lease.

"The apex court was kept in the dark about the lease. But what pained the settlers most was that a lease for any specific period was not discussed at the time of the settlement process. Otherwise, the Assam Rifles personnel would not have agreed to quit their jobs and settle in such a remote area," says Chet Narayan Upadhyay of Buddha Mandir village.

"The land allotment system in the State changed with The Arunachal Pradesh (Land Settlement and Records) Act, 2000, and a person holding a land possession certificate (LPC) came to be declared as the owner of the land. With an amendment in 2018, the Act indirectly gives ownership rights to only the indigenous tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh. In between, we approached various authorities to convert our land allotment issued on a 30-year lease to LPCs or permanent titles over land. All our efforts went in vain," says a member of the All Settlers' Welfare Association.

The association says the settlers have not been able to avail themselves of the benefits of any government scheme as they are not indigenous. "There is no mechanism to issue any domicile certificate to us. The permanent resident certificate issued by the Changlang district administration was discontinued a few years ago and replaced with a residential certificate (RC) so that our people can apply for jobs, especially in Central forces, as the quota for the settlers in the Assam Rifles was done away with," he says.

"In a nutshell, we are landless people. We are denied participation in panchayat polls and we are likely to be thrown out of a remote part of the country where our parents were settled with unfulfilled promises. There are demands now to discontinue the RCs too and the government has been silent about it. We are paying the price for having defended our international borders in isolation and without connectivity," says S. Chhetri, an advocate.

The Gorkha Youth Committee asks why the settlers have been reduced to temporary residents with minimal rights after having been allegedly sold a dream by some officers to relocate and give up their lands in India or Nepal. "It is all the more painful as foreigners entering as late as the 2010s are enjoying APST status and accessing the government schemes," a member says. The foreigners he refers to are the Yobins.

### 'Going by the law'

Changlang is probably the only district in the Northeast where the people from India's neighbourhood outnumber the indigenous people. As per the 2011 Census, Chakmas and Hajongs, who were displaced by the Kaptai Dam in erstwhile East Pakistan in the 1960s, constitute 29% of the district's population of 1.48 lakh. Gurkhas constitute more than 7%. Many of them are descendants of soldiers from Nepal employed by the Indian armed forces. The district also has more than 2,600 Tibetan refugees. Yobins, concentrated in the Vijaynagar area, number about 5,000.

The ex-servicemen claim there were hardly any Yobin or Lisu families around when they were flown in to settle in the Vijaynagar valley.

Lisu organisations say the theory that they are foreigners is based on the fact that members of their community inhabit parts of Myanmar and China. "It is wrong to tag our people as foreigners just because some of us inhabit neighbouring

countries. We have been living in the Vijaynagar area for decades before the Indian armed forces came across our people. Disconnected from the rest of India, many of our people realised that they were Indians after the two countries demarcated the India-Myanmar border in 1972," says AYSU president Ngwazosa Yobin, one of the 45 people arrested for arson, rioting, and vandalism in Vijaynagar on December 11, 2020.

Avia Ngwazah, the general secretary of the Yobin Tribe Fundamental Rights Forum, says the State government acknowledged the contribution of Yobins to the demarcation of the India-Myanmar border and awarded a gold medal to one of them, Akhi Yeliyeh, in 2019 for suggesting the locations of the border pillars. Yeliyeh also donated a large portion of Dawodi (the Yobin name for Vijaynagar) for the construction of an advanced landing ground at Vijaynagar in 1962, he says. The citation that accompanied Yeliyeh's medal says he and other Yobin men declared their allegiance to the Indian flag and vowed to be loyal Indians.

However, as Tifusa Yobin of Yobin Welfare Society points out, members of the community were subjects of suspicion and were often detained by security forces for allegedly being foreigners as their existence was not recorded for a long time and their Indian citizenship was withdrawn temporarily in the 1970s. Despite their age-old connection to the land, they were recognised as APST in 1979 only to be de-recognised soon after. The status was restored in 2015, but withdrawn again in 2017 owing to a faulty notification. The State government started issuing Scheduled Tribe certificates to the Yobins again in December 2018 following directives from the Tribal Affairs Ministry and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes.

"We are not against the Gurkhas or the ex-servicemen but letting them contest the rural polls is against the provisions of the 73rd Amendment related to Panchayati Raj as well as the Arunachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act, 1997, which empower local people. We are just going by the State law," Ngwazosa says.

### Improving connectivity

Residents say the occasional conflicts between a mix of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian Gurkhas and the Christian Yobins and their run-ins with the security forces and forest officials have often escaped the attention of the world because of poor communication, both terrestrial and telecom. The December 11, 2020 violence could have been averted had there been no communication failure, say officials.

"The Miao-Vijaynagar road has helped cut down travel time although the unpaved portion within the national park where the tribal communities live becomes difficult to navigate during the rainy season. But the condition of the road is much better than about two years ago when I joined," Vijaynagar's Circle Officer Chownein Maio says, adding that a project to expand the road and realign it further to avoid the national park as much as possible is in the works.

The road trip costs a passenger ₹1,000 one way. A twice-a-week subsidised chopper service, prone to cancellation because of the unpredictable weather, offers a cheaper alternative for Vijaynagar residents to reach Miao and beyond. "BSNL offers 2G calling and messaging facility for 200 users at a time. There are 10 VSAT Internet facilities for paid WhatsApp messaging. Mini hydropower projects and solar power stations have changed the electricity scenario to a large extent. A new gas agency has 752 households as clients. Road connectivity, despite the bumpy ride through the national park, has opened up the area for tourism with the Gurkhas and Lisus offering homestays," Maio says.

"Connectivity and opportunities are changing the local economy," Yaofu Yobin says. But what apparently has not changed is the perception that the Gurkhas began outliving their utility as the road from Miao reached Vijaynagar in 2022.



## A touch of optimism

MPC takes sanguine view on growth, inflation for FY25

The Monetary Policy Committee's first policy statement for FY25 had an 'out-of-the-woods' tenor written all over it. As Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das himself said at the start of the post-policy press conference, the policy was along expected lines — with a standstill in repo rates at 6.5 per cent. The policy projects growth and inflation rates for FY25 at 7 per cent and 4.5 per cent, respectively. This is against an expected growth rate and inflation rate for FY24, of about 8 per cent and 5.4 per cent, respectively.



Despite the somewhat high base, the inflation projection is perhaps tinged with optimism. The central bank's projection of GDP growth of 7 per cent for FY25 appears based on the expectation of a normal monsoon this fiscal, which along with a robust rabi crop, is expected to lift rural demand. In FY24 and earlier years, rural demand had not kept up with its urban counterpart. Meanwhile, the RBI Governor expressed the hope that investment would become broadbased, given the sustained government impetus. As for CPI inflation, it has been hovering in the 5-5.5 per cent range over the last six months, led by food inflation in particular. RBI's inflation projection for FY25, with the reading for second quarter dipping to 3.8 per cent, is premised on record rabi wheat production, a normal monsoon and benign global food prices. But high temperatures and any change in monsoon behaviour could play havoc with supply of vegetables and pulses.

Besides, global crude oil prices have been surging due to geopolitical tensions in the Middle East and tighter supplies; Brent crude has gained almost \$10 in March 2024, crossing \$90 a barrel, exceeding the MPC's assumption of \$85 a barrel. The MPC's optimism on inflation is notable, given that foreign portfolio flows into the debt market are expected to accelerate in coming months, coinciding with the inclusion of Indian bonds in global bond indices. Unless the RBI decides to allow the rupee to appreciate, liquidity excess looks like a distinct possibility. Besides, the system liquidity has been moving into surplus since February due to higher government spending, reversal of the USD-INR sell swap auction initiated in March 2022 and the dollar purchases by the central bank to sterilise the foreign portfolio inflows into equity and debt markets.

Market interest rates are already exhibiting downward pressure as a result of liquidity surplus. Unless the RBI becomes proactive in mopping up liquidity, its 'withdrawal of accommodation' stance may seem out of sync in future months. Meanwhile, the proposal to issue a draft circular to review the liquidity coverage ratio framework is timely given ease of money transfers with growing digitisation. Similarly, providing a mobile app for buying and selling government securities on RBI's Retail Direct portal, could improve participation of small investors in GILT securities.

## FROM THE VIEWROOM.

## Ensure safety of women in sports

Anjana PV

The Indian football community was left reeling this week as news surfaced of two players from Khad FC accusing Deepak Sharma, the general secretary of the Himachal Pradesh Football Association, of physical assault. Palak Verma and Ritika Thakur alleged that Deepak, reportedly intoxicated, assaulted them on the night of March 28 in Goa. This incident has once again raised concerns about the safety of women in Indian sports. Sadly, this isn't an isolated case, as the media has reported similar assaults against women in the past.

In another distressing incident, protests erupted against BJP MP and former Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh over alleged sexual harassment of female wrestlers. These protests even led Olympic medalist Sakshi Malik, a prominent Indian wrestler, to quit from the sport.

While India has made strides in increasing women's participation

in sports, safety remains a major deterrent for women considering sports as a profession. RTI data reveals that between 2010 and 2020, there were 45 complaints of sexual harassment filed with the Sports Authority of India (SAI), with 29 implicating coaches. Often, the legal processes for seeking justice for victims are prolonged.

The recurrent instances of assault against women athletes underscore the urgent need for robust internal complaints committees and adherence to legal protocols. There's a pressing need for swift investigations and judicial proceedings. The government must take proactive measures to establish better rules and regulations to address such incidents.

While we celebrate the achievements of our female athletes on international platforms, it's crucial to ensure their basic safety and protection. Failure to do so would not only reduce women's participation but also hamper efforts to attract talented female athletes to various sports.

## Four tailwinds that are lifting the rupee

Fundamental shifts are underway in services exports, remittances and FPI flows

## CIRCUIT BREAKER.



AARATI KRISHNAN

Long-term investors in India take certain big-picture trends for granted. They assume real GDP will grow at 6-7 per cent a year. Inflation will average 4-6 per cent. The rupee will depreciate by 3-4 per cent a year against the US dollar.

But sometimes these long-held assumptions get challenged by shifts in underlying fundamentals, which fly under the radar. India's balance of payments, which decides the exchange rate, has been undergoing such changes lately.

After sinking by 10 per cent against the dollar in 2022, the rupee depreciated by less than 1 per cent in 2023 and has held steady this year. Lately, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) actions have been aimed at stemming unruly gains in the rupee rather than declines. This is because of four fundamental shifts underway in India's balance of payments equation.

## SURGING SERVICES EXPORTS

The primary factor that keeps India's demand for dollars higher than supply is the merchandise trade deficit. Between FY15 and FY20, India ran up a merchandise trade deficit of between \$112 billion and \$180 billion. With the Covid freeze, this shrank to \$102 billion in FY21. After re-opening, imports ballooned while merchandise exports remained sluggish. This saw the goods trade deficit rocket to \$265 billion in FY23.

Despite the record deficit, India managed to contain its CAD or current account deficit to \$67 billion or 2 per cent of GDP. It shrank further to 1.2 per cent in the first nine months of FY24.

Folks who were in the markets in 2013 will remember the panic about India's balance of payments and a run on the rupee that year. In FY13, India reported a merchandise trade deficit of \$195 billion (much lower than FY23) and this resulted in a CAD of \$88 billion (much higher than FY23).

The invisible number that has made all the difference between then and now, is services exports. Unlike India's merchandise trade, its services trade earns a dollar surplus, which has soared from \$64 billion in FY13 to \$143 billion

## Changing picture on dollar flows

(\$ billion)

	Goods trade	Services trade	Private transfers	FDI	FPI
FY13	-195.6	64.9	64.3	19.8	26.8
FY14	-147.6	73.0	65.4	21.5	4.8
FY15	-144.9	76.5	66.2	31.2	42.2
FY16	-130.1	69.6	63.1	36.0	-4.1
FY17	-112.4	68.3	56.5	35.6	7.6
FY18	-160.0	77.6	62.9	30.2	22.1
FY19	-180.2	81.9	70.6	30.7	-0.1
FY20	-157.5	84.9	76.2	43.0	1.4
FY21	-102.1	88.5	74.4	43.9	36.1
FY22	-189.5	107.5	81.2	38.6	-16.8
FY23	-265.3	143.2	101.7	27.9	-5.1
FY24 GM	-117.6	75.0	48.8	4.8	20.6

All the above data captures net flows into India Source: RBI Database on Indian Economy

in FY23. In the first nine months of FY24, the services surplus at \$45 billion amounted to two-thirds of the goods deficit of \$71 billion.

The continued rise in the services surplus, even as the goods deficit charts a zigzag path, offers the hope that the two will meet sometime in future.

## NOT JUST SOFTWARE

The success story of Indian software services is well documented. Lately though, there have been signs that the global market for India's IT services may be maturing, with growth moderating to single digits. There's also worry that the elusive US recession will finally arrive this year.

But thankfully for India's balance of payments, its services exports are no longer reliant only on IT. Scores of MNCs setting up Global Capability Centres (GCCs) to source operations, product and research services from India have sparked off a boom in 'business services' exports. RBI data show that exports of business, financial and communication services netted \$24 billion in FY23, up from \$9 billion in FY22 and \$3 billion 10 years ago.

A December essay from the Chief Economic Advisor noted that business

After sinking by 10 per cent against the dollar in 2022, the rupee depreciated by less than 1 per cent in 2023 and has held steady this year.

services exports may prove resilient to global crises, as they provide both cost savings during downturns and value-added services during boom times.

Business services have added a new leg to India's services trade surplus, which can cushion against slowing IT exports.

## RESILIENT REMITTANCES

With a vast diaspora, India has always been a topper in inbound remittances. But it was traditionally believed that, with the bulk of remittances flowing in from oil-reliant GCC nations, these inflows were a fair-weather friend.

This thesis was proved wrong during Covid, when the World Bank issued a warning that India's remittances would fall by 23 per cent and found itself far off the mark. Remittances saw just a 0.2 per cent blip in 2020 and rose 8 per cent in 2021. Between 2021 and 2023, they have further expanded from \$83 billion to \$125 billion.

Later RBI research attributed this to a material shift in the profile of Indian emigrants. Between 2015 and 2020, even as India saw a material decline in blue-collar emigration to the GCC region, an increasing number of emigrants from the metros headed to white collar work in the US, UK and Singapore. As a result, India's remittance flows post 2020 have been originating more from white collar workers in the advanced economies than lower-income workers in the GCC region, imparting greater resilience to these flows. The US has been the top source, followed by UAE, UK and



Singapore. Given that Indian parents continue to send large cohorts of teenagers abroad to pursue higher education in the advanced economies, this shift in remittances may be here to stay.

## FPI IN BONDS

The dollar shortfall that India runs up with its CAD is usually financed by its capital account surplus. Two heavyweight contributors to the capital account surplus are foreign direct investment (FDI) and foreign portfolio investment (FPI). Until FY22, with ample global liquidity, India attracted a large influx of FDI into its thriving start-ups. But with liquidity reversing, FDI flows have dwindled.

But new FPI flows seem to be rushing in to fill this gap. After stampering out in the last two years, FPIs poured \$41 billion into Indian stocks and bonds in FY24.

FPIs have traditionally been a fickle source of capital flows — moving in and out based on global rates, returns on alternate assets and the rupee outlook.

But one fundamental change in the past year, is Indian government bonds netting \$14 billion in FPI flows. Until 2020, FPI in Indian bonds was strictly controlled through a quantitative ceiling. In April 2020, RBI had a change of heart and opened the doors for FPIs in domestic gilts without any strings attached through a new Fully Accessible Route. It took three more years for global bond index providers to include Indian gilts in their indices. But with JP Morgan and Bloomberg making the first moves starting this year, Indian gilts are set to attract regular passive flows.

The timing for this is opportune. US interest rates have peaked, Indian rates are still high and government finances on the mend, making a sound case for global funds to allocate to Indian bonds. Many global equity managers are already overweight on India after the recent spell of 7 per cent plus GDP growth.

Of course, it is early days yet to say if the above shifts will set off long-term improvements in India's balance of payments or the rupee. But the facts are changing and investors should sit up and take note.

## Credit policy focuses on stability

The opening policy for FY25 smacks of optimism on the growth front. The outlook on inflation remains cautious

Madan Sabnavis

The RBI credit policy had no surprises. Status quo was maintained on rates, the stance and the voting pattern. The commentary was virtually unchanged and hence bond yields were not affected.

The rationale put across for keeping the status quo is important because there is a school of thought which believes that not cutting the repo rate can hinder growth. The RBI has reiterated that growth in India is robust and that the way forward is only upwards, and hence it can focus fully on inflation.

The growth projection for next year remains unchanged at 7 per cent. This means that even while it is sanguine on the factors that will be driving growth in FY25, it prefers to play cautious until some data points are known. It may be expected that during the course of the year GDP forecast can be upgraded.

The RBI believes that two militating factors to growth in the past will be reversed. The first is rural consumption which has lagged. A very good rabi

harvest topped with a normal monsoon, and hence robust kharif crop, will lead to rural incomes increasing. Rural demand has been a headwind for most companies in the consumer goods space in the last two or three years.

## PRIVATE INVESTMENT

The other engine which is to fire is private investment. True, it has worked in specific sectors like cement and steel where the front-end was government capex. But this needs to get broad based. Here the RBI has indicated that rising demand and better capacity utilisation will automatically lead to higher investment in a broader manner.

On inflation, the RBI has maintained a forecast of 4.5 per cent. The quarterly numbers are also almost unchanged at 4.9 per cent, 3.8 per cent, 4.6 per cent and 4.5 per cent — all under 5 per cent. Here there can be a counter-view that given the intense heat predicted, the possibility of food inflation spiking in Q1 looks likely before the onset of the monsoon. The reservoir levels are down to 35 per cent of capacity. The base effect, however, will support a lower



FOOD PRICES. A cause for concern

inflation number, though prices of some products could increase. Vegetables in particular could be susceptible to this heat; and hence higher food inflation is possible.

But the significant point made by the RBI is that the central bank will work to bring inflation down to 4 per cent. This means that numbers like 4.5 per cent or thereabouts will not be satisfying, even if they are comforting. Now, what can be gleaned from this statement of RBI?

One way of looking at it is that there will not be a rate cut unless the RBI is

convinced that inflation is moving asymptotically to the 4 per cent mark. Q3 inflation at 3.8 per cent can be a trigger. But in the third and fourth quarters inflation is set to rise to 4.6 per cent. A conclusion to be drawn is that inflation less than 5 per cent is a necessary condition for a rate cut.

Therefore, August can be the time for the first rate cut provided inflation plays out in the expected manner. However, given that inflation is slated to rise subsequently, the RBI will be conservative with the quantum of rate cut and probably stick to 25-50 bps for the year.

Overall, the RBI Governor's statement does smell of optimism. India is in a 'sweet spot' as it has over-performed over the years and on target to accelerate in future. The domestic and external sectors have done well, reflecting astute intervention by the central bank to manage volatility. This can be assumed to be the role that the RBI will continue to play in FY25 too.

The writer is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda. Views are personal

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

## MPC keeps inflation focus

The decision of the MPC (Monetary Policy Committee) of the RBI to keep the repo rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent and maintain the policy stance of withdrawal of accommodation does not come as a surprise. While there has been a broad-based moderation in inflation, higher food inflation keeps headline numbers elevated. With uncertainties in food prices continuing to pose challenges, the MPC cannot afford to lower its guard, and it is incumbent upon it to be vigilant about the upside risks to inflation. The RBI has retained its GDP growth forecast at 7 per cent in FY25. However, headwinds from

geopolitical tensions, volatility in international financial markets, and geo-economic fragmentation pose risks to the growth outlook.

M Jeyaram  
Sholvandam, TN

## Giving start-ups a leg-up

This is with reference to 'A grim future for start-ups' (April 5). There is no dearth of talent and ideas in India, but too much government interference or bureaucracy prevents our entrepreneurs from executing their ideas and creating jobs. India should learn from Silicon Valley, which is home to many of the world's largest high-tech corporations as well as thousands of

start-up companies. In Silicon Valley, risk-taking is encouraged, and entrepreneurs are heroes. It is important to understand that the US government practically has no role in the functioning of Silicon Valley. It funds basic research, provides education and infrastructure, and does not come in the way of entrepreneurs. Secondly, there is no social stigma attached to failure, but failure is considered a stepping stone towards success. If we can learn some basic principles from Silicon Valley, I think our Prime Minister's ambitious scheme of start-ups will be a huge success.

Veena Shenoy  
Thane

## API manufacture

Promoting domestic production of medical devices is welcome. The country has all the potential to meet both domestic and export demand. A similar incentive scheme may be extended to manufacturers of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) required to make pharmaceutical formulations. Currently, around 70 per cent of these are being imported from China. By producing API locally, the cost of our medicines could be made still more economical for the domestic market and also be more competitive in the international market.

AG Rajmohan  
Anantapur, AP

## Growth with jobs

The recent India Employment Report 2024 of the ILO says India will be the third-largest economy in the world by 202. However, India's per capita income of \$2,601 is the lowest among the G-20 countries. The report also indicates that the youth unemployment rate has been rising over the past several decades. This shows that the high economic growth had little impact on youth employment. The Indian economy is on the growth track, but not on the right path. The focus should be on reducing poverty, creating jobs and keeping food prices low.

Haridasan Rajan  
Kozhikode, Kerala



# Can Europe's economy exceed expectations in 2024?



KENNETH ROGOFF

After 15 years of economic upheavals, from the European debt crisis to the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the European economy appears set to underperform in 2024. But are appearances deceiving?

Germany, Europe's largest economy, has been hit particularly hard by the surge in energy prices and China's ongoing slowdown. Moreover, Germany has

exacerbated its own economic woes by diluting or abandoning many of former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's market-oriented reforms, which had previously underpinned its robust gross domestic product (GDP) growth. Although leading German forecasters project that the country will (barely) avoid a recession in 2024, its economic outlook remains precarious.

France is faring slightly better. But with a fiscal deficit of 5.5 per cent of GDP in 2023 and real interest rates rising globally, the French government is under pressure to tighten policy. On the other hand, after years of declining productivity and persistent debt issues, Italy is growing again and appears to be on a positive trajectory. And Greece, which maintains the European Union's largest underground economy, continues to struggle, primarily owing to rampant tax evasion.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons for hope. First, Central and East

European economies have been outperforming Western Europe for some time now. According to Eurostat, Poland has overtaken both Greece and Portugal in terms of real GDP per capita, with countries like Romania on track to achieve similar milestones within the next five years. While Hungary has grappled with exchange-rate fluctuations and a 0.8 per cent contraction in 2023, reflecting Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's attempts to curb the central bank's independence, the country is expected to return to solid growth in 2024 and 2025.

To be sure, Central and East European countries are also aging rapidly, much like their Western counterparts. Still, for now, the fast-growing East will continue to pull up Europe's overall growth rate.

Second, Southern Europe is also growing faster than Northern Europe, with Spain, Portugal, and even Greece outstripping German growth by a wide

margin since 2020. This is partly catching up from dismal growth in the years following the global financial crisis; but, given these economies' robust tourism industries and lower dependence on manufacturing, it could continue.

Third, it would be unwise to bet against a long-term resurgence of the German economy. When I was a graduate student in the late 1970s, one of my classmates presented a paper showing how East Germany had outperformed other Soviet bloc economies. "They have yet to invent a system where the German economy is inefficient," he quipped. Although Germany's recent leftward turn may end up proving this argument wrong, it is more likely that the country will manage to correct course and return to building high-quality infrastructure.

Fourth, upcoming elections across Europe could usher in some much-needed effective leadership. French

President Emmanuel Macron, once viewed as the successor to former German Chancellor Angela Merkel as Europe's most respected leader, has struggled to address his country's numerous economic challenges and has been criticised for his naivete in dealing with Russian President Vladimir Putin. And Ms Merkel's actual successor as German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, is grappling with dismal approval ratings that make US President Joe Biden seem popular by comparison.

Despite stabilising the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is hindered by the widespread perception that he is a lame duck. Mr Sunak's Conservative Party is currently trailing far behind in the polls against a revitalised Labour Party, which has successfully positioned itself as economically centrist. By contrast, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has unex-

pectedly emerged as one of Europe's most effective and popular leaders.

Lastly, the looming threat of a Russian victory in Ukraine could catalyse Europe's fiscal integration—an unthinkably prospect not so long ago. Meanwhile, as I recently argued, November's US presidential election is unlikely to mitigate America's ongoing political turmoil, regardless of the outcome.

All of this suggests that Europe could still turn its situation around. European stock markets could easily replicate last year's unexpectedly strong performance, considering that valuations, as measured by price-to-earnings ratios, are significantly lower than those in the US.

While European economies have underperformed for a long time, no trend lasts forever. As grim as Europe's outlook seems right now, its economic prospects could look a little better later this year.

*The writer is professor of economics and public policy at Harvard University  
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ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



# BJP has an ambitious target



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

In mid-2023, economist Sabyasachi Das released a paper "Democratic Backsliding in the World's Largest Democracy". This looked for signs of manipulation in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The paper had not been peer-reviewed. It triggered a firestorm, which forced Mr Das' resignation from his post at Ashoka University. The incident has dire implications for academic freedom but that's a subject for another day.

Mr Das used statistical methods to examine voting patterns in 59 Lok Sabha constituencies, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won or came second, in close contests defined as a margin of less than 5 per cent of the votes cast. It also looked at voter suppression, with a focus on the removal of Muslim names from electoral rolls.

It marked off constituencies in states controlled by the BJP, and looked at the possibility that state civil service officers (SCS) tasked with election duties may have been "pliable". The paper also looked at discrepancies between turnouts and votes cast in the initial data released by the Election Commission of India (ECI). The ECI later released corrected figures. It's still an open question if the discrepancies were due to manipulation or statistical error.

Mr Das' conclusions: The BJP won a disproportionately large number of close-margin seats. It won 41 of the 59 seats he examined. Assuming as the paper did, that these seats were a near coin-toss, the BJP should have won close to half—say, around 30 seats. But as Mr Das acknowledged, the BJP has a strong ground game with many workers, financial clout and social media outreach. It may have won close contests because it campaigned better.

The paper claimed larger discrepancies in the ECI data in seats won by the BJP. Seats with election officials drawn from SCS cadres in states controlled by the BJP also had more data discrepancies. Growth in registered voters for seats

with high Muslim populations was less than the national average of growth in voters—er go, there may be some evidence of voter suppression.

But although Mr Das claimed to find a few such tell-tale signs, the paper acknowledged: "The tests are, however, not proofs of fraud, nor does it suggest that manipulation was widespread." Subsequent examinations of the paper suggested that it may have had flawed methodology.

However flawed it was, the paper pointed to 59 constituencies with close contests. If the BJP is going to hit the target of 370 seats in 2024, it must hold the bulk of the 303 seats it won in 2019 (including the 41 cited above). It will also have to win another 70-odd seats. Even if it wins the 18 close contests cited, where it came second, it will have to win 50-odd seats where it ran at over 5 per cent behind the winner.

In the last two Lok Sabha elections (2014 and 2019), the BJP pushed its vote share to 37.4 per cent (2019) from 18.9 per cent (2009) and raised its Lok Sabha tally to 303 (2019) from 116 (2009). To go to 370, it would have to cross 45 per cent of the vote share. The aggregated National

Democratic Alliance won 45 per cent of the vote in 2019, and 353 seats.

Such a large single-party vote share has not been registered since 1984, when the Congress won 47 per cent of the vote, and 414 seats after Indira Gandhi was assassinated. Indira Gandhi's Congress won 43 per cent of the vote and 353 seats in 1980. The elections of 1980 and 1984 were unusual. Before the 1980 elections, India's first non-Congress government had collapsed due to infighting, leaving no Opposition. In 1984, there was a huge sympathy wave.

Thus far, 2024 shows no signs of being a "wave" election. In the absence of Black Swans, the BJP has a massive edge in money. But in 10 years, it has failed to deliver on employment or inclusive growth—over 800 million on welfare is ample proof of that failure. After the release of the electoral bond data, the direct correlations with Enforcement Directorate cases, and the arrest of Opposition politicians, the narrative of being a clean party is also hard to push. Anti-incumbency—a well-known theme in Indian politics—makes it more likely it will lose some vote share and some seats, than that it will pick up enough vote share to surge to 370.

# Politics for nuclear winter

Opposition parties know better than most what they are up against. Much of the talk among them is more about where they could limit Modi, rather than having him voted out of power

As the combatants ready their manifestos for the 2024 campaign, the first set of opinion polls is with us. I understand the scepticism about news TV channels and the "so what else would you expect from these guys" view among those who support the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) rivals, but some data is better than data-free analysis.

Left to us journalists and pundits who predict poll outcomes after talking at a few dhabas and with three taxi drivers, we could conveniently give victory to our own favourites and then go to sleep happily. If the results are different, there are always the electronic voting machines to blame.

The fact is, you do not even need any pollsters to tell you the BJP is way ahead in this contest. Even as the Opposition's ambitious INDIA bloc has struggled to maintain cohesion, the BJP has set about repairing and rebuilding the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The passion of the partisan aside, much of the talk within the Opposition parties is about where they could limit Narendra Modi rather than having him voted out of power.

That's the state of play at this point in time, although the Opposition believes the revelations about the electoral bonds have put some wind in its sails. The idea of the BJP's "washing machine" is a campaign pitch with some oomph. Is it powerful enough to turn the Opposition's fortunes? Most Opposition leaders would still look at the picture more soberly. It is about how to "limit" Mr Modi to a "reasonable" number.

An insight into the Opposition thinking came in a conversation with the leader of one Opposition party across the aisle on an IndiGo flight early January. The third-generation dynast has inherited a party with a solid caste-based vote bank, albeit in a limited geography. I asked how he looked at the prospects, and whether he believed his caste's vote bank would survive Mr Modi's pull.

The caste vote bank may be generally safe, he said, but when people go out to vote in the Lok Sabha elections, they will see only one choice. "How do you convince them there's an alternative?" he asked. His party

(and the Opposition), he said, was struggling to find an issue that brings a critical mass of people out in the streets. For example, if you raise the Agniveer scheme, only those affected will come to protest. The rest of the voters will be indifferent.

"What's the solution then? Has your three-generation politics come to an end?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "let's see it like we are in a nuclear winter. All we can do is survive until it thaws. In politics, that would mean preserving your caste vote bank, winning at least a few seats and conserve your resources. Live long enough until times change."

Prescient, I thought, and very wise too. Except, just days after this conversation, he left the INDIA bloc and joined the NDA. He probably chose this as a way of dealing with his nuclear winter. At least when and if things change, he will still be in the ring, and up on his feet and weigh new options.

With self-preservation or surviving to fight another day being the topmost thought on the minds of the Opposition parties, each one faces different challenges. For some, like Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress, their state governments would be destabilised by any addition to the BJP's 2019 tally of seats.

The currently embattled Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) would look to make a bigger statement in Delhi than the wipeout of 2019. For the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT) and Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party faction, a relative success is essential for survival. For Akhilesh Yadav's Samajwadi Party and Lalu/Tejashwi Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), a 2019-like performance will make their dream of returning to power in their states that much more improbable.

These parties also have limited avenues for funds. Where they aren't in power, the taps have remained dry for years and the savings running out. Those that still rule a state and can "persuade" moneyed people to pay have the "agencies" on their tail. This would scare their prospective donors even more.

All this is about one-state parties. Or maybe one and a half states in the case of



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

# Talking climate with kids

EYE CULTURE

CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

"Every country around the world says NO to fossil fuels, we can defeat the climate change monster," writes Bibek Bhattacharya in *Our Beautiful World*, which was picked as the Children's Book of the Year (Ages 8+) at the Publishing Next Industry Awards last week.

Illustrated by Joanna Davala and published by Pratham Books, what makes this book special is that it does not talk down to young readers and tell them what they ought to do to fix the climate crisis. They are not the ones who brought the planet to its current state of ruin; their ancestors did. What we need right now is the willingness to take collective responsibility, and this is beautifully reflected in Mr Bhattacharya's consistent use of the personal pronoun "we".

This is a refreshing change from the environmental studies textbooks of yore that assigned children a to-do list of cautionary measures such as closing taps and switching off fans. A strong inner compass is important to keep us on track while setting out to achieve big goals but, in the context of the climate crisis, we need to adopt a civilisational perspective.

This book shows how agriculture, urbanisation, trade, and art have transformed human life and—in the bargain—also depleted the earth's resources. Wanting more from the planet is not a new phenomenon but the industrial revolution ushered in an

era of unchecked burning of fossil fuels like coal and oil to power machines entrusted with furthering human progress. If we continue, the sea level will rise, and "cities like Mumbai and Kolkata will be deserted".

Given his background as a journalist and podcaster focusing on the climate crisis, Mr Bhattacharya is skilled at communicating facts without sugarcoating. Children need to see things as they are because they have to live with them. At the same time, he reminds them that "there is hope" because humans have "built technologies which can draw energy from the sun, wind and water". If the world can stop burning fossil fuels by 2050, there will be no extra carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and we can save the planet from heating up further.

No crisis can be tackled if we give up on optimism, which is certainly a renewable resource as evident from environmental journalist Bahar Dutt's new book for children—*Planet Protectors: Stories of Green Heroes (2024)*—illustrated by Pankaj Saikia and published by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI). In this delightful book, two sisters Aranya and Prakriti learn about individuals who have made it their life's mission to protect the planet.

Readers are introduced to Tulsi Gowda, a tribal elder and custodian of indigenous knowledge on trees, shrubs, and seeds; Afroz Shah, who organises beach cleanups; Biju Bhaskar, who teaches architects to build with mud and plant materials; Poonam Bir Kasturi, who trains

people in home composting to reduce pressure on landfills; Vijay Jardhari, who started the Beej Bachao Andolan to save traditional varieties of seeds; Ritwick Dutta, who provides legal representation to communities that cannot defend themselves against polluting companies in court; Samarth Khanna, who creates mini-forests in cities; and many other heroes.

Without being preachy, Ms Dutt lays out a number of paths that children can pursue when they grow up. Parents and teachers who are worried about the legacy that they are leaving behind can rest assured that future generations have it in them to craft a better future for the planet. Reading about these heroes can encourage them to tap into their own creativity and innovate.

Former journalist Bijal Vachharajani has teamed up with illustrator Rajiv Eipe to create a laugh-riot of a book called *When Fairyland Lost its Magic (2023)*, published by HarperCollins. It retells popular fairytales in the context of the climate crisis. Rapunzel struggles to take care of long, flowing hair because of a water shortage. Snow White is renamed No White because all the snow has melted. Thankfully, her stepmother cannot poison her with an apple because early rain has damaged most of the apple harvest. Sleeping Beauty has insomnia; her therapist has diagnosed this as a case of climate anxiety.

As anyone dealing with a crisis knows, the best ally to have is a good sense of humour.

# The passing of the technocrat age



TICKER

MIHIR S SHARMA

Manmohan Singh, who retired from the Rajya Sabha this week, may be the most successful technocrat in history. Few have been granted, on the basis of their expertise, positions of leadership that are in any way comparable in status and influence to the ones that Dr Singh occupied over his long career. His retirement serves thus as a reminder that the age of technocrats and theorists is over. It has been replaced by the age of populists and project managers.

The 1990s and 2000s were a golden age for technocrats globally. Government—and not just in India—was, depending upon your point of view, either depoliticised or too highly politicised. On the one hand, there was a broad consensus about the economic and social welfare policies that should be followed for growth, development, and uplift. This

meant depoliticisation to the extent that sharp policy differences were no longer the stuff of party politics.

On the other hand, the growth of identity-based mobilisation meant that the composition of government became ever more politically fraught. In some parts of the world, this led to turbulent internal party politics. In India, this was expressed through coalition machinations. The question of who obtained what within the administrative sphere became the main object of politics. Thus, from that point of view, government was more politicised.

Both these apparently contradictory trends in fact allowed a special place for technocrats. The depoliticisation of policy choices meant that policy discourse devolved to questions of how efficiently the consensus could be applied and implemented. Technocrats offered the promise of getting the hard work of policymaking out of the way, allowing the politicians to focus on identity struggles. Meanwhile, the existence of those identity struggles meant that technocrats served another useful purpose: They could occupy certain roles and positions of "national" importance, marking those posts as off-limits for political contestation.

Dr Singh was, to an extent,

a beneficiary of both these trends. He was not the first choice for finance minister during the crisis of 1991—that was probably I G Patel—but there seems to be little doubt, in retrospect, that when faced with a crisis of that magnitude the Union finance minister appointed would be an economist. Further, there was general agreement on what needed to be done. In the then Prime Minister's words: "All the other [1991 reform] measures were really written about in newspapers times without number. For months and months they were being discussed... The papers were ready [when we took office]." What was needed was a technocrat who understood the purpose of reform and how it could be carried out, and Dr Singh fit the bill.

When he was appointed Prime Minister in 2004, the other side of the coalition age was in evidence. By choosing a loyal technocrat, the Congress president made it clear that the post of Prime Minister in the United Progressive Alliance government was not a prize for political contestation, but a position that required expertise. This reduced the scope of politicking considerably, especially as compared to the chaos of the 1990s, when everyone thought they could be PM.

This sounds like ancient history now, whether in India or

elsewhere. Across the world, charmers or populists have ousted boring technocrats, beginning with dour Third Way architect Gordon Brown losing to a [then] charming and inexperienced David Cameron in 2010. And the supposed expertise that technocrats, with their grasp of policy, would bring has been replaced at the highest level with the PowerPoints and bullet points of project managers who prize policy implementation over formulation. The lateral entrants into the council of ministers in this government are more likely to be bureaucrats than economists.

History has tides, however. The populist 1930s and 1940s were replaced, after a crisis, with the technocratic 1950s and 1960s, run by the "best and the brightest" in JFK's White House, the welfarist "Butskellism" bipartisan consensus in the United Kingdom, and the post-Mahalanobis planning bureaucracy in India. This was the period, in fact, in which Dr Singh was trained, and he seemed to retain, in spite of his famous humility, some of the intellectual arrogance that characterised policy economists of that era.

When the wheel turns, populists will be out and technocrats will be back in fashion once again. Let's hope it doesn't take yet another crisis for that to happen.

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## OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

## Both dovish and hawkish

RBI has maintained its stance on policy rate citing food inflation. But tying policy to food prices may force economy to sacrifice growth

The first Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting for the new fiscal year has kept the policy rate unchanged at 6.5% and retained the stance of monetary policy as focused on the withdrawal of accommodation. It has also not made any changes to the inflation and growth forecasts made in its February meeting. RBI believes India's GDP growth rate and benchmark inflation rate, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), to be 7% and 4.5%, respectively, in FY25. This means that the Indian economy is likely to retain its goldilocks environment of low inflation and high growth in the current fiscal year as well.

Does this make Friday's MPC a non-event as far as monetary policy is concerned? It would have been the case, had Governor Shaktikanta Das not given the inflation elephant "appears to be returning to the forest" analogy in his statement released with the MPC resolution. Compared to his past MPC statements, where he underlined the importance of inflation returning to the 4% target and not just the 2%-6% range, this is the first sign of RBI pivoting towards a dovish stance even if only in rhetoric. Given the fact that core inflation (non-food non-fuel) fell close to its lowest-ever levels in February, the dovish tilt in Das's statement recognises the big picture on inflation.

Does it mean that a reduction in rates is now a possibility that will happen sooner rather than later? Analysts are advocating caution on this front and think that the central bank is likely to wait for more clarity on the 2024 monsoon and its impact on food inflation before eventually bringing down interest rates. After all, it is food inflation that has kept the benchmark inflation rate above RBI's target of 4% and its prospects are linked more to climatic conditions than the non-farm part of the economy.

That RBI's inflation targeting strategy has become so wedded to food prices, and by extension climate events, is a complicated policy challenge for the Indian economy. With the climate crisis worsening, extreme weather events and their adverse effects on food production will only become more common. There is very little monetary policy can do to manage food inflation and therefore, it is unfair if it is held accountable for inflation overshooting the target even if it is being driven by food prices.

The current growth momentum of the economy has given some policy buffer to RBI in keeping interest rates high and (potentially) erring on the side of caution. Das's statement says this explicitly. However, this might not be the case whenever food inflation-driven tailwinds pull the overall inflation rate above RBI's inflation target. In that case, the economy would have to sacrifice its growth potential.

To be sure, part of this problem is a result of the delay in updating the CPI basket which is still based on the 2011-12 Consumption Expenditure Survey (CES). Summary stats from the 2022-23 CES show that the share of food spending in the overall consumption basket is likely to fall significantly from its current value of 39%. Once the new CPI series reflects this changed reality — it will require at least one more CES result to check whether the 2022-23 numbers are statistically robust — food inflation-driven tailwinds for overall inflation are likely to weaken than what they are now.

## Two seat-belts to safely invest in small-cap stocks

Small caps have a place in a retail portfolio, but investors must have protections in place

The recent Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) warning of a potential bubble in several small-cap stocks had taken some gains off a market that the regulator believed was getting overheated. Retail investors who had looked at the substantial returns in some small-cap funds and stocks over the past year and had rushed in late to the party when the run-up had already taken place, took home losses when markets fell as a consequence of Sebi's statement. So, should retail investors stay away from this risky small-cap category and remain safe with large-cap and blue chip-based investing? Or do small caps have a place in retail investor portfolios? I believe that small caps must make up a slice of the equity asset allocation pie for investors who are willing to wear seat-belts that absorb the wild volatility of this asset category.

But first, what is a small-cap stock? Sebi defines small-cap stocks as those that are the 251st stock onwards in terms of market capitalisation. Mid-caps are between 101st and 250th stock and stocks from one to 100 are called large cap. Market cap is the price of a stock multiplied by the number of stocks issued by the company and is a single number that points to the value of a company as judged by the stock market. Large-cap stocks are mature large companies that do not usually see very large swings in prices. Mid-caps typically are higher growth companies that carry the potential for a higher return, but come with a higher risk attribute than large caps. Small-cap stocks can have very high growth but carry a much higher risk of failure. The category itself moves between very good years and terrible years in terms of

returns. How high can the growth in small caps be? The average annual return on small-cap mutual funds over a 10-year period ending March 23, 2024, has been 22.16% compared to 14.17% for large-cap funds. To illustrate, ₹1 lakh would have become ₹3.8 lakh in a large-cap fund and ₹7.4 lakh in a small-cap fund — this is the performance multiplier potential of an average small-cap fund.

So, where is the catch to this high-return route to investing? Small caps are extremely volatile and can yo-yo wildly one year to the next. We can see the volatility in the swings in the value year on year in the small-cap index. Good years are usually followed by bad years in an extremely volatile way as the category goes from best performing in all asset classes to the worst performing in the short period of just a few months. An investor in the S&P BSE Small Cap index with ₹1 lakh in 2006 would have seen the money almost double to ₹1.9 lakh in 2007 and then crash to ₹54,300 in 2008. When investors see the small caps running up, as they have in the past year with some funds giving over 70% returns in a year, they tend to rush in. But then the sentiment turns and they make losses. Every few years, this cycle repeats, the old investors who burnt their hands stay away and a fresh crop enters with their money and a deep, driving desire to make quick money.

So, should retail investors stay away from this risky asset category? I believe that small-cap funds have a place in an average retail portfolio, but with some protections in place. Investors need two seat-belts to keep them strapped into safety.

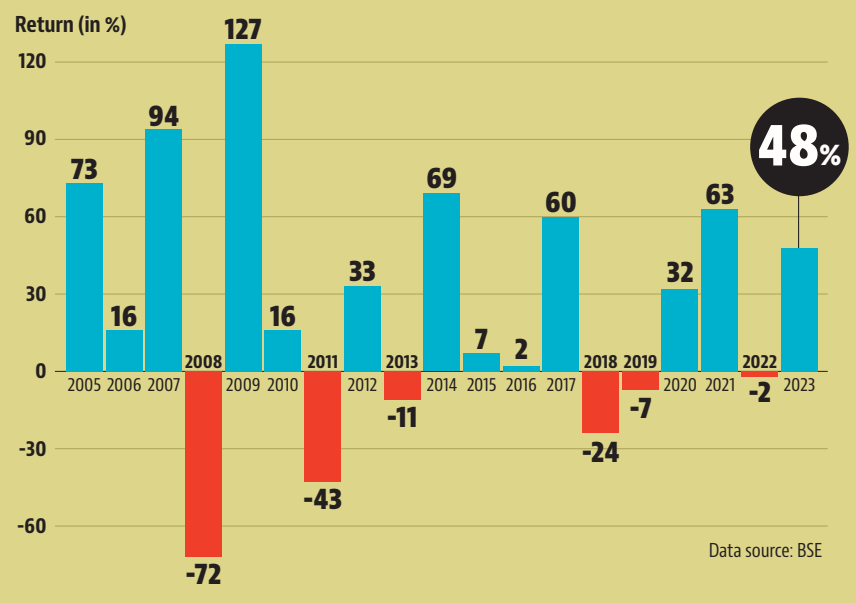
The first seat-belt is using an allocation route. This means that investors must plan to always have small caps in their portfolios and not just when the markets have froth in them. The error most retail investors make is to rush in with all their equity money into small caps after they have seen the huge past returns. A



Monika Halan

## Beware small-cap volatility

Small caps are extremely volatile and can yo-yo wildly one year to the next. We can see the volatility in the swings in the value year on year in the small-cap index



more mature way to get the upside of small caps while keeping risk contained is to follow the allocation route — investors decide what part of their equity portfolio can be invested in risky small caps that have the potential for high growth. A standard equity allocation can have a 50% allocation to large caps, and a quarter each to mid- and small-caps. This can vary according to the risk appetite of each investor. Investors with a lower risk appetite can reduce the small-cap allocation.

Once the allocation is fixed, it is time for the second seat-belt. Investors must rebalance portfolios as allocations change due to a market run-up or down. For example, if there was a 25% allocation to small cap at the start of last year, by December, this allocation would have

gone up to 30% or more depending on what was held in the portfolio. Without doing anything, investors saw the allocation change due to the upswing in small caps. When this happens, it is time to rebalance the portfolio to the target allocation of 25% (or whatever the desired number is). This would mean selling when the small caps are on fire. It is emotionally difficult to sell at that point, but the seat-belt's role is to remind investors to be safe. This process must reverse when small caps go into a free fall. If the allocation falls below the desired number, investors must buy more. The cues to buying and selling come from the asset allocation and not some tipster in the market.

Following this route to sensible investing allows investors to harvest some gains that the small-cap category has to offer. Of course, new investors will do well to note that equity investing needs at least seven to 10 years of patient investing rather than a buy-and-sell approach. India has seen good equity markets for the past few years and a new crop of investors have not yet seen a bear market. They exist and investors must take care to have liquidity in fixed deposits and debt funds at all times in their portfolio.

Monika Halan is the author of the best-selling book *Let's Talk Money*. The views expressed are personal.

## A spark on screen from the Quit India firestorm

A few of us based in Delhi used to organise an annual programme in memory of Allah Baksh, under the auspices of the Samajwadi Manch. The first programme was organised in Queen's Park in 1995 or 1996. The choice of the venue was deliberate. In 1940, when the Muslim League passed its Pakistan Resolution, Allah Baksh — then the premier of Sindh province — organised an anti-partition conference in Queen's Park. Allah Baksh was not a Congressman but the leader of the United Party, and a true supporter of Indian nationalism. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad had praised Baksh's conference in India Wins Freedom.

The Quit India Movement began in August 1942, and then British prime minister Winston Churchill delivered a speech full of contempt towards the people of India in the British Parliament on September 10. Allah Baksh returned all the honours the British Raj had bestowed upon him, writing a protest letter to Churchill. On October 16, he was removed as premier despite having the majority in the assembly and was assassinated on May 14, 1943.

It was to celebrate this remarkable person's life that we invited Gandhian freedom fighter Usha Mehta as the chief guest. I had the opportunity to sit and talk with her for about two hours. When I came to know that the recently released film *Ae Watan Mere Watan* is based on Mehta's life, I knew I had to watch it. I will dis-

miss the film in its historical context.

First, the title of the film is written in Persian (Urdu) script along with Nagari (Hindi) and Roman (English) scripts. These days, the tradition of writing titles in Urdu has been all but abandoned. The beautiful Hindustani language of Hindi films and songs has also been on the decline.

Second, Mehta and the other characters in the movie have not been reanimated in cinema to serve any propaganda. Their portrayals are free from the hyperbolic nationalism currently prevalent in the country — a good Gandhian message.

Usha was the daughter of Hari-prasad Mehta, a judge in the Raj. Trapped in a conflict between patriotism and paternal love, she dedicated herself to patriotism. In the film, it seems as if she is in competition with her close friend and staunch Lohiaite, Fahad, when it comes to patriotism. Usha, a 22-year-old student, also wants to take her love affair with Kaushik to a higher level of patriotism. Her aunt also adopts the Quit India movement mantra of "do or die" after observing her commitment and that of her companions. Overwhelmed by Usha's sacrifice and fame, her father also starts to admire her.

Usha, Firdous Engineer, Fahad and Kaushik undertake the extremely risky task of broadcasting underground, through what is named Congress Radio, for about three months. Congress Radio becomes a phenomenon within the



Congress Radio became a phenomenon within the first few days. Ram Manohar Lohia also joined the young broadcasters.

HT ARCHIVE

first few days. Ram Manohar Lohia joins the young broadcasters.

The broadcasting is done in Hindustani and English from different places in Bombay to avoid the police. Influenced by Gandhi since childhood, Usha has faith in non-violent resistance to injustice. But she does not shy away from taking risks or making sacrifices. She has been portrayed as a fearless and true Gandhian in the film. One day, she asks Lohia if they are moving away from Gandhiji's path of non-violence? Lohia's "philosophical" reply does not satisfy her, but she keeps mum.

Usha makes the last important broadcast of Congress Radio — Lohia's recorded speech in which he issues a *Bharat roko* call, i.e., "bring everything to a halt". Usha is arrested in the final moments of the broadcast. The police ask her about Lohia's hideout. Despite police atrocities, she does not provide any information.

Third, the film's team knows its focus and

range very well. As the gateway to Independence, the Quit India Movement is an epic event in the history of the Indian freedom struggle. It has many complex aspects at the national and international level. Doing justice to all of them is possible only in an epic artwork. The film knows it must depict only one spark of the epic event. That spark is Usha Mehta and her young comrades, Gandhi and Lohia appear in the film. But the film belongs to the young revolutionaries, though Congress Radio emerges as an independent character. But being Usha's brainchild, it becomes an extension of her personality.

Fourth, an objective history of the Quit India Movement has not been written so far. The movement had been a subject of controversy within the Congress itself since the days of preparations were mounted for it. When the call was given from Gowalia Tank Maidan on August 8, it wasn't just the British that were active in suppressing the movement. There were indigenous political groups that even spied on the revolutionaries for the British. These elements though are not mentioned in the film.

Fifth, and most importantly, I felt that the film conveys the basic message of the epic event of the Quit India Movement through the portrayal of a spark. In Lohia's words, it was "an explosion of Indians' will to freedom" and it is even more remarkable that a young woman has become the medium of this message. It is pleasantly surprising that *kujat gandhivadi* (heretic Gandhian) Lohia has been given so much space in mainstream cinema for the first time.

Prem Singh is a former teacher at Delhi University and a fellow of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. The views expressed are personal.

## When space shrinks for writing on the arts

The ongoing controversy about the Madras Music Academy's decision to confer its Sangeetha Kalanidhi honour upon eminent Carnatic vocalist TM Krishna has been widely discussed in the media. Such discussions and debates enervate the public sphere and create awareness. Perhaps this will also lead to finding a new audience for all artists involved in this debate. Not all readers or consumers of media are initiated into the classical arts. Some may thus attempt to look up the artists (and their work) embroiled in the ongoing debate and also educate themselves about their music and points of view. Having said that, I wonder if the controversy is the only occasion when the mainstream media



Kunal Ray

is reminded about the classical arts?

The classical arts should be debated and critiqued just like any other form of art-making or socio-cultural enterprise, but why should a controversy be the only harbinger of such a conversation? The classical arts do not exist in a vacuum. Their history, adaptability, issues of hierarchy, inclusion, or the lack of it, must be widely discussed to create an informed and engaged audience. Tradition, after all, is not static but constantly evolving with time.

Writing on and about the arts has been the biggest casualty in the post-Covid times. Several publications and media outlets have either trimmed their arts pages or completely disbanded such sections. Some

moved their art writing entirely online thereby depriving those who read the print edition of such reportage. Increasingly, film-based writing or reporting has come to subsume all forms of art writing. There is very little space for independent writing on the non-film related arts in India. Sadly, arts writing has been reduced to an occasional feature, and almost only when an artist receives an award, or her/his centenary is being observed or some such big occasion. The writing is mostly adulatory or biographical, devoid of any critical vocabulary. Concert reviews, the few that appear, are summaries of the performance at best with glib adjectives such as amazing and interesting neither of which helps to understand the presentation or the artist. There is little or no discussion about form, structure or aesthetics which are key to understanding an art form or contemporary work which may have been derived or based on the classical.

Even in such cases when a reportage-based feature appears in the media, a tiny selection of artists tends to dominate. It is not the artists' fault, of course. Artists cannot be held responsible for their popularity. We

also know that popularity and quality of the art presented are not necessarily coterminous.

The media chooses to focus on popular artists because there is an audience interest to know more about their favourite musician or dancer. But the media has another role too — to search for other practitioners across class, caste and gender who may not necessarily be mainstream and platform their stories. This could help to encourage diversity both through profiling artists and presenting their work.

The visual arts still get some attention, but lest we forget, there is big money involved there. What about theatre? For a director or play to be featured, does it need to win an award? Controversies do not sustain an art form or help popularise it. Nor do the works of a select few artists. It can only happen when there is a thriving ecosystem of healthy dialogue and debate in and around the arts.

Kunal Ray teaches literary & cultural studies at FLAME University, Pune. The views expressed are personal.

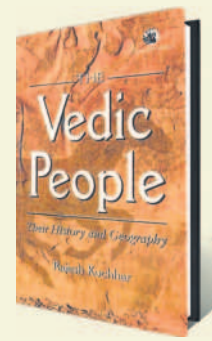
### { EDITOR'S PICK }

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

## REVISITING THE ARYAN MIGRATION DEBATE

The spotlight is back on the Aryan Migration Theory, which posits an influx of European or Central Asian "Aryans" into the subcontinent who displaced the pre-Vedic indigenous people of the Indus Valley Civilisation. The National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) has revised Class 12 history textbooks to deny the theory, citing 2018 studies of DNA samples from an excavation site in Rakhigarhi, Haryana. The findings of the studies, though, have sparked off a corollary debate on how they should be interpreted.

Against this backdrop, it would amply repay reading Rajesh Kochhar's *The Vedic People: Their History and Geography*. Kochhar, an astrophysicist trained in mathematics and physics at Panjab University, dissects evidence from a range of disciplines, from archaeology to natural history to astronomy, to place the Vedas and, by extension, the Vedic people in specific loci in history and geography.



The Vedic People: Their History and Geography: Rajesh Kochhar Year: 2000





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**EVERYDAY ECONOMICS**

**EXPLAINED ECONOMICS**

**YOU CAN FILE ITR NOW — BUT PERHAPS YOU SHOULD WAIT. HERE'S WHY**

**ANCHAL MAGAZINE**  
 NEW DELHI, APRIL 5

AROUND 23,000 taxpayers filed their income tax returns (ITR) in the first three days of Assessment Year (AY) 2024-25 (FY23-24) after the Income-tax Department for the first time opened return filing utilities on its portal from the first day of the assessment year, that is, April 1, 2024.

Last year (for AY 23-24 or FY 22-23), even though the returns had been notified early, they became available for filing on the IT portal only in May.

Filing functionalities were available from May 20, 2023 for salaried individuals (ITR-1) and individuals, HUFs, and partnership firms generating an income from a business or profession (ITR-4). The filing utility for individuals and HUFs having income other than income from profits and gains from business or profession was available from May 30 (ITR-2).

**For this year, who can now file ITRs?**

The I-T Department, which functions under the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), has operationalised the filing functionalities for some. Returns can be filed on the department's website. "The ITR functionalities i.e. ITR-1, ITR-2 and ITR-4, commonly used by taxpayers, are available on the e-filing portal from 1st April, 2024 onwards... Companies will also be able to file their ITRs through ITR-6 from April 1 onwards," the Department said in a statement on Thursday. The facility to file ITRs 3, 5, and 7 will be made available shortly.

The Department said this is for the first time in recent years that taxpayers are able to file their returns on the first day of the new financial year. "This is another giant step towards ease of compliance and seamless taxpayer services," it said.

**Should you file returns immediately?**

According to tax department data, as of April 3, 22,599 returns had been filed for AY2024-25. Of these, 20,868 returns have been verified for AY2024-25, and 2,907 verified ITRs have been processed.



**Almost 3,000 ITRs have already been processed.** File

However, tax experts pointed out that the Annual Information Statement (AIS) and Form 26AS are not updated until March 31, 2024, the last day of the last financial year. They said it may be better to wait for the AIS and Form 26AS to be generated before finalising tax returns to avoid discrepancies in filings later.

**What are the AIS and Form 26AS?**

The Annual Information Statement is a summary of a taxpayer's financial transactions given in Form 26AS, which contains details of all Tax Deducted or Collected at Source (TDS/TCS) along with other details regarding interest, dividend, and stock market and mutual fund transactions.

While filing the income tax return, the detailed summary through AIS and Form 26AS is available to the taxpayer, who can either accept it as correct, or point out discrepancies, if any.

**But why is this information delayed?**

Since AIS includes details of financial transactions from reporting entities, the information will be available only after it gets updated from reporting entities such as banks and financial institutions. Similarly, Form 26AS gets updated after the income tax department processes the TDS returns.

Since the last date for filing TDS returns for the January-March quarter is May 31, the updated information is available only in the first week of June. This is the reason experts have flagged that filing returns without verifying AIS/Form 26AS may result in errors, and lead to notices for incorrect reporting of income.

**AGGAM WALIA & SUKALP SHARMA**  
 NEW DELHI, APRIL 5

THE MINISTRY of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) has announced a Rs-496-crore (until 2025-26) scheme to support pilot projects that either test the viability of green hydrogen as a vehicle fuel or develop secure supporting infrastructure such as refuelling stations.

Big Indian commercial vehicle manufacturers such as Tata Motors, Volvo Eicher, and Ashok Leyland are doubling down on efforts to develop hydrogen-powered trucks and buses by ramping up research and development, and building manufacturing capacities.

Indian energy companies too are trying to scale up production of green hydrogen and bring down costs to make it affordable enough to compete with other fuels.

Hydrogen is expected to be used widely in the transportation sector in the coming years, and as a large and growing market for both vehicles and energy, India stands to gain significantly from the large-scale adoption of green hydrogen as vehicular fuel.

Green hydrogen promises significant reductions of emissions to help slow global warming and climate change. India sees advantages ranging from curbing pollution and meeting its climate goals to reducing costly fossil fuel imports, as well as a business opportunity to become a global hub for the production and export of green hydrogen.

**Green and grey hydrogen**

Hydrogen is colourless, and green hydrogen is 'green' only by virtue of the way it is produced, and the source of the energy used to manufacture it. Green hydrogen refers to hydrogen that is produced from the electrolysis of water — splitting it into hydrogen and oxygen — using an electrolyser powered by renewable energy. This is considered to be a virtually emission-free pathway for hydrogen production — it is 'end-to-end' green because it is powered by green energy, uses water as feedstock, and emits no carbon on consumption.

Currently, most hydrogen produced for industrial consumption and applications is 'grey' hydrogen, which is produced from natural gas through energy-intensive processes, and has high carbon emissions. Except for a difference in the production pathway and emissions, green hydrogen is essentially the same as grey — or hydrogen categorised by any other colour.

**Transport sector scheme**

The major objectives of the MNRE



**An October 2020 file photo of a hydrogen fuel pump in Torrance, California. Shell has now shut its hydrogen refuelling stations for cars in the state.** The New York Times

**THE COLOURS OF HYDROGEN**

**GREY** hydrogen constitutes the bulk of India's production currently. It is extracted from hydrocarbons (fossil fuels and natural gas), and carbon dioxide is the byproduct of consumption.

**BLUE** hydrogen is also sourced from fossil fuels, but byproducts such as

carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide are captured and stored, so it is better than grey hydrogen.

**GREEN HYDROGEN** is an 'end-to-end' green fuel. Electricity generated from renewable sources such as wind or solar is used to electrolyse water. Byproducts are water or water vapour.

scheme, guidelines for which were issued in February, include (i) validation of technical feasibility and performance of green hydrogen as a transportation fuel, (ii) evaluation of the economic viability of green hydrogen-powered vehicles, and (iii) demonstration of safe operation of hydrogen-powered vehicles and refuelling stations.

The Ministry of Road Transport & Highways will appoint a scheme implementation agency that will invite proposals for pilot projects. The selected company or consortium will be the project's executing agency.

Based on the recommendation of a Project Appraisal Committee, the MNRE will approve viability gap funding (VGF) for the project. The VGF amount will be finalised after considering "specific needs, merits, and feasibility of each project". The executing agency will be required to complete the pilot project within two years.

**Hydrogen fuel cell vehicles**

A hydrogen internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicle utilises hydrogen through combustion — which is similar to cars running on diesel and petrol, except there are no carbon emissions.

A hydrogen fuel cell electric vehicle (FCEV) utilises hydrogen electrochemically by converting hydrogen stored in a high-pressure tank into electricity, leaving water as the byproduct. Even though hydrogen ICE vehicles do not emit carbon, research suggests that burning hydrogen is far less energy efficient than converting it into electricity in a fuel cell.

Compared to battery electric vehicles (BEVs), in which the battery is the heaviest part, hydrogen FCEVs are typically much lighter because hydrogen is a light element, and a fuel cell stack weighs lesser than an electric vehicle (EV) battery.

This makes hydrogen fuel cell technology a viable alternative to EV battery technology, especially for heavy-duty trucks that can benefit from an increased payload capacity — without coughing clouds of smoke from burning diesel.

Indeed, research shows that long-haul FCEVs can carry freight amounts similar to diesel trucks, whereas long-haul BEVs have a weight penalty of up to 25% due to heavier batteries. Given the need to cut carbon emissions in the transportation sector while ensuring there is no loss in revenue-generating payload capacity, green hydrogen holds promise.

**A number of challenges**

There are significant challenges to the large-scale use of green hydrogen in the transportation sector. The foremost among these is the prohibitive cost of production, followed by challenges of storage and transportation at scale. With more innovation in technology and scaling-up of production though, costs are likely to come down in a few years.

Green hydrogen-powered vehicles are not yet seen as a suitable alternative to four-wheel BEVs due to challenges arising from fuel costs and building supporting infrastructure. Shell, a pioneer in hydrogen refuelling technology, last month announced it was shutting all its hydrogen refuelling stations for cars in California due to "supply complications and other external market factors". Hydrogen filling stations for heavy-duty vehicles, however, continue to remain operational there.

For hydrogen FCEVs to compete with BEVs, green hydrogen needs to cost between \$3 and \$6.5 per kilogram by 2030. For perspective, retail green hydrogen prices in California touched \$30 per kilogram in 2023. Also, the California Transportation Commission estimates that building a hydrogen truck fuelling station costs up to 72% more than the cost of building a battery electric truck fuelling station.

The MNRE plans to convene a meeting with stakeholders to discuss the development of specialised cylinders to store green hydrogen after manufacturers of commercial vehicles flagged challenges related to high-pressure storage cylinders.

Currently, most cylinders manufactured in India are designed to carry compressed natural gas (CNG). But hydrogen is stored at a much higher pressure, and CNG cylinders cannot carry hydrogen. For cylinders to carry a high mass of hydrogen, the carbon fibre needs to be stronger, which makes high-pressure hydrogen cylinders expensive. This is a key barrier to the adoption of hydrogen as a transport fuel. For the same reason, the existing natural gas pipeline infrastructure is also not seen as viable.

Hydrogen is extremely flammable, which means that special care would be needed in handling the fuel at retail stations compared to diesel, petrol, or even CNG. Robust and fool-proof handling and safety standards need to be developed before pushing large-scale adoption.

Finally, as advancements in battery technologies continue to reduce the overall weight of EV batteries, the long-term viability of green hydrogen-powered heavy duty commercial vehicles could also come under pressure.

**Smell in self-identification: What research on snake species shows**

RESEARCHERS HAVE found that garter snakes — a common name for small- and medium-sized reptiles that are found across North and Central America — can distinguish themselves from one another using scent, not sight.

Researchers administered an olfactory version of the traditional mirror test — which checks if an animal can recognise itself on a reflective surface — on two different snake species: the highly social North American eastern garter, and the more solitary African ball python. Self-identification has long been viewed as a proxy for more sophisticated intelligence.

Oils on snake skins leave a scent trail, like in humans. Researchers rubbed make-up removal pads on both species to collect scent samples, some of which they doctored with olive oil. They then placed the pads at either ends of boxes, and offered the snakes choices: between their own odour and olive oil; their own odour modified with olive oil; and modified or unmodified odours of other snakes of the same species.

While the ball pythons showed no apparent distinction, the garter snakes zeroed in on their own tampered smell and ignored variations of the other snakes' smells.



**PAPER CLIP**  
 NEW RESEARCH

THE NEW YORK TIMES

**ANONNA DUTT**  
 NEW DELHI, APRIL 5

VAPING AT any point in life can increase the risk of heart failure by up to 19%, according to a new study published by the American College of Cardiology. Heart failure is a condition where the muscles of the heart either stiffen or become weak and are unable to pump blood properly.

"Nicotine in the vaping solution increases heart rate and blood pressure, stressing your heart with long use. It constricts your blood vessels, makes them less flexible and stiffens them up as in fibrosis," Dr Nishith Chandra of Fortis Escorts Heart Institute in Delhi said.

While India is one of the few countries to have banned the manufacture, import, and sale of e-cigarettes, the products continue to be available in the grey market. Around 23% of people in India reported using e-cigarettes,

with 8% using them daily, according to a survey published last year in the journal *Preventive Medicine Reports*. The Global Adult Tobacco Survey pegs the number of current e-cigarette users at 0.02% of the population.

**Vapes, e-cigarettes**

Vapes or e-cigarettes electronically heat a solution of glycerine, flavours, and nicotine, the addictive substance in cigarettes. While people use cigarettes for the nicotine hit, it is the tar from smoking that is harmful. This is the reason e-cigarettes, which don't contain tar, were pushed as an aid for smoking cessation.

There is, however, not enough data to show that the use of e-cigarettes actually helps to quit smoking; users often end up smoking both cigarettes and vapes. Also, the different flavours in vapes may tempt even non-smokers. US data show that e-cigarettes

are the most commonly used tobacco product among students.

**What the study says**

The study scanned 1.7 lakh people and followed them for 45 months. Of them, 3,242 suffered heart failure. The results showed that those who used e-cigarettes at any point were 19% more likely to suffer heart failure compared to non-users.

Researchers also accounted for a history of smoking and other risk factors.

"The difference we saw was substantial. It's worth considering the consequences to your health, especially with regard to heart health. More and more studies are linking e-cigarettes to harmful effects and finding that it might not be as safe as previously thought," Yakubu Bene-Alhasan, lead author of the study and the resident physician at MedStar Health in Baltimore, said in a statement.

The researchers found that vaping increased the odds of a particular type of heart failure called heart failure with preserved ejection fraction (HFpEF) — a condition in which the heart muscles become stiff and the heart does not properly fill between contractions. "The heart doesn't relax between beats. Daily use damages the lining of blood vessels, restricts the development of new blood vessels and stokes inflammation. This increases the risk of both heart attacks and strokes," Dr Chandra said.

**Other dangers from vapes**

The nicotine in e-cigarettes may be a source of addiction instead of an aid in quitting regular cigarettes. Accidental exposure to the liquid could cause acute nicotine poisoning.

With no standardisation of the liquid used, many vapes release chemicals that cause lung disease, and contain cancer-causing compounds and heavy metals.



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**Bengaluru and Cape Town: A tale of two cities hit by water scarcity**

**SANATH K PRASAD**  
 BENGALURU, APRIL 5

WITH BENGALURU facing severe water shortage, many have compared the city's predicament to Cape Town's in 2015-18.

Dr TV Ramachandra, Coordinator, Energy and Wetlands Research Group in Bengaluru's Indian Institute of Science, was asked about this comparison in a recent interview with *The Indian Express*. He noted that if the city continues to "mismanage" its water supply, it can soon face a situation worse than South Africa's legislative capital a few years ago.

**The Cape Town water crisis**

Cape Town faced a serious water shortage between 2015 and 2018, which peaked around 2017. It was characterised by critically low levels of water in the city's reservoirs, threatening to completely exhaust the city's water supply, and forcing authorities to implement strict water-rationing measures.

The scarcity was such that the prospect of "Day Zero" — the day when municipal

authorities would effectively cut water supply due to empty reserves, and residents would have to queue up for a daily ration of water — defined life in the city. This would have made Cape Town the first major city in the world to "run out" of water.

The crisis was caused by a prolonged period of below-average rainfall, resulting in a drought across the Western Cape. This resulted in the water levels in Cape Town's reservoirs dropping significantly. A rapidly growing population, unplanned urbanisation, and inefficient water-use practices further strained the city's water supply.

Fortunately, by September 2018 the scarcity had started to ease, and by 2020, things were back to normal.

**Low rainfall a key reason**

The crisis in Bengaluru is caused by scanty rainfall in the Cauvery basin — which accounts for 60% of the city's water supply — and the depletion of its groundwater reserves. Like in Cape Town, Bengaluru's water reservoirs have fallen to critically low levels due to this. For example, at the peak of



**Residents collect water from a tanker in Bengaluru last month. PTI** In 2018, scenes of people queueing up before springs in Cape Town were common. Reuters



the crisis, Cape Town's Theewaterskloof Dam, the single largest source of water in the city, was filled to only 11.3% of its capacity. Currently, Bengaluru's KRS Dam is filled to under 28% of its capacity.

According to Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar, of the city's 13,900 public borewells, 6,900 have gone dry. Areas like Varthur, Marathahalli,

Bellandur, Byrathi, Hoodi, Whitefield, and Kadugodi are completely dependent on water tankers to meet daily water needs.

**Urbanisation also to blame**

Beyond low rainfall, rapid, unplanned urbanisation has played a significant role in the crisis in both Cape Town and Bengaluru. In Cape Town, as the city expanded, exist-

ing water infrastructure (reservoirs, pipelines and treatment plants) struggled to keep up with demand. This strain then resulted in leaks and other problems, and led to inefficient water use. Moreover, as concrete covered increasing swaths of land, groundwater levels fell drastically, with replenishment not keeping up with consumption.

Bengaluru too has seen something similar. In the 1800s, the city had 1,452 water bodies, with roughly 80% of its area covered in greenery. Now, only 193 water bodies remain, and green cover is below 4%.

This is especially bad for East Bengaluru, which is dependent on groundwater. With tech parks, gated communities, and high-rise apartments covering the once green stretch of land, simply not enough water is percolating underground.

**Drastic impact on daily lives**

Water scarcity has drastically impacted the daily lives of citizens in Bengaluru, like it did in Cape Town. Restrictions have been imposed on water usage.

At the peak of Cape Town's water crisis, citizens were allowed to use no more than 50 litres of water daily. The use of drinking

water to wash vehicles, hose down paved areas, fill up private swimming pools, and water gardens was also declared illegal.

The Bengaluru Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) has brought in similar rules, banning the use of potable water for washing cars, gardening, swimming pools, construction activities, road maintenance, entertainment, etc. The board has announced a penalty of Rs 5,000 for violators.

Like in Cape Town, Bengaluru's poor are the worst hit in the crisis, with increased health risks arising due to the lack of water for sanitation and hygiene purposes. Images of residents queuing up to collect water from public taps and tankers have dominated news in Bengaluru this year, just as they had during the Cape Town crisis.

**Not a crisis, say authorities**

BWSSB chairman Ram Prasath Manohar, however, said that Bengaluru is only facing a shortage of water, not a "crisis". He said the situation would improve in the "next 15 days". Measures have been taken to conserve water and reduce wastage, and only treated water is being used in construction, he said.



The Indian EXPRESS

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# Waiting for summer

Fear of inflation keeps RBI from cutting rates. Poor monsoon, oil prices could throw spanner in works



DHARMAKIRTI JOSHI

## HOLDING THE RATE

Greater clarity over monsoon and trajectory of food inflation could create space for RBI to cut rates

IN ITS FIRST meeting of this financial year, the Monetary Policy Committee of the Reserve Bank of India voted to maintain the status quo. The repo rate remains at 6.5 per cent. Alongside, the committee retained its policy stance, deciding to remain focused on the withdrawal of accommodation. This was expected, as even though core inflation had fallen to 3.4 per cent in February, food prices were elevated. Moreover, the outlook for food inflation remains uncertain. RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said that the committee needs to be watchful for the upside risks that “might derail the path of disinflation” and that policy must remain “actively disinflationary to ensure anchoring of inflation expectations”.

Recent data has shown that food inflation has continued to inch upwards. The consumer food price index edged up to 8.66 per cent in February, up from 8.3 per cent in January. Inflation remained elevated in cereals, eggs, vegetables, pulses and spices. However, there are expectations of rains being better this year, which augurs well for food inflation. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration expects La Niña conditions to develop, which bode well for the southwest monsoon, according to a note by Crisil. More clarity will emerge in the coming months. As of now, the RBI expects inflation to average slightly above its target this year. On the growth front, the central bank has retained its estimate of GDP growth at 7 per cent for 2024-25. This healthy growth momentum has provided the committee the space to focus on price stability. While uncertainty continues over both private consumption and investment, the central bank appears to be optimistic. It notes that “private consumption should gain steam with further pick-up in rural activity and steady urban demand”, and that “prospects of fixed investment remain bright... signs of upturn in the private capex cycle”.

The decision of the committee was, however, not unanimous. MPC member Jayanth Varma voted to reduce the repo rate by 25 basis points, and to change the policy stance to neutral. Varma has in the past argued that the real interest rate may now be restrictive. In the April policy, the RBI has projected inflation at 4.5 per cent in 2024-25. Considering that the repo rate is at 6.5 per cent, this implies a real rate of 2 per cent. In comparison, Varma has argued in the past that a real rate of 1-1.5 per cent would suffice to guide inflation to the RBI's target of 4 per cent, implying the space to cut rates. The US Federal Reserve is also expected to cut rates in the coming months. As more clarity and certainty emerges over the monsoon and the trajectory of food prices in the country, it is possible that the space to cut interest rates will emerge.

THE RESERVE BANK of India's (RBI) non-action on April 5 was par for the course. With growth stronger than expected and inflation above target, the market expected the RBI to stay put on rate action as well as its stance.

The second advance GDP estimate released in February had shown the economy ticked at over 8 per cent in the first three quarters, lifting the fiscal's growth to 7.6 per cent. High-frequency data shows the momentum has continued into the fourth quarter. The composite Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) for March at 61.8 was in a very strong expansion zone. Direct and indirect tax collections have exceeded targets with the solid performance continuing in March. This highlights the resilience of non-farm sectors, particularly construction, manufacturing and financial services. Agricultural growth, though, was an anaemic 0.7 per cent in 2023-24.

Viewed from the expenditure side, GDP growth has been largely investment-driven with private consumption growth trailing GDP. That said, private consumption, vital for balanced and sustainable growth, will remain a key monitorable.

CRISIL expects India's GDP growth to moderate to 6.8 per cent in the current year. The transmission of the RBI-effected rate hikes between May 2022 and February 2023 is underway and is likely to modestly weigh on demand in 2024-25. Regulatory actions to tame unsecured lending will also have a bearing on credit growth. Additionally, a lower fiscal deficit will mean a lower fiscal push to growth. Despite the expectation that growth and inflation would moderate in 2024-45, the RBI has been wary of declaring an early victory. Governor Shaktikanta Das noted that the last leg of disinflation has proved to be a difficult one across the world. “Strong growth prospects provide the RBI policy space to remain focused on inflation and ensure its descent to the target of 4 per cent,” he said.

Mint Road retained its February forecast of 7 per cent GDP growth in 2024-25, marginally higher than CRISIL's expectation. Inflation is projected to drop to 4.5 per cent assuming a spell of normal monsoon and

range-bound crude oil prices.

The India Meteorological Department believes that the El Niño's impact will fade by the second half of the year and La Niña conditions, associated with abundant rains will set in. This will help cool food prices, which has been the key worry. Food inflation has averaged 7.4 per cent in the first 11 months of this year, whereas non-food inflation was only 4.1 per cent.

The latest print for February showed food and non-food inflation were at 8.7 per cent and 2.9 per cent respectively. Core inflation, computed after removing food and fuel from the headline inflation, was at a benign 52-week low of 3.4 per cent. Within food, food-grain inflation softened somewhat, but vegetables inflation has stayed high and volatile, flaring up to 30.2 per cent in February from 27.1 per cent in January.

The RBI can generally look through vegetable inflation since it is volatile. Moreover, vegetables have short crop cycles and their prices correct fairly quickly. However, vegetable price shocks have been quite persistent this time, keeping inflation in this category high. The bigger worry has been foodgrain inflation which, despite softening, was still at a high of 9.8 per cent in February. While central bank policy moves cannot bring down supply shock-driven food inflation, it can prevent high prices from travelling to non-food inflation. Especially when growth is high and food inflation persistent, as in India.

Another worry stemming from food inflation is that it hurts the lower income deciles more than the upper ones. Our calculations show in February, the bottom 20 per cent of the urban population faced 5.5 per cent inflation compared with 4.7 per cent faced by the top 20 per cent since food has a higher weight in their consumption basket. The pattern in rural areas was similar. This should correct with softening of food inflation in 2024-25.

High food inflation is likely to have contributed to weak consumption demand since it erodes discretionary spending of households. The government's free foodgrain programme does provide a cushion to low-income households, but an overall reduction in

food inflation will bring bigger relief. Expectation of normal monsoons, healthy agriculture and lower food inflation will be positive for rural consumption this fiscal.

After food, let's turn to fuel. In our base case scenario, we do not expect any significant risk to fuel inflation since crude prices will likely be \$80-85 per barrel in 2024-25. However, the recent surge in crude prices in an uncertain geopolitical setting does raise some concern.

The Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank have not been in a hurry to cut rates since headline and core inflation remain high despite the softening trend. In its March meeting, the Fed hinted it would cut interest rates in the coming months. S&P Global believes inflation will likely remain above the Fed's target of 2 per cent through 2024 reflecting persistently higher service price inflation, even as goods prices ease modestly. We expect the Fed and ECB to initiate rate cuts in June.

To be sure, India's monetary policy decisions are based more on domestic conditions and inflation dynamics than on US rate moves. But in an interconnected world, rate cuts by systemically important central banks do nudge rates cuts in emerging markets. S&P Global expects Latin American emerging market central banks that have already cut rates to continue with the same through this year. Central banks in emerging Asian economies will likely start cutting rates in the second half.

The other good news on the rate front is that fiscal policy is unlikely to come in the way of rate cuts due to improved coordination between fiscal and monetary policy. The interim budget focused on fiscal consolidation by aiming to cut the fiscal deficit to 5.1 per cent of GDP this year. Going by experience, the budget post the elections is unlikely to change the fiscal stance if the current government returns to office. The overall macro environment is turning conducive for central banks to begin cutting rates by the end of summer. For India, though, a poor monsoon, extreme weather events and crude oil prices could throw a spanner in the works.

The writer is Chief Economist, CRISIL Limited

## MANIFESTO & SPEECH

From silence on OPS to promise on bail, Congress makes some right noises in manifesto but campaign is the challenge

OVER THE LAST decade that it has been in the Opposition, the Congress has seemed inarticulate and inconsistent in terms of what it stands for. Having lost its centre of gravity, it has been often pushed and pulled to the extremes. This, as it confronts a sure-footed, organised and ideologically-driven adversary. Now, with elections barely two weeks away, the grand old party's manifesto, or “Nyay Patra”, breaks some of that standstill and the flailing. Compared to the fire-and-brimstone 2019 manifesto, which promised to scrap the sedition law and review AFSPA, this one offers a more nuanced rethink on politics and policy. The “Nyay Patra” promises to relook at laws that hinder free speech and place stringent conditions on bail — the roots of such provisions under the PMLA and the power to censor online speech (first enabled by Section 66A of the IT Act), that are being weaponised by agencies today can be traced back to the UPA government. The manifesto takes a clear position on the Delhi government — the L-G must abide by the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers — and urges full statehood for Jammu & Kashmir. It is, to its credit, silent on the Old Pension Scheme, which has been implemented by Congress governments in states like Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan, where it places a mounting burden on the exchequer. While anti-business signals were read into Rahul Gandhi's posturing on “suit-boot ki sarkar”, the Employment Linked Incentive Scheme in the manifesto acknowledges the imperative of job creation and the private sector's centrality.

A question can be asked of Congress: Why has the pragmatic balance evident in the manifesto been missing from the speeches of its leaders and the party's campaigns, yatras and rallies? The Congress's political messaging has been of three kinds: First, it has played a kind of “me-too” politics in its attempt to take on the BJP. Two, Congress's top leaders — including and especially Rahul Gandhi — have indulged in rhetoric more suited to a college campus than a national party. Think the ill-advised “chowkidar chor hai” campaign or his more recent fires-will-rage warning. The other side of this coin has been the well-meaning but apolitical formulation of “nafrat ke baazaar mein mohabbat ki dukan”. Mostly, Congress has sought to paint an apocalyptic picture of BJP rule and leave it at that, instead of providing an alternative vision of governance and politics.

The election manifesto does make an attempt to fill the gap in the creation of which the Congress has been complicit. But for it to influence the voter, this needed to be the culmination of work — not its inauguration. As a starting point, it has come late. The document shows an ability to formulate innovative policy proposals but the challenge for the party is to translate this text into a campaign language that can persuade — and carry credibility.

## A WELCOME SIGN

In a first, IPL has introduced sign-language commentary. It is only when society doesn't make disability a barrier that it isn't

FREEDOMS MIGHT SPEAK of bitter rivalries, but one of the basic tenets of sports spectatorship is that it gathers everyone along in the heady adrenaline rush that matches inspire. The din in the stadium as Virat Kohli lobs the ball over the boundary line for a six, the collective sigh of despair as a slower delivery from the unheralded Lucknow Super Giants' spinner Manimaran Siddharth lulls him into a misguided shot straight into the hands of Devdutt Padikkal — on Thursday, in a first in India, IPL's fervour got communicated to spectators with auditory or visual disability through real-time sign-language and ball-by-ball descriptive commentaries. It made for a strong statement in a country where disability rights are still at a nascent stage and conversations on inclusivity are guided, more often than not, by ableist parameters.

Over the last few years, sign language assistance services have been a part of accessibility protocols in several international sports. In clubs such as Camp Nou, home of the Barcelona Football Club, Arsenal's home ground Emirates Stadium, or Wembley, home to England's national football team, there are provisions of sign language interpreters to help visitors. In India, where there are approximately 63 million people who suffer from significant auditory impairment according to WHO estimates, equal, uninhibited access to public places and community activities and services remains a challenge. India has seen significant movement on disability rights in recent years, with the question of accessibility gaining prominence across the board. The apex court, too, has initiated a consultation on sensitisation against the use of stereotypes vis a vis persons with disabilities.

While the introduction of sign-language commentary for IPL is significant, larger conversations on equality of opportunity and access await. It requires a reshaping of community attitudes and a recognition of the needs of all persons.



SHUBHRA GUPTA

RETURNING EARLIER THIS week from the first edition of the Cinévesture International Film Festival (CIFF) held in Chandigarh, I began thinking of that thorny query that crops up around such events: What exactly is the point of a film festival where filmmakers, invited delegates, and the *aam janta* rub shoulders over a designated period, watching, chatting, debating, in an era where everything, or almost everything, is available on streaming platforms? Why start a full-fledged film festival at a time when the entire ecosystem which creates, distributes and exhibits “content” is under attack from the enormous convenience of watch parties at your own time and pace?

The answers were, of course, wrapped in my question. Yes, you can crack open your phone, laptop, or TV set and choose from a bewildering array of “content” — yes, that problematic word again. You can start and stop and pause, answer a doorbell, check your phone, and return to whatever you were watching. Or not. But, and this is where everything is, at the sense of community built at a film festival, in a city hungry for a taste of an eclectic slate consisting of buzzy international titles and sharp Indian independent voices, is irreplaceable.

And that's what I found at CIFF, the brainchild of Nina Lath Gupta, who runs Cinévesture, an online market for cinema. One of the advantages of a startup, and this festival feels exactly like one, is the freedom to create the team that will help shape and run it: Festival director V S Kundu who turned around Films Division; artistic director Bina Paul who has had multiple editions of the

## QUALITY, NOT CONTENT

Inaugural film festival in Chandigarh provided springboard for fresh cinematic ideas

International Film Festival of Kerala under her belt; market projects curator Namrata Joshi, seasoned film critic and programmer; children's film curator Monica Wahli, well regarded in this field; as well as Gupta herself with her years of experience as the head of the National Film Development Corporation's (NFDC) Film Bazaar, were all part of it.

I could be there only for the last two days, but that was enough time to see that the event was well-organised and thoughtfully curated. There were panels with prominent film personalities, with a strong focus on producers, a CIFF USP: The most popular sessions, naturally, were the ones topped by Karan Johar, Boman Irani, Suvinder Vicky and Abhay Deol, but so were the ones with Richa Chadha and Ali Fazal, Swanand Kirkire and Hussain Haidry, Rasika Dugal and Rajshri Deshpande, Jaideep Ahlawat, and Roshan Mathew. For me, the most instructive one was on the state of Punjabi cinema, with Anurag Singh, Gurbinder Singh, Smeep Kang and Jagdeep Sidhu as animated discussants — the session, in Punjabi, a perfect match for the place and event, spilled well over time for all the right reasons.

The films on offer included Aki Kaurismäki's *Fallen Leaves* (2023), Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Monster* (2023), Jonathan Glazer's *Zone Of Interest* (2023), Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale* (2022), Anh Hung Tran's *The Taste Of Things* (2023), Ken Loach's *The Old Oak* (2023), Steffi Niederzoll's *Seven Winters In Tehran* (2023), as well as Rima Das's *Tora's Husband* (2022), Jayant Somalkar's *Sthal* (2023), Prasanna Vithanage's *Paradise* (2023), Gurbinder Singh's *Adh Chanani Raat* (2022),

and the South Korean horror smash-hit *Exhuma* as the closing film. There was also a Classics section, featuring Guru Dutt's *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959) and Kundan Shah's *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* (1983).

The selection reminded me of the time when the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), in its old avatar, was a place where we could find the cream of films from around the world, and India. That pre-internet era, considered prehistoric by even those who have faint memories of it, cemented the importance of sound choices: If the films were good, so was your experience. And that really brings me to an event like this, which shows that it wants to use its power to curate wisely and well to elevate good cinema, not to blunt or bend it towards reigning dispensations.

Clearly, CIFF has begun as it means to go, to provide a springboard for fresh cinematic ideas which may flower from connecting with like-minded investors, especially those from outside the industry. What also struck me as a good thing is the catch-em-young workshops with school children and college students — if you want newer audiences which will gravitate towards meaningful cinema, this is one way to go. This is the kind of matchmaking that should, hopefully, save cinema from going down the sinkhole of profit-at-any-cost, story-telling-be-damned projects that keep threatening to swamp us. A viewer that can tell the difference between soul-killing generic “content” and a film/web show/TV series? Yes, please.

shubhra.gupta@expressindia.com

## APRIL 6, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### NSA IN PUNJAB

THE GOVERNMENT HAS issued an ordinance making the National Security Act more stringent in the case of detenus in Punjab. The ordinance was signed by president Zail Singh when the Lok Sabha was discussing the Punjab situation.

### SAARE JAHAN SE ACCHA

“SAARE JAHAN SE Achcha.” This was Sqn Ldr Rakesh Sharma's reply when he was asked by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi how India looked from outer space. In a short six-minute televised conversation, Mrs Gandhi

extended her greetings to Sqn Ldr Rakesh Sharma and his fellow Soviet cosmonauts on their successful flight. Their feat would help India become “space conscious” she said, and inspire the youth of the country.

### WRITERS WIN

AUTHORS DO NOT need the government's permission to get their books published abroad and earn a royalty on them, according to a verdict of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Appellate Board. The verdict came in the case of Arun Bose, a DU teacher who had appealed against an enforcement directorate order penalising him for getting

his two books published in Britain without seeking the government's permission.

### IRAN-IRAQ CONFLICT

IRAN RULED OUT mediation by non-aligned movement to end its prolonged conflict with neighbouring Iraq. Addressing a news conference, the visiting Iranian Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Hossein Sheikh-ul-Islam said there was no question of mediation by the non-aligned to end the war. He said what his country wanted was for India, as the chairman of the movement, to raise the issue of alleged use of chemical weapons by Iraq in the war.





# 11 THE IDEAS PAGE

## Copyright vs AI

As 'The New York Times Co v Microsoft Corp et al' weaves its way through the court system, more such challenges for the law will emerge



**OPENING ARGUMENT**  
BY MENAKA GURUSWAMY

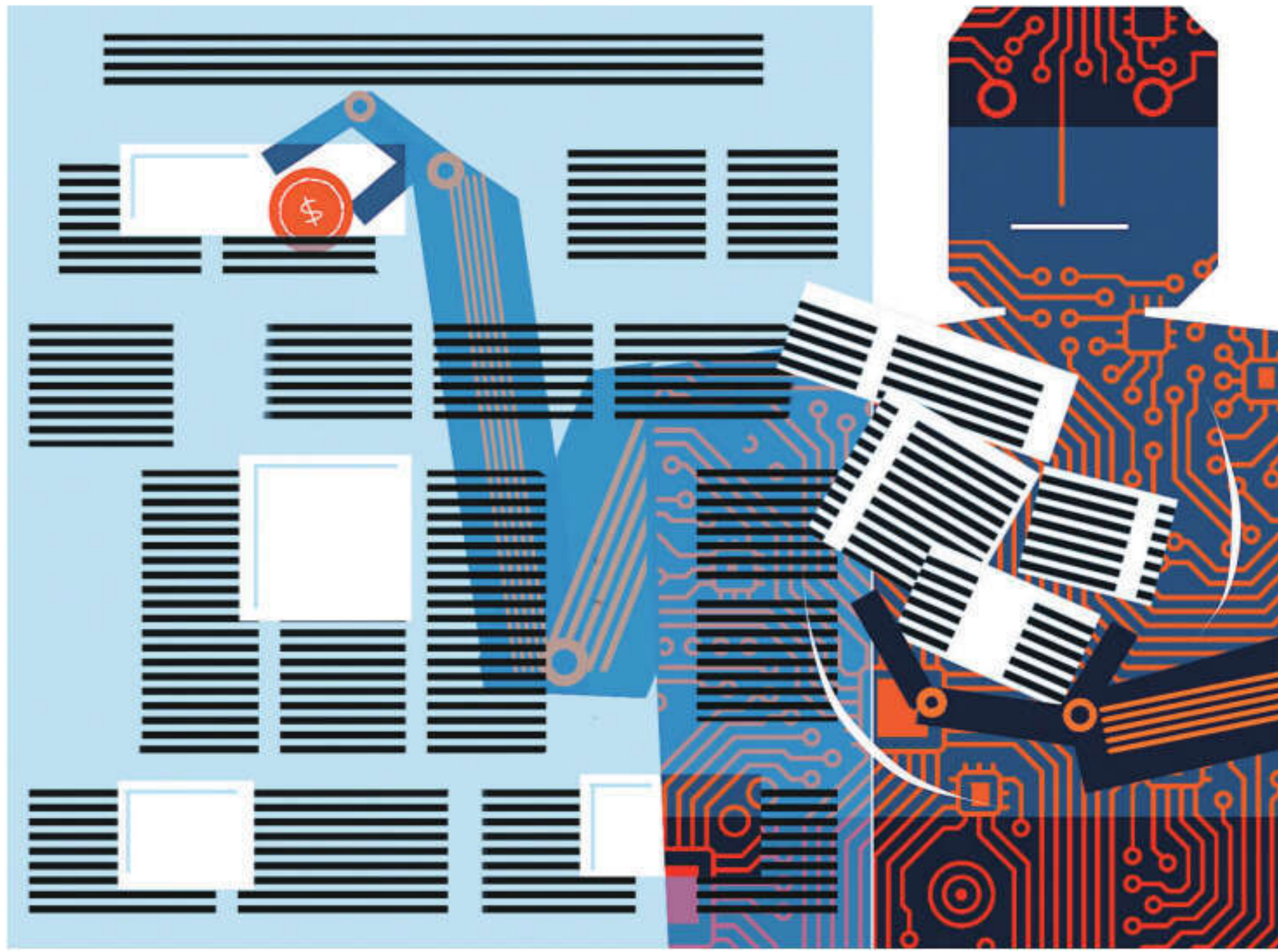
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is reconfiguring our lives and forcing us to question whether only human beings are capable of sophisticated intelligence? After all, AI is passing lawyers' bar exams and other professional tests. It's even performing precise but finite surgical procedures. However, there are some fetters in the AI revolution. And this has come from an unlikely quarter — copyright law. Novelists, newspapers, writers are amongst plaintiffs who have sued various companies using AI alleging that AI "ingests" their work. These plaintiffs from various suits include the popular author John Grisham and *The New York Times*.

The *New York Times* (NYT) in a very high-profile case, in late December 2023 sued OpenAI and Microsoft for copyright infringement. In their petition, the NYT alleges that the "defendants' generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools rely on large-language models ('LLMs') that were built by copying and using millions of *Times* copyrighted news articles, in depth investigations, opinion pieces, reviews, how-to-guides, and more. While the defendants engaged in wide-scale copying from many sources, they gave *Times* content particular emphasis when building their LLMs — revealing a preference that recognises the values of those works."

The NYT in these absolutely delightful pleadings, argues that the Constitution and the Copyright Act recognise the "critical importance of giving creators exclusive rights over their works". The newspaper felt strongly that their copyright was violated by OpenAI and Microsoft and hence they were unable to enjoy the "fruits of their labour and investment." How does the NYT explain this alleged exploitation of their labour? They argue that "powered by LLMs containing copies of *Times* content, Defendants GenAI tools can generate output that recites *Times* content verbatim, closely summarises it, and mimics its expressive style", as demonstrated by scores of examples. "Defendants also use Microsoft's Bing search index, which copies and categorises the *Times* articles that are significantly longer and more detailed than those returned by traditional search engines."

Essentially, the NYT is arguing that the defendants are using its intellectual property without paying for it and enriching themselves. The NYT links this use of its intellectual property protected work to the growth in Microsoft's valuation to a trillion dollars, and OpenAI's ChatGPT's valuation of \$90 billion.

In a bid to address the argument of "fair use" that is often a defence against copyright infringement, the NYT argued that there was nothing transformative about using NYT content without payment to create products that substitute for the newspaper and steal audiences away from it. The core argument of the



C R Sasikumar

NYT is that the outputs of "Defendants' GenAI models compete with and closely mimic the inputs used to train them" copying NYT works and hence is not fair use.

The NYT's petition includes extracts from searches conducted on ChatGPT, and Bing Chat (Microsoft's GenerativeAI) that are alleged to throw up NYT articles verbatim. Importantly, the petition for the NYT, while arguing that it has lost billions of dollars, does not ask for a specific amount for damages. It does ask for an injunction to stop the alleged unlawful conduct from continuing.

The reply of OpenAI is clever. In fact, the legal petitions filed by the three parties are rigorous and deeply enjoyable reading. For students of law (by that I mean those in law school and those practising law) the petitions are worthwhile to review for they are indicative of what good legal drafting ought to be. Succinct, clever and elegantly incorporating the law.

However, the case of *The New York Times Co v Microsoft Corp et al* is also fascinating since it has all the attributes of an international caper. How, you might ask? OpenAI responds to the allegations by arguing that "the *Times* paid someone to hack OpenAI's products." Further, that it took the newspaper ten of thousands of attempts to generate the "highly anomalous results" that constitute the illustrations in the complaint. Further, that they were able to do so only "by targeting and exploiting a bug by using deceptive prompts that blatantly violate OpenAI's terms of use. And even then they had to feed the tool portions of the very articles they sought to elicit verbatim passages of, virtually all of which already appear on multiple public websites."

Microsoft responded strongly by com-

In a bid to address the argument of 'fair use' that is often a defence against copyright infringement, the NYT argued that there was nothing transformative about using NYT content without payment to create products that substitute for the newspaper and steal audiences away from it. The core argument of the NYT is that the outputs of 'Defendants' GenAI models compete with and closely mimic the inputs used to train them' copying NYT works and hence is not fair use.

The writer is a Senior Advocate at the Supreme Court

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Embracing the TTP's leadership would be a huge mistake. Instead of promoting talks with the TTP, the Afghan Taliban should ensure that their 'brothers' do not attack Pakistan. For the government, the only acceptable option would be for the TTP to lay down their arms..." — DAWN, PAKISTAN

## Calling China's bluff

External Affairs Minister Jaishankar's visit to the Philippines had a message: An assurance for Manila and a warning for Beijing



**RAM RAJYA**  
BY RAM MADHAV

WHEN NEWS OF China renaming some geographical entities in Arunachal Pradesh broke in December 2021, some social media enthusiasts took a "tit for tat" approach. They gave Indian names to Chinese and Tibetan cities. Beijing was called Bhujang Nagar and Lhasa became Laxmangarh. They also referred to Shanghai as Sanghipur, Nanjing as Nandigarh, Yunnan as Yananapuram, Chengdu as New Chandigarh, Hubei as Hanumangarh and Guangzhou as Gandhinagar. This was mere light-hearted banter by social media activists, who were idle due to Covid restrictions.

The Chinese *tamasha* of releasing "standardised" geographical names in "Zangnan", their name for Arunachal Pradesh, started with the renaming of six places in 2017. Then they added 15 places in 2021 and another 11 in 2023. In 2024, the list included 30 new places, among which were 11 residential areas, 12 mountains, four rivers, one lake, one mountain pass and even a piece of land.

The Indian External Affairs Ministry did the right thing by dismissing the renaming *tamasha*. "China has persisted with its senseless attempts to rename places in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. We firmly reject such attempts," External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

There is a method in this madness of China, a civilisational nation with an "invented" historical memory. Its claims are for the long term. For example, the historical figure Zheng He was invoked in a novel in the early 1900s. A century later, this novel is a reference point in Chinese plans to explore the routes and destinations of his voyages with the aim of making historical claims to them. It sent so-called research ships to the Sri Lankan coast recently, claiming that Zheng had visited that country in the 15th century. In the case of Arunachal Pradesh too, the Chinese leadership had once claimed that graves of their people's ancestors were in that state and that the descendants should have the right to worship them. Such claims sound senseless and invented today. But that is China's way of using history as a weapon for expansion.

To tackle China, we must understand its civilisational character and know how to hit back where it hurts the most. That is precisely what External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar did during his visit to the Philippines in the last week of March.

India has traditionally avoided expanding theatres of engagement. To the chagrin of its friends in the QUAD, Delhi steadfastly refused to commit itself to a role in any potential conflict in the Western Pacific. However, in the Philippines, Jaishankar made an important departure from that position by telling the hosts that India would stand by them.

"We are convinced that the progress and prosperity of this region is best served

by staunch adherence to a rules-based order. UNCLOS 1982 is particularly important in that regard as the constitution of the seas. All parties must adhere to it in its entirety, both in letter and in spirit. I take this opportunity to firmly reiterate India's support to the Philippines for upholding its national sovereignty," Jaishankar said. The Philippine News Agency also reported that Jaishankar assured President Ferdinand Marcos Jr that India is "very resolute" in its position on the South China Sea disputes and acknowledges the validity of the 2016 Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling, which invalidates China's claim on the Philippines' waters. He is also reported to have expressed his willingness to become a "charter member" of the Philippines, as far as efforts against China's aggression in the South China Sea are concerned. He said India was ready to help the Philippines, "whatever consequences they may be confronted with".

This is a bold move from the Indian leadership. India has always been an abiding signatory to the UNCLOS regime, even when rulings have gone against its own positions. However, an explicit statement calling on China to adhere to the tribunal's 2016 ruling came for the first time last year when Enrique Manalo, the Foreign Minister of the Philippines visited New Delhi for a bilateral dialogue. While reciprocating the visit last week, Jaishankar not only reiterated that statement but also demonstrated India's arrival on the global stage by indicating its readiness to get involved in a conflict far from its neighbourhood.

India's firm stand had a predictable response from China. "Jaishankar's visit is not purely for diplomatic purposes", *Global Times* wrote, alleging that "India's motivation was to draw countries that have conflicts with China, especially over territorial sovereignty disputes" closer to itself.

The Chinese mouthpiece said that India's hope was that "the Philippines will engage in a long-term entanglement with China in the South China Sea, depleting China's strategic resources, tarnishing China's image in the international community, and diverting China's attention in India-related issues."

That Jaishankar's statement has had the desired effect can be gauged from the futile threats issued by Chinese spokesmen, that "India's involvement in the South China Sea will also have a significant negative impact on China-India relations, forcing China to be vigilant against the Indian government's potential intention to stir up more trouble".

India is a responsible nation, not a warmonger. Its leadership wants to play a "responsible and influential" role in global affairs.

In his recent phone call with US President Joe Biden, Chinese President Xi Jinping enumerated three principles for good relations between China and the US. First, peace must be valued. Second, stability must be prioritised. And third, credibility must be upheld. India wants the same from the Chinese leadership in its engagement with itself and other countries. India wants all nations, including China, to adhere to a rules-based international order. That was Jaishankar's core message from Manila.

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

## Big ideas, concrete steps

Congress manifesto outlines bold plan to tackle unemployment, deliver social justice



**PRAVEEN CHAKRAVARTY**

ON MARCH 30, the BJP announced the constitution of a 27-member committee to begin preparing its manifesto for the national elections starting April 19. In contrast, by March 19, the Congress party's working committee had already approved the manifesto that had been drafted over three months. The BJP's cautious approach shows that either it does not think the manifesto is as important for its campaign as its divisive politics, or it has no new ideas for voters. An election should primarily be a contest of ideas for people's betterment. Keeping with that ideal, the Congress party has unveiled its manifesto, prepared diligently through consultations with the public and domain experts from India and abroad.

The twin pillars of the Congress manifesto are social and economic justice. Extreme social inequity and yawning income disparity are the bane of Indian society. The nation can no longer afford to be distracted and divided through the opium of religion or the placebo of welfare in the foolish hope that these problems will disappear. The imminent and categorical imperative for the new government is to come up with bold, concrete policies and actions to rebuild and strengthen these broken pillars of Indian society.

One of the boldest new ideas in the Congress party manifesto is RTAP — right to apprenticeship. Under RTAP, every youth under the age of 25, with at least a diploma degree, can demand a formal one-year apprenticeship and the government will be obliged to provide one with either a private or public sector entity, along with an annual stipend of

one lakh rupees. The government and the employer will share the expense of this stipend. There are more than a million GST-registered establishments that have the capacity to absorb apprentices and are keen to do so. Our analysis suggests that five to ten million aspirants can be given apprenticeships every year. If RTAP is implemented, India will be the first country in the world to legislate youth apprenticeship as a right. Nearly one in two young graduates in the country today is unable to find a job. Current policies or ideas, such as unemployment allowance, urban NREGA and so on, may provide temporary relief but are not aspirational and do not pave a path for their future. RTAP offers hope, dignity, on-the-job skill training, income and employability.

The manifesto also proposes a new employee-linked incentive (ELI) scheme, in contrast to the Modi government's current production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for companies. ELI will provide tax and other incentives to firms based on the number of formal jobs they create, and not just their output. In the contemporary economic development paradigm where the balance has shifted enormously towards capital vis-à-vis labour, ELI will bring balance by incentivising companies to focus as much on creating jobs as generating output. This will also be a first in India, if implemented.

The other bold idea to tackle unemployment is the Congress' promise to create nearly 15 million new jobs by doubling the share of mining to five per cent of GDP. Recognising the

global opportunity in the transition to electric mobility and India's inherent geological advantages, Congress has promised to launch a big strategic mining programme to explore and mine for critical minerals, in accordance with stringent environmental and labour safety standards using the latest mining technologies. Mining is an unskilled labour-intensive activity that takes jobs to people rather than people to jobs and can employ a large number of locals in backward and tribal areas.

Nearly a hundred years after B R Ambedkar's crusade against caste discrimination, social injustice and inequality continue to threaten Indian society. The Congress party recognises the need for a rigorous and comprehensive approach to end this injustice. A caste census is the first and foundational step in this approach, which the Congress party has promised to undertake. This will be followed by some immediate solutions under the principle of "proportional rewards" through greater reservations for the oppressed castes beyond the 50 per cent ceiling, commensurate share of government resources, contracts and budgets. This principle of "proportional rewards" will also be extended to religious minorities and women, along with the promise of 50 per cent reservation in all central government jobs for women from 2025.

Another highlight is the emphasis on states' justice. Recognising that India's federal structure has been considerably weakened in the last decade, the Congress party has outlined specific ideas to restore states'

rights. The biggest bone of contention in the Union-states relationship is the distribution of tax revenues where the Modi government has been duplicitous in its massive use of cess and surcharges that it does not have to share with the states. The Congress party promises to limit such cess and surcharges to five per cent of total tax revenues. It also promises to devolve more powers to states and reject the "one nation, one policy" framework of the Modi government.

These are just some of the bold new ideas in the manifesto. It has also clearly articulated the steps the party will take to reverse the enormous damage done to the country's institutions through various laws and amendments. The nearly 50-page document has plenty of other concrete promises and ideas to improve the lives of people across all sections and nurture a harmonious and ecologically safe society.

The Congress manifesto has put out a coherent, conscientious set of ideas to govern the nation. The task now is to take these ideas to voters and explain them — an enormous challenge especially when the party's bank accounts are frozen, and the media is tightly controlled. With the release of the Congress manifesto, the people of India have a clear choice to make between those who believe ideas for good governance matter and those who don't.

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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### WELCOME TESLA

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Charging up' (IE, April 5). Tesla has long advocated for reductions in import taxes as a prerequisite for committing to significant investments in one of the world's largest automobile markets. As per the government's announcement, companies seeking tax concessions must invest a minimum of \$500 million and commence electric vehicle production from a local plant within three years. Tesla now has to outline its investment strategies for India. Tesla aims to increase its procurement of auto parts from India to approximately \$15 billion. This is welcome.

**Khokan Das, Kolkata**

### WHY NO 400 PAAR

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Absolute conquest, absolutely' (IE, April 5). In August of 2014, Narendra Modi declared he would govern on the basis of consensus and not majority in Parliament. This is betrayed by the denouncement and suspension of Opposition leaders. Secondly, in the interest of the nation's progress, Modi called for a 10-year moratorium on contentious caste and communal issues. Yet, Ram mandir, Article 370, triple talaq and CAA were brought in. Thirdly, despite the undemocratic nature of electoral bonds, it was tabled as a Money Bill in the Rajya Sabha. And lastly, senior BJP leaders like Karnataka's

Anantkumar Hegde, and Joyti Mirdha in Rajasthan stated that "400 paar" is required to change the Constitution.

**L R Murmu, New Delhi**

### HEED SC'S WORDS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No free pass' (IE, April 4). Patanjali's stand and Baba Ramdev's comments on allopathic medicine have possibly caused a lot of damage. The SC's order forces them to comply with regulatory protocols. Unlike before, hopefully this time around, they will heed SC's words. It is alarming that there are about 1,500 misleading advertisements of such products. This must be investigated at the earliest.

**Subhash Vaid, New Delhi**

### FOLLOW PROTOCOL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No poll issue' (IE, March 3). Katchatheevu has resurfaced as an issue ahead of the elections. Despite the timing, it is undeniable that the area has strategic significance. If down the line, Sri Lanka hands over the island to inimical forces, India will have a strategic tornado to manage. Besides, as per the verdict in Berubari case, an adequate constitutional amendment and subsequent ratification by Parliament is protocol, which was not done in the case of Katchatheevu.

**Devendra Awasthi, Lucknow**



# Opinion

SATURDAY, APRIL 6, 2024



## INDIA'S STELLAR GROWTH

Vice president Jagdeep Dhankar

“Contrary to the global scenario, our economy has been steadily looking up despite challenges of the Covid Pandemic and global conflagrations threatening supply chains

## Playing it safe

A cut in policy rate seems unlikely until the MPC is convinced inflation has been durably tamed

**T**WAS WIDELY expected that the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) would leave the policy rate unchanged at 6.5% and that there would be no change in the 'withdrawal of accommodation' stance when it concluded its deliberations on Friday. One understands why the MPC is in no hurry to cut the repo rate at this point when food inflation spurts every now and then and when crude oil prices have crossed the \$90 per barrel mark. Moreover, headline GDP numbers have been very strong, giving the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) abundant room to fight inflation.

While the RBI forecasts that inflation will taper off to 4.5% in FY25, the fact is that uncertainties, in terms of geopolitical tensions, persist. Moreover, while Fed Chair Jerome Powell has indicated rates would be cut sometime this year, it's not clear how soon these cuts will materialise. While the RBI may choose not to acknowledge this, there has undoubtedly been some degree of co-movement between the Fed's moves and those of India's central bank.

Again, with Deputy Governor Michael Patra observing that it isn't really material to consider the level of real interest rates when inflation is still way above the 4% target, it would appear that a cut in the policy rate would not take place until the MPC is convinced inflation has been durably tamed. Also, the caution on both global and local supply-side shocks suggests that the cuts in the first phase—possibly starting in August or October—could be just about 50 basis points. The RBI clearly believes it would be prudent to wait to see how the monsoon plays out and ahead of that whether the above-normal temperatures in the coming months impact the production of food crops.

While the policy rate may be at 6.5%, the transmission of the cumulative hikes in the policy rates is as yet incomplete. So lending rates, which are already elevated, could trend up further as banks remain compelled to pay out more to customers in the scramble for deposits. The problem is that if the cost of funds remains high, it could continue to limit the revival in private capital expenditure. Right now, it is the government that is investing and that may not be enough to drive growth. While the GDP may have grown at 8.4% y-o-y in Q3 FY24, the growth in the GVA was just 6.5%. Economists have attributed the slower rise in the GVA to a curbing of spends on subsidies. Critically, on the demand side, the increase in private consumption—which accounts for 57% of the economy—was anemic. It inched up to 3.5% y-o-y in Q3 from an even slower 2.4% y-o-y in Q2. The point is that the GDP is being driven up largely investment whereas consumption is very weak. There too, the jump in the gross fixed capital formation of 10.6% y-o-y in Q3 came a weak base.

While the drag from net exports eased in Q3 FY24, from -1.8 percentage points to -1.2 percentage points, the fact is export growth moderated. This is important given the slowdown in the global economy is expected to persist. Locally, sales of commercial vehicles and tractors continue to be underwhelming. It is, therefore, not surprising at all the RBI's growth forecast for FY25 was left unchanged at 7%. Unless interest rates come down small enterprises will suffer and private capex won't pick up meaningfully.

## Goldman Sachs' women still look underpaid

**GOLDMAN SACHS GROUP** Inc. just can't seem to keep hold of top female bankers, judging by recent high-profile departures. At first glance, it looks like money is part of the problem — and it has settled lawsuits over this. The firm has had the biggest average difference in what men and women are paid for the past three years among investment banks that report these data in the UK. More bad news as proxy advisors say shareholders should vote against Goldman's executive compensation plans.

But dig more deeply into the numbers and the picture at Goldman is less clear cut. Most banks are pretty bad at developing, promoting and paying women — and there's not a wide variation in their average gender pay gaps.

The UK has required all companies with more than 250 employees to report a slew of gender-based statistics since 2017, including mean and median pay gaps and how men and women make up the different quartiles of income. Goldman came out worst for 2023 with its men paid 54% more than its women on a simple average. That compares with 47% at JPMorgan Chase & Co., which has shown a decent decline in its pay gap over recent years.

However, the median difference at Goldman in the UK was one of the best for the second year running at just 28.5%, versus JPMorgan's 44.4%. A simple average is easily skewed by a few extremely well-paid people at the top end, while the median shows the gap between the mid-ranking man and woman. A much smaller median suggests there could be less difference between what large numbers of men and women receive than the simple mean shows.

Then there's another curious thing about Goldman's data: It has more women among its highest earners than most of its rivals. Nearly one-quarter of the company's largest checks are handed to women, whereas for most peers women account for less than 20% of the big money. Better representation in the top group at Goldman coupled with the widest overall pay gap tells us logically that either Goldman's best-paid women are systematically underpaid next to their male peers, or that this top group contains a subset of men who get vastly more than everyone else at all levels of the bank.

One obvious reason is that the bank didn't promote and support enough female partners in the past. Goldman makes its best performing bankers into partners only every two years. When it last elected a group in 2022, it trumpeted its most diverse class of new partners ever: Women made up 29%. Add these to its existing group of partners, which typically numbers about 400 globally, and Goldman says women now comprise the highest share of this set in the bank's history. That still amounts to fewer than one in five.

What is stopping them? Across banking and finance, executives and headhunters often say that it's hard to retain the very best women because so many companies are struggling to meet their own targets for improving the gender balance of their top ranks. The same arguments are no doubt made in other industries, as well as the difficulty of balancing non-executive boards. You have probably heard similar protests about boosting racial or ethnic representation.

Sometimes you might even hear complaints that these targets for diversity, equity and inclusion are giving women unmerited opportunities for greater pay and promotion than they might otherwise get. Frankly, this is nonsense. The inherent premise is that everything else that leads to promotion is down to merit, while gender or skin colour are just something you're born with. The bottom line is that anyone in banking — or any other job — who becomes visible enough for rivals to poach has very likely worked pretty hard to get there, even if some particular characteristic is part of what makes them a suddenly more desirable employee.

If any banker gets to exploit their gender even once for a better deal — and I'm really not sure that many ever do — then good luck to them. All their peers are using every last stratagem and argument they possibly can to gain their own advantage, too. It's all political, especially at the top.



PAUL J DAVIES  
Bloomberg

**R**EMAIN DOVISH after two odd years of being a hawk. That said, the RBI expectedly paused yesterday, with growing uncertainty about US inflation and Fed cuts. Although it is plausible that RBI rate cuts typically support the rupee, it is fully understandable that the RBI Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) is reluctant to take chances with the INR at a narrow 1% rate differential with the Fed. While the RBI refers to inflation as the elephant in the room, its monetary policy is driven, like that of all other central banks, by the other elephant — the Fed. In fact, I reiterate that this inflation is yesterday's story, notwithstanding the hawkish note in the monetary policy. With El Niño set to fade to La Niña, inflation is likely to remain well within the RBI's 2-6% mandate. On my part, I continue to worry about the rising real repo rate that, at 1.4%, has crossed the 1% deemed neutral. Once the Fed commits to a cut date, it can be safely expected that Governor Shaktikanta Das will begin the rate cut cycle to support growth.

It is expected that the RBI MPC will cut the repo rate by 15 basis points (bps) on August 8, if the Fed commits to its first cut in, say, September, as expected. As the US dollar will then sell off, the RBI's concerns about the rupee will also abate. Around 100 bps of RBI rate cuts can be predicted by June 2025, with the Fed set to cut 75 bps in 2024.

I continue to highlight that inflation is yesterday's story. Inflation can be projected at 4.5% in March and 4.8% in FY25 (4.5% RBI), well within the RBI's 2-6% mandate. Just as importantly, this is actually lower than the growth-maximising 'threshold' inflation

## FOLLOWING THE EAGLE

ITS MONETARY POLICY, LIKE THAT OF OTHER CENTRAL BANKS, IS DRIVEN BY THE FED

# The elephant in RBI's room

## INDRANIL SENGUPTA

Head of India research, CLSA  
Views are personal



tion of 5.5%. Core inflation has fallen to as low as 2.9%. In fact, I continue to highlight that fundamental factors are not inflationary:

■ **Limited pricing power:** Real gross value added growth is expected to slow down to 6% levels — pretty much around my estimated potential — in 2024 to limit any excessive pricing power.

■ **Lower agflation:** Most weather forecasters expect the El Niño (that drives rain clouds away from India) to fade to La Niña (that drives rain clouds to India) by June. This should cause a normal monsoon to water a bumper kharif autumn crop towards the end of 2024. Rabi/winter sowing has also improved to last year's levels. Just as importantly, the summer rabi harvest has also ended at 2024 levels, although the rising heat is a risk.

Food minister Piyush Goyal is also taking many steps to limit agflation. The government is selling Bharat rice, Bharat wheat etc. at subsidised rates, taking several measures to augment supply by importing, raising export duty and so on. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has extended the 5 kg monthly limit for free rice/wheat supplied to low-income

groups (57% of population) under the National Food Security Act by five years.

■ **Tight M3 growth:** Governor Das has kept a tight rein over money supply growth, at 11.3%, well below the 14.7% average.

Commodity prices should remain well in control with Fed tightening.

Imported inflation is broadly in check with Governor Das' build-up of FX reserves, ensuring a relatively stable rupee. A forecast of the rupee reaching 82 against the dollar and the dollar trading at 1.16 against the euro by March 2025 is reasonable.

I continue to point out that domestic inflation surely does not warrant a 6.5% repo rate. The real repo rate, at 1.4%, is higher than the 1% seen as adequate in normal times. If the US slows, notwithstanding the recent Fed growth upgrade, is not the ex-post real repo rate at 3.6% with core inflation at 2.9% simply too high? At the RBI's 4.5% FY25 inflation forecast, the real RBI repo rate is also a high 2%. It is for this reason that the RBI, as well as a number of other EM central banks, are expected to cut rates the moment they receive the green light from the Fed.

It can be predicted that the Fed will cut 25 bps each on September 18, November 7, and December 18 as of now. That said, it was really touch and go between two and three rate cuts in the last Fed dot plot. It is very difficult for the Fed to cut rates unless US core inflation settles at least 0.3% month-on-month (m-o-m) for, say, three months. In my view, if US core inflation is below 0.3% in H2 2024, then there will be 75 bps Fed cut in 2024 and 100 bps RBI cut by June 2025; if US core inflation is 0.3% m-o-m (=3.6% annualised) in 2024, there will be 50 bps Fed cut in 2024 and 100 bps RBI cut by June 2025; if US core inflation is 0.4% m-o-m (4.8% annualised), there will be a Fed pause and 50 bps RBI rate cut by June 2025.

RBI rate cuts will support rather than hurt the rupee as the dollar prices the Fed peak. The relationship between the RBI repo rate and the rupee is different for India. Foreign portfolio investors' (FPIs) equity holdings are almost 15-20 times those of debt FPIs. RBI rate cuts support growth, attract FPI equity flows, and support the rupee. This, in turn, is crowding debt FPIs) looking for capital/FX gains, especially given JP Morgan/Bloomberg EM Bond Diversified Index inclusions.

Tying this all together, I remain bullish for bonds. The 10-year yield should slip to 6.5% in FY25, taking into account finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's fiscal consolidation programme and the RBI's rate cuts. Estimates suggest that the government securities market should balance with, say, \$28 billion of RBI open market operations. Finally, debt will bring in a total of some \$27 billion after India's listing in the JP Morgan/Bloomberg Emerging Markets Bond Index (Diversified).

**It is very difficult for the Fed to cut rates unless US core inflation settles at least 0.3% month-on-month for, say, three months**

# AI on the board: No room for assumptions



## SRINATH SRIDHARAN

Policy researcher and corporate advisor  
X: @ssmumbai

While AI presents boundless opportunities, navigating its integration into boardroom discussions demands a judicious balance of enthusiasm and pragmatism

**THE INCLUSION** OF artificial intelligence (AI) in boardroom discussions has already become a pressing matter. The pervasive hype and euphoria surrounding AI demand a deeper introspection within corporate boardrooms, as the allure of technological advancement often obscures the nuanced risks and complexities inherent in its integration. This is why Indian boards need to pay more attention, listening and understanding.

First, there is the human risk of overestimating AI capabilities, at least for now. Despite advancements, human intelligence and cognition remain unparalleled, relegating the singularity concept to a distant horizon. Second, the allure of AI can lead to overconfidence. It's vital not to be swayed solely by AI-generated responses, as even sophisticated models can produce random outputs devoid of correlation, as of now.

Third, achieving harmony between AI processes, risk mitigation strategies, and human expertise is paramount. The seamless integration of these elements into business systems and design ensures a cohesive approach to leveraging AI within corporate frameworks. Lastly, businesses must hedge against technological risks, recognising the need for robust contingency.

It is evident that AI's impact extends beyond surface-level comprehension. Boards and corporate entities must invest time in understanding AI nuances, including emerging technologies like quantum computing. However, the reality of boardroom dynamics presents a challenge, with meetings often squeezed between hectic schedules. Moreover, embarking on an AI journey demands a meticulous understanding of risks, which evolve real-time. Rushing into AI adoption without laying a solid

foundation is akin to courting disaster.

AI is no longer a distant concept confined to science fiction; it's a tangible reality reshaping industries. Amid discussions of AI's potential, there exists a less understood frontier: quantum computing. Quantum computing promises exponential leaps in computational power, challenging conventional paradigms of problem-solving and data processing. Boards must grasp the implications of quantum computing alongside AI, as it holds the potential to revolutionise algorithms, encryption, and optimisation techniques.

Boards have to spend time in understanding AI and what their management team is trying to do with AI. Board meetings leave little room for in-depth exploration of AI's intricacies. However, this time constraint underscores the need for proactive measures, such as dedicated workshops, educational resources, and expert consultations. Boards must prioritise carving out time for AI education, recognising it as an investment in future competitiveness and resilience.

**Learn all the risks first, as risk is a real-time continuous journey:** Risks associated with AI encompass a wide spectrum, from data privacy breaches to algorithmic biases and operational disruptions. Risk is not a static concept but a dynamic, real-time journey. Boards must adopt a proactive stance, continuously assessing and mitigating risks throughout the AI life cycle. With the Digital Personal Data Protection Bill 2023 soon coming into reality, boards must exercise caution in their adoption of AI, as they face

the threat of steep financial fines and reputational risks for any data breaches.

**Don't jump into the fray until you are ready with the base and core of what you want to do:** Prudent boards understand the importance of laying a solid foundation. Rushing into AI adoption without a clear strategic road map risks squandering resources and diluting organisational focus. While AI presents numerous potential benefits for businesses, including improved efficiency and innovation, it also poses significant risks that cannot be overlooked. Instead, boards must undertake comprehensive planning, defining clear objectives, identifying suitable use cases, and establishing governance structures.

**In the AI race, it is better to be the tortoise—slow and steady is the mantra:** Prudent boards recognise the merits of a methodical approach. Incremental progress, marked by careful experimentation, iterative learning, and deliberate scaling, mitigates the risk of over-committing to unproven technologies or strategies. Only by balancing sustainability over speed, boards can navigate the complexities of AI adoption with confidence and resilience.

**Don't assume that management knows, that's board hallucination:** Board members must guard against the assumption that management possesses exhaustive knowledge of AI and its implications. Such complacency risks fostering a dangerous disconnect between boardroom discussions and operational realities. Instead, boards must cultivate a culture of curiosity and inquiry, encouraging open dialogue and

knowledge-sharing between management and board members.

**Having pilots and scaling only after multiple pilots is key:** Pilot projects serve as invaluable learning experiences in the journey towards AI integration. By conducting pilots, companies can assess feasibility, identify challenges, and refine strategies before committing to large-scale implementation. Crucially, scaling initiatives should occur judiciously, guided by insights gleaned from multiple pilot iterations. This iterative approach minimises risks, optimises resource allocation, and fosters a culture of innovation and continuous improvement within the organisation.

**Wesuddenly have forgotten ESG, net zero, sustainability, climate change, Web 3.0:** While AI holds immense potential, it should not overshadow pressing issues such as environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and ethical governance. Boards must maintain a holistic perspective, balancing AI investments with commitments to ESG principles, net-zero initiatives, and sustainable business practices. By embracing a multidimensional approach to innovation, boards can navigate the complexities of the digital age while remaining anchored in principles of long-term value creation and societal well-being.

As India grapples with the paradox of more keypad-literate than literate citizens, the need for informed decision-making in the corporate landscape becomes even more pronounced. Thus, while AI presents boundless opportunities, navigating its integration into boardroom discussions demands a judicious balance of enthusiasm and pragmatism, ensuring sustainable corporate growth in an era of technological disruption.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Combatting global hunger

NR Narayana Murthy's revelation of enduring 120 hours of continuous hunger while hitchhiking in Europe, recounted during a special event at the United Nations, resonates deeply in the context of global food security. Murthy's narrative underscores the stark realities faced by many and

highlights the urgent need to address hunger and poverty. His emphasis on gratitude towards subsidised education and advocacy for supporting underprivileged children underscores the vital role education could play in breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring food security for future generations. His call for other nations to adopt similar models reflects a collective responsibility to

prioritise these pressing issues on a global scale, aligning with the sustainable development goals.

—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

### Updating labour codes

Apropos of "Prioritising labour reform", like land, labour reforms are equally critical to make investment attractive and seamless in India. Gujarat and Rajasthan have shown to

other states that if there is a will there's a way. Both the stakeholders, industry and labour unions, need their concerns to be addressed, and if the government shows flexibility and upgrading the skills remains an option to ensure continuous employment, it will be a win-win situation.

—Bal Govind, Noida

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

— Rammath Goenka

## PLAN AGAINST WEATHER SHOCKS ON FOOD PRICES

THE Reserve Bank on Friday sounded dovish over falling prices and rising GDP, but maintained that its fight over persistent inflation remains unfinished. While confirming that the inflation 'elephant' was returning back to the forest (read, easing inflation), RBI governor Shaktikanta Das delivered both good and bad news. Even if the quarter-wise inflation estimates were revised lower, the central bank pegged the headline inflation for 2024-25 at 4.5 per cent—0.5 percentage point above the annual target. What's upsetting is that just one quarter, Q2, is expected to see inflation printing below the target at 3.8 per cent, while the remaining three quarters will likely see higher prints. Unlike price rise that happens fast and in a straight line, disinflation, as we are seeing now, is rather slow and not diagonal. This perhaps explains why the RBI is being extra careful in maintaining status quo not just on rates, but also on its policy stance.

One of the key factors interrupting the inflation outlook is food prices, which remained volatile through the second half of 2023-24. If the last mile of disinflation turns out to be protracted, as the RBI noted, interest rates may remain higher for longer, which in turn could upset growth. If erratic rainfall and deficient soil moisture hindered the rabi crop sowing, water reservoir levels and other climatic factors are now imparting uncertainty to the food price outlook. Much like rainfall, summer temperatures are posing challenges for monetary policy with the national weather office predicting above-normal temperatures and heat waves. Such a prospect imparts an upside risk to food inflation and could raise headline inflation by about 1 percentage point over the baseline. Hence, the government should load up on buffer stocks to ease the anticipated inflationary pressures.

As for growth, buoyed by domestic demand, India remains the fastest growing major economy and is well on its way to clock 7 per cent for the third consecutive year. Though the 2023-24 growth is pegged at 7.6 per cent, it is not broad-based, as the two main engines of consumption and investment are not running full-steam. However, for the future, the government's capex push, upbeat business and consumer sentiments, and strong corporate and bank balance sheets should come in handy. That said, global oil prices, other external factors, rising trade distortions and geo-economic fragmentation could weigh on trade and growth.

## JUSTICE DELAYED AND DENIED IN RIYAS CASE

IT has been seven years since Riyas Maulavi, a young madrasa teacher, was murdered in the communally-sensitive Kasaragod in Kerala. But justice continued to elude his family as a local court recently acquitted the three RSS workers arraigned as accused in the case. The much-delayed verdict amounts to injustice on two counts. One, the question of who killed the 27-year-old remains unanswered and those behind it seem to have gotten away with murder. Two, the three accused—aged 19, 20 and 25 at the time of their arrest—if indeed not guilty, have been made to spend seven years in jail for no reason. The case points to either a shoddy investigation or the prosecution's failure to convince the court of the culpability of the accused with the available evidence.

Riyas was killed on the night of March 20, 2017 in his room attached to the mosque where he taught. He was stabbed 14 times and left to die. With the incident assuming communal and political overtones, the police were under immense pressure to crack the case. The three suspects were apprehended within three days and the charges filed within 90 days. However, the trial took long and the case came up before eight judges. Finally, the court acquitted the accused saying the prosecution failed to prove motive and pointed out lapses in the investigation. The police theory was that the accused nurtured hatred towards Muslims and committed the crime with the sole intention of disturbing communal harmony, which, the court said, the prosecution failed to prove.

On its part, the state government has filed an appeal against the acquittal before the Kerala High Court, submitting that conclusive evidence, including scientific proof, was discarded by the trial court. The verdict indicates that the investigation, probably conducted in a hurry due to political pressure, may have been botched. If that is indeed the case, an appeal in a higher court may not lead to the conviction of the accused. The government must review the case, conduct a reinvestigation if necessary, plug the loopholes, and proceed with the intention of punishing those responsible. Going for a hurried appeal to score a political point in the election season may not serve the purpose, or may even prove to be counter-productive. What is important is delivering justice for the family of Riyas.

### QUICK TAKE

#### SETTING GROUND RULES

PREMIER League club Fulham made a splash last week when they unveiled plans for a new stand at their Craven Cottage ground that would have a brasserie, a bar and a three-tier 'sky deck' with a rooftop swimming pool. Rich clubs offering unique in-stadium experiences isn't new. Manchester City have a restaurant with a glass wall that looks on to the players' tunnel; Real Madrid are planning a nightclub at Bernabeu. Indian clubs—both in the IPL and ISL—can start with the basics. Clean toilets, access for the differently-abled and lifts for the elderly would go a long way in getting more fans to the stadium.

THE Uttarakhand state's draft of a uniform civil code gained presidential ascent and became a law recently. While the Act significantly resembles the Hindu Marriage Act, its few new additions raise serious concerns. More than gender equality, the Act addresses the popular and damaging sentiment that 'at least something is done'. The idea that something is better than nothing promotes carelessness and hides negligent drafting. In a bid to 'get things done', we end up with a law that embodies the discrimination it was ostensibly meant to address.

Here, I limit my critique to three brief points. One, the dealing of Muslim personal law. Second, its understanding of live-in relationships, and, relatedly, its contribution to gender equality.

The Act places undue emphasis on the supposed disabilities created by Muslim personal law. In some sense, Muslim personal law is offered as bait to prompt state intervention, and significant media attention is deployed to highlight its obscurity. Practices like *nikah halala*, which were neither common nor legal, often end up in petitions before courts. Often dismissed and rarely made by the victims, they serve the purpose of stirring up a conversation about Muslim personal law rather than looking at the specificities of the case, where there is usually an individual criminal operating without religious sanction. A reasonable comparison would be to blame Hindu personal law for an individual case of sati—a practice already banned, criminalised and, in popular imagination, no longer associated with the Hindu way of life. Bigamy becomes another argument over which Muslim personal law is brought to focus, although any conversation over polyamorous practices in other religions are treated as occurring rarely but illegal.

The code grants exemptions to tribal groups that constitute around 3 per cent of state population. Focusing on tribal exceptions is important precisely as it offers a valid and significant argument against uniformity. Where the Northeast region is involved, it is even more convenient to turn a blind eye as it lays bare the true antagonism between federalism and uniformity. It highlights that discrimination, not difference, must be the basis for reform.

Gender justice is often the foundation on which many arguments for uniformity are mounted. Many aspects of the current Act not only fail to promote gender justice, but they actively hinder it. Provisions in the Special Marriage Act like the 30-day notice period already encourage surveillance and local procedures such as seeking an affida-

Gender justice is often the foundation on which arguments for a uniform civil code are mounted. But the recent Uttarakhand law actually hinders it

## A CODE NEITHER CONSIDERATE NOR REFORMIST

SAUMYA SAXENA

Associate Professor, O.P. Jindal University



SOURAV ROY

vit a 'no objection' before parties register their marriage have also emerged. The UCC Act takes it a step further, seeking even live-in couples register their relationship. The code not only retains restitution of conjugal rights, a colonial inheritance that forces couples into cohabitation even when its accompanied by discrimination or violence, but also leaves intact the marital rape exception and maintains different ages of marriage for men and women.

In other words, Uttarakhand is extremely keen to keep couples together whether married or otherwise, but not necessarily address the violence or inequality within marriage. It encourages an alliance that is heterosexual and intra-religious, where men are older than their wives.

This sentiment of surveilling love is a common one frequently deployed in courts

and codes. The Gujarat government in mid-2023 considered including a mandatory parental consent in all love marriages to be registered in the state. This is not new and even the 1954 debates on the Special Marriage Act witnessed speeches where it was treated as a way to contain the 'rebels'. Multiple anecdotes were cited to forward the argument that the fate of inter-religious marriages was to end in doom. Nevertheless, the Act became an enabling piece of legislation that only stands to be undone by laws proposed by Uttarakhand's UCC.

On occasions where live-in relationships have remained consistent for a long time, the Supreme Court judgement in the case of *Dhannu Lal vs Ganeshram* in 2015 already offers such couples protection, treating their relationship as marriage. And this assessment of whether a live-in rela-

## CARNATIC CROSSFIRE: SOCIAL BHAKTI vs MUSICAL SHAKTI

AS the crow flies, the predominantly Tamil Brahmin Chennai locality of Mylapore is only a mile or so from Alwarpet, an equally predominant Tambram area. Or, should one say 'unequally' predominant? In that lie the social nuances of the current controversy in Carnatic music.

Thodur Madabusi Krishna being awarded the title of Sangita Kalanidhi, the highest honour in Carnatic music, has so many dimensions it reminds one of *Rashomon*, the Akira Kurasawa film in which everyone appears right in their version of the truth. Krishna is getting extra marks because he stands for the in-vogue DEI (diversity equity inclusion) value system.

The challenge thrown by the Ranjani Gayatri sister duo, who criticised the mighty gents of the Madras Music Academy, is stuff of both literature and pulp. You have caste, politics, diversity, musical excellence, aspirations, life goals and culture coming together for an epic conflict, like two ragas getting mixed up in a concert.

I wonder whom to take inspiration from on this: my great grandfather, who once argued for and against the TamBrahm practice of *sandhya vandhanam* (twilight ritual) to show his debating skills, or his composer brother-in-law (ergo, my great-grand-uncle), who won the Sangita Kalanidhi in 1940. Either way, I don't fancy Carnatic music itself facing the music.

Both Krishna and RaGa are cult figures in the Carnatic world. Their conflict also echoes the current state of national politics, in which those who speak for social justice are pitted against those for whom culture, tradition and religious devotion are paramount. Caste makes it all so quirky, because, as Krishna notes, there are invisible screens that block those other than Brahmins from breaking into the upper echelons of the classical world dominated by a clutch of male-dominated sabhas, whose roads lead to the Music Academy, the Vatican of the Carnatic church.

Krishna has broken norms. He has, on occasion, avoided the December season concert, mouthed lyrics in honour of anti-Brahmin ideologue Periyar, and sung in Arabic in praise of Allah while sporting a skullcap, besides conducting a music festival in a slum. Periyar's well-documented rants against Brahmins are such that the RaGa duo has some evidence-based case against Krishna's ideological zeal. But Krishna unquestionably excels as a musi-



MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior Journalist

### REVERSE SWING

cian and historian of theory and practice, and deserves the honour.

The Music Academy has a double identity, one of unwritten Brahmin dominance in composition and as a centre of musical excellence. Things get complicated when a term like 'culture' gets attached. Culture is



TMK is a grand-nephew of TTK, whose family has historically been a key force in the Madras Music Academy, which is located on TTK Road. As an *avant-garde* liberal among Alwarpet Brahmins, TMK is challenging social rules; by questioning the Alwarpet elite's dominance, the RaGa duo are being reverse-swing radicals

viewed by the average Jagannathan or Janaki as a combo pack that includes Carnatic music, higher education, vegetarian food, pursuit of excellence in a white-collar career, and respect for traditions and elders. Oh, add some cricket connection, too.

Carnatic music's acknowledged goal is to express devotion to god (*bhakti*) to seek union with the infinite (*mukti*). The methodical form has lent itself to film music, jazz and world music, but its core remains devotion. The *bhakti* tribe is not usually conscious of its historic privileges. TamBrahms can be economically poor; yet pay to learn classical music, because it is their culture. Contemporary political correctness is usually not part of this baggage.

Thanks to a new affluence spawned by

economic growth, rewards for higher education, and the boom in IT, younger TamBrahms who would have been singing a *kriti* while working as humble accountants are now ambitious and increasingly tilted towards a resurgent Hindu nationalism. Singers now fly to Cleveland, where an annual Thyagaraja festival is part of a new, hip TamBrahmdom.

One tweet shared by RaGa described them as a modest duo that travelled from Matunga in Mumbai to Mylapore, where humbler Brahmins live, and contrasted them with the privileged elite of Alwarpet, whose prime road is named after industrialist T T Krishnamachari or TTK, who served as India's finance minister. TMK is a grand-nephew of TTK, whose family has historically been a key force in the Music Academy, which is located on TTK Road.

The Academy has a strong tradition of respect for talent and an awesome archival system that makes it a mini university. But its awards can get arbitrary. While TMK says breaking of the caste barrier is rare in the Carnatic world, Sangita Kalanidhi awardees include Sheik Chinnna Moulana, a Muslim nadaswaram player. Some nadaswaram players from the Pillai caste have figured on the long list since the 1930s, but a prominent Pillai vocalist like Madurai Somasundaram never won the accolade.

In some ways, the controversy in Chennai is strikingly similar to that at Harvard University, where the faculty's pursuit of excellence has been shaken by a push for diversity. It's not for nothing that the elite of Harvard's city were once called Boston Brahmins.

As an *avant-garde* liberal among Alwarpet Brahmins, the Magsaysay-award-winning TMK is challenging social rules. By questioning the Alwarpet elite's traditional dominance, RaGa are being reverse-swing radicals challenging the Academy select after striving long to be blessed by them. If the TNK vs RaGa tale strikes discordant notes, it's between the streets of Mylapore and Alwarpet.

(Views are personal)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Help fishermen

Ref: *Keep politics aside, address Tamil fishermen's issues* (Apr 5). The fishermen's problems have nothing to do with Katchatheevu. Sri Lankan laws prohibit the damaging practice of bottom trawling in Palk Strait. Both the Centre and TN government should help our fisherfolk switch over to deep-sea fishing. Losses suffered by them can be compensated by raising subsidies. **NA Joseph, Ettumanoor**

#### Doorstep service

Ref: *TDP scores self-goal on ward volunteers* (Apr 5). Non-receipt of pensions at doorsteps will certainly act as a deterrent against opposition parties in the Andhra state elections. The opposition, instead of aiming at disallowing volunteers, should have appealed to the EC to disburse pension by state government employees at pensioners' doorsteps from the beginning. **Katuru Durga Prasad Rao, Hyderabad**

#### Amethi choice

Ref: *Vadra itching for Amethi ticket. Is Cong listening?* (Apr 5). At a time when the Congress party is in a big dilemma due to the mass exodus of its loyalists, the BJP one after another, nominating Robert Vadra to contest from Amethi can only add fuel to the fire in the rank and file as Vadra has neither a political background nor the experience. **Sudhakar Cherukunnu, Kannur**

#### Model violation

The central government has brazenly used Doodardshan to telecast the controversial cinema, *The Kerala Story*, which callously portrays a particular community in bad light, in order to polarise society and garner votes. This is in violation of the model code. The concerned minister should be charged by the EC. **PH Hema Sagar, Secunderabad**

#### Sandeshkhali hearing

Ref: *Shame if even 1 victim's affidavit is true: Cal HC* (Apr 5). The Calcutta High Court made a scathing remark on West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee as it heard affidavits from victims in Sandeshkhali ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. The unreported and dark deeds of the TMC are hogging the limelight now. **S Lakshmi, Hyderabad**

#### Women's votes

Ref: *Surjewala's Hema Malini remarks 'vile, sexist': BJP* (Apr 5). Randeep Surjewala is known for his controversial comments, but this one was demeaning and derogatory, not just for Mathura MP Hema Malini but for womankind as a whole. This may cost the party women's votes in the coming elections. **Jayanthi Ramani, Trichy**



## Voting is Boring, And The Kids Are Alright

Don't worry, once older, they'll get in the groove

As the bard sings, 'You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.' But some number-crunching helps convert apocrypha to facts. And the fact of the matter is, voting is boring, at least for 62% of 18-19-year-olds eligible to vote for the first time. With only 38% of this demographic — about 1.85 cr citizens — having enrolled to vote in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, and the possibility of further attrition not unlikely, it is as much about the nature of the sport of voting as it is about the 'players': voters. Like Test cricket, elections are no longer exciting, and certainly not when pitched as 'duty' to a teen. And this has been the trend for a while now, considering the 2019 polls saw about 1.5 cr first-time voters, actually 23% less than in this round. If voting was an FMCG sector industry, marketing budgets for this target group would have been slashed with good reason.

Elections now take place amidst far more other attractions than before — much of it happening online on a mobile phone screen. The stretched out 7-phase, 6-week marathon makes it even harder to pitch elections as a celebratory party of democracy, media overkill not helping. Ironically, even as personality cults — of sportspersons, celebrities, politicians — have grown stronger, elections serve only a small part of this function. To show support or admiration,

voting is just one option — and the least demonstrative one in an age of hyper-demonstration. Add to this the loosening correlation between political results and the *reason* for one's vote — candidates swapping camps, parties pitched against each other finding themselves aligned to each other post-polls, etc — and voting is less 'participatory' than believers believe. And smart kids know that.

Issues like merit-based exams, jobs, personal freedom and migration plans bear little bearing to electoral promises or deliveries where life seems only socially-engineered. So, is it all doom and gloom? Not quite, since as anyone who was once 18-19 knows, those eligible to vote for the first time will become older over time, and get into the spirit of things. As the 9% increase in the number of total registered voters from 2019 shows.

## Foreign Job-Seekers, Look Before You Leap

Rising aspirations, better quality of life and possibilities of earning more are making working abroad increasingly attractive. But the rising demand is also creating opportunities for fly-by-night operators who are turning the dream sour for many. The latest case of nearly 300 Indians rescued from Cambodia — where instead of promised IT jobs, 'successful' candidates were inducted into cyberfraud operations — is cautionary.

It is well-nigh impossible to completely block these scamsters, especially as social media has become a tool to reach target(ed) audiences. Increased vigilance, rigorous regulations, improved access to information, awareness campaigns and easy access to verification mechanisms are the antidote. All that glitters is not gold. Job-seekers need to be able to identify the Real McCoy. GoI must design and enforce regulations fit for purpose and keep up with changing practices of these 'recruiters'. Job-seekers like Azad Yousuf Kumar of Pulwama in J&K — who was recruited via YouTube to work in West Asia, only to find himself fighting with Russian mercenaries in Ukraine — should be able to verify offers. Many recruiters operate in cyberspace. Absence of brick-and-mortar establishments means making registration mandatory is not enough of a safeguard. Mechanisms like toll-free numbers for job-seekers to seek a verification check should be put in place. Regulations and support must span the spectrum — from unskilled to highly skilled specialists.

Government and other stakeholders must work with schools, colleges, training outfits and local authorities to increase awareness. Partnerships with other governments sharing information to identify and take action against fraud need to be enhanced.



### JUST IN JEST

Diplomacy can be so dripping with utter nonsense that it's sheer genius

## When Russian Oil Stops Being Russian

The US is like that friend who *always* has an excuse for everything. It gets busy meddling in some foreign country's affairs telling itself, 'We must save democracy.' But when it's chilling, you can bet there's some other sneaky plan brewing with a bizarre reasoning to back it up. Earlier this week, Anna Morris, acting assistant secretary for terrorist financing, found herself in a pickle when asked about India's continued infatuation with Russian oil amid all the Ukrainian drama. Why would the US turn a blind eye to this oily love affair? There could be many reasons: maybe it's because the US and India are like two peas in a pod, sharing friendship bracelets and secret handshakes. Or, perhaps, it's a strategic game of geopolitical chess, and India's move to cosy up with Moscow is another pawn sacrifice. Or, maybe, Uncle Sam is too preoccupied with his own dramas to gaze at other navels.

But hold your ghee-laden purse. The real gem of wisdom dropped by Morris was, well, a wisegem. According to her, once Russian oil gets refined, it magically sheds its Russian identity faster than a spy changing disguises. So, next time you're indulging in a deep-fried delicacy, don't sweat the greasy details. By Morris logic, once that puri hits your plate fresh off the kadhai, it's a health food exorcised of all oiliness.

Health equity is of vital economic importance, especially for India becoming viksit desh by 2047

## Healthy Is Wealthy & Wise



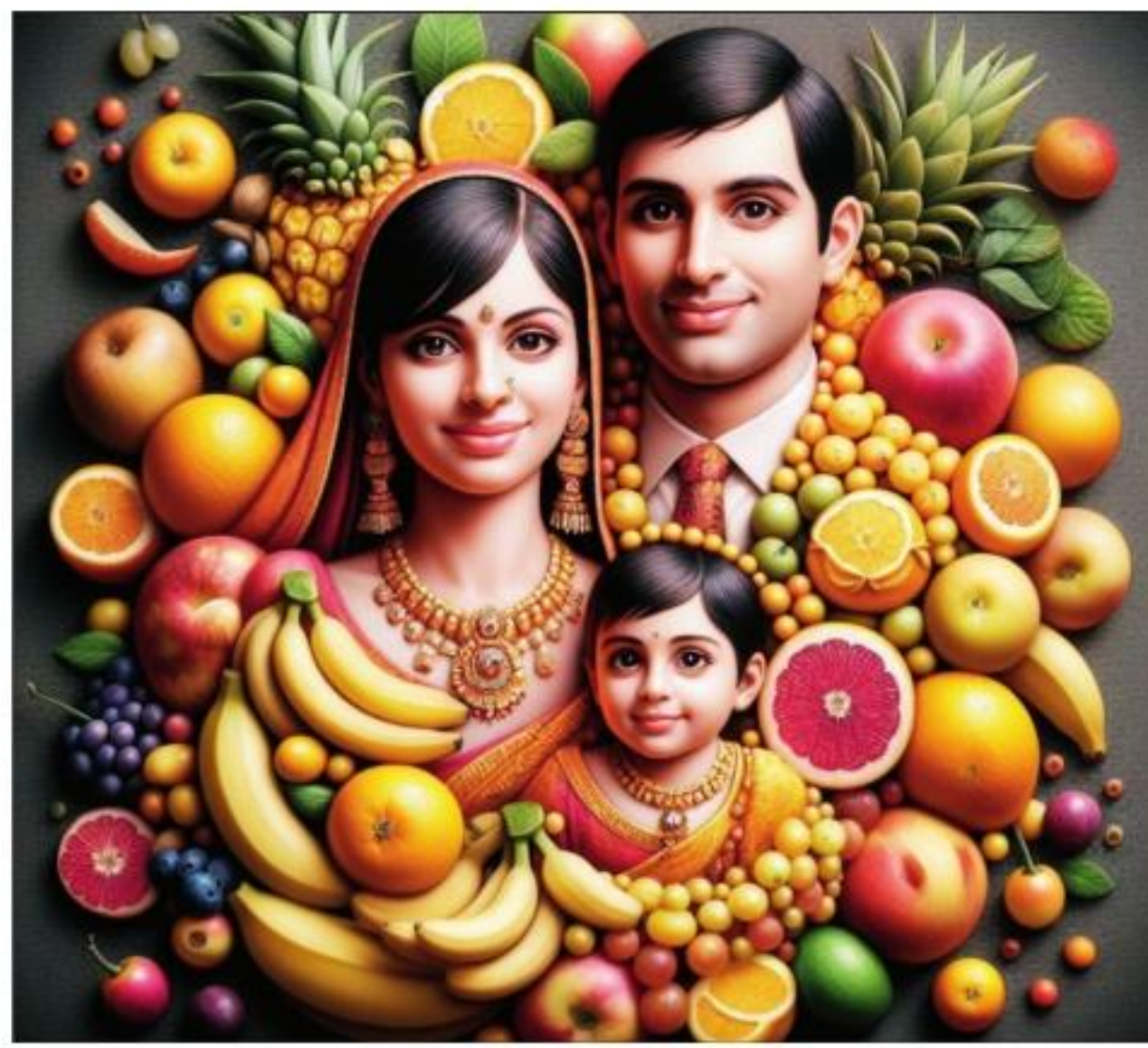
Sigal Atzmon

In 1948, WHO's constitution declared that 'enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being'. In the decades since then, the world has seen significant advances toward equity in health, but there's still a lot to do. Addressing health inequity means ensuring that a person in a remote village has the same access to preventive care, nutrition and healthcare as someone in a city.

Ensuring health equity in a country as vast and diverse as India is challenging. Despite developments in healthcare infra and services such as Ayushman Bharat, there are challenges to equitable healthcare access due to the diverse geographical spread and large population. Addressing the gap in access to quality healthcare between urban and rural populations, various socioeconomic groups and even between people of different genders is a moral imperative and a strategic necessity for India's growth.

This is because health inequity has a definite economic impact. A McKinsey report in Harvard Business Review in 2020 indicates that poor health can reduce global GDP by 15% each year.

Better health is linked to increased productivity, demographic effects and education outcomes. Healthier children are more capable of learning effectively in school and college. Improved education outcomes will, in the long term, translate to a better-educated workforce, contributing to economic growth. It is estimated that health improvement contributed to one-third of GDP per capita growth of developed economies in the last century. Bet-



Fruits of prosperity

ter health can add \$12 tn to global GDP by 2040.

Gains in life expectancy have positively affected economic growth in India. The country's life expectancy at birth increased from 29 years in 1930 to 60 years in 1990. Growth in life expectancy by 9.1 years since 1990 has been accompanied by a growth in GNI per capita of around 287%.

Average life expectancy increased from 62.7 years in 2021 to 67.7 years in 2022, with a 6.3% jump in the GNI per capita. Today, average life expectancy in India is around 70 years and is expected to reach as high as 82 years by the end of this century.

Many countries have prioritised health equity through comprehensive healthcare systems that ensure universal access to quality care. These

Urban centres have advanced facilities, while rural areas lack even basic infrastructure. High healthcare costs push many into financial distress, more so when there is no adequate insurance coverage



Urban centres have advanced facilities, while rural areas lack even basic infrastructure. High healthcare costs push many into financial distress, more so when there is no adequate insurance coverage

nations enjoy high health standards, economic competitiveness and social harmony, highlighting how health equity is a pivotal component of sustainable development. Challenges to health equity include:

- Imbalanced resource allocation.
- Limited physical access to quality health services.
- Inadequate human resources.
- High out-of-pocket health expenditures (OOPE).
- Medical inflation.
- Behavioural factors that affect the demand for appropriate healthcare.

India has centres of medical excellence attracting global patients, while millions struggle to gain access to even basic services. Urban centres have advanced facilities, while rural areas lack even basic infrastructure. High healthcare costs push many into financial distress, more so when there is no adequate insurance coverage.

A decrease in OOPE as a percentage of total health expenditure from a staggering 64.2% in FY14 to 48.2% in FY19 may seem like progress. But it is still significantly above reasonable limits. India has the advantage of a relatively young population, and this dividend is expected to peak around 2041, with 59% of the population in the

working age of 20-59 years. This advantage is likely to remain until 2055-56, and it is critical to ensure the health of this demographic dividend if India is to get the maximum economic benefit from it.

However, while India has the largest cohort of young people, the population above 60 is expected to double from 10.5% in 2022 to 20.85% by 2050. If the healthcare infrastructure does not keep pace, this can strain it and increase the risk of health inequities, affecting all age groups and impacting the pace of economic growth.

Embracing health equity means:

- Increasing investments in rural healthcare infrastructure.
- Enhancing quality of public health services.
- Promoting preventive healthcare.
- Making health insurance more inclusive and accessible.
- Leveraging tech through telemedicine and e-health services to bridge the urban-rural divide and bring specialised healthcare to remote areas.

The journey towards health equity requires efforts and collaboration between GoI, the private sector, non-profits and the community. Initiatives such as Ayushman Bharat and the National Health Mission must be strengthened further.

By fostering health equity, India can unlock its full potential, create a healthier, more productive workforce, and set a global benchmark for inclusive and sustainable development. In doing so, India will advance its progress, and contribute to shaping a healthier and more equitable world.

The writer is CEO/founder, Medix Global



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Beyond Belief

J KRISHNAMURTI

We realise that life is ugly, painful, sorrowful, we want some kind of theory, some kind of speculation or satisfaction, some kind of doctrine that will explain all this. So, we are caught in explanation, in words, in theories, and, gradually, beliefs become deeply rooted and unshakable because behind those beliefs, behind those dogmas, there is the constant fear of the unknown.

But we never look at that fear; we turn away from it. The stronger the beliefs, the stronger the dogmas. And when we examine these beliefs — the Christian, the Hindu, the Buddhist — we find that they divide people. Each dogma, each belief has rituals, compulsions that bind man and separate man. So, we start with an inquiry to find out what is true... and we are soon caught up in beliefs, in rituals, in theories.

Belief is corruption because behind belief and morality lurks the mind, the self growing big, powerful and strong. We consider belief in God, the belief in something, as religion. We consider that to believe is to be religious. You understand? If you do not believe, you will be considered an atheist, you will be condemned by society. One society will condemn those who believe in God, and another society will condemn those who do not. They are the same.

So, religion becomes a matter of belief — and belief acts and has a corresponding influence on the mind that then can never be free. But it is only in freedom that you can find out what is true, what is God, not through any belief, because your very belief projects what you think ought to be God, what you think ought to be true.



BLISS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

## Supermarket Safari

Walking through supermarket aisles may seem ordinary, but it offers a whole array of pleasures that often go unnoticed. There's the sensory delight of noticing all those colours and shapes lined up neatly on shelves at every turn. You find yourself inside this geometrical pattern as if in a maze. From the fresh produce section to the aromatic bakery corner and the fish stall, each aisle beckons with its own distinct appeal. And, navigating the aisles provides a sense of exploration and discovery.

You never know what new product or tempting treat you might stumble upon, sparking curiosity and the thrill of the unexpected. Be it stumbling upon an exotic spice or a specialty cheese, the supermarket *galleis* offer a treasure trove of culinary delights to be explored.

Then there's a certain satisfaction in meticulously selecting items from the shelves, comparing prices and making informed choices. It's a simple pleasure, yet it fosters a sense of control and accomplishment, especially when decision-making has become hurried and automatic. People-watching — what someone is buying, another one is mulling over, yet another one looking lost — brings a certain anthropological joy to the supermarket safari.

and the thrill of the unexpected. Be it stumbling upon an exotic spice or a specialty cheese, the supermarket *galleis* offer a treasure trove of culinary delights to be explored.

### Chat Room

## Fire Israel for Its Relentless Fire

Appropos the news report, 'Biden To Bibi: Protect Civilians, Future US Support Depends on It' (Apr 5), the Joe Biden administration has done well to emphasise to Israel that safeguarding civilians is a condition for receiving US support. The US president expressed his disapproval of the attacks on humanitarian workers and the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, which has led to famine warnings by the UN. In recent months, Biden has grown more frustrated with Benjamin Netanyahu, but still backs Israel's right to counter Hamas, which is strange. Qatar has been taking the lead in ongoing discussions for a temporary ceasefire, which would involve the release of hostages taken during Hamas' deadliest attack in Israeli history.

But we have enough examples of Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea and China, which have seen their populations shrink and get older as their economies got richer. And the incentives rolled out by them for women to have kids have proven to be too late and too little.

In India, it may soon be time for policymakers to again popularise the 'Hum Do, Hamare Do' slogan. But this time around for family promotion, rather than family planning.

N J RAVI CHANDER  
Bengaluru

## Need to Go Way Beyond IITs, JEE



Suresh Prabhu & Shobhit Mathur

India's engineering aspirants deserve an education that prepares them for life, not just for an exam. It needs leaders, thinkers and innovators, roles that can't be fulfilled if the richness of education is reduced to the ability to choose the right option on a multiple-choice question.

As educators and policymakers, we must advocate for and build an education system that nurtures diverse talents and potential of our youth. We must encourage them to look beyond the narrow confines of JEE and IITs and embrace a broader vision for their education and future.

For decades, the IITs have been seen as the holy grail of engineering education in India. JEE, the rigorous test for entry into these hallowed institutions, is often considered the

ultimate measure of a student's worth and potential. Yet, this singular focus is proving to be a narrow, even detrimental, pursuit for the country's youth. Alternative institutions must rise to the occasion.

JEE is venerated as the arbiter of merit. However, the rise of industrialised coaching centres has muddied the waters, questioning whether the exam truly selects the right individuals for IITs. These coaching centres have fostered a system where rote learning and the ability to solve multiple-choice questions often trump genuine understanding and innovation. Instead of nurturing curious minds capable of innovative and flexible thinking, we are manufacturing generations of students who can pass exams but can't think beyond them.

The aspirational allure of IITs has imposed an immense psychological and financial burden on families and students. Extreme levels of preparation often required come at the cost of a student's mental health and well-being. Kota in Rajasthan, a coaching hub, is a grim testament to this, with a high number of student suicides illustrating the unbearable pressure the current system exerts.



Break out of parrot learning

True education should be a transformative experience, not merely a transactional one. It should cultivate minds that are inquisitive, empathetic and capable of critical thought. Subjects should be studied for their intrinsic value and the richness they bring to one's cognitive framework, not merely as stepping stones to secure a seat in an engineering college.

As sociologist Avijit Pathak warns, when education becomes a commodity, we risk creating a generation devoid of creativity and critical thinking essential for leadership and innovation. Students spend years preparing for a test that is inherently limited in scope, which can stifle their broader intellectual development. This narrow focus can cripple

## Time for Hum Do, Hamare Do 2.0?



Kiran Somvanshi

Last month, a study published in *The Lancet*, 'Global fertility in 204 countries and territories, 1950-2021, with forecasts to 2100', projected India's total fertility rate (TFR) — the average number of children born to a woman — to drop to 1.29 by 2050. India's TFR dropped significantly from 6.2 in 1950 to an estimated 1.9 in 2021, slipping below the universally accepted replacement rate of 2.1. However, India is not exceptional. The global fertility rate dropped from 4.5 in 1950 to 2.2 in 2021.

The global push for rolling out sustainability initiatives to save Earth and its environment will matter little, at least to humans, if there are no humans left to live on in a few generations. Natural reduction of the fertility rate may become the most effective natural tool to reverse climate change and save the planet.

A country's fertility rate tends to be inversely proportional to its economic growth. Countries with high incomes have had their fertility rate dropping below the replacement rate. For instance, in Germany and Japan, TFR has been well below 1.5 for over two decades. As India is on track to

become a \$10 tn economy, it must brace itself for declining birth rates.

While demographic and lifestyle changes have led to this global trend, most countries have failed to acknowledge and reward their women for the socioeconomic value of their ability to reproduce. Instead, women feel penalised by being unpaid and unrecognised producers, nurturers and caregivers. And even when they are rewarded, it is often too late. For instance, South Korean construction group Booyoung is offering workers a \$75,000 bonus for each baby they produce when the country's fertility rate dropped from 0.78 in 2022 to 0.72 in 2023. The administration has spent \$270 bn in incentives since 2006 to improve the birth rate.

The current global trend of increa-

sing women's participation in the workforce is encouraging in the way it rewards women economically, and increases their involvement in mainstream economic activity and decision-making. But there is an opportunity cost involved that a society pays in the form of a steadily declining fertility ratio.

For women, it is often about choosing between career and motherhood. Women join the workforce to meet the growing household expenses in an inflationary environment and/or to deploy the skills their education equipped them with. However, working women tend to have fewer or no kids to be as effective and productive as their male or unmarried female colleagues.

And this isn't a phenomenon of organised workplaces alone. In 5 women sugarcane farmers in Beed district in Maharashtra have been found to undergo hysterectomy in a bid to avoid getting periods, falling ill or becoming pregnant, any of which may affect the daily wages they earn from farm work.

Here's what policymakers can do to incentivise women to choose to bear children:

► **Gender balancing** These can come in the form of periodic milestone-driven payments in their accounts for their families' upkeep, or subsidies doled out to mothers while seeking housing, education and medical facilities. Men can be incentivised to be more involved in household work.



All the kids who're fit to fit

their ability to apply knowledge creatively in new contexts, a skill that is becoming increasingly valuable with rote work being replaced by AI.

Universities beyond IITs must step up to provide a more holistic form of tech education. Institutions must offer curricula that build technical prowess over a holistic learning foundation. By doing so, they can provide viable alternatives to IITs, thus expanding available choices to engineering aspirants.

A paradigm shift in the selection mechanism for engineering programmes is also overdue. Many reforms have been proposed in the past to reform JEE. But IITs have no incentive to make the change. The present system serves them well as they get first dibs on talent. When competition emerges from outside the IIT pantheon, the system will be forced to reform itself.

By offering an education that values development of a well-rounded intellect, we equip our students not just to solve the problems of today but to innovate for a better tomorrow.

Prabhu is chancellor, and Mathur is vice-chancellor, Rishikood University, Sonapat, Haryana

kiran.somvanshi@timesgroup.com





### A thought for today

That night, the soup tasted of corpses

ELIE WIESEL, Night

## War On Food

Israeli strikes on aid workers cross all red lines

The Bengal famine of 1943, which killed 3 million people, was more the making of Churchill-era British policies than nature. In Gaza today, all 2.2 million residents are food insecure – because of Netanyahu.

**Accidental/Intentional** | For five months, they have been blockaded in, with more bombs than humanitarian support. This week, three deadly Israeli strikes on a World Central Kitchen convoy have halted its operations. Earlier, UN's relief and works agency suspended aid deliveries in north Gaza, after its convoy was struck.

Giving advance notice of their movements to Israeli military, known as deconfliction, is standard procedure for aid organisations. That over 200 aid workers have yet been killed, is now raising horrifying suspicions that they have been actively targeted.

**Outrage/Bombs** | The WCK incident, however, marks the first international casualties. And since citizens of Western countries were killed Israel has been more 'explanatory' than usual. And that's also why even Trump has conceded, "Israel is absolutely losing the PR war...losing it big." But will Western outrage allow Gazans access to the hundreds of million tonnes of aid idling outside Gaza's border? For now, US supply of weapons to Israel to drop on Gazans remains in heavier flow.

**Humanity/Barbarity** | Delivering food aid in warzones is kind and brave work. A moving commitment to humanity. We saw this during the pandemic as well, civil society organisations, including gurdwaras, stepping up to help the hungry where govts failed. WCK, founded by celebrity chef José Andrés, helped Israelis after the Oct 7 attack. It helps in Ukraine. As Andrés says, food is not a weapon of war; and yet that is what it has been turned into in Gaza. Israel cannot keep arguing, "It happens in war," as its actions literally starve Gazans to death. But who'll make the Israeli govt eat its own words?

## Pitch Perfect

IPL match hears what most of us don't

Mumbai's April 2 IPL match – between Bangalore and Lucknow teams – had a record first: a sign language interpretation of the cricket commentary. It follows another record first – last Oct, Supreme Court appointed an Indian Sign Language interpreter for a hard-of-hearing advocate. CJI said, "we're thinking, for constitution bench hearings, we'll have an interpreter so everyone can follow."

Make this happen. As a country, we're tone deaf to the needs of the hearing impaired, though India's home to 63m deaf and hard-of-hearing people, globally the largest proportion of population. India's done precious little to help either teach them their language of communication (Indian Sign Language), or incorporate ISL in teacher training, or in classrooms.

In fact, Indian Sign Language Research & Training Centre's website noted ISL wasn't even used in schools for the deaf. Advocacy led to GOI setting up the ISL research centre in 2011. In 2022, it was still struggling to compile a directory of schools for the deaf.

Far too many reports speak of affected children not following a word in regular classrooms, but allowed to 'copy' to pass tests. Add to that the push for cochlear implants as a solution, instead of improving communication by promoting sign language. The IPL match was made pitch perfect for hearing-impaired cricket lovers. Let's learn from cricket.

## Make Childhood Good & Phone-Free Again

Gen Z was the first to ditch play-based childhood

Kids are not alright, argues *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* by Jonathan Haidt. Between 2010 and 2015, rates of anxiety and depression went up sharply for adolescents in many countries, while older cohorts were unaffected. Only one-third of college students reported feeling anxious less than half the time or never. Self-harm and suicide rates also rose.

That coincides with the smartphone era. Gen Z is the first to grow up with a portal in their pocket, watching the shiny lives of their friends and distant influencers. Being 'forever elsewhere' is a profound transformation of human consciousness and relationships, the book argues. Pre-puberty is a critical learning period for language and culture, and during this period, Gen Z's identities, selfhood and relationships have been mediated through phones.

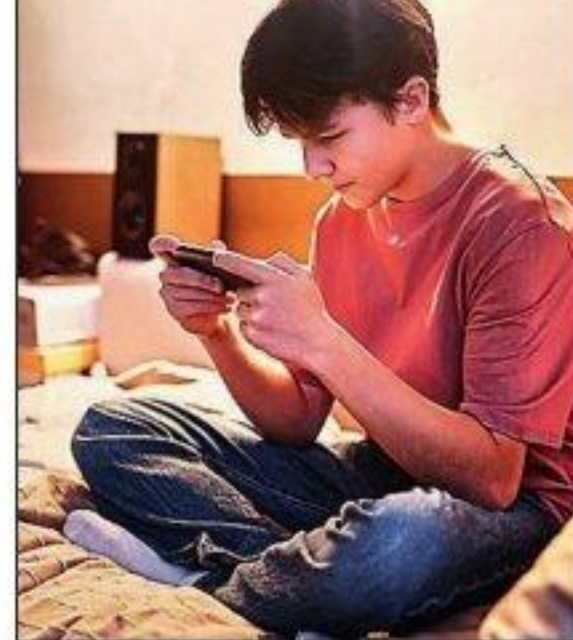
But this drastic rewiring of childhood is also about how adults began to over-protect children. Unsupervised play declined around the same time that personal computers took off, in the late 1980s. A wide discourse of stranger-danger and 'safetyism' took over parenting and schooling.

This blocked children's experience in basic ways. Humans have a long childhood to acquire certain capacities. Kids need to take risks and chase thrills, to be antifragile, learn to manage in the physical world. Face-to-face and shoulder-to-shoulder interaction and play attunes them to others. They actually need some acute stress to build emotional resilience.

Social media platforms, meanwhile, hijack the adolescent need to model themselves on others. They are designed to be conformity engines, and to exploit the human urge for prestige. Gen Z aims their social learn-

### mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



ing systems towards faraway influencers setting unrealistic and unhealthy goals. Selfies and social media occupy girls, while boys tend to be taken over by online multiplayer games, along with YouTube, Reddit and porn. Preteen girls are particularly vulnerable, more likely to engage in visual comparisons and perfectionism.

Parents struggle too. They can see the harms of social media and online games, but the world has configured itself so that anyone who resists screen-time is condemning their child to social isolation. Think of the opportunity costs of that time whiled away from social and sleep deprivation to attention fragmentation and addiction.

Internet adulthood starts at age 13: that's when digital platforms allow you to start an account. In ten years, reward centres of the brain are active, but the frontal cortex that determines self-control does not develop till one's mid-20s. So these kids are insecure, easily swayed by social validation.

One could argue that this anxiety and depression is caused by objectively bad conditions this generation faces – climate change, wars, political instability, and a precarious future. But previous generations have not been laid low by external situations, they have been energised by it to take collective action. Today, world events are pumped in through their phones, not as news but as emotionally loaded stories, which have a different impact, as emotions are contagious.

What can be done about this? Govts and tech companies have to get their act together, recognising the harms and vulnerabilities of teens. At the least, the minimum age to get on to these platforms should be raised to 16 and smartphones should not be given to children before high school. Phone-free schools, plenty of play and childhood independence are essential.

# 'Manxiety' In Our Metros

Young men, no longer anchored by tradition & looking for jobs in cities, anxiously search for new masculinity. They join gyms, look up to stars from films, business & sports

Dipankar Gupta



When the old rural economy collapses it also brings down patriarchy, or the traditional authority of male family elders. Yet, because the household still expects men to be providers, they are sent out to cities foraging for jobs but without a route map or compass.

The lonely, fearful male migrant, now uncertain of every leaden step, soon develops an acute case of manxiety. Patriarchy's shade, so ample in the village, shrinks quickly under the high urban sun. Neither the authority of fathers and uncles, nor the oligarchy of male cousins can offer comfort. Manxiety steps in when migrants step out into the urban unknown and compete against other men for the rules of engagement are very different.

The new migrant soon begins to resent the privileged few who are smugly cocooned by their urban connections. BJP's distinction between "naamdar" (descendants of privileged) and "kaamdar" (children of toil) evocatively depicts this combative sentiment, an attitude further reaffirmed by the 2016 demonetisation. The urban underclass now felt that Modi, with this move, had properly deflated the bloated "naamdars".

### Once upon a time in Europe

Such things don't happen only in India. Men were racked by similar bouts of manxiety after the social mashup 19th century Europe suffered on account of industrialisation and anti-monarchical uprisings. Workers, again, portrayed the urban elite as spoiled rotten.

What wells up, soon enough, is the longing for a masculine image that best expresses the turmoil men must endure in an alien urban setting. If Lord Ram is idolised today it is because he symbolises a valiant battle against demonic forces. Now with faithful Hanuman alongside, male aspirations seem like a righteous goal; a just struggle of the weak against the strong.

In post-revolution France too, a similar mood emerged. Jacobins found the flag waving Marianne,

that so enthused citizens against the monarchy, not inspiring enough in their fight against the remaining naamdars. They rooted instead for Hercules with his foot on the hydra-headed monster representing the corrupt elite.

Manxiety develops as patriarchy loses its grip, and out of this masculinity evolves. No longer are elders the role models, but self-made men. Hence, snippets from APJ Abdul Kalam's life rank high among 18/30-year-old male subscribers of OMTV. Now, here was a true kaamdar who, from humble origins,

and only around 4% are in engineering trades. 80% of MSMEs too are owned by men. Also, men migrate mostly for work, while women for marriage.

Masculinity does not focalise women but looks up instead to men, from business, films and sports, who triumphed on their own. Masculinity also tempts youth to sculpt their physiques with an imaginary ideal in mind. This turn is largely because the body is the one area, in this fickle world, over which men believe they have some control.

Unsurprisingly, exercise equipment sales in India are growing 8% annually, fitness app downloads rose 157% just between Q1 and Q2 of 2020. Movie stars too, like SRK and Salman, look like animated muscular cutouts. This attracts men in the age group of 20-29 who visit film halls three times more often than women.

It is tempting to bundle masculinity with atrocities against women, but not so quick. It can give one a muscle pull because when it comes to rape and crimes against women, Punjab's rank in India is a low 19th and 25th respectively. This notwithstanding the immense popularity of late rap musician, Siddhu Moosewala, who lyricised guns and violence.

### The lonely side

What really hurts is when masculinity tips men over the brink to suicide. According to a recent Lancet article, 75% of those who die by suicide are men, many economically precarious youths. The suicide rate in India increased from 6.3 per lakh in 1978 to 12.4 per lakh today, almost apace with the 44% urban growth our last Census recorded.

Without patriarchy's protection, men's vulnerabilities surface and this sets off an urge to prove their masculine worthiness, primarily to themselves. In time, and this process has already begun, urbanisation's clean fuel will disintegrate joint families and propel women into technical education and skilled jobs. IITs today are not quite the male bastions they used to be.

Men will then no longer be cast as the main family earner, thus easing their manxiety. Tagore once wrote that ants grow wings before they perish. With some luck, and along the same lines, if men grow muscles, before long, manxiety too might perish.

The writer is a sociologist



became the President of India. These manxiety burdened men are usually urban migrants, less than 30 years old. As roughly 70% of people above 60 live in villages, urban India becomes the land for the young and restless. Only a minority of migrants are illiterate, only 14% are graduates. These new urbanites are young, restless, yes, but also qualified.

### It's not about women

At this point, a quick impression needs a correction. Manxiety is not because men are competing against women, but rather against other men. Women are not threatening as just about 5% of them have salaried jobs

## 'Our Ideas Have Always Mattered'

A member of Congress's manifesto committee argues his party's just-released policy programme provides the template for addressing India's 'fundamental challenges'

Amitabh Dubey



BJP's failings in its decade in power are no secret. People are being asked now to wait till 2047. However, someone has to actually represent people and govern meanwhile, which is what Congress knows something about. As the party that built most of the institutions, brought in economic liberalisation and built the social safety net – MGNREGA and National Food Security Act – that saved India during Covid and subsequent distress, its ideas have always mattered. Enter Congress's Nyay Patra manifesto.

**It's all about jobs** | Rahul Gandhi's *Bharat Jodo Yatra* encountered large numbers of unemployed men and women. Jobs for large numbers of hopeful, restless young people is the central economic challenge of our time. Economist Santosh Mehrotra estimates, using PLFS data, that the number of unemployed has risen from 1 crore (2012) to 4 crore (2022). The State of Working India 2023 report by Azim Premji University found that 42% of graduates under 25 are unemployed.

Congress manifesto deals with this crisis in two ways. The short-term solution is an expansion in govt employment. This includes 30 lakh positions under the *Bharti Bharosa* scheme in the central govt, central educational institutions, hospitals, healthcare centres and paramilitary forces. Counter to conventional wisdom, the Indian state is highly understaffed – India has only 16 public employees per 1,000 people, while even US has 77, China has 57 and Norway has 159, as economist Karthik Murlidharan reveals.

But govt can't do everything. Private sector employment is the key. To start with, the *Pehli Naukri Pakki* scheme will provide graduates and diploma holders below the age of 25 with the right to a one-year apprenticeship. They will be paid ₹1 lakh shared equally by employers and govt. Companies with 30+ employees

are already required to hire apprentices under the 1961 Apprenticeship Act. *Pehli Naukri Pakki* converts this into a tangible right.

Beyond apprenticeship, Congress will set up an employment-linked incentive (ELI) scheme that gives companies tax breaks for creating secure, good quality jobs. The existing production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme has mostly given subsidies to capital-intensive sectors like electronics, automobiles and pharmaceuticals where relatively few additional jobs are generated.

Not everyone wants a salaried job. Many young people want to set up their own businesses, but don't have professional or educational networks to get invited to incubators in Gurgaon or Bengaluru or shows like Shark Tank. For young people under 40, Congress will set up a ₹5,000 crore professionally-run *Yuva Roshni* fund. This will be mandated to fund businesses in every district of India.

We have promised a Socio Economic Caste Census to know how resources are distributed across our society. This is a diagnostic tool, and we will work towards widening opportunities for all rather than merely sharpening social and economic inequalities.

**Keeping women safe** | Fear for their physical safety still deters many women from participating fully as citizens and workers. One solution is to increase women's participation in govt decision-making. Congress will immediately implement the current govt's vague promise to reserve for women 33% of seats in Parliament and state assemblies. But we will go beyond this and reserve 50% of all new central govt jobs for women from 2025. This would only be fair: The All India Survey on Higher Education shows that 48% of students in higher

secondary education and 54% of BA and BSc graduates in 2021-22 were women.

Note that the 50% reservation will also apply to IPS. And the manifesto also promises 33% reservations for women in paramilitary forces. These promises represent a potential transformation in how the coercive arms of the state interact with citizens.

Vulnerability also inhibits women's labour force participation. The rate fell from 40% (2004-05) to 23% (2017-18) according to PLFS. Since then it rose to 34% (2022-23), but most of the increase was from women working as "own-account enterprises" or "unpaid helpers". Women will only move to where good quality, salaried jobs are if they can find accommodation, for which Congress will double the number of working women's hostels.

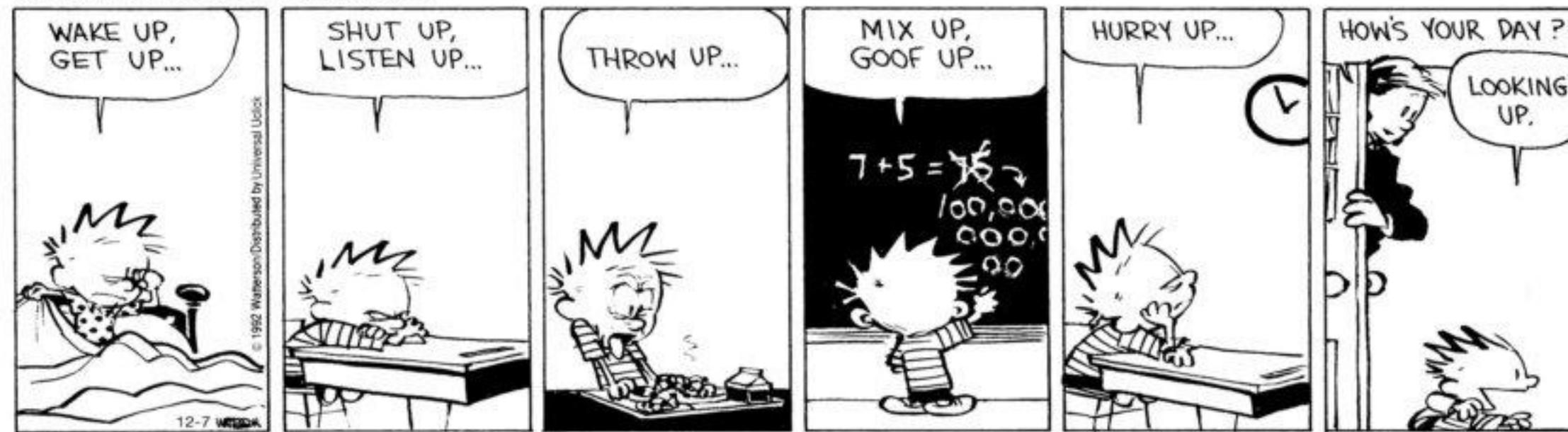
Many women face stigmatisation and insensitivity when reporting crimes. To counter this, Congress will appoint an Adhikar Maitri in every panchayat to provide women with information and legal assistance.

**Reforming our institutions** | Congress manifesto unambiguously states: "we promise you freedom from fear." This applies to everyone: businesses, citizens, institutions.

Concrete steps in this direction include: decriminalising defamation; a concrete right to privacy; assuring freedom in personal choices, compulsory counting of VVPATs; ensuring police and investigation agencies function in accordance with the law.

We will focus on hope over fear, and restore to Indians the dignity of being citizens.

## Calvin & Hobbes



## The Inner And Outer Worlds Of Climate Change

Jug Suraiya

In a recent conversation with Bill Gates, after urging caution regarding the use and misuse of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Modi observed that in some parts of India a mother is called 'Aai', and now when a child is born she says both 'Aai' and 'AI'. The light-hearted remark deserves serious reflection. Is AI becoming the mother of human invention?

In his new book, *Jung vs Borg: Finding the Deeply Human in a Posthuman Age*, psychologist Glen Slater raises fundamental questions about the essence of humanness.

The author embarks on his exploration by comparing the outer world of our physical environment with the inner world of our psyche. Slater references Rachel Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, on the environmental degradation caused by Big Business through its commodification of nature,

seeing the planet's resources only in terms of commercial exploitation. Slater compares this rapacious violence done to the outside world, with what the psychologist Carl Jung described as the 'desacrilisation' of the inner world of the psyche, by the increasing predominance of technological utilitarianism in our ways of thinking and living.

Slater notes that, in the decades since Rachel Carson's clarion call, there has been a growing awareness of environmentalism resulting in the now universal acknowledgment of manmade climate change and the dangers it poses to our planet. However, in "the world within us...the ecosystem of the mind...now faces its own significant disruption of data overload... This is leading to a world drowning in information and thirsting for understanding."

The man/machine distinction has

become increasingly blurred. AI has reached an inflection point in that it doesn't need human input to further its cognitive capability but has learnt to learn on its own.

Yuval Noah Harari has prophesied that just as our species, Homo Sapiens, replaced Neanderthals in the evolutionary ascent, we too will be supplanted by bio-mechanisms or self-replicating cyborgs.

While such claims remain in the realm of science fiction, Slater cautions that in the digital 'technosphere' which envelops us, "Virtuality has begun to displace reality, making the ground of human existence hard to discern."

To regenerate the inner world of the psyche, Slater turns to the Jungian concept of the 'collective unconscious' formed by the "instinctual patterns that shape behaviour and the timeless values that mould the cultural imagination".



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Sacredspace



The outer life is like a beautiful flower... inner life is its fragrance. If there is no fragrance... we cannot appreciate the flower... if there is no flower, how can there be any fragrance? So, the inner life and the outer life must go together.

Sri Chinmoy





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## At crossroads

### Desertions continue to plague Congress even as it releases its election manifesto

The just-released Congress manifesto heralds the vision for a new era of governance, promising radical changes to the existing political landscape. Led by party president Mallikarjun Kharge, along with former chiefs Sonia Gandhi and Rahul, the manifesto emphasises the need for a paradigm shift in governance, particularly in light of the BJP's decade-long rule. Much to its consternation, however, its rank and file are making a beeline to the camp of its arch-rival, the BJP. Undeterred by the desertions, the Congress put up quite a show to launch its manifesto, where the key highlights are the party's commitment to conducting a nationwide socio-economic and caste census. This move, aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of India's diverse population, is intended to make policies tailored to address the needs of every segment of society. Additionally, the manifesto guarantees a constitutional amendment to raise the cap on reservations for SCs, STs and OBCs to 50 per cent, signalling a commitment to social justice and inclusivity. This is perhaps its best shot as the Congress and its allies can harness disgruntled backward votes and corner the BJP on caste census. The manifesto promises to adopt the Rajasthan model of cashless insurance, providing coverage of up to ₹25 lakh for universal healthcare. It also pledges to address the issue of unemployment by filling nearly 30 lakh vacancies in sanctioned posts within the Union Government. The party vows to provide a legal guarantee for Minimum Support Prices (MSP) for agricultural produce, as recommended by the Swaminathan Commission, underlining its commitment to farmers' welfare.



The biggest challenge right now for the 'grand old party' is to keep its flock together and deal with internal dissent. The relentless wave of defections threatens to undermine its unity and electoral prospects. As if to stall this trend, the name of Robert Vadra for the Amethi constituency is doing the rounds. The Congress has proposed amendments to the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, making defection an automatic disqualification from membership in an Assembly or Parliament. Despite these efforts, the party finds itself embroiled in a battle to retain its members, with several prominent leaders defecting to rival parties in recent weeks. The timing of these desertions underscores the internal turmoil and challenges facing Congress. Attacking the BJP in its manifesto, the Congress underscores its commitment to protecting personal freedom, promising not to interfere with individual choices regarding food, dress, love, marriage, travel and residency within India. This assertion of personal liberties is aimed at resonating with a diverse electorate and emphasising the party's commitment to democratic values. As the Congress prepares to present its manifesto to the electorate, it also faces the internal struggle to maintain cohesion and unity within its ranks. The road ahead is laden with obstacles, yet the party seems resolute in its commitment to forge a fresh path.

## PICTALK



Muslims attend an 'iftar' during the Ramadan at the Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti Dargah, in Ajmer

# Afghanistan under Taliban rule

## Continuous obliteration of women's rights goes hand in hand with export of terrorism



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

Not content with robbing Afghan women of all their rights, the Taliban are pressing forward with measures that would victimise and humiliate them further. The latest indication of this is provided by a verbal outburst by its chief, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, who said, towards the end of March, 2024, in a voice message carried by Afghanistan's state television, "You say it is a violation of women's human rights" but "we will soon implement the punishment for adultery. We will flog women in public. We will stone them to death." The report (dated March 26, 2024) by Akhtar Makooi in The Telegraph of the United Kingdom, which carries the above quote, further cites Akhundzada, who was addressing Western officials, as saying, "These are all against your democracy but we will continue doing it. We both say we defend human rights—we do it as God's representative and you as the devil's."

What Akhundzada said deserves attention for two reasons. It indicates that fresh barbarous steps against Afghan women are on the anvil. Second, his use of the expression 'representatives of the devil' reflects the visceral hatred that he and the Taliban harbour towards the Western democracies. Further, the indication that the Taliban would fight against the West until sharia rule is established there as well, is implicit in his statement, also quoted in the same report in The Telegraph, "I told the Mujahedin that we tell the Westerners that we fought against you for 20 years and we will fight 20 and even more years against you... We will bring Sharia to this land."

The Taliban are proceeding apace in implementing the provisions of Sharia law all over Afghanistan. At this rate, why should it take 20 years "and even more" to complete the process? It would take, at the most, not more than several years. The time span Mullah Akhundzada mentioned makes sense only if he was thinking of establishing Sharia rule beyond Afghanistan—a move that would lead to conflict. Against this, at the Taliban's first official news confer-



ence in Kabul on 17 August 2021, two days after taking the city over, Zabihullah Mujahid, their spokesman, had said that they wished for peaceful relations with other countries and no group would be allowed to use Afghan territory to attack other nations. The Taliban, however, have not always acted according to their pronouncements. Mujahid had also said at the same press conference, "The Islamic Emirate doesn't want women to be victims. They should be in the Government structure according to Shariah law." What has happened in practice is well-known. Since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, women have been wholly excluded from public office, the judiciary and NGO employment. Women and girls are required to adhere to a strict dress code, covering themselves from head to toe, and are not permitted to travel more than 75 kilometres without a close male relative belonging to the category of mahram—one in front of whom a woman does not have to wear a hijab. Girls have been barred from joining secondary schools and women from tertiary education. Women and girls have been



INDEED, AFGHANISTAN MAY AGAIN BECOME A GLOBAL EXPORTER OF TERRORISM EVEN IF THE TALIBAN ARE NOT INVOLVED

banned from entering amusement parks, public baths, gyms and sports clubs. Those believing in the Taliban's profession of its desire to avoid conflicts, can refer to the fact that, as of now, the Taliban cannot win a conventional war against the West. This, however, is a reality that a rational person will recognize. The Taliban are fanatics. If nothing else, their unquestioning allegiance to their obscurantist and perverse version of Islam is proof thereof. Besides, their fanatical belief in their ultimate triumph against the West seems to have been reinforced by their ascent to power in Afghanistan after 20 years of war with the United States and its allies. The Taliban's conflict with the West may, doubtless, take the form of an asymmetrical rather than a conventional war, with terror strikes at the US, its allies and their interests on their own soil or abroad, as the principal weapon. Indeed, Afghanistan may again become a global exporter of terrorism even if the Taliban are not involved. As the 13th report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (ASSMT) of the UN Security Council, submitted on May

25, 2022, states, the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban remains close and is underscored by the presence, both in Afghanistan and the region, of al-Qaeda core leadership and affiliated groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). That this was right was proved by the killing in Kabul of the al-Qaeda supreme, Ayman al-Zawahiri, by a drone strike by the US on July 31, 2022. Terrorist outfits like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) are also active in Afghanistan. The former has been targeting Pakistan and the latter has claimed responsibility for the recent attack at the Crocus City Hall concert venue outside Moscow on March 22, 2024, which killed 140 people. Contrary to Zabihullah Mujahid's assurance mentioned earlier in this column, Afghanistan is becoming a launching pad for terrorism abroad. The world must take serious note of this, as it must of the plight of Afghan women.

*(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)*

## Yoga-based training to enhance athletic performance



ISHAN SHIVANAND

### Drawing from ancient yogic principles, this approach not only enhances performance but also fosters holistic wellbeing

The mental and emotional well-being of athletes is just as crucial as their physical fitness for optimal performance and overall health. Both professional and amateur athletes encounter numerous stressors in their training and competitions, which were further heightened by the pandemic, impacting their access to resources and support systems.



It is essential to approach athletic training with the lens of integrative healthcare to enhance mental and emotional resilience. In competitive environments, athletes face significant psychological stressors such as injuries, performance pressure, high expectations, and demanding training regimens, often leading to sleep disturbances, eating disorders, sports anxiety, and other serious issues. Sudden cardiac arrests (SCAs) are also a leading cause of death among student-athletes, with at least 1 in 300 young individuals having underlying cardiac abnormalities. Therefore, the ability to manage and recover from stress, known as resilience, is crucial

relaxation and reducing physiological stress markers. **Efficacy of Yoga-Based Resilience Training** Resilience training methodologies, rooted in ancient Indian Knowledge Systems, combine yogic, breathwork, and meditation techniques. The principles align with sports psychology, emphasizing mental resilience, focus, and emotional regulation among athletes for peak performance. Through non-invasive meditative protocols, athletes develop heightened awareness of their breath and emotions, enabling them to navigate competition pressures calmly and clearly. Studies involving cricketers have shown yoga's positive impact on physical fitness, speed, and accuracy. **Embracing Challenges and Opportunities:** The integration of Yoga-based Resilience Training into sports presents both challenges and opportunities. Sccepticism among athletes and coaches enables the traditional prioritisation of physical conditioning over mental well-being. Additionally, cultural misconceptions may hinder acceptance in sports cultures

unfamiliar with yoga-based practices. Logistical hurdles, including access to qualified resources and suitable facilities, further impact widespread adoption. However, these challenges also offer opportunities for dialogue, education, and collaboration. Open discussion and evidence-based education can dispel scepticism and foster understanding within the sports community. Collaboration across disciplines—such as yoga, sports psychology, and sports science—can tailor yoga-based programs to athletes' specific needs. Innovation in training methods, supportive environments within sports organisations, and ongoing research into their effectiveness are also vital. Addressing these challenges and embracing opportunities can allow sports communities to harness the full potential of yoga-based interventions to enhance athlete resilience and elevate athletic excellence.

*(The writer is a mental health researcher and Founder of Yoga of Immortals; views are personal)*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### INDIA'S MARITIME DOMAIN VITAL

Madam — Apropos the news article "A Tribute to India's Maritime Legacy" published on April 5, this is my response. National Maritime Day on April 5th holds profound significance, marking India's journey from maritime history to modern prowess. The maiden voyage of SS Loyalty in 1919 symbolised India's maritime aspirations, laying the groundwork for economic growth and global connectivity. With sovereignty over vast marine areas and rich biodiversity, India's maritime domain is vital for trade and livelihoods. As we celebrate, it's crucial to acknowledge the contributions of seafarers and maritime organizations. Gunter Pauli's 'Blue Economy' offers insights for sustainable development, aligning with India's goals. Amidst climate concerns and security threats, proactive measures are vital. India's initiatives like Sagarmala and Bharatmala signify progress, but more is needed. Modernising ports, enhancing infrastructure, and embracing technology can bolster India's maritime competitiveness. By promoting responsible practices and international collaboration, India can secure its marine resources and emerge as a global maritime leader. The future of India's maritime sector hinges on strategic vision and concerted efforts to navigate challenges while harnessing the vast potential of the seas.

Khirabdi Tanya Nayak | Noida

### CONGRESS MANIFESTO

Madam — Apropos the news article "Congress launches Ghar Ghar campaign" published on April 4, this is my response. Ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Wednesday, 3 March, launched the party's 'Ghar Ghar Guarantee' initiative under which it aims to reach out to crores of households across the country and make them aware of its "guarantees". Kharge launched the initiative from Usmanpur, Kaithwada, in the North East Delhi parliamentary constituency and distributed pamphlets on the party's 'Paanch Nyay

## A statesman's departure



Apropos the news article "A Dignified Liberal" published on April 5, this is my response. The editorial in the Pioneer pays homage to the illustrious career of Dr Manmohan Singh, a figure whose influence on India's economic and political landscape is unparalleled. Singh's journey from an academic economist to the Prime Minister's office is a testament to his intellect,

integrity, and dedication to public service. His tenure as the Chief Economic Adviser and later as the Finance Minister during the economic crisis of the early 1990s showcased his boldness in implementing liberalization reforms that propelled India onto the global stage. Despite facing criticism during his tenure as Prime Minister, Singh's commitment to inclusive growth and secularism remained unwavering. His departure from the Rajya Sabha symbolises the end of an era in Indian politics, leaving behind a legacy that will continue to shape the country's future. The editorial rightly praises Singh's contributions, acknowledging the profound impact he has had on India's economic trajectory and global standing.

Neha Gupta | Delhi

Pachees Guarantee.' The Congress' poll pitch is centred around 'Paanch Nyay' or five pillars of justice, namely 'Yuva Nyay', 'Naari Nyay', 'Kisaan Nyay', 'Shramik Nyay' and 'Hissedari Nyay' as well as the guarantees made by it to the people under these heads as the Guarantee of the BJP have failed which has become bogus and misleading.

The Congress will release its manifesto for the Lok Sabha elections in New Delhi on 5 April with sure Guarantees to the people who have been deprived of promises and the Guarantees for the last 10 years to force them to suffer and struggle by voting for the BJP to bring them to power.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

### THE RISE OF 'WATER AUNTIES'

Madam — Apropos the news article "The rise of 'water aunties' and sustainable solutions" published on April 4, this is my response. The recent water crisis in Bangalore sheds light on the pressing need for water conservation efforts throughout India. Exacerbated by factors like deficient southwest monsoon rains in 2023, this crisis underscores the precarious balance between water availability and population

density. India, with only 4% of the world's freshwater resources accommodating 18% of the global population, faces a daunting challenge in ensuring water security. Understanding the intricate interplay between clean water access, conflict, cooperation, and climate change is crucial for ensuring sustainable water security. Collaborative management of shared water resources, coupled with international treaties and agreements, offers a promising alternative to conflict. Empowering communities, particularly women, plays a vital role in addressing water security challenges. Initiatives like the ijal Network demonstrate the effectiveness of community-driven solutions in providing sustainable water access. Managed predominantly by women, these initiatives not only empower local leadership but also leverage their expertise and understanding of water needs. Replicating such models nationwide can significantly contribute to achieving sustainable water security and fostering equitable water management frameworks across India.

Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com





## FIRST COLUMN

### I AM THE ULTIMATE REALITY

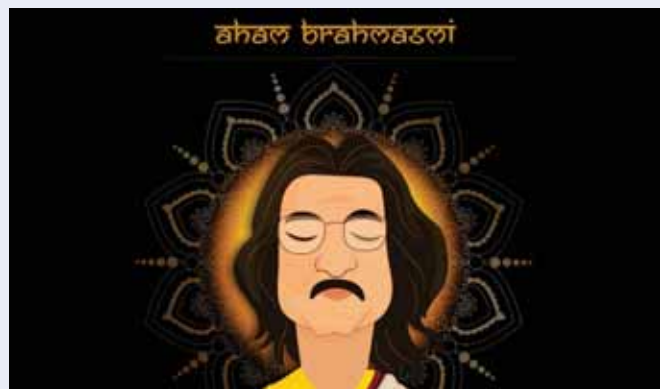
'Aham Brahmasmi' encapsulates the essence of Vedanta philosophy



SWAMI CHARANASHRIT

In the vast tapestry of Hindu philosophy, the principle of "Aham Brahmasmi" stands as a profound declaration encapsulating the essence of existence. This ancient Sanskrit phrase, often translated as "I am Brahman," carries profound implications within the context of Vedanta, one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy. It is a declaration of identity, affirming the indivisible connection between the individual self (Atman) and the ultimate reality (Brahman). Let's delve deeper into the meaning and significance of Aham Brahmasmi.

At its core, Vedanta explores the nature of reality and the individual's relationship with it. It posits that the universe is an interconnected web of existence, and understanding this interconnectedness is crucial for realizing one's true nature. Central to Vedanta is the concept of Brahman, the ultimate reality, which is formless, infinite, and beyond attributes. Brahman is the underlying substratum of the universe, the source from which all phenomena arise and into which they dissolve. Conversely, each individual possesses an inner essence known as Atman, often translated as the "self" or the "soul." Atman is not bound by the limitations of the body or mind; it is eternal, unchanging, and identical to Brahman in its essence. However, due to ignorance (avidya), individuals identify themselves with their bodies, minds, and egos, thereby experiencing a sense of separateness from the divine. Herein lies the significance of Aham Brahmasmi. When one declares, "I am Brahman," they are asserting the fundamental truth of their existence—that their true nature is divine and inseparable from the ultimate reality. It is a recognition of the underlying unity that pervades the cosmos, transcending the boundaries of individuality and ego.



The journey towards realizing Aham Brahmasmi is a central theme in Vedantic philosophy. It involves the process of self-inquiry (Atma-vichara) and spiritual practice (sadhana), aimed at transcending the limitations of the ego and realizing one's innate divinity. Through meditation, introspection, and the study of sacred texts such as the Upanishads, aspirants seek to directly experience the unity of Atman and Brahman.

Moreover, the realization of Aham Brahmasmi brings about a profound shift in consciousness. It leads to the dissolution of the illusion of duality (dvaitya) and the recognition of the underlying unity of all existence (advaita). This realisation is not merely intellectual but experiential, akin to the metaphorical tasting of honey rather than merely reading about its sweetness.

The significance of Aham Brahmasmi extends beyond the realm of philosophy; it has practical implications for daily life. When one recognizes the divine nature within themselves, they naturally extend that recognition to all beings, fostering a sense of compassion, empathy, and interconnectedness. This realisation serves as the foundation for a life lived in harmony with the universe, guided by principles of love, truth, and righteousness.

In conclusion, Aham Brahmasmi encapsulates the profound truth of Vedanta philosophy—that the individual self is not separate from the ultimate reality but is, in fact, identical to it. It is a declaration of oneness, unity, and divine identity. Through self-inquiry and spiritual practice, one can realize this truth and live a life in alignment with the eternal principles of Vedanta. As the ancient sages proclaimed, "Tat tvam asi"—"Thou art That."

(Writer is a spiritual guide; views are personal)

# Power propaganda nexus: A symbiotic bond



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

John Pilger's quest for truth amidst the cacophony of official narratives remains ever-relevant, urging us to scrutinise media's role in shaping perceptions

Amongst other great minds, last year we lost another exceptional man who was larger than life. But he left us with the essence to comprehend how the media evolved and aligned with the power to eliminate the powerless. He is John Pilger, who endeavoured to make others understand the everyday bitter truth about propaganda. I believe it's important to borrow some of his ideas and pen a few thoughts needed for today.

Not only the noise and disturbing content, but also our day-to-day news suppliers and other social media users conveniently monetize oppression and, as Huxley says, 'adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think'. Consequently, the state, as the regulatory body based on ethics and morals, has been weakened. Take our food supply, for example. A few companies are controlling everything by hurting small producers. What they don't realize is that by the time regulation gets enacted and filters down to the farm level, it always hurts small producers and helps the large producers. It's the revolving door. Don't eat healthily; only eat junk. There's only a small group of companies that control the entire food production. They're not only putting everybody out of business but also prioritizing profits over equal distribution. They are systematically manipulating the very right to food of living beings. Propaganda is the vein that follows the blood of this manipulation. The same goes for others.

The First World War, a catastrophic bloodbath claiming 20 million lives and leaving 21 million wounded, saw a desperate thirst for truth amidst relentless propaganda. Prime Minister David Lloyd George confided to C.P. Scott, editor of The Guardian, that if the public truly grasped the reality of the conflict, it would cease instantly. Yet, the British populace, starved of authentic information, clamoured for genuine news amidst the flood of official narratives.

In today's era of incessant news cycles, wars and armed conflicts persist unchecked serving as grim realities. Delves into the unseen dimensions of modern conflict, scrutinising the role of media, particularly in the West and other liberal democracies that hailed to protect and promote the emancipation of mankind, in perpetuating and justifying rapacious wars, is the need of the moment. Edward Bernays, a pioneer in propaganda, highlighted the power of manipulating the masses and shaping public opinion through covert means. His involvement in the US Committee on Public Information during World War I heralded the birth of modern propaganda machinery, cementing the insidious influence of media in shaping perceptions of war and governance.

Edward Bernays's ingenious manipulation tactics disregarded facts in favour of emotional manipulation, pioneering a strategy to sway public opinion by tugging at unconscious desires.

Utilising symbols like the Statue of Liberty in ruins or associating smoking with women's liberation, he forged powerful connections in consumers' minds, irrespective of truth. His legacy endured, evolving into a sophisticated machinery of war propaganda exemplified by numerous conflicts orchestrated by powerful nations such as the United States. The media, once heralded as a beacon of freedom, became entangled in the Pentagon's webs, complicit in disseminating illusions and false narratives. Had journalists rigorously questioned authori-



ty rather than regurgitating official statements, perhaps the calamity of war could have been averted.

The Iraq invasion, as Pilger observed, orchestrated through the doctrine of shock and awe, aimed to instil terror and dismantle the country's infrastructure akin to the devastating impact of atomic bombs on Japan. However, this campaign of destruction was veiled in layers of deception, with embedded journalists serving as conduits for the sanitised narrative dictated by the Pentagon and the Ministry of Defence. Despite sporadic glimpses of truth, the pervasive influence of embedded journalism and the echo chamber of 24-hour news perpetuated illusions and distorted realities, enabling the war machine to operate unchecked.

The toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue hailed as a symbol of liberation, concealed the brutal conquest underway, meticulously orchestrated to exploit media optics and control the narrative. The complicity of journalists, embedded within military units, stifled dissenting voices and prioritised official narratives, shielding the public from the grim realities of war. In the fog of misinformation and propaganda, critical scrutiny faltered, allowing the machinery of war to proceed unabated, casting a shadow over journalistic integrity and the pursuit of truth.

During the symbolic event of the Americans' arrival in Baghdad, the manipulation behind the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue went untold, emblematic of the control exerted over media optics. The image of an American soldier draping the flag over the statue's face signified America's assertion of dominance over Iraq, echoing the sentiments of ownership and conquest. Meanwhile, the invasion hailed as a triumph by Blair and Bush, failed to depict the grim reality of civilian casualties and destruction on the ground, with atrocities like the assault on Fallujah largely

omitted from mainstream coverage. Today's Gaza, under Israeli control, where just a few days ago seven aid workers, along with other unarmed civilians, were killed, is a continuation of this pattern and a consequence of media behaviour. The prime responsibility of media as voices for the victims, shedding light on the untold suffering amidst the sanitised narratives propagated by mainstream media, has been systematically veiled. In contrast to embedded journalists, who may inadvertently perpetuate propaganda, independent reporters like Wilfred Graham Burchett have historically challenged official narratives, uncovering truths that authorities sought to conceal.

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked not the end of conflict, but the beginning of a nuclear arms race and the era of the Cold War, characterised by the perpetual threat of annihilation. Secret conversations, such as the exchange between President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, reveal the willingness of leaders to contemplate the use of nuclear weapons, underscoring the gravity of the global situation. Despite the absence of a clear nuclear threat from Iraq, the Bush administration, bolstered by sensationalist rhetoric from figures like Colin Powell, and Victoria Nuland in the Biden administration manipulated public perception to justify the invasion or covert operations for "regime change", with mainstream media outlets perpetuating false claims and contributing to the dissemination of propaganda. The journalistic failures in scrutinising government narratives reflect a broader failure to uphold the truth and challenge authority, ultimately leading to disastrous consequences.

The repercussions of events in Syria, followed by Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya surpass personal sentiments, constituting a colossal crime. Aren't we experiencing the same in Ukraine? Journalists, albeit unwittingly, become accomplices to such crimes, contributing to the dissemination of propaganda. Despite illustrious careers, figures like Dan Rather acknowledge the presence of fear within newsrooms, stemming from concerns about job security, institutional pressures, and patriotic labels. Rather's admission reflects a broader need for introspection within the journalism community, urging a courageous examination of past failures to uphold truth and integrity in reporting. This is what we keep forgetting, or rather, deliberately ignoring.

Indifference to learn from history, led us to this recurrence of catastrophes and keeping the powerful in power. Learning from history isn't merely a quaint idea; it's an imperative for societies striving to advance and avoid catastrophic missteps. Herodotus, the revered 'Father of History', echoes across the ages, reminding us of the historian's solemn duty to rectify distortions of truth. Yet, in today's world saturated with mass media and communication tools, the dissemination of factual information morphs into a battleground. Cicero's sagacity warns against the folly of ignorance, spotlighting the perpetual infamy of those who dismiss the lessons of the past. Marx's incisive analysis cautions of history's cyclical nature, where tragedies replay as farces if wisdom remains unheeded. Santayana's sombre reflection underlines the dire consequences of historical amnesia, dooming societies to repeat their blunders. Churchill's declaration accentuates the peril awaiting those who ignore historical counsel.

Even Twain's astute observation, that history may not repeat itself verbatim but often rhymes, highlights the urgency of identifying patterns to avert folly. But what if we are truly entertaining ourselves with this folly?

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



THE TOPPLING OF SADDAM HUSSEIN'S STATUE, HAILED AS A SYMBOL OF LIBERATION, CONCEALED THE BRUTAL CONQUEST UNDERWAY, METICULOUSLY ORCHESTRATED TO EXPLOIT MEDIA OPTICS AND CONTROL THE NARRATIVE

# Soft power as comparative advantage for India

Soft power stands as a compelling force, often wielded through economic or cultural influence to shape global perceptions and agendas

Soft power is a persuasive approach to international relations, typically involving the use of economic or cultural influence. India has the potential to create its credibility using this non-tangible power. India is sometimes labelled a "soft power by default" (Wagner, 2010), and is believed to have substantial potential in this field. It was one of the first countries to pursue a soft power strategy, under the leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, long before the term was coined.

However, after the defeat in the 1962 war with China, India gradually shifted towards a hard power approach, and its foreign policy became more prag-



KAJLEEN KAUR

matic and driven by realpolitik. The Chanakya Niti of non-aggressive settlements; Gandhi's non-violence movement; the Panchsheel pact of peaceful advancement and a good friendly policy towards its neighbours all exemplify India's comparative advantage in soft power. The notion of soft power for Indians dates back to the Upanishads with the thought of 'VasudhaivaKutumbakam'. We can still vouch for our soft power assets in terms of the widespread acceptance of Buddhism; the popularity of yoga and Ayurveda; and belief in ancient universities which draws scholars and learners to India. To date, our rich, diverse yet

united, and vibrant culture, topography, cuisine, architecture and history attract heavy tourism. Not to forget, Indian cinema has helped popularize not just Indian actors but also the vibrant culture and craze for ethnic clothes. Besides, the only common religion of India 'Cricket' has empowered the dreams of every youngster in India and has helped create India in the international sports arena. Our present prime minister Narendra Modi has recognised soft power as an asset and has instigated several of these which have helped in the popularization of our nation abroad. The huge success of India's tenure as G-20 president has been well-acknowledged the



world over. Modi's catchphrases like 'now is not the time for war', drew international applause. Similarly, Atmanirbhar, Make in India and Swachh Bharat have become national slogans and have been able

to redefine and give better meaning to the age-old Pleonasm policies, and have also popularized India across the world. Besides he has played a major role in increasing the number of embassies abroad and also

reviving ties with regional groups ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and SAARC along with strengthening and intensifying with Eastern and South Asian countries through the East Policy Act, and the Neighborhood First Policy Act. These have helped draw commercial and strategic benefits for India. Ironically, even after recognizing the huge potential and benefits of soft power, we have several limitations in deriving maximum advantages from it. There is a lack of formal inclusion of soft power in foreign policy or its nature and scope. It takes a back seat to other important economic and security concerns or the hard power components. Moreover, soft

power has only drawn limited attention from scholars and policymakers. Even after a rich and diverse diaspora, culture and media, we have not made noteworthy efforts to formalize any policies in literature.

India being an emerging economy, will take time to stand tall against other developed nations in terms of hard power. But recognizing its strengths in soft power in varied forms, it should work towards further enriching its assets and using it for international trade, thus creating a niche for itself.

(The writer is an Assistant Professor Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, University of Delhi; views are personal)



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Tough stand on terror

National security remains paramount for India

**H**OURS after National Security Adviser Ajit Doval met a representative of Iran's Supreme National Security Council in Kazakhstan on Tuesday, Jaish al-Adl militants attacked Iranian Revolutionary Guards' premises in Rask and Chabahar and killed 11 security personnel. Jaish al-Adl is an extremist Sunni Muslim militant group that operates in southeastern Iran and the western Pakistani province of Balochistan. The terror strikes have reignited tensions between Iran and Pakistan after a lull. In January, Iran had targeted two bases of the Jaish al-Adl in Pakistan with missiles, prompting a retaliation from Islamabad.

The developments are of immense significance for India, which has been combating cross-border terrorism for decades. In his address at the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Astana (Kazakhstan), Doval stressed the need to shun double standards and hold sponsors, financiers and facilitators of terrorism accountable. He asserted that the perpetrators of terrorism should be effectively and expeditiously dealt with.

It is worrisome that Pakistan-based terrorists are causing trouble across the neighbourhood, be it in India, Iran or Afghanistan. Even as New Delhi has reiterated its tough stand on terror, *The Guardian* has reported that Indian spy agency R&AW was involved in killings in Pakistan as part of a larger strategy to eliminate wanted terrorists living on foreign soil. The Ministry of External Affairs has dismissed the allegations as 'false and malicious anti-India propaganda'. The report, which quotes some 'intelligence operatives of India and Pakistan', is in line with the ploy of some Western countries to cast aspersions on India's counter-terror measures. When national security is at stake, New Delhi knows how to tackle the situation without crossing any red line. The US-led West, whose war on terror came a cropper in Afghanistan and Iraq, should review its campaigns abroad before pointing fingers at a nation that has been bleeding from a thousand cuts made by its neighbour.

## Congress manifesto

Party must strive to regain credibility

**T**HE Congress has unveiled its manifesto ('Nyay Patra') for the General Election, with the focus on ensuring comprehensive justice by addressing pressing issues such as unemployment, poverty, health-care, farmers' welfare and social inequality.

To tackle the scourge of unemployment, the party has promised several measures — the creation of jobs, the provision of relief for students burdened by educational loans and filling nearly 30 lakh vacancies in Central Government departments. The party's proposal to provide one-year apprenticeship to every diploma holder or graduate below the age of 25 reflects its commitment to creating opportunities for the youth and fostering skill development. It has also announced a plan to provide a legal guarantee for procurement at the minimum support price, aiming to safeguard the interests of farmers. Among the other promises are the restoration of Jammu and Kashmir's statehood, the scrapping of the Agnipath scheme and the adoption of the Rajasthan model of cashless insurance for universal healthcare. The pledge to provide a national minimum wage of Rs 400 per day highlights the party's emphasis on inclusive growth and social justice. The proposed Mahalakshmi scheme, which would offer Rs 1 lakh per year to every poor family, marks a significant step towards poverty alleviation.

However, the grand old party needs to go all out to retain its support base and regain credibility. Facing competition from allies within the INDIA bloc, the Congress has its work cut out. Even as the road ahead is challenging for the party, a strong leadership can help other Opposition parties finetune their manifestos.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, APRIL 6, 1924

## Combating untouchability

IT does not require any extraordinary perspicacity to realise that the classification of a large number of Hindus as untouchables and unapproachables is not only a serious blot on Hinduism but a source of vital weakness to its solidarity and capacity for resisting any attacks that might be made upon it. It is a well-known fact that quite a large proportion, if not the majority, of the Hindu converts to other faiths are drawn from the suppressed classes. And considering the treatment to which they are subjected within the Hindu fold, it is not at all a matter of surprise that this should be so. On the other hand, the patience and forbearance with which the depressed classes have been enduring the cruel, unjust, and, in certain cases, inhuman treatment for centuries are, indeed, marvellous. We are, however, not directly concerned for the present with this aspect of the matter, but with its political and civic aspects. Of late, systematic attempts have been made by the enemies of India's political aspirations to make the existence of untouchability in certain parts of India the basis of their opposition to her demand for Swaraj. Attempts have also been made to defend the imposition of irksome and insulting disabilities on Indians in the colonies, on the ground that in India itself, the members of the distressed classes are not treated on a basis of equality. The extreme hollowness and the mala fides of this argument are quite obvious. But, at the same time, it must be confessed that as long as this institution will continue to exist, this argument will also be there, and that its existence is not at all calculated to enhance India's reputation amongst the nations of the world.

## Recalling the blood spilt on mountaintops

Doklam incursion, Ladakh standoff variants of the playbook exposing Indian vulnerabilities on its borders

NOUS INDICA  
RAJESH RAMACHANDRAN

**T**HERE is no greater medal of honour for war reporting than a benign piece of shrapnel lodged between the kidney and the pancreas. But unlike an old soldier, I don't want to retell the tale of the shrapnel that nearly killed me and left me grievously injured; but it is time to recall the Kargil War — if we may call it a war. In a few weeks, we would be commemorating the 25th anniversary of shepherd Tashi Namgyal sighting Pakistani regulars in Pathan outfits, digging bunkers atop the Batalik mountain range.

What if Namgyal had fallen sick or broken his leg? What if his yaks had not gone missing? (he was apparently searching for the animals when he sighted the incursion). These are questions that a national security state needs to ponder over before making Katchatheevu a political issue to denigrate a leader who had redrawn the South Asian map by tearing apart a hostile neighbour to create a new nation altogether. In the era before satellite pictures, a shepherd was all that the Indian Army had to tell it about its biggest intelligence blunder.

All intelligence agencies, including the military intelligence, failed in every which way — forecasting, detecting, thwarting or even ascertaining the number of intruders once the transgression was detected by the shepherd. A former commander of the mountain division that fought the war said as much. This all-round intelligence failure was neither acknowledged nor punished. Militarily, the



VALOUR: It's a story of discipline, integrity and commitment of the soldiers. TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

operation was limited to an area starting from the Zoji La and running 200 km eastwards on the Mushkoh-Drass-Kargil-Batalik-Turtuk axis, focused on 5-12 km of intrusion in the Batalik and Drass sectors on Tololing, Tiger Hill and unnamed mountaintops.

The air operations were limited to the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC), while the Navy was not involved at all. In that sense, it was not a full-fledged war. The Indians suffered a large number of casualties to get the Pakistani men to vacate the mountaintops without crossing the LoC or the international border. The intruders had made a big tract of Indian territory vulnerable. Any vehicle travelling on National Highway 1A was in Pakistan's crosshairs and any establishment in the region could be targeted. Even now, Pakistani trolls claim the possession of Point 5353 that offers them an overview of the area.

It was a saga of sacrifice for 559 bravehearts who laid down their lives climbing the mountaintops like ants. Without opening fire, Pakistanis could have killed them by simply rolling down boulders and that was the battle



The young officers and men who climbed 90-degree rock faces to brave bullets turned the story around to make Indians proud of their leadership.

mostly about — soldiers climbing impossible mountain faces. Still, if the Indians climbed the mountains, engaged with the enemy, fought them and threw even the last intruder out, it is a story that has to be retold many times. It is a story of discipline, integrity and complete commitment to the nation of those officers and men who staked their lives valorously.

Ideally, the first in this series of articles should have been the

personal account of the man who was involved in clearing the Tololing ridge and then capturing the Tiger Hill. He is still angry about not being given even a rough idea about the number of intruders, about having to see his closest comrade die in his arms, about being pushed into combat without any preparation, about logistics and just about everything else. But he decided to keep quiet. There are a lot of stories of Kargil that still have not been told, despite the many books, movies and opinion pieces that have been published in the past 25 years.

This Thursday, a British newspaper published a news story about Indian intelligence's alleged involvement in eliminating Pakistani terrorists in their country. Still, there is a lot more to be heard about Pakistani perfidy in inviting then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee for a bus ride on February 19, when it was actively organising the Kargil intrusion. Going by various accounts, the number of intruders varied from 1,500 to 5,000, making it indeed a massive operation. There were reports of Pakistanis building eight helipads on the Indian side of the LoC.

India in 1999 lacked spy satellites and actionable HUMINT (human intelligence), but was the West too taken by surprise or, as it had happened many times in the past, did it wink at the Pakistanis taking Indians for the bus ride to sign the Lahore Declaration? Questions of diplomacy, spy craft and operational efficiency should reveal vulnerabilities that push Indians into the traps laid according to the same playbook since 1947. The Pakistani army, which attacked Jammu and Kashmir in October 1947 in the garb of tribals, repeated the attempt in 1965.

In 1999, the playbook remained the same with minimal alterations in the sense that the Pakistani strategic objective was not to capture J&K militarily — which they know is not possible after the 1971 war — but to derail any possible peace effort, expose the Indian military's vulnerabilities and seriously sully its image over the J&K issue. The young officers and men who climbed 90-degree rock faces to brave bullets turned the story around to make Indians proud of their leadership. The immediate political outcome was Vajpayee's victory in the elections, after which he was firmly in the saddle for full five years.

Politically, it proved immensely helpful for the BJP's muscular hypemationalist image. In the din of celebrations was drowned forever a speech made by then US President Bill Clinton to both Houses of the Indian Parliament. On March 22, 2000, Clinton audaciously claimed credit for Indian soldiers repelling the intrusion: "... as American diplomacy did in urging the Pakistanis to go back behind the LoC in the Kargil crisis."

Returning to recent times, the Doklam incursion and the Ladakh standoff are all variants of the playbook exposing Indian vulnerabilities on its borders that need to be discussed. Let us hope *The Tribune's* Kargil series would be as popular and participative as the ones on 75 years of the Partition and 50 years of the 1971 war.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Only India and Pakistan can work out the problems between them. — Bill Clinton

## Remembering Ramzan in Iran

SUMIT PAUL

*Mahaal kuchh iss qadar badla badla sa hai  
Ramzan aur Eid ka maza bhi jaata raha hai*  
(Things have changed quite considerably/The warmth and zeal of Ramzan and Eid have gone slowly)

—Raj Manikpuri

I studied at a boarding school in Iran's capital, Tehran. My father was forever on the move, and I didn't have any siblings or relatives around. During the vacation, especially in the month of Ramzan, most of the inmates preferred to go home to observe roza and the school would declare holidays so that the children could be with their parents in the holy month.

Iran is predominantly a Shia country; its religious rules are slightly relaxed compared to those of its neighbour, Iraq. My stay at the boarding school during Ramzan was never an issue for the management or the warden. Moreover, my father requested the school authorities not to impose Islamic traditions on me, as I had no faith in any god or religion. I was the only non-Muslim, rather atheist, student there.

During Ramzan, a Muslim is not supposed to eat during the daytime, and he/she breaks the fast (roza) only in the evening. Yet, never did I go without food. The school management as well as the relatives of some inmates would bring fresh vegetarian food for me despite their roza. I spent seven years in that Iranian school and never experienced any problem regarding food during the month of Ramzan. No one even remotely suggested that I, a vegetarian, should eat meat.

The hostel management prepared vegetarian food for me till the time I left the place to pursue higher studies in the UK. Not only that, I would get *Eidee* (gifts) from my Muslim friends on the occasion of Eid. I would wear gifted clothes and visit my friends' place for relishing *sheer khurma*. My Iranian Muslim friends were aware of my sweet tooth. They would stuff me with all kinds of sweets.

In these times, when Hindus and Muslims are at loggerheads and fanaticism is on the rise across the globe, such heart-warming experiences serve as a beacon of hope for the beleaguered humankind. I remember the goodness of those people with tears in my eyes and recall English poet Robert Southey's immortal lines: 'And while I understand and feel/ How much to them I owe/ My cheeks have often been bedew'd/ With tears of thoughtful gratitude.' We still have angels amidst us. All is certainly not lost for humanity.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Promoting diversity on campus

Refer to the editorial 'Progressive guidelines'; the set of guidelines issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) for all educational institutions under its jurisdiction is commendable. It will help promote diversity on the campus. The recitation of the Preamble to the Constitution and the setting up of an inter-religious prayer room will help inculcate patriotism and respect for all faiths among the students. Besides, in view of the communal atmosphere in the country, it is high time that all communities reviewed their religious practices and traditions. Discarding the divisive elements and promoting those that encourage harmony are imperative for helping children grow into mature adults.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

## Fostering an inclusive environment

Apropos of 'Progressive guidelines'; the CBCI's directive to educational institutions for the recitation of the Preamble and to respect all faiths is welcome. Avoiding the imposition of Christian traditions and setting up inter-faith prayer rooms demonstrate the CBCI's commitment to diversity. Displaying the Preamble at the entrance of the institution promotes the values of justice, equality, liberty and fraternity. In a polarised society, prioritising individual dignity and national unity is vital for nurturing a sense of social responsibility among citizens. Other institutions affiliated with any religion should also emulate the CBCI's model to foster an all-inclusive environment for the true development of the nation.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

## Fostering a harmonious society

With reference to the editorial 'Progressive guidelines', the directive from the CBCI, urging schools under its jurisdiction to showcase constitutional values and respect all religions, is a step in the right direction. By emphasising justice, equality, liberty and fraternity on the campus, the body can foster a culture of inclusivity and tolerance. More such efforts should be made to help students grow into responsible citizens who create a harmonious society. Religion should be a source of solace for an individual, and hence, it should not be forced on anyone. The initiative

reflects a commitment to nurturing responsible citizens and creating a more peaceful world.

VUJAY KUMAR KATIAL, PANCHKULA

## Indian polls an internal affair

Apropos of the report 'Don't need UN to tell us poll should be free and fair: EAM'; External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has rightly dismissed a senior UN official's remarks on the conduct of elections in India. The UN Secretary-General must pull up the official concerned for overstepping his boundaries. The UN must stick to performing the functions it is supposed to. If the UN is so concerned about the integrity of elections, why did it not intervene when allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections were being made? Why did it not act when Chinese and Russian meddling in Canadian elections was suspected? People from other countries don't need to lecture India about how elections should be held here.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

## Double standards of US

Apropos of the report 'Varying stance by US on arrest of Kejri, Imran'; it does not behove the US, the oldest democracy in the world and an ally of India, to treat the cases of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal and former Pakistan PM Imran Khan differently. US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller was caught in an awkward situation when asked why Washington supported imprisoned Kejriwal but not the hundreds of political prisoners in Pakistan, including Imran. Though he dismissed the characterisation, he failed to address the difference in the approach.

VIJAYA SHARMA, BY MAIL

## Curb wastage of food

It is concerning that at a time when 78.3 crore people are facing chronic hunger, 19 per cent of the food is getting wasted. The menace of food wastage needs to be checked. The global goal to halve it by 2030 is commendable, but a hidden enemy hinders progress. Current methods for tracking food waste are not adequate. We urgently need a multi-pronged approach to curb the issue. This includes robust measurement systems for identifying hotspots of wastage across the entire food supply chain.

ANANSHA GODANI, UJJAIN



# Where Indian entrepreneurs can make money



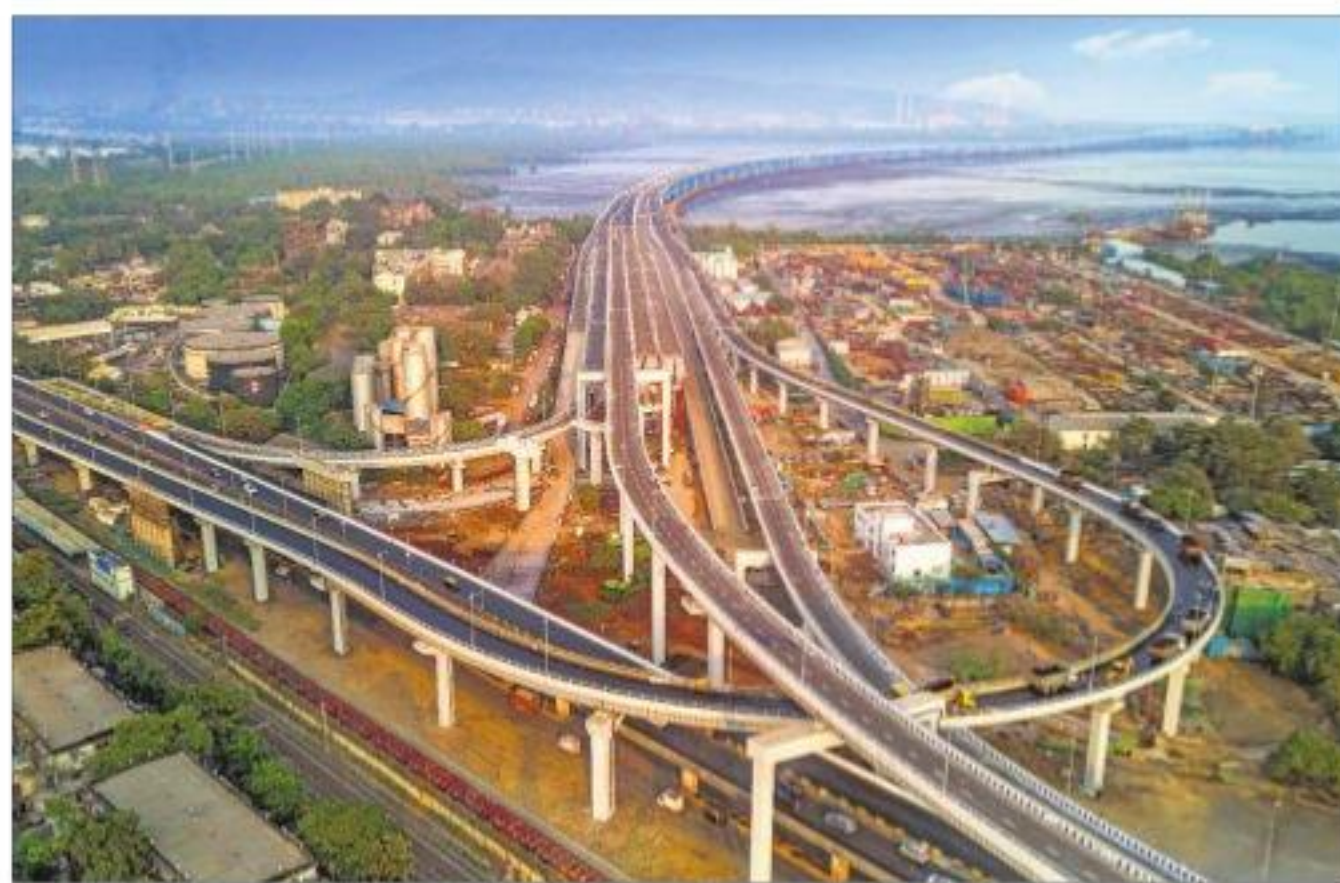
**AUNINDYO CHAKRAVARTY**  
VICEDEAN, INDUSTRY & INNOVATION,  
IILM UNIVERSITY, GURUGRAM

**H**OW much money does an average family need to live comfortably in a big city in India? Rent in a middle-class neighbourhood would not be less than Rs 30,000. School fees and education (including books, uniforms and private tuition) will be another Rs 8,000. Tech expenses like phones, laptops and mobile and broadband bills would average another Rs 4,000. Health and medical insurance would be roughly Rs 3,000 per month. A home help would not work for less than Rs 5,000. Petrol bills would be another Rs 2,500 or even more. Food — including eating out or ordering in — would be at least Rs 15,000. Electricity would cost at least Rs 2,500 if one had to run geysers in the winter and air conditioners in the summer. Add to this the average cost of durables such as cars, refrigerators, washing machines, TV sets, air conditioners, geysers and mixer-grinders, which could easily add another Rs 5,000 to the monthly expenses. If you add up all

these expenses, then a comfortable middle-class lifestyle would cost about Rs 75,000 to 80,000 per month. So, if a family wants to invest in a house or save for the future, they would have to earn at least Rs 1 lakh a month.

How many families in India earn that kind of money? Back-of-the-envelope calculations based on the estimates made by the Paris-based World Inequality Lab suggest that families at the 90th percentile make roughly Rs 1 lakh per month. So, one could say that households that are above that threshold account for the bulk of consumption in India. That would be about 40 to 45 million families. Out of these, most would spend a large part of their money on basic goods and services and provide a very small replacement demand for white goods and durables. To invest in big-ticket items, a family would not only have to have cash flow but also savings and assets of at least Rs 10 lakh. Again, using the same data, we can estimate that only those in the top 5 per cent of Indian families have that kind of wealth. That is roughly 20 to 22 million families.

So, if you are an entrepreneur selling a service, you can expect to be able to get roughly 70 to 80 million customers spread across 45 million homes. If you want to sell goods that are relatively expensive, your target customer base will not be more than 20 to 30 million. These



**HIGH CLASS:** The biggest contribution of the ultra-rich to domestic consumption is probably in the form of the infrastructure they use — expensive toll roads, air travel, high-speed broadband. **PH**

numbers are more or less consistent with what successful startups have managed. For instance, in 2022-23, Zomato had about 58 million unique customers (some of whom, admittedly, would belong to the lower-middle income groups), while Blinkit serviced 20 million users in November last year. Even telecom companies that learnt the hard way that acquiring low-paying users could lead to losses are now targeting 'high-value customers' to enhance their earnings.

Various estimates and surveys show that the size of this consuming class has been more or less stagnant for the past 15 years. While the share of the top 5 to 10 per cent in

the total national income has steadily grown, others below them have not been able to increase their consumption levels. This has shown up in crucial industries, such as automobiles: domestic passenger car sales, which grew at an annual rate of 12 per cent in the 15 years between 1992-93 and 2007-08, grew at just 2.5 per cent annually in the subsequent 15 years. India produced 11.1 million refrigerators in 2012-13 and 12.3 million in 2019-20, despite the fact that refrigerators are now bought even by better-off households in semi-rural areas.

If one looks at it from this standpoint, almost every large service provider and

manufacturer has reached a saturation point. There is very little room for expansion, other than the rate at which the income of these top 5 to 10 per cent of households grows and any replacement demand that they generate. Anyone who wants to make big money in India, therefore, has to find a niche market with very high margins and steady revenues. And that is where the rich come in.

The average monthly income of families between the 98th and 99th percentile (just below the top 1 per cent of Indians) is about Rs 5 lakh per month. These people live in plush homes in tony neighbourhoods, eat at expensive restaurants, buy organic vegetables, use boutique ayurvedic shampoos and soaps, travel abroad for their holidays and send their kids to the most exclusive schools in India. There are about 4.5 million families who collectively earned about Rs 23 lakh crore in 2023-24.

Above them are another 4.5 million families who are ultra-rich, with an average income of about Rs 15 lakh per month. These people are of very limited value to Indian companies because their consumption basket overwhelmingly consists of imported goods, from the almond milk and muesli they eat for breakfast to the bath gels and shampoos they use in the shower. They buy the most expensive foreign cars and decorate their homes with

expensive imported furniture and lamps. Their biggest contribution to domestic consumption is probably in the form of the infrastructure they use — expensive toll roads, air travel and high-speed broadband.

Their bigger role in aggregate demand is in the form of their investments in factories and offices and the inputs they consume — real estate, construction material, machinery, high-speed Internet, road and rail freight, shipping cargo, electricity, computers, cement, iron and steel. This is why the ultra-rich spur investment in international quality infrastructure — shiny offices, smart cities, bullet trains, super-fast highways. Most of these are entirely out of reach of not just the poor but even the lower-middle-income groups because they carry a hefty service fee. For instance, the new Atal Setu bridge that links Sewri and Nhava Sheva in Mumbai carries a one-way toll of Rs 250.

At the macro level, this concentration of wealth will make several industries highly profitable — high-value realty, infrastructure, banking, finance and insurance, luxury travel, hospitality and entertainment. Any young entrepreneur who wants to make money has this highly concentrated market to tap. The volumes will not be high, but the very high profit margins will make up for it.

Various estimates and surveys show that the size of this consuming class has been more or less stagnant for the past 15 years.

# Work out measures to streamline the grant of bail



**VIKAS SINGH**  
SENIOR ADVOCATE,  
SUPREME COURT

**R**ECENT developments in bail-related court cases are reminiscent of the context in which the provision for anticipatory bail was first deemed necessary. The Law Commission of India, in its 41st report (September 24, 1969), examined the steadily increasing tendency of politicians to try to implicate their rivals in false cases. The objective of such actions was to disgrace and shame them in the eyes of the public. The Commission asserted that even in other circumstances, it was hardly justified to arrest and detain in custody a person who was not likely to abscond or misuse his liberty. In *Gurbaksh Singh Sibbia vs State of Punjab* (1980), the Supreme Court recognised that there may be situations wherein the police are not free agents and may be used to harass or humiliate opponents. It stated: "That can even take the form of the parading of a respectable person in hand-

cuffs, apparently on way to a court of justice. The foul deed is done when an adversary is exposed to social ridicule and obloquy, no matter when and whether a conviction is secured or is at all possible."

These words have proved to be prescient in the run-up to the General Election. Leaders of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) are being placed under arrest one by one by the Enforcement Directorate (ED), which is controlled by the Central Government. The arrests have taken place under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, which has more stringent conditions for the grant of bail than for ordinary offences. Section 45 of the Act provides that a court may grant bail to an accused if it is satisfied that firstly, there are reasonable grounds for believing that the accused is "not guilty of such offence" and secondly, that the accused is "not likely to commit any offence while on bail". It is apparent that these 'twin tests' can only be satisfied on an examination of the case on its merits. However, at the bail hearing of AAP leader Sanjay Singh on April 2, the apex court indicated to the ED that if bail was opposed, it would have to pass an order that may adversely affect the case of the prosecution at the trial. The prosecution decided



**IMPERATIVE:** Courts should have the latitude to grant bail generously, unless the accused poses a threat to society or to the ongoing investigation. **PH**

not to oppose the bail plea, and the court passed an order stating that the 'concession' of granting bail to Singh would not be treated as a precedent, and that no comments were being made on the merits of the case.

The highest constitutional court of the land must ensure that justice is done in every respect. If there seems to be an absence of sufficient evidence, prima facie, proving the guilt of the accused, the same must be recorded. Non-recording of reasons also deprives the co-accused, who stand on a similar footing, of using the grant of bail as a precedent to get respite.

The AAP arrests have been made in the Delhi excise policy

Even in cases not involving political rivalry, bail remains a distant prospect for many accused persons.

case. The policy was implemented in November 2021. The Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi recommended a CBI probe into the case in July 2022. The issue has been in the public domain for almost two years. Certainly, no question of tampering with the evidence or influencing witnesses arises so late in the day.

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has been arrested in this case. The ostensible reason given is that he did not cooperate with the investigating agency in the inquiry. However, it is a fundamental right under Article 20(3) of the Constitution that no one can be forced to testify against oneself. Hence, the justification for the neces-

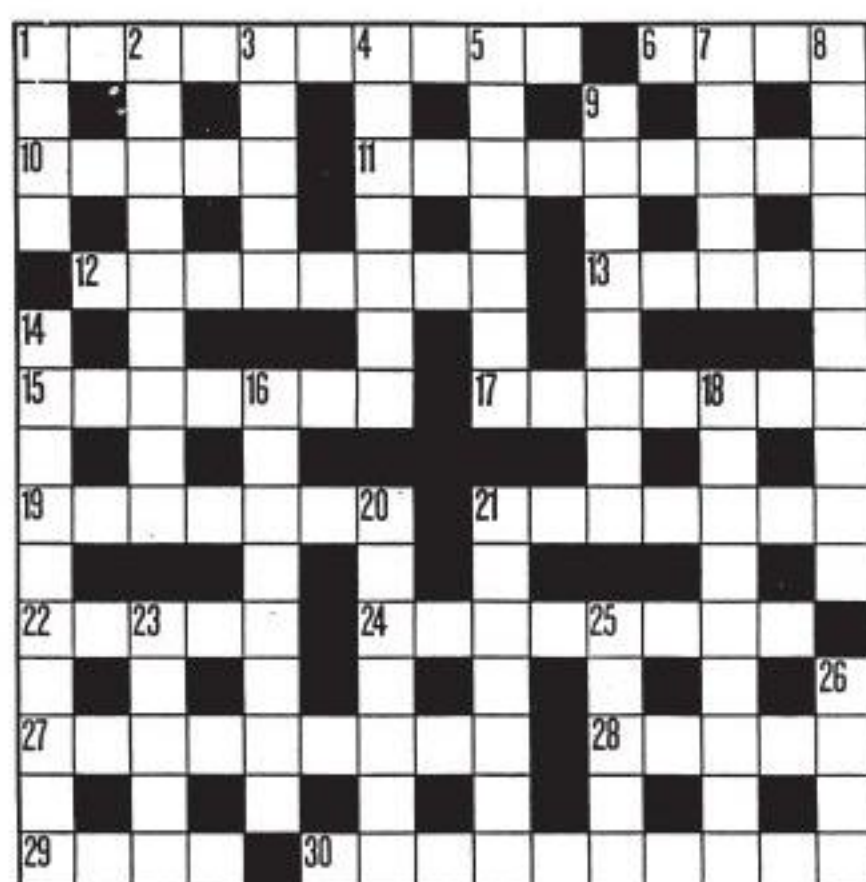
sity of his arrest does not hold water. This series of events should lead to introspection on the implementation of bail provisions in special Acts where "jail is the rule and bail is the exception". The police hold wide discretion in their power of arrest, which increases the scope of this power being used arbitrarily at the behest of the ruling party. This underscores the urgent need for reforms to make the police force more accountable.

Even in cases not involving political rivalry, bail remains a distant prospect for many accused persons. This is in spite of the legal presumption of innocence until one is proven guilty and convicted. For an undertrial to be deprived of his liberty for years on end, merely on the suspicion of having committed an offence, is a harsher punishment than any envisioned in law. In 2022, in a landmark judgment in *Satender Kumar Antil vs CBI*, the Supreme Court voiced deep concern over the massive population of undertrial prisoners languishing in India's jails. The court, in no uncertain terms, criticised the conduct of investigation agencies which automatically oppose bail, terming it a 'vestige of colonial India'. The danger of democratic India being seen as a repressive police state was highlighted. The

court went on to lay down guidelines for the grant of bail in four categories of offences, and asked the government to consider introducing a separate Act to streamline the grant of bail.

The *Satender Kumar Antil vs CBI* judgment is part of a long line of judgments that firmly base the grant of bail on the premise of the right to life and liberty. However, this often does not translate to implementation on the ground. The prevailing judicial principles must be strictly followed, and courts should have the latitude to grant bail generously, unless the accused poses a threat to society or to the ongoing investigation. However, in the case of convicts, bail should be allowed sparingly. The practice of using statements made by other co-accused or suspects in police custody to make a case for denial of bail must also cease. A statement under Section 161 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, is inadmissible as evidence, apart from the limited purposes of cross-examination or when such statements lead to the discovery of other incriminating evidence. It follows that such statements can certainly not be used to deny bail to an accused person, unless corroborated by legally admissible evidence.

## QUICK CROSSWORD



### ACROSS

- As an estimate (4,2,4)
- Accordingly (4)
- Wash with clean water (5)
- Notes made for future use (9)
- First-rate (3-5)
- Choose (5)
- Black and white in patches (7)
- Blatant lie (7)
- Bade (7)
- Sitting of a public body (7)
- Sudden convulsive movement (5)
- Spendthrift (8)
- Mistaken (9)
- Porcelain (5)
- Two-masted sailing boat (4)
- Inviolable (10)

### DOWN

- A founder of communism (4)
- To degenerate (3,2,4)
- Vast expanse of sea (5)
- Finite (7)
- One way or another (7)
- Depend (5)
- Slight superficial knowledge (10)
- Causing suffering (8)
- Furniture fabric, springs, stuffing etc. (10)
- Bitterness of feeling (8)
- Lack of life's necessities (9)
- An educational certificate (7)
- A surety (7)
- Direction indicator (5)
- Ancient Peruvian people (5)
- Innocent moral talk (4)

### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 In-depth, 5 Pupil, 8 On display, 9 Arc, 10 Yawn, 12 Judicial, 14 Gallie, 15 Luxury, 17 Implicit, 18 Herb, 21 Paw, 22 As regards, 24 Early, 25 Suggest.  
Down: 1 Ivory, 2 Dud, 3 Pose, 4 Hold up, 5 Physique, 6 Platitude, 7 Locally, 11 Willpower, 13 Military, 14 Gimpse, 16 Tigris, 19 Beset, 20 Agog, 23 Rye.

## SU DO KU

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

### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

### CALENDAR

APRIL 6, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Chaitra Shaka 17
- Chaitra Parvishite 24
- Hijari 1445
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 12, up to 10.20 am
- Shukla Yoga up to 2.20 am
- Shatbhisha Nakshatra up to 3.40 pm
- Moon in Aquarius sign

## FORECAST

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	18:44 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	06:04 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	35	19
New Delhi	36	19
Amritsar	32	18
Bathinda	33	16
Jalandhar	32	18
Ludhiana	33	18
Bhiwani	34	22
Hisar	34	19
Sirsa	33	21
Dharamsala	29	16
Manali	23	09
Shimla	23	12
Srinagar	20	07
Jammu	33	16
Kargil	13	-01
Leh	11	-03
Dehradun	34	15
Mussoorie	22	11