

Opinion

FRIDAY, JUNE 7, 2024



AI IN FINANCE

US Treasury secretary Janet Yellen

Specific vulnerabilities may arise from the complexity and opacity of AI models, inadequate risk management frameworks to account for AI risks, and interconnections that emerge as many market participants rely on the same data and models

Focus on rural distress

The new govt must increase allocations to the core rural sector schemes for the next five years

ONE OF THE major reasons for the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) subdued performance in the general elections is its failure to address the concerns of rural India. The distress in rural areas is evident from the sluggish growth in consumption demand. An analysis by Motilal Oswal showed that rural consumption increased by just 0.5% year-over-year in Q2FY24, the slowest pace in eight quarters. This is not surprising because while agriculture fared reasonably well in the FY21-FY23 period, growing at above 4% annually, this growth sharply tapered off to just 1.4% in FY24. In fact, in Q3FY24 and Q4FY24, growth slumped to below 1%, partly due to unseasonal rains that damaged crops and impacted sowing. As such, the production of food grains for the agricultural year 2023-24, estimated at 329 million tonnes, was virtually the same as in the previous year. While GDP grew at a robust 8.2% in FY24, the farm economy languished. Additionally, agriculture exports in FY24 fell 8% compared to the previous year; at \$48.9 billion, it was well below the government's targeted \$60 billion.

The neglect of rural distress, despite evident signs, is inexplicable. Government data showed that real rural wages had contracted in 25 of the 27 months leading up to February 2024. Rising inflation during the November-February period, between 7.1% and 7.5%, caused a sharp contraction in real wages. The pressure on nominal wages was partly due to the return of about 30-35 million migrant workers to their homes during the lockdowns following the outbreak of COVID-19. This reversed the structural change that had been underway between 2004 and 2019, during which the absolute number of workers in agriculture had fallen. The government needed to recognise that surplus labour would pressure wages and work to support the farm economy. Instead, it followed ad hoc policies that hurt farmers' earnings and their disposable incomes. There is also no denying that unemployment remains a major problem – a report in March this year flagged concerns about poor employment conditions: the slow transition to non-farm employment has reversed; youth employment is of poorer quality than employment for adults; wages and earnings are stagnant or declining.

There is an urgent need to frame a comprehensive policy for the rural economy. The objective should be to boost value-added products such as poultry, fishery, dairy, and horticulture, and to provide incentives encouraging farmers to diversify beyond paddy and wheat. Producers need financial and marketing support, as well as warehousing and transport facilities. Measures to increase farm productivity and incomes are essential to enable rural households to spend more and repay their loans. While fiscal support to rural programmes helped sustain consumption during the pandemic, the allocation was reduced by 16% in the 2023-24 Budget compared to the revised estimates for FY23. Although the reduction was smaller if food subsidies are included, there should not have been any cut in the first place.

The new government must rectify this by increasing allocations to core rural sector schemes for the next five years. Structurally, to ease pressure on the farm economy, the government must run schemes to skill and train people for non-agricultural jobs. To help revive the non-farm rural economy, where construction is a significant employment generator, the government should push banks to lend to developers at affordable rates. Banks and other lenders must also support micro and small business enterprises. Without a concerted effort, rural distress will only worsen.

Why Toyota's 'safety scandal' is a nothingburger

AT THE TIME when Japan's auto industry is at a critical juncture, it's taking an off-road the nation doesn't have time for.

The country's carmakers have had their reputations dragged through the mud this week, with Toyota Motor Corp. and other firms announcing, following internal investigations sparked by a similar brouhaha at Daihatsu Motor Co. last year, that they had falsified parts of safety-certification tests.

In a surprise move, transport ministry officials raided their offices, a step usually reserved for more serious wrongdoing. The news reaction was predictable: Many foreign media outlets invoked the phrase "safety scandal", while others termed it "massive cheating". The domestic press was, if anything, harsher: "Toyota testing scandal leaves another stain on Japan auto industry," said one outlet; another termed it "an unusual and shameful day in Japanese auto history".

But does this matter really require such self-flagellation? Here are some of the automakers' findings:

- Honda conducted noise tests using a different weight in the vehicle than that specified by regulations (although the weight used was heavier than required).
- In 2014, Suzuki failed to conduct a braking test when weaker pressure was applied to the brakes than the specified value (the model is no longer in production).
- Toyota used collision data simulating a pedestrian impact with a 65° angle, not the 50° angle required (even though the 65° angle results in greater damage).

While this isn't a comprehensive list of the testing lapses, none of it reveals a Dieselpgate 2.0. As I have written before, in that scandal executives at German carmaker Volkswagen AG deliberately and intentionally worked around emissions tests, fully aware their cars couldn't pass.

What we're seeing here is almost the opposite: factory floor-level workers taking shortcuts during testing, in the knowledge that the vehicles would almost certainly pass inspection anyway, even if the tests aren't followed to the letter of the law. Observe that there are no recalls in this circumstance. No one is saying the vehicles out there are, in any sense, actually unsafe.

This is borne out by recent history. The Daihatsu incident last year that triggered this current brouhaha generated ample headlines when the kei carmaker pulled its entire fleet of vehicles from sale. But much less reporters' ink was spilled when the autos concerned were retested in accordance with procedure: They passed with flying colours, without any changes, and are now back on showroom floors. Where's the "safety scandal," exactly?

Automakers largely have their hands tied in how they can respond. "We think the rules are stupid anyway" won't exactly play well in the Japanese media. And no one is suggesting that the companies should be above the law.

But at a critical time for automakers worldwide, with China churning out electric vehicles and the industry's future direction up for grabs, Japan needs a more holistic perspective. The rules might not have been followed to the letter, but this is a good chance to reform a clearly overwrought process: With testing conducted and paid for by the carmakers, rather than the regulator, there's every incentive for certification to become bloated.

Japan's certification process hasn't caught up with the times. Fixing that should be a priority, and looking at an overzealous regulator shouldn't be too far behind: Raiding the headquarters of the automakers en masse after a voluntarily reported investigation is a provocative move that creates an air of suspicion among the public and a broader sense there is something wrong with the industry. It's a step more typically reserved for flagrant wrongdoing, but there is no evidence of a broader conspiracy, just misguided corner-cutting.

Japan's long prided itself on its reputation for safety. But it shouldn't create uncertainty over threats that don't exist. The low-stakes gains from this investigation aren't worth the reputational hit to the industry. This scandal is a nothingburger.



GEAROID REIDY

Bloomberg

COOL ROOFING SOLUTIONS SHOULD BE SCALED UP, AS ADAPTING IS AS IMPORTANT AS MITIGATION

Heatwaves go through the roof

INDIA HAS EXPERIENCED an unprecedented heatwave this year. Last Sunday, temperatures exceeded 45 degrees Celsius in at least 37 cities, with Sirsa in Haryana, Churu, and Phalodi in Rajasthan, and Nagpur in Maharashtra crossing 50°C. Reports indicate that around 25,000 people have suffered heat strokes this year, heat-related deaths have crossed 50, and the Rajasthan High Court has appealed to the Centre to declare heatwaves as a national calamity.

It is well known that the heatwaves are being caused by excessive greenhouse gas emissions, leading to a steady rise in temperatures. Despite nations signing the Paris Agreement and increasing their climate action ambition at Glasgow, the world's emissions trajectory continues to proceed in the wrong direction. Armed conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine are making the situation worse. Though the clamour for decarbonisation and emission reduction continues in the shadow of these conflicts, we must prepare to live in harsher conditions where heatwaves are more frequent, widespread, and longer than before. To live comfortably, adapting to this dystopian situation is as important as trying to mitigate it.

One way to adapt to worsening ambient heat conditions is by reducing the impact of external heat on the roof of a building since it is the surface most exposed to solar radiation. Prior research shows that conventional grey roofs can be 31-47°C hotter compared to the surrounding air temperature, while cool roofs tend to stay between 6 and 11°C higher than the air temperature. We counteract heat ingress by air-conditioning (ACs) internal spaces and this requires energy. As much as 50% of Indian households are expected to have ACs by 2037, up from 10% now. This will mean far

greater energy consumption, more emissions, and more atmospheric heating. Creating cool roofs by increasing the reflection of heat from the roof surface will help reduce the internal temperature of a building (adaptation) and also provide knock-on emission mitigation benefits by reducing the need for cooling.

Traditionally, whitewashing roofs using lime and chalk has been a common practice to reduce heat gain from them, but there are a number of other ways in which roofs can be kept cool as well. The National Disaster Management Authority has published a comprehensive *House Owners' Guide to Alternate Roof Cooling Solutions* that lists 16 roof cooling technologies including heat insulation tiles, modified bitumen membrane, and gravel roof. The publication is an acknowledgment of the critical need for cool roofing as an adaptation solution and has very useful information.

The usage of cool roofing solutions has increased after its mention in the Energy Conservation Building Code and incorporation in rating systems such as the Indian Green Building Council and Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment. Learning from international best practices such as the cool roof programmes in New York, Toronto, and Los Angeles, India's first cool roof policy



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was launched in Telangana in 2023, and is applicable for five years. According to this policy, cool roofs are mandated for all non-residential government and government-owned buildings, and for residential buildings with plot area of 600 square yards or more.

Three metrics are used to measure the effectiveness of a cool roofing solution. The solar reflectance index (SRI) quantifies how hot a surface can get relative to a black surface. SRI for a standard black surface is 0 and a complete white surface is 100. Reflectance is the ability of the surface to reflect light (black surface = 0.05; white surface = 0.8) and emittance is the ability of the surface to reflect heat (black surface and white surface = 0.9). A cool roof, as recommended by the Energy Conservation Building Code of India, should have solar reflectance value of at least 0.6 and thermal emittance of at least 0.9.

In recent times, the use of cool roofing paints has gained traction because of their effectiveness and ease of use. Many locations, including the new Parliament building, have used cool roofing paints, and these can be regarded as extensive proofs of concept. A test report of the National Mineral Development Corporation, Hyderabad, shows that the use of a cool roofing paint developed by the Indian

Institute of Technology Bombay, with reflectance around 0.87 and emittance of more than 0.9 (Thermacoool), led to roof surface temperature drop of 11 to 14°C and ambient temperature drop of 4.8°C.

A field experiment conducted in a composite climate (Hyderabad) showed the benefits of a painted cool roof compared to a black roof. Statistical analysis of the measured data showed that energy savings due to roof whitening ranged between 20 and 22 kilowatt hours per square metre of roof area corresponding to air-conditioning energy use reduction of 14-26%. Further analysis of environmental impact showed that the annual direct carbon dioxide reduction associated with this reduced energy use would be 11-12 kg per square metre of roof area. Besides, cool roofs abate the phenomenon of urban heat island – the increased urban temperatures compared to rural surroundings.

The benefits of cool roofing solutions such as increased thermal comfort, reduced energy consumption, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and cuts in energy costs are now proven. Recent experiments suggest cool roofing solutions could have spin-offs like increasing the efficiency of solar panels on roofs and reducing wear and tear of construction material. Several studies have found that the benefits associated with cool roofs in buildings already outweigh the costs. With 60% of buildings required in India by the end of this decade yet to be built, skyrocketing air conditioner penetration, and a rooftop solar revolution only starting now, this is the right time to scale up cool roofing solutions and adapt to the steadily rising temperatures and debilitating heatwaves.

With inputs from Surekha Tetali, assistant professor, Centre for Sustainability, Mahindra University

Walking into wellness



S RAMADORAI

Former CEO and MD, Tata Consultancy Services
Views are personal

India needs innovation and entrepreneurship to motivate people to embrace positive behaviours through technology-led positive reinforcement

THE MODERN ERA, characterised by technological advancements and digital connectivity, has paradoxically led to a more sedentary lifestyle. Desk-bound work, long hours in front of screens, and a reliance on vehicles for transportation have become the norm. This prolonged sitting is associated with numerous health issues, including obesity, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and even certain types of cancer. The human body is not designed for such inactivity, leading to a need for integrating some form of physical activity into our daily routines.

Walking is a low-impact exercise easily accessible to people of all ages and fitness levels, and can help us reap a range of benefits. Regular walking can help maintain a healthy weight, strengthen bones and muscles, improve cardiovascular fitness, and boost immune function. It also releases endorphins, which reduce stress and anxiety, help clear the mind, and spark creativity. Walking can be a social activity, offering a chance to bond with friends, family, and co-workers.

Integrating walking in daily life

Walking has been a significant part of my life since childhood, irrespective of where I am in the world. It is not only a habit, but a source of tranquility and great joy, especially when shared with my better half, Mala. Together we cherish our walks, which now include wonderful moments with our grandchildren. This enduring habit has proven to be beneficial in many unexpected ways throughout my life.

One such instance occurred in 1980 when Tata Consultancy Services (TCS)

was setting up its first overseas branch in New York. On April 1, 1980, a subway strike brought New York City to a standstill. I had a crucial meeting with a client and was determined to honour it. From my apartment in Long Island City, I could see the Manhattan skyline and thought it could not be very far. I started walking from Queens, over the East River to Manhattan. The trek took me an hour and a half, much longer than anticipated. However, my love for walking saved the day and played a pivotal role in a significant moment in TCS's history.

It is important to realise that incorporating walking into our daily lives can add value in countless ways. Simple changes, such as taking short walking breaks during work, opting for stairs instead of elevators, and walking to nearby destinations instead of driving, can make a significant difference. Establishing a routine where walking is a part of both work and leisure can foster a healthier lifestyle. For instance, walking meetings, evening strolls with family, or morning walks before starting the day can seamlessly blend physical activity with daily tasks.

Globalise National Walking Day

National Walking Day in the US, celebrated on the first Wednesday of April, highlights the importance of walking. However, given the prevalence of sedentary lifestyles, this initiative should be

expanded to an International Day of Walking. A worldwide event would not only raise awareness but also inspire collective action towards healthier living. It could include virtual walking events, international step challenges, and educational campaigns promoting the benefits of walking. By creating a movement, we can share success stories, provide mutual encouragement, and foster a sense of global community striving for better health.

Start-ups promoting walking

Innovative start-ups are making significant strides in promoting walking and physical activity. Notable examples include Sweatcoin, Nature Meet, and Travel Hands.

Sweatcoin is an app that converts your steps into a digital currency, which can be redeemed for various products and services. By gamifying walking, Sweatcoin incentivises users to move more, turning physical activity into a rewarding experience. Nature Meet is a platform that connects people for walking and hiking activities. By facilitating group walks in scenic locations, Nature Meet promotes physical health and social interaction while encouraging an appreciation for the environment. Travel Hands is a very innovative platform that pairs visually impaired individuals with sighted guides for walking commutes. It not only provides a necessary service but

also fosters inclusivity and community support, highlighting the social benefits of walking. These start-ups exemplify how technology can drive positive behaviour changes. India, with its vast population and diverse challenges, needs similar innovation and entrepreneurship to motivate people to embrace positive behaviours such as more walking, quitting smoking, and adopting healthy diets through technology-led positive reinforcement.

The need for continued discussion

Promoting walking is more than just encouraging physical activity; it is about transforming public health. Increasing walking rates can alleviate the burden on healthcare systems by reducing the prevalence of chronic diseases. It can also lead to healthier, more vibrant communities.

We must increase awareness about the dangers of prolonged sitting and the benefits of walking through public health campaigns. At the same time, we must advocate and support policies that promote walkable environments and walk-centric communities, such as improved pedestrian infrastructure, maintenance of walking paths, and regular walking events at workplaces, societies, and schools.

While walking is a simple activity, its powerful influence in enhancing health and well-being is unmatched. By making a collective effort to integrate walking into our daily lives, we can create a healthier future for ourselves and generations to come.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Coalitions are not economy roadblocks

India's return to coalition politics is often seen as a hindrance to economic reforms, but this perception is mistaken. Since the 1990s, most economic liberalisation has occurred under coalition governments. These reforms have not been reversed over the past 33 years due to the consensus-building process that ensures their longevity.

The Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance, with their reformist credentials, are well-acquainted with these challenges. This familiarity suggests that finding common ground on reforms may be easier than anticipated, and the extra effort to build support can help mitigate opposition to market reforms. With a broad political consensus on the need for economic transformation and a strong administrative leadership, India

is poised to continue its economic momentum, largely independent of the political dynamics in New Delhi. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Parliamentary path

Apropos of "Beyond Modi bashing" (FE, June 6), undoubtedly, both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Modi have been weakened, as far as the number of seats is concerned. A lot of credit must go to Akhilesh Yadav and Rahul Gandhi. But

the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance must introspect and change its way of working in the parliament. Creating unnecessary disruptions would neither help them nor the country. The BJP and Modi have to be humble and pragmatic in their approach as coalition dharmas calls for different traits altogether than in a majority government. —Bal Govind, Noida

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The Tribune

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Economic hurdles

BJP must walk the talk on jobs, inflation

ECONOMIC issues such as unemployment, high inflation and falling income levels played a key role in determining voters' choices in the Lok Sabha elections, according to a post-poll survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Lokniti. These factors proved crucial as the ruling BJP fell short of securing a majority. At least 30 per cent of the respondents who voted in the General Election said they were worried about inflation, whereas the corresponding figure was 20 per cent in the pre-poll survey. Unemployment was the main worry for 32 per cent of the respondents in the pre-poll survey; this dropped to 27 per cent after the elections, possibly due to the employment-related promises made by various political parties.

What clicked with a significant section of the voters was PM Modi's leadership and the BJP-led government's efforts towards developing the country, besides its governance and welfare schemes. Ironically, the construction of the Ram Mandir was the 'most liked work' of the government, as per the survey, even though the BJP lost the Faizabad seat in Ayodhya district and performed well below the expectations in Uttar Pradesh.

Even as coalition pulls and pressures are set to test Modi's mettle during his third term, the BJP needs to realise that the PM's aura is no longer what it was a decade or even five years ago. The party can't always rely heavily on his mass appeal to win elections. It will have to walk the talk on generating employment opportunities and taming inflation. Making India a developed country (*Viksit Bharat*) by 2047 is too distant a goal. The country's young citizens, in particular, can't wait too long for the fulfilment of guarantees of high-quality education, world-class sports facilities and lucrative employment and entrepreneurial avenues.

Delhi's water crisis

SC orders smooth flow from HP via Haryana

THE Supreme Court's directive to Haryana to ensure that the additional water Himachal Pradesh has agreed to supply reaches Delhi underscores the issue of water politics in India. Since HP does not share a border with Delhi, the water must be routed through the Wazirabad Barrage in Haryana. Amid a scorching heatwave, Delhi is grappling with a water crisis. The court's call for an apolitical approach to water distribution highlights the fundamental need for cooperation and rational resource management among states.

Delhi relies heavily on neighbouring states for its water supply, making it vulnerable to inter-state disputes and inefficiencies in water management. The matter has been contentious for years, reflecting deeper systemic issues in water governance. Haryana has frequently been accused of withholding Delhi's fair share, citing its own water needs and lack of clear mechanisms to measure surplus supplies from HP. These disputes escalate during summers, leading to legal battles. The Upper Yamuna River Board (UYRB), meant to mediate in such cases, has been criticised for its ineptitude, highlighting the need for a cooperative, transparent approach to water management. The ongoing crisis not only threatens public health but also highlights the necessity for sustainable and equitable water management practices.

Meanwhile, the Delhi government also needs to fix its inefficiencies, including water wastage — which is reported to be over a shocking 50 per cent due to leakage, theft and the tanker mafia — and crack down on illegal connections. Simultaneously, efforts must be intensified to spur robust inter-state cooperation and effective implementation of agreements facilitated by bodies like the UYRB. This requires an apolitical, collaborative approach to water management that prioritises the needs of all citizens. Sustainable water practices must become the norm to prevent future crises and ensure equitable distribution of this precious resource.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JUNE 7, 1924

O'Dwyer-Nair case

AFTER a protracted hearing, the O'Dwyer-Nair libel case came to a close on Thursday last. Sir Michael O'Dwyer has won the case and has been awarded damages. No one in India, no one at any rate who followed the latest proceedings in the case, can say that this result was unexpected. It was in fact the very result which the public had been anticipating ever since the Judge had opened his lips in the case. From the first, he had made no secret of his sympathies. He had simply been 'out-O'Dwyering' O'Dwyer. He found nothing wrong in anything that any authority, whether civil or military, had done in the unforgettable days of Martial Law in Punjab and in every single case in which he interrupted a witness or put a question to him, he was defending some authority or some case of official bungling or other. The summing up was entirely worthy of all that the Judge had done before. It was not only a complete whitewashing of Sir O'Dwyer but an equally complete whitewashing of Gen Dyer, who was not before the court and who had not even been produced as a witness and subjected to a cross-examination. Even Sir O'Dwyer has said in his evidence that from Dyer's statement before the Hunter Committee, his conduct was indefensible. The Judge would not allow even this qualified condemnation to pass unchallenged. His own deliberate conclusion, based upon the whole evidence given in the case, he said, was that "Gen Dyer, under grave and exceptional circumstances, had acted rightly and that he was wrongly punished by the Secretary of State for India."

Oppn parties must keep INDIA intact

The bloc has done well to disprove Modi-Shah's prediction of a runaway victory for the NDA

TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

NARENDRA Modi has won his third term as the Prime Minister. It was not the cakewalk that the exit polls had predicted. The BJP managed just 240 seats, well below the half-way mark of 272. It will have to accommodate its partners in the NDA in order to govern. The Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the Janata Dal (United) and others together picked up 50-odd seats; this will pose a problem for Modi in allocating Cabinet portfolios.

The NDA, which includes the parties that had a pre-poll understanding with the BJP, secured more than a hundred seats less than the 400-mark that Modi had set. He is still the most capable political leader in the country, but his authority has diminished. He will have to rethink his strategy of governance, particularly how he treats political opponents and the minorities.

Modi used the 'Hindu majority versus Muslim minority' card to gain electoral victory. It worked in 2014 and 2019. But with this modified mandate, he will have to change his approach. Clearly, it is not a winner anymore. He needs to discipline the fringe elements in the Sangh Parivar who had free rein in the first 10 years of his reign and had tasted blood. Taming them will take some doing. It is not easy to rebottle the genie once it is released.

Modi will have to concentrate on jobs and unemployment. This should be his first and foremost concern in his third term. His meditation at the Vivekananda Rock Memorial must have filled him with thoughts of things to do and also, I hope, things he should not do. All that will need to be revised in the light of the



VALIANT BATTLE: INDIA leaders should not consider this electoral loss as a defeat. PTI

harsh message that Indian voters have delivered. He will have to start with the basics — education and health.

Here, he should draw lessons from his opponent, Arvind Kejriwal, and the Aam Aadmi Party. That party has made major strides in both fields. Unless the productivity of our labour force is raised by many notches, we will not be able to match our neighbour to our east, which has stolen a march of 50 years or more on us. For productivity to improve, the levels of education and health of the lowest economic brackets have to be lifted by their bootstraps.

Modi also needs to moderate his dislike for those he calls 'urban Naxals'. Most of them come from affluent families but have developed an outsized concern for the poor and the dispossessed. Last week, I wrote about Alpa Shah and her book on the 16 Bhima Koregaon accused. Two or three of the 'BK 16' were deeply concerned for the tribals. Eight were Dalits fighting for the empowerment of their community. None had shown any violent streak. None had pushed their followers into activities that could be classified as violent. Yet, they had been incarcerated for years under the draconian UAPA. Modi should give the green signal for the release on

Modi will have to rethink his strategy of governance, particularly how he treats political opponents and the minorities.

bail of those still in jail. That would signal a change of heart that is urgently needed.

With the BJP failing to secure a majority on its own, stability is not assured. Chandrababu Naidu's TDP and Nitish Kumar's JD(U) do not share the BJP's Hindutva ideology. What is needed now is course correction on the lines spelt out by me earlier. That course correction is necessary to retrieve Modi's fast-fading reputation as a 'once-in-a-lifetime' leader with the qualities that befit a statesman.

The INDIA bloc had come together to oust Modi from power. Its members were aware that when he ruled from his vantage position as the elected leader, he was likely to crush them one by one, like he had disposed of the old leaders in his own party and kept upcoming leaders gues-

ing. Modi is a natural-born leader with a sharp instinct for survival. He is not going to allow this 'defeat' to demoralise him.

Modi had declared that INDIA would dissolve into thin air after its defeat in the polls. Taking a cue from his own wisdom, these leaders should think positively. They have fought a valiant battle and should not consider this electoral loss as a defeat. They have disproved Modi's and Shah's prediction of a runaway victory for the NDA as a gross miscalculation. It could even be interpreted as a slap on the face of the two leaders. The BJP enjoys only 37 per cent backing of the Indian people. The NDA collectively is slightly better at 41 per cent. The majority of the Indian electorate is not with Modi and his ideology.

Keeping this in mind, INDIA constituents need to stick together for survival. Sharad Pawar, once Maharashtra's strongman, predicted that small-er parties in INDIA would merge with the Congress. I doubt if that would happen. An up-and-coming leader like Kejriwal has his sights on the PM's chair. There is no chance of his party merging with the Congress, which AAP has already reduced to irrelevance in the national capital territory. Incidentally, AAP's own

performance in these elections was quite miserable.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) was the recipient of much flak, mostly uncalled for but some well-deserved. Its hesitation to rein in the PM, particularly for vituperative remarks bordering on the scandalous, was the real cause of the epithets hurled at the commission. The loss of credibility of the ECI is the biggest negative outcome of this year's Lok Sabha polls. That could have been avoided in the 'Mother of Democracy'.

The exit polls were unanimous in proclaiming the BJP as runaway winner of the Lok Sabha polls. I had calculated that the BJP would win but not with such a wide margin. The less affluent sections of the country's population were solidly behind Modi. The domestic help, security guards and others of the same economic bracket, hailing from UP, Uttarakhand and Bihar, were solidly pro-Modi.

The BJP had lost traction among those who had benefited the most from its economic policies. I am not referring here to the captains of industry and the businessmen at the top of the corporate ladder, but to their high-salaried employees.

Even the monthly dole of 5 kg of rice/wheat for each 'below-poverty line' ration-card holder seemed to have swayed them. The direct transfer of subsidy to individual bank accounts, the pension payments to widows and welfare grants to women for education or their marriage expenses — all these played on the minds of the less fortunate, without whose votes victory was out of the question.

The salaried and, more than them, the intellectual class, which would normally have supported right-wing dispensation, had begun questioning the government's approach to human rights and freedom of speech. Some of the political moves against its adversaries also came up for scrutiny. The BJP lost the votes of these people, but the loss was compensated by the freshly minted votes of the poor.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We are destined to live with coalition governments. — J Jayalalithaa

With a namaste, touch the hearts

RITU KAMRA KUMAR

THE other day, my nephew came home. He had been living in Canada for almost a decade before family commitments made him return to India. He always greets me with a hug, saying 'hello, maasi' with a wide smile. But this time, he greeted everyone with a *namaste*. When asked why, he said he missed the warmth of *namaste* abroad and believed that this word expressed reverence for the person he greeted.

I was transported to the times when, as kids, we used to wish our teachers with folded hands and a *namaste*; later, it became 'good morning' and, finally, 'hello ma'am'. Among family and friends, it was 'hello, aunty' or 'morning, uncle'. While I appreciate all these forms of greetings, I think the culture of *namaste* ingrained in the Indian sensibility is more than just a casual greeting. It is a gesture transfixed in the rich tapestry of tradition and imbued with spiritual significance.

Namaste transcends a cursory hello; it embodies a connection with oneself, with the others and the universe. *Namaste* finds a mention in the Vedas. It is a combination of two Sanskrit words: *namah*, which means 'bow', and *te*, which means 'to you'. Hence, it translates to 'I bow to you' or 'the divine in me bows to the divine in you.' *Namaskara* is more polite, as *kara* means 'making' or 'doing'. Combined with *namah*, it means 'showing reverence'.

The gesture is also an integral part of Indian classical dance forms, religious rituals, yoga, auspicious ceremonies and spiritual practices.

In 1985, during my sister's marriage, my brother-in-law's paternal uncle instructed the bride and groom to greet each other with folded hands before the 'Jai Mala' ceremony. Pin-drop silence followed the request. The uncle explained that *namaste* in the 'anjali mudra' (the prayer pose) was a symbolic gesture; the pressing of palms together in front of the heart, accompanied by a slight bow of the head, had spiritual significance. It was a powerful tool for fostering respect and understanding in a diverse and inter-connected world, a way of creating a spiritual connection between souls, he said. Then, not only the bride and groom but everyone also greeted each other with a *namaste*. The moment was crystallised in many photographs.

As the world has become a global village, the age-old gesture of *namaste* has found a place in the hearts of some political leaders and statesmen. They are using it to bridge the cultural divide. I believe we can't hold love in our hands, but we can make someone feel it in the heart by just folding our hands and saying *namaste*. It is a great way of expressing our love, friendship, gratitude and respect to the people we meet.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BJP's loss in Ayodhya

Apropos of the editorial 'The UP verdict', the BJP was hopeful that the consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya would significantly improve the electoral fortunes of the party. But much to the shock of the saffron party and political analysts, the BJP lost the Faizabad parliamentary seat in Ayodhya district to the Samajwadi Party (SP). The loss can be attributed to the inconvenience that the locals had to face because of the construction of the temple and preparations for the grand inaugural ceremony. Villagers in Ayodhya were not happy about the acquisition of land around the temple and the airport. Amid all the frenzy, the residents of the district were sidelined.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM

Don't take voters for granted

With reference to the editorial 'The UP verdict', the much-hyped inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya by PM Narendra Modi earlier this year was expected to give the BJP an edge in the General Election in UP. But the party failed to reap any electoral dividends from the grand event and the religious fervour surrounding it. Besides, it appears that the pollsters failed to correctly gauge the mood of the voters. The predictions were way off the mark, calling into question the utility of such forecasts and the credibility of the pollsters. The strategy crafted by the SP-Congress combine helped prevent the BJP from crossing the 272-seat mark. This is a reminder that voters cannot be taken for granted.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

BJP should change tack

Refer to the editorial 'The UP verdict'; the defeats that the BJP faced in states like UP, Haryana and Maharashtra must compel it to go for course correction. The governing alliance must shift its focus to real issues like inflation, unemployment and national security concerns. The electorate has had enough of the anti-minority rhetoric that pits Hindus and Muslims against each other. Voters yearn for development, job opportunities and healthcare facilities. The saffron party's losses in Faizabad, Amethi and Lakhimpur Kheri should serve as a lesson to parties about the importance of keeping the voters' priorities in mind while campaigning.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

The dilemma of jailed lawmakers

The parents of jailed 'Waris Punjab De' chief Amritpal Singh — Tarsem Singh and Balwinder Kaur — have hailed his win from the Khadoor Sahib parliamentary constituency as the verdict of the people against the government's high-handedness. They are calling for his release from prison. Up there in J&K, PDP president Mehbooba Mufti has asked for the release of Sheikh Abdul Rashid — who is in jail in connection with a terror financing case — following his victory in the Lok Sabha election. Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal — who has been in judicial custody — and other AAP leaders tried to garner votes with the 'Jai ka jwab vote se' campaign. Leaders must stop treating the law of the land as a plaything. Such unreasonable demands for the release of anti-national elements must not be entertained.

RAVINDER KWATRA, KURUKSHETRA

Naidu, Nitish should join INDIA

Refer to 'Naidu's comeback'; realising that giving another term with a simple majority to the ruling BJP will only spell trouble and threaten the democratic principles of the country, the electorate has rightly clipped the wings of the saffron party. The BJP now has to depend on the support of N Chandrababu Naidu of the TDP and the JD(U)'s Nitish Kumar to stay in power at the Centre. Naidu and Nitish are seasoned leaders who know how the BJP might treat its allies after forming the government. If the two leaders want to save the country from the clutches of an autocratic regime, they must join hands with the INDIA bloc members and help them form the government.

THARCIUS S FERNANDO, CHENNAI

Kangana's foray into politics

People in Himachal are elated over Bollywood actress Kangana Ranaut's foray into politics. Her victory in the Lok Sabha election from Mandi, her hometown, is a reflection of the huge base of fans and supporters that she commands. Kangana won because the people of Mandi reposed their faith in her ability to lead. She has won over people with her acting talent over the years. Now, she is set to impress them as a political leader. The woman who did justice to her role in *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* will hopefully also do justice to the post she holds.

VASUDHA PANDE, PAONTA SAHIB (HP)

Tolerance & acceptance count in polarised times



VIVEK KATJU
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

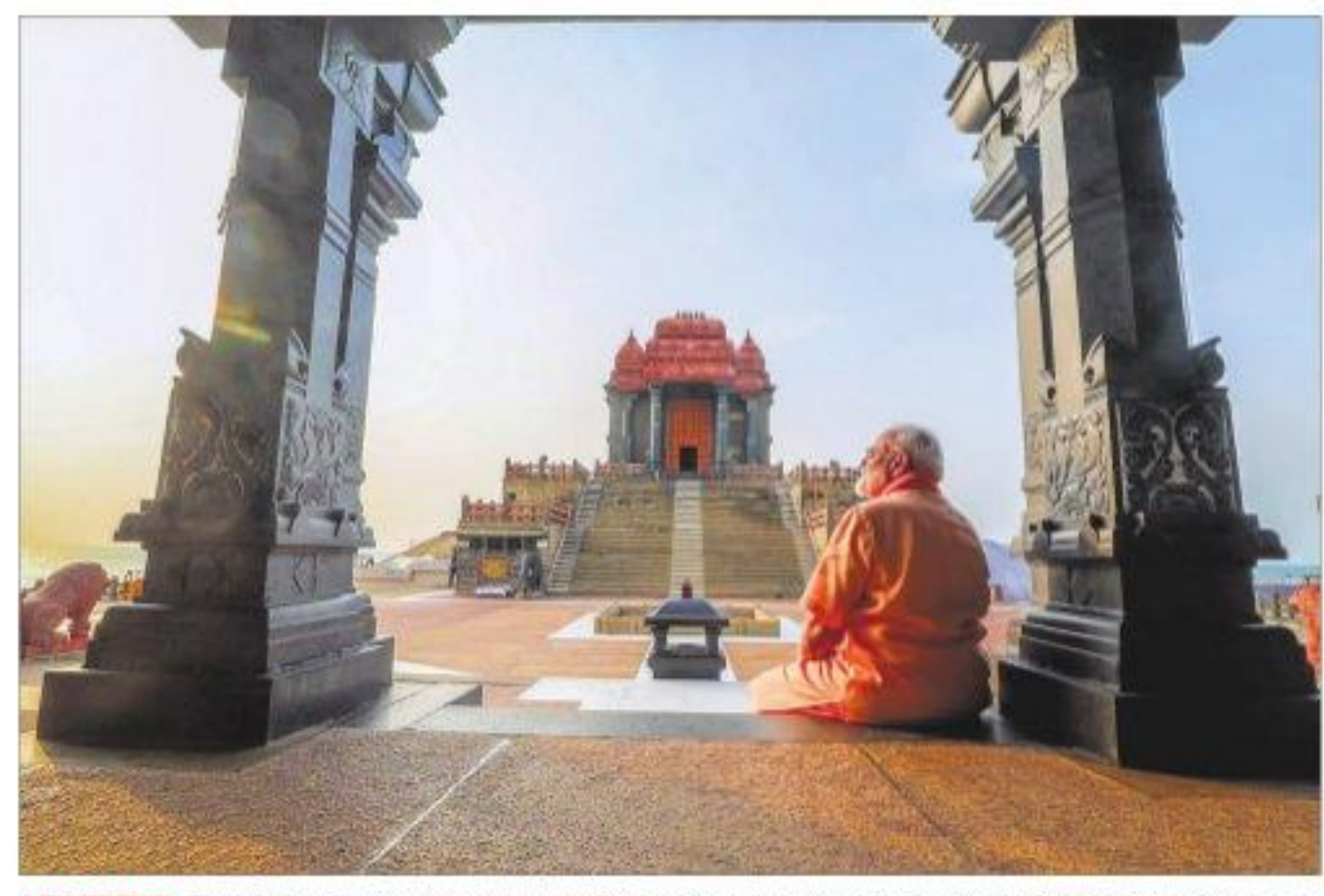
AT the conclusion of his much-publicised meditation at the Vivekananda Rock Memorial in Kanniyakumari recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "Swami Vivekananda, a leader of spiritual renaissance, has been my ideal, my energy and the source of my spirituality." Modi is only one of the countless Hindus to be inspired by Swamiji since he entered the nation's consciousness in the 1890s, primarily through his impactful speech on the Hindu faith at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. His message to the Hindus, and the youth in particular, to be strong but also compassionate, is of everlasting significance. The question is whether Modi's spirituality is on all fours with the deals that Vivekananda firmly believed in, lived by and espoused.

Vivekananda and his companions established the Ramakrishna Mission to spread the ideas and ideals of their masters, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and Sarada Maa. The mission has carried

forward their spiritual teachings. It is good that the Prime Minister has rejuvenated himself with this spiritualism as he will begin his third term but, for the first time, leading a full-fledged coalition government.

The core of Vivekananda's understanding of the Hindu way of life was expressed by him in his address at the inauguration of the Parliament of Religions. Calling Hinduism the "mother of religions", he said: "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth... I will quote to you, brethren, a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is everyday repeated by millions of human beings: 'As the different streams having their sources in different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.'"

He went on to add: "Sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilisation



MEDITATION: PM Modi visited the Vivekananda Rock Memorial in Kanniyakumari before the counting day. PTI

and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now." He concluded with the fervent hope that fanaticism and persecution would end.

I have extensively quoted from Swamiji's address because his message on central Hindu beliefs is particularly relevant to our polarised times. If 'tolerance' and 'accepting all religions as true' are the essence of the Hindu faith, it logically follows that all Hindus should accept these propositions and live by them without linking them to the beliefs of the adherents of other faiths. And, political leaders who

Vivekananda denounced sectarianism, bigotry and fanaticism. He would be appalled at the utterances of some leaders during the election campaign.

have been inspired by them should demonstrate their commitment to these ideals through the correct implementation of their policies instead of just mouthing slogans. This obviously can never mean that Hindus should meekly accept deliberate contempt or distortion of their great faith.

The election campaign of the BJP, in particular, drifted away, in part, from the path of tolerance and acceptance. The political class should carefully consider how to preserve the values of tolerance and acceptance even during an election campaign. A moral code of conduct can only be upheld if these values are not aban-

doned during campaigning. Yes, the cut and thrust of arguments and forcefully putting forth views which support a party's thinking and programmes are part of politics and electioneering. Yes, campaigns can generate heat through criticism and even sarcasm, but should they go beyond all that? Certainly, Swamiji would have been appalled at the utterances of some of the leaders during the campaign.

In a recent article, Modi wrote that as he continued with his meditation at the rock memorial, "the heated political debates, the attacks and counter-attacks, the voices and words of accusations, they all vanished into a void". The point is that all people are not as spiritually evolved as he is. They cannot forget unkind words. The words remain in memory, gnawing away at their emotions and their sense of self-worth. It can even be asserted that historical wrongs cannot be corrected by causing anguish among large sections of people. Other ways to address them have to be found.

Swamiji denounced sectarianism, bigotry and fanaticism. These characteristics are not the monopoly of any faith. The Constitution, too, mandates that all Indians will be treated equally. It obliges political leaders to make equality the foundational principle of governance. It is insufficient that all sections of the people be

given equal access to the advantages of economic schemes for they need the assurance of living their lives without fear and with dignity. They should also have a sense of participation in governance. Some of the political utterances during the campaign sailed close to the characteristics that Vivekananda had denounced.

There is little doubt that ideological battles will continue in India. The past decade has witnessed Modi and the Sangh Parivar's attempts at putting their stamp on the country. In his speech to the party's faithful after the election results, Modi asserted that his campaign to make India great would go on. The Parivar wishes to make India great in keeping with its lore of India's ancient glory. There has been a concerted attempt to change the public culture of India. Naturally, public culture evolves. The Indo-Persianate culture gave way to one infused with British practices. Now, the Parivar derides all that which emerged during Nehru's India. These changes really do not matter so long as India's public culture contains the values which Swami Vivekananda mentioned in his Chicago address. This can only mean that tolerance and acceptance be extended to all faiths and their adherents in India. That was lamentably absent in some of Modi's campaign speeches.

South Africa learning to keep up with a changing world



GURJIT SINGH
FORMER AMBASSADOR TO AFRICAN UNION

THE ruling African National Congress (ANC) has recorded its worst poll performance since the end of apartheid in South Africa three decades ago. It has bagged barely 40 per cent of the votes in the recent elections, even as former President Jacob Zuma's newly founded uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party secured a vote share of 15 per cent.

South Africa went to the polls on May 29. Voting was held for the formation of Parliament and state Assemblies. The new Parliament will elect the President. Observers have viewed the poll outcome as a sign of the diminishing value of the single-party system. A transition to a coalition government was anticipated, but the scale of the ANC's decline is huge. Will this lead to a more mature polity? Or, like in other African countries, will election outcomes widen fissures? Kenyan President William Ruto, who led the African Union (AU) observer mission, suggested a coalition

based on agreement. Since the end of apartheid in 1994, the ANC has had a majority in both Houses of Parliament. The party's vote share had been in excess of 60 per cent, except in 2019, when it dipped to 57.5 per cent.

Though the ANC still has the largest vote share, it lacks a majority to form the government. It is holding talks with other parties over stitching together a ruling coalition. A 14-day window for government formation is open.

While the White-dominated Democratic Alliance (DA) has improved its vote share from 20.77 per cent to 21.69 per cent, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) has seen its share decline from 10.8 per cent to 9.46 per cent. The good performance delivered by Zuma's MK is the major reason why the ANC has lost ground, mainly in KwaZulu-Natal.

With Cyril Ramaphosa as the President, South Africa tried to play a larger role on the world stage. A stable nation would be able to continue to do so. A coalition government, however, would need to harmonise the nuances of foreign policy.

The MK and the EFF are unlikely to have major differences with the existing foreign policy. Their domestic demands may be stronger. A coalition



HELM: During Cyril Ramaphosa's presidency, South Africa tried to play a larger role on the world stage. REUTERS

including the DA will lead to a balancing act in foreign policy and perhaps push South Africa to a less strident anti-West position. The DA is a centre-right party with an anti-corruption and economic reform agenda, which is preferred by investors.

In the past five years, the salient features of South Africa's policy have included a closer engagement with China and, consequently, with Russia. It has distanced itself somewhat from the Western bloc. After initial criticism of the Russian action against Ukraine, not only did South Africa abstain from voting on UN resolutions pertaining to the conflict,

India sees South Africa as an important partner in the BRICS and G20 forums and hopes to strengthen the bilateral ties.

but it also led an African peace initiative to visit both warring countries. This is not in consonance with the position held by the US-led West on Ukraine.

Between 2019 and 2021, South Africa held a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council and chaired the AU. The challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the civil war in Ethiopia during that period showed the limitations of South African influence.

During its BRICS chairmanship in 2023, South Africa played a role that was aligned with China's push for rapid expansion of the grouping. It is uncertain if the new members — Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, the

UAE, Iran and Egypt — are beholden to South Africa in any way. If South Africa was trying to project itself as a leader of the Global South, it failed as it couldn't persuade Argentina and Indonesia to join the bloc.

South Africa, which will take over as the G20 president in 2025, will become the fourth country in a row from the South (after Indonesia, India and Brazil) to chair the multilateral body before the US assumes its presidency in 2026. It remains to be seen whether South Africa will play the role of a Global South leader or a Chinese-influenced president.

South Africa has been taking the lead in the World Trade Organisation in conjunction with India in regard to issues of importance in the countries of the Global South. On the West Asian crisis, it has stepped out of the crease to attack Israel through the International Court of Justice, invoking the Genocide Convention.

South Africa is learning to cope with a changing world. Some analysts, who are sceptical of Ramaphosa's foreign policy, blame him for a decline in the nation's global moral standing. Some believe that he focuses on international crises as it diverts attention from domestic issues. The huge blow to the ANC may see Ramaphosa lose his presidency unless the coalition

partners value his potential for stability.

A coalition government will test South Africa's ability to push a stronger foreign policy agenda. Even if Ramaphosa survives the electoral disappointment, the churn in the ANC will continue. He will need to project a stronger voice for the Global South. Domestic politics and foreign policy are interrelated. What happens domestically impacts a country's global stature.

Arina Muresan of South Africa's Institute for Global Dialogue stated that in a coalition, the partners' oversight over policy would increase through Parliament. The DA is an investor-friendly party. It will not hedge relations with China and Russia if the business makes progress, but it will seek adjustments with the West and Israel. The DA has questioned the anti-Israel economic policy. Evidently, the coalition partners will need a common minimum programme. This will be a new experience for South Africa.

For India, what matters is that a stable South Africa plays an important role in the next troika of the G20 presidency, including Brazil and the US. India sees South Africa as an important partner in the BRICS and G20 forums and hopes to strengthen the bilateral relationship.

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OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

No country for the unaffiliated

Political parties that stayed away from alliances face an existential crisis

The 2014 verdict, which gave the BJP a simple majority in the Lok Sabha, suggested that the country may be leaving behind the coalition era of nearly a quarter century. The Congress and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) it headed were decimated in that election. Five years later, the BJP, riding on the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, won 303 seats, indicating that the polity was heading for a unipolar moment; the Congress had state-level alliances that failed to find traction among voters, except in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. However, regional outfits such as the Trinamool Congress, YSRCP, Bharat Rashtra Samithi, Biju Janata Dal (BJD), Samajwadi Party, and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) survived the Modi blitz and found decent representation in the Lok Sabha. The 2024 general elections have altered the national picture. The BJP is 32 seats short of a simple majority, though the NDA at 293 appears set to form the government. The INDIA bloc led by the Congress, an expanded version of the 2004-14 UPA, has emerged as a strong Opposition with 235 MPs. Clearly, the polity has turned bipolar, with voters backing two strong coalitions. Political parties that chose to stay outside these two alliances have fared poorly; the lone rangers now face an existential crisis. There are just 16 seats in the Lok Sabha that have been won by independents or parties that are not part of either INDIA or NDA.

Take the case of regional heavyweights including the BJD, BRS, AIADMK and BSP that refused to join any alliance. These will have no representatives in the Lok Sabha whereas the YSRCP, another lone ranger, has barely survived the storm (its tally is down to four from 22 in 2019); The Shiromani Akali Dal, one of the oldest allies of the BJP, left the NDA in 2020 and is now down to a single seat (its vote share fell from 26.3% in 2014 to 13.4% in 2024). On the other hand, parties that opted for alliances — the Telugu Desam Party, Janata Dal (United) and Janata Dal (Secular) in NDA, Shiv Sena and Nationalist Congress Party factions in NDA and INDIA, and the Communist parties — have salvaged some ground and will have representation in the lower house of Parliament.

Interestingly, the YSRCP, BJD and BRS, which used to support the BJP's legislative agenda in Parliament but refused to be a part of NDA, have seen their collective tally drop from 43 seats in 2019 to just four this time. All three parties have lost in their respective strongholds — Andhra Pradesh (YSRCP), Odisha (BJD), and Telangana (BRS) — and two have even lost the state (the third did in December itself). Clearly, the electorate prefers clarity about where the parties stand in a time of great ideological polarisation.

Listen to rumblings in the Punjab results

The general elections results were declared two days before the 40th anniversary of Operation Blue Star, which had left Punjab traumatised. The scars of militancy are hidden by the return of normalcy in public affairs. However, two poll outcomes should serve as a warning and, hopefully, make the political mainstream reflect on the restive state of Punjabi society, especially its youth.

Among the 13 winners from Punjab are two independents, Amritpal Singh and Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa, who represent a radical stream in the polity. Amritpal Singh, a detenu charged under the National Security Act, has been trying to claim the legacy of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the preacher who became the face of militancy in Punjab. He won a five-cornered contest in Khadoor Sahib with a margin close to 200,000 votes. Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa, son of Beant Singh, one of the assassins of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, defeated candidates from six parties to win the Faridkot seat with a margin of over 70,000 votes. It is evident that the electorate was spoilt for choices but preferred Amritpal Singh and Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa.

It is welcome that the radical fringe wants to join the electoral mainstream. However, the big daddies of Punjab politics — the Congress, AAP, SAD and BJP — should probe the reasons behind the backing for the radical politicians. Clearly, there seems to be disquiet among sections of the population that the political mainstream is unable to address the state's concerns. The AAP promised change, but its government is struggling to fulfil its promises. The discontent is not to be dismissed as signs of separatism or militancy, but it needs to be engaged with by the political mainstream and the root causes addressed by the State.

The Naidu vs Jagan potboiler in Andhra

The revenge politics and governance gaffes of Jagan Mohan Reddy cost the YSRCP dearly in the elections. It has given a new life to the TDP in the southern state

In September 2022, YS Jagan Mohan Reddy, leader of the Yuva Jana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) and then chief minister (CM) of Andhra Pradesh, addressed a massive gathering following the party's victory in the Kuppam assembly constituency, held by Telugu Desam Party (TDP) chief Chandrababu Naidu since 1989. He enthused party members with the rallying cry of "Why not 175", envisioning a sweep of all 175 assembly constituencies in the upcoming elections. As the 2024 assembly and Lok Sabha elections approached, Reddy launched his party's campaign with the same slogan, confident that his government's flagship welfare schemes, described as *navaratnalu* (nine gems), would secure the necessary seats for re-election.

However, the YSR Congress suffered a staggering defeat, securing only 11 seats. In sharp contrast, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), consisting of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Jana Sena Party (JSP), and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), clinched a landslide victory, securing 164 seats. The sharp drop in the YSRCP's electoral performance — its seats plummeted from 151 in the 2019 assembly

elections to just 11 in 2024 — calls for scrutiny. Similarly, the NDA's overwhelming triumph deserves an examination of the key factors that fuelled its success.

During his 2019 electoral campaign, Reddy made grand promises to the people of Andhra Pradesh, such as completing the construction of the capital city in Amaravati, securing Special Category status for the state, releasing an annual job calendar on January 1 each year, and the completion of the Polavaram project. However, in office, rather than focussing on fulfilling these promises, he engaged in a politics of vengeance. He used the office to settle scores with his arch-rival, former CM and TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu. For instance, all projects initiated and contracts awarded by Naidu in Amaravati were abruptly cancelled by Jagan's government. His animosity against Naidu ran so deep that, instead of distributing the ready-to-occupy flats to the promised beneficiaries from the poor segment of the population in Amaravati, he allowed those flats to fall into disrepair. Reddy mooted three capitals for the state instead of completing Amaravati. However, people wondered if the CM could construct three capitals when he couldn't complete even one!

The YSRCP government's volunteer system had a debilitating effect on state institutions, especially local governing bodies. Under this system, a volunteer was assigned to every 50 families, acting as a facilitator for transactions between the state and

these families. Although this seemed like a form of pastoral care by the state, it gradually undermined institutions like the *panchayats*, leaving their employees paid but without work. Moreover, the volunteer system strained the state's finances, as the honorarium for volunteers came from the state exchequer. Many people lamented that volunteers acted as informants for the ruling party, reporting on supporters and opponents, leading to bias in governance.

Throughout Reddy's term, law and order deteriorated. In several instances of violence, YSRCP leaders and workers were given free rein against TDP leaders and workers. The police, who were supposed to maintain neutrality, were accused of acting as a private force of the ruling regime. Reddy's politics of vengeance peaked when his government arrested Naidu and held him in remand for an extended period. The scenes of the elderly Naidu — he is 74 — being dragged by the police created public sympathy in his favour.

An important aspect that significantly damaged the YSRCP's reputation was the AP Land Titling Act of 2023. The government claimed the Act was passed to streamline land records, resolve disputes, and provide permanent titles. However, Opposition leaders, particularly Naidu, labelled it a "land grabbing Act" and warned people against it. He argued that it was another tactic by Reddy to seize people's lands, emphasising that the Act required only a photocopy of the transaction, leaving the original



Pawan Kalyan's emergence as a political force influenced the outcome ANI

documents with the government. Naidu also highlighted how the YSRCP government printed Reddy's image on land passbooks instead of the official state emblem. This move alarmed land and property owners.

It is this mismanagement in government that has allowed the TDP to re-emerge as a strong alternative to the YSRCP ahead of the 2024 elections. Naidu, who had previously lost office and faced significant challenges, including arrest, was wary of taking unnecessary risks. He successfully negotiated an alliance with the BJP. Surprisingly, the electoral partnership between the BJP and TDP disproportionately benefited the former over the latter. In the 2019 assembly elections, the BJP had failed to secure even a single seat in the state. However, in the recent elections, it managed to win eight of 10 seats allocated to the party. While the long-term implications of this coalition on Andhra Pradesh's political landscape remain uncertain, for now, it has yielded more seats to the alliance partners than initially anticipated.

Actor Pawan Kalyan's emergence as a political force further influenced the outcome. His relentless criticism of the YSRCP government's undemocratic practices and campaigns against its alleged corruption resonated across the state, particularly the Kapu caste and youth from backward

communities. His party's sweeping victory, securing all 21 allocated seats, underscores his growing influence.

Additionally, the TDP's "Super Six" welfare promises significantly bolstered its electoral prospects. Recognising the YSRCP's success with welfare schemes, the TDP offered ambitious initiatives, such as creating two million jobs for young people, providing financial assistance to schoolchildren and women, and ensuring essential resources such as gas cylinders and free transportation. Despite the fiscal challenges these pledges pose, they garnered substantial support from women and lower-income groups, contributing to the landslide victory.

Despite this resounding success, navigating Andhra Pradesh's precarious financial situation presents a daunting challenge for the TDP and its allies, although being part of the NDA and having a voice in Delhi will help. Naidu's political acumen will be crucial in overcoming these hurdles. Nonetheless, for now, it's a moment of celebration for the Naidu-Kalyan partnership, marking the beginning of a new political era in the state.

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Delhi hospital fire calls for more than mourning

On May 25, seven newborn babies were killed in a major fire at a private hospital in Delhi. The usual elements of a post-tragedy set-up in India were played out: Condemnation by politicians, promises of strict action by the regime, a few hasty arrests and a sudden knee-jerk reaction by public health regulators. All of this will play out over a couple of weeks and then all will be fine — till the next hospital fire. We, as a nation, fail our people in the introspection of such heartbreaking tragedies.

India is one of the few liberal democracies where health care has nearly completely passed into private hands. From dingy clinics in bylanes to posh corporate hospitals, private players now provide more than 80% of health care in this country. In other words, the government of a country with 1.4 billion people is responsible for the health of only 280 million of its citizens. This is what should worry us more than anything else. The May 25 fire is thus not just any accident. It is the outcome of a poorly managed and operated health care delivery apparatus, allowed to go free by an irresponsible public health care regulator. It was thus an accident manufactured with the consent and connivance of multiple players, both private and public.

Fires at hospitals are not uncommon in this part of the world. The AMRI hospital fire in Kolkata killed 90 people in 2011. In April 2021, at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, 13 patients were killed in a fire at the Vijay Lalbah Hospital near Mumbai. In the same year, 11 patients were killed at the Sunrise Hospital fire, again in Mumbai. In 2022, eight patients perished in a fire at the New Life Multispecialty hospital in Jabalpur and 50 patients were killed in a fire at the Murshidabad Medical College in West Bengal in 2016. A 2023 study (Shravishtha Juyal, Tabassum-Abbasi, Tasneem Abbasi and SA Abbasi), which compiled all the major fires in Indian hospitals from 2010 to 2023 found the incidence of fires was equal between private and public hospitals but the number of deaths in private hospital fires far outweighed those in government hospitals.

Private health care in India is poorly regulated. In a welfare state promising to provide free health care to its people, health remains a state subject which may be explained by the fact that each state has its own health priorities. Having said this, health regulations, particularly for private health set-ups at the state level are not only poorly implemented, but are liable to the pressures of money and power. The implementation is patchy in most places and private practitioners go scot-free even after blatant violations. Hospitals and nursing

homes in the Capital city are regulated by the Delhi Nursing Homes Registration Act, 1953, which stands amended by the Clinical Establishments (Registration and Regulation) Act, 2010. But even after all approvals, the act remains to be implemented, thanks to the tug of war involving the Centre and the Delhi state government. Political ambitions remain the single most important determinant of health in the world's largest democracy!

It is an open secret that most private hospitals in Delhi fail to provide free treatment and beds to poor patients, despite this being a legal requirement in lieu of the land given at the time of their construction. If this can happen in the country's Capital, we can only imagine the situation in smaller towns and cities. Having said this, it is important to realise that private health care is here to stay. Mere condemnation of private health care providers is not a solution in a system where private health care delivery is so tightly entrenched that the system now depends on it for its own viability and survival. Failures such as the killer fire can only be minimised through the proper implementation of regulatory mechanisms. The common causes of fires in hospitals are usually poor building structure with no escape routes, presence and improper storage of inflammable liquids and gases in the vicinity and, most importantly, lack of fire safety standard operating protocols.

As a nation enamoured by the West, we need to learn what happened after the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017 that killed 72 people. The synthetic cladding used in the exterior of the tower, which was the main cause of the fire, was banned in the country. Criminal charges have been brought up against the company which manufactured those claddings. A total of 180 investigators, in collaboration with international experts, prepared an extensive report that set off a broad reckoning of British regulations and fire safety. All in all, accountability was set and regulations enforced.

For the new government that will soon assume charge at the Centre, the Delhi hospital fire should provide a moment for reflection: It must take steps on priority to enhance public investment in health care besides regulating the private facilities that have mushroomed all over the country. It is the shortage of affordable health care facilities, which only the State can provide, that has facilitated the emergence of a market for establishments with poor facilities and untrained personnel. What has happened to us as a civil society is that our sense of outrage has been blunted by deaths and mishaps about which we feel we can't do much except mourn. Whether it's a bridge crash, a hoarding collapse, a train accident, a tunnel caving in on workers or a hospital fire killing the ill, we have learnt the art of looking the other way. Accountability is no longer ingrained in the apparatus of civility. We shall continue this way if the offenders, and equally the lawmakers and the law enforcers, continue to go unnoticed, unaccounted and most importantly unpunished.

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{ KRISTALINA GEORGIEVA } MANAGING DIRECTOR, IMF

Pessimists say humanity faces a disastrous reckoning. But I see a different picture. If we act decisively in this decade, we can help ensure a livable planet



How Trinamool played out BJP's spin in Bengal

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee has successfully shepherded her party to a convincing win in the just-concluded general elections. Before we start parsing the results, a word on the prognostications of the pollsters would not be out of place.

The exit polls almost unanimously had the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) pulling ahead of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) both in terms of seats and vote share. A "poll of polls", for instance, gave the BJP 23 seats and the TMC 18. One exit poll predicted 26-31 seats for the BJP against 11-14 for the TMC, while also placing the respective vote shares at 46% and 40%.

The TMC won 29 seats against the BJP's 12. The TMC's vote share has risen from 43.3% to around 46%, while the BJP's vote share has fallen from 40.7% to around 39%. The point of beginning with the exit poll projections is to highlight their failure to look at the situation on the ground.

A number of observers who have been keeping their ears to the ground foresaw a diminution of the BJP's vote share and consequently their seat strength because of several developments leading up to the declaration of the elections on March 16 and subsequently during the nomination process and campaigning.

In the run-up to the announcement, it appeared that the BJP had decided to fashion its campaigning around February's Sandeshkhali agitation, mostly led by women, against land grab, intimidation, physical assault, corruption and, crucially, the sexual oppression of large numbers of women, orchestrated by Sheikh Shahjahan, a local TMC functionary. There was no real Plan B. Thus, when the state government moved, albeit a little dilatorily, to arrest the culprits and begin the process of resituating plots of land converted from agricultural fields to water bodies for pisciculture, some of the force of the campaign was blunted.

Then, when a series of sting videos emerged suggesting that the movement against sexual exploitation was orchestrated by state BJP leaders by offering inducements, alongside retractions of allegations of sexual abuse by several women, the TMC got a chance to draw the sting from the agitation. In fact, Banerjee sought, it now appears successfully, to paint the inducements as an attempt to dishonour Bengal and its women. Sandeshkhali is in the Basirhat constituency, which the TMC's Haji

Nurul Islam won by a landslide despite being pitted against the BJP's Rekha Patra, one of the leaders of the movement, whose candidature was endorsed by Prime Minister Modi.

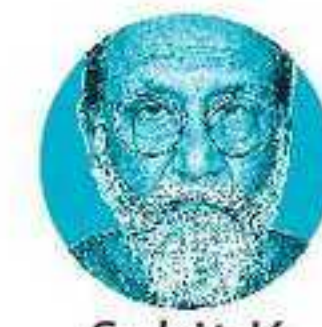
It was debatable from the outset whether the Sandeshkhali issue would have a statewide resonance, given that Banerjee has created a redoubtable constituency among women by rolling out several welfare schemes specific to them.

The other string in the BJP's bow was the education scam. But the TMC managed to neutralise that as well when the Supreme Court (SC) passed a verdict favourable to the government. On April 22, the Calcutta high court (HC) passed an order cancelling over 25,000 school jobs on account of irregularities in the hiring process though only a fraction of them had been contested in the first place. This gave the Opposition ammunition. The BJP tore into the TMC, without expressing sympathy for those who had lost their jobs.

On May 7, the SC stayed the order, citing precisely the fact that not all the jobs cancelled had been affected by the recruitment "scam". This enabled the TMC to turn the issue into one of livelihood. After the HC order, Banerjee had said she would fight it and not allow people to lose their livelihood. After the SC order, she claimed vindication, painting the Opposition as unfeeling and alleging a nexus between the BJP and some HC judges. Her position gained credibility because Abhijit Gangopadhyay, the judge who had originally been trying some of the recruitment cases, quit, joined the BJP and was fielded by the party from the Tam-luk constituency, the backyard of Suwendu Adhikari, the BJP's leader of the Opposition. Gangopadhyay won with a margin of over 77,000 votes.

The BJP scored a few self-goals in the process of managing the elections in West Bengal. Their nomination process was slow, which gave the TMC an early-mover advantage. The nominations were quixotic in some cases as well, especially when winning candidates were shuffled around.

The strategy of bringing in star campaigners from outside and sidelining state leaders helped the TMC characterise the BJP as a "party of outsiders", just as it did during the 2021 assembly elections.



Suhit K Sen

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OUR VIEW



Amaravati: A city back in India's political arclights

This project may be revived as BJP's Modi and TDP's Naidu join hands at the Centre. India needs urban dispersal and this is a chance to create an eco-friendly city for the digital age

This election placed the Constitution of India in the national spotlight, but what its results have brightened overnight is the prospect of Amaravati emerging as an entirely new city to serve as the capital of Andhra Pradesh (AP). A prime mover of this project, N. Chandrababu Naidu of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), has risen to political prominence. Not only did Naidu's party win power in AP, a state bifurcated a decade ago with Hyderabad to be hived off as part of Telangana, its 16 Lok Sabha seats constitute crucial support for the BJP-led coalition that's set to take charge at the Centre. Reports suggest the TDP chief is looking for a big central package to dust off a plan that stayed mostly on paper for half a decade, the result of neglect by AP's outgoing regime, which wanted Amaravati only as the state's legislative seat, with Kurnool as its judicial HQ and Visakhapatnam its administrative capital. High real-estate stakes may have made tussles inevitable over what's best built where, but this week's power tilt has loaded the odds in favour of Amaravati as originally conceived. While Naidu is the chief champion of this project, there is also a major opportunity in it for the BJP and Narendra Modi as Prime Minister. Infrastructure development has been a definitive thrust under Modi's national leadership, but no planned-from-scratch city has arisen in recent memory on the scale of, say, Chandigarh, which arose under Nehru's watch. Amaravati may well be a chance for both Modi and Naidu to literally consolidate an urban legacy.

India has been urbanizing so rapidly that it's a wonder how our existing urban spaces have managed to hold up (even if this isn't evenly true across an overcrowded urban-landscape). It has

long been obvious we need whole new cities that afford citizens the same sort of job and lifestyle options that metro-dwellers enjoy. We need dispersal. Instead, we have seen urban sprawls emerge and expand in haphazard ways around the few mega-cities we have, with great bulks of extra concrete and asphalt doing little to help residents lead better lives. Technology seers had once expected digital connectivity to make cities obsolete as generators of economic value, reversing an industrial trend of people swarming into them. The pandemic even tested how work could be done without gathering together. Yet, cities that throb with life in all their diversity seem set to endure for a variety of good reasons, some organic and cultural, others intrinsic and practical (think airport proximity). If urban living is what the future holds for most of us, regardless of how technology reshapes the economy, then it might be worthwhile to double down on a grand urban plan and make up for lost time. If Amaravati proves a success, it could set the tone for more to come.

Nehru's dream city of Chandigarh reflects an aesthetic that held highbrow appeal in the heady days of early freedom, a modernity drawn from self-evident truths of Euclidean and Constitutional inspiration both. This is a hard act to follow—partly because statism is passé—but Amaravati could also be mounted as an art project. Reports of the involvement of filmmaker S.S. Rajamouli had hinted of an architectural theme taken from portrayals of palatial grandeur in his film *Baahubali*. Whatever the city's outward look is inspired by, it should be built to be climate friendly and tech-focused—not just in the sense of being perfectly green and digitally equipped, but also to convey India's idea of a city created for tomorrow.

MY VIEW | TECH WHISPERS

Miraculous treatments are born when AI weds molecular biology

Its benefits go far beyond creating videos and recipes. AI is helping humans transcend our biology



JASPREET BINDRA

is a technology expert, author of 'The Tech Whisperer', and a Masters in AI and Ethics from Cambridge University.

To understand life," says *The Economist*, "you must understand proteins. These molecular chains, each assembled from a menu of twenty types of amino acids, do biology's heavy lifting. In the guise of enzymes, they catalyze the chemistry that keeps bodies running. Actin and Myosin, the proteins of muscles, permit those bodies to move around. Keratin provides their skin and hair. Haemoglobin carries their oxygen. Insulin regulates their metabolism. And a protein called spike allows coronaviruses to invade human cells, thereby shutting down entire economies." Proteins are the origin of existence; the tail of a human sperm is a structure composed of many types of proteins that work together to form a complex rotary engine that propels the sperm forward to fertilize an egg and create life.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the breakthrough that made me a convert to the religion of AI had to do with proteins. AlphaFold by Google DeepMind cracked one of the hardest problems in medical science—predicting how a protein would fold. Every carbon-based life form is made of proteins, and it is how they fold that decides almost everything about our physiology and life. There are over 200 million known proteins today, and each of them folds in a unique three-dimensional shape. It was impossible for scientists to study each one of them, which considerably hindered

efforts to tackle disease. If proteins fold wrongly, for instance, they can cause horrific harm—Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, Huntington's and Lou Gehrig's disease, and thousands of diseases we do not know yet. DeepMind built on an existing product AlphaGo (the one that famously defeated world champion Lee Sedol in the complex game of Go) to study the sequences and structures of 100,000 proteins, and in four years brought it to a level where it can predict the folded shape of a protein right down to the molecular level. In 2020, the problem was declared solved; a breakthrough as important as mapping the human genome, or the discovery of antibiotics, something that can change medical science forever.

AlphaFold is built on deep learning and neural networks, technologies that shaped AI. The next powerful AI technologies, LLMs and Generative AI, are doing even more magical stuff. GenAI-based image generators like DallE, Midjourney and now Sora and GPT4o can create wondrous images and breathtaking videos with mere word prompts. Researchers are using these technologies to generate blueprints for new proteins, ones that nature has not been able to do. These new proteins could revolutionize our ability to battle diseases. David Baker of the University

of Washington has been building artisanal proteins for years (bit.ly/3V8ie3U), but with this new technology, he can design more sophisticated protein molecules with a higher success rate, shrinking the timeframe from "years to weeks." As an example, GenAI can be used to create proteins of a uniquely distinctive shape such as the spike protein of the covid virus. "What we need are new proteins that can solve modern-day problems, like cancer and viral pandemics," says Baker. "We can't wait for evolution." The amazing part is that this can happen through the right kind of text prompts to begin with. As former Stanford researcher Namrata Anand tells Cade Metz of *NYT* (bit.ly/3V8ie3U): "...protein engineers can ask for a protein that binds to another in a particular way—or some other design constraint—and the generative model can build it."

AI's astonishing innovation in biology and genetics has just begun. A California company Profluent released a research study (bit.ly/45444wy) where GenAI technologies can build new gene editors to edit human DNA, using a Nobel prize winning technology called CRISPR. Profluent's technology learns from how nature creates cellular structures. This gives doctors and scientists another tool to create new medicines and highly personalized treatments. DeepMind just released AlphaFold 3, which goes beyond proteins and peers into biochemical networks that make cells and organisms function. This astonishing marriage of AI and molecular biology has started having demonstrable effects. The *Financial Times* quotes a BCG study that indicates that drugs discovered by AI have higher early-stage trials success rates (bit.ly/3yDhT1w).

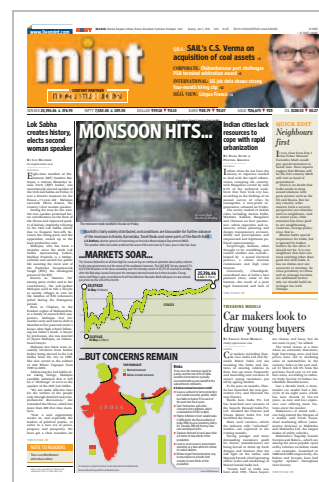
For a lot of us today, AI is a gee-whizz experience of creating stunning videos, travel itineraries and food recipes. But its real benefits to humankind will be deeper and more fundamental, and nowhere more useful than in helping humans transcend our biology.

QUICK READ

New-age AI technologies can analyse millions of proteins quickly and help us create new ones that are aimed specifically at treating serious diseases that have defied cures so far.

Next-gen technologies like LLMs and GenAI are more than just video-making tools. Their benefits are profound as they're especially useful in helping us ease our medical constraints.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Artificial intelligence can be a supplement to human insight, not a substitute.

ABHIJIT NASKAR

THEIR VIEW

A comprehensive approach could boost India's exports

AMIT KAPOOR & SHIVANI KOWADKAR



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India's recently released trade figures have become a subject of intense scrutiny, and rightly so. The line that grabbed attention points to India registering trade deficits with nine of its top 10 trading partners in 2023-24. India's imports from China, the UAE, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Iraq, Indonesia, Hong Kong and South Korea surpassed its exports to these nine nations. The only exception is India's trade surplus with the US; our exports to the country exceeded our imports from it by over \$36.7 billion in 2023-24. India's top three trade partners—China, the US and UAE—were in the same position in 2013-14. Given the fact that these top 10 countries together make up about 52% of India's total trade, this data warrants attention. However, our scrutiny must go beyond a superficial level. To unearth what ails Indian trade and resolve persisting trade deficits, we must dig deeper. Only a comprehensive analysis of structural, policy and market factors can lead to sustainable solutions that address the problem's root causes.

A comprehensive assessment requires a multifaceted approach. The trade deficit story often gets oversimplified. The World Economic Forum's Global Future Council on International Trade and Investment calls an emphasis on trade balances "a poor guide to understanding past sources and implications of trade performance." A deficit can be an effect of various causes. The country may be importing more raw materials to produce more goods. An increase in imports may point to increase in domestic income or cheaper foreign products, among other reasons. The former indicates increased purchasing power and the latter may point to a competitiveness issue at home. This is not to present trade deficits as desirable, but to show that it comes with a set of pros and cons, a major con being added pressure on a country's currency. All in all, the causes and effects of a trade imbalance varies according to the specific circumstances of the economy. Trade deficits also persist for multiple reasons. For instance, a general assumption associates tariff reductions with increased exports. That is not a direct causation. Factors such as inverted duty structures and asymmetric tariff rates can hinder domestic manufacturing by incentivizing imports. The conversation needs to move from an

overemphasis on one parameter to understanding how India can maximize gains from its trade relations and enhance its overall trade ecosystem.

We must assess our capacities to identify which products can be efficiently produced locally and traded globally. Opportunities can thus be explored with each trade partner. For example, a substantial portion of India's exports to the US in 2023-24 were in the HS2 code category of 'Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof; sound recorders and reproducers, television image

recorders and reproducers, and parts.' We need in-depth trade partner-specific analysis to understand our competitive advantage. Boosting India's manufacturing capabilities through efficiency and productivity is also critical. In recent years, an emphasis has been evident on boosting manufacturing with the vision of making India self-reliant. Apart from initiatives like the Production-

Linked Incentive scheme, the introduction of GST, measures related to the ease of doing business, a reduction in compliance burden and the National Infrastructure Pipeline, among others, have given this sector the right impetus. Strategic mapping of India's manufacturing capacities at a regional level will be a crucial exercise to attain greater self-reliance. We must ponder: What is the most effective pathway to spur domestic manufacturing? How do we enable small-scale industries to produce at scale? Thoroughly evaluating import-export figures, mapping our competitive advantage with each trade partner and understanding how boosting manufacturing is a must to make India a global export hub are of huge significance in leveraging trade for overall economic growth.

QUICK READ

The conversation needs to move from an overemphasis on our trade deficit to understanding how we can maximize gains from trade relations and enhance India's overall trade ecosystem.

India's main priority should be to boost domestic manufacturing by leveraging competitive advantages, move up the value chain and invest in technology and innovation.

QUICK READ

Our focus should be on policies that make our manufacturing firms globally competitive. One key effort that lies ahead is diversifying our export basket and markets.

Trade policy experts have acknowledged a welcome change in India's export basket, which has seen a shift away from traditional commodities such as gems, jewellery and textiles towards engineering and electronic goods. A shift to high-value goods reflects a move up the value chain and speaks of our competitiveness. India saw its electronic goods exports increase by around 54.8% in February 2024 compared to February 2023. Additionally, India's notable merchandise exports included engineering goods, electronic goods, chemicals, drugs and pharmaceuticals and petroleum products.

However, there is still extensive ground to cover for India to truly become a high-value commodity exporter. Targeted support, investment in R&D, skilling and infrastructure development will pave the way towards the country's export targets.

It is important to understand that the country's trade balance, while an important indicator, provides insights into only a part of the real scenario. India's main priority should be to enhance domestic manufacturing by leveraging competitive advantages, move up the value chain and invest in technology and innovation. Thriving in international markets as an export powerhouse requires a comprehensive approach.



MY VIEW | THE LAST WORD

MINT CURATOR

The task after India's elections: Unite against a common threat

Post elections, the country should come together to confront climate change, exacerbated by local abuse of natural resources



INDIRA RAJARAMAN
is an economist.

The seven-phase general election was a stupendous achievement by any measure and places India firmly on the global map of sturdy democracies. However, the process carried a high cost in the midst of a torrid heat wave gripping much of the country. A shocking total of 43 staff, on duty on the last day of polling in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, are reported to have succumbed to the heat. Climate scientists have long said the Indian landmass will be among the worst affected by global warming, an impact exacerbated by destruction of tree cover and other predatory gouging of natural resources. Yet, action to combat this existential threat had no play at all in the heat of electioneering rhetoric.

The very terms in which the major sparring between political parties was phrased have to be repurposed. The word 'community' automatically implies, in Indian usage, religious groups. But with global warming and freak climate events upon us, the word 'community' has to be used in its more usual global sense, as a group of people with shared geographical or occupational interests, like 'farming community' or 'coastal community.' What matters is the catastrophe confronted, whether it is forest-fire hit Uttarakhand or drought-hit Karnataka.

The GDP print of real growth in 2023-24 at 8.2% may well lull us into thinking the economic engine will chug us into third place in global GDP rankings, regardless of climate doomspeak. There is also faith, fuelled by the success of space missions and digital payment channels, that the technology elite will miraculously save the country. But much of that technology elite operates from Bangalore, and like other human beings, they need water to live.

Karnataka state has historically had drought-prone districts. What brought drought conditions to Bangalore city was the decades-old assault on traditional water bodies dotting the city, which were drained to make way for housing projects, airports, hotels, casinos, pubs, you name it. Bangalore borewells, which drew from aquifers charged by those water bodies, ran dry. In the recent freak torrential rainfall in the city, there was urban flooding in the absence of water bodies for rainwater to drain into.

Climate action is more than just about the emission reduction targets that India commits to on the international stage. Every community has to act to protect its own immediate environs. Where should climate action start? How are the priorities to be set? Can the scientific elite help point us in the right direction?

NASEM in the US is a joint action front of three independent professional bodies, its National Academies of Sciences (NAS), Engineering and Medicine. These are not taxpayer funded, but the



oldest (NAS) was appointed by an Act of Congress signed into law by Abraham Lincoln in 1863. The other two are more recent spinoffs under the NAS charter. On the NASEM website, topmost on its list of topics is 'climate.' A little further down is 'artificial intelligence.' Other topics further down the list are more politically flavoured, like 'mobilizing support for Ukraine.'

Under the climate head, the activities include a monthly webinar series titled 'Climate Conversations: Pathways to Action.' The most recent, on 31 May, was about the considerations to keep in mind for relocation of communities displaced by climate events to be least damaging and disruptive. Then there is a Board on Environmental Change and Society, which holds virtual workshops, such as one in late May on how infrastructure can be designed to 'reduce climate risks effectively.'

NASEM uses its considerable expertise in a wide range of fields to pick up research of relevance for climate action, not confined to work done by academy members themselves, and act as a conduit to bring the findings to the attention of policymakers and the public.

India has had formidable climate action warriors, from Alok Shukla, who successfully fought for legislation to preserve the Hasdeo forest in Chhatisgarh from the depredations of coal mining, to

the Centre for Science and Environment, which has researched traditional methods of water preservation in dryland India, and notable environmental scientist Madhav Gadgil. But there is no dissemination point, with the weight of academic assessment behind it, to prioritize climate action and exert pressure on policy at the central and state levels.

India has three autonomous science academies and a national academy of engineering, funded under Demand 89 of the Union Budget for the department of science and technology. There is also a national academy of medical sciences funded under Demand 46 for the department of health and family welfare. But there is no platform where their combined expertise can be brought together to address existential threats to life on the Indian landmass.

These academies hold annual meetings where they might well host discussions or talks on issues of public interest. But they have to reach beyond the choir to the larger audience outside their protected environs. NASEM aims to provide "independent, objective analysis and advice to the nation and conduct other activities to solve complex problems and inform public policy decisions." A similar commitment by our academies will give us a firmer grip on our future.

QUICK READ

Climate action is more than just about emission reduction targets. Local communities must act to protect their immediate environs, but we need the guidance of scientists.

India needs the equivalent of America's NASEM, a joint action front of institutions that aims to advise the country on such matters. It would give us a firmer grip on our collective future.

Post-pandemic revenge travel appears to be losing its appeal

How this summer pans out will reveal the market's normal state



ANDREA FELSTED
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering consumer goods and the retail industry.

Revenge travel is losing its appeal. After three years of rushing to book trips in the wake of pandemic-era restrictions, sharply higher fares, protests against tourism, fatigue from endless hours spent in airports and incomes squeezed by inflation are all taking their toll. Travel demand is far from falling off a cliff. But there are signs that our wanderlust is downshifting from never-ending to a more normal pattern.

For airlines and tour operators, the next few months will be crucial in filling seats and hotel rooms. If demand is strong, they will be able to sell leftover capacity at higher prices. But if consumers hold off, they'll be forced to discount, something that hasn't happened in three years.

In Europe, many people who were passionate about their vacations booked in January in order to secure their preferred destination, hotel and even room. But in recent months, some consumers, particularly more budget-constrained families, have been holding off to see how their own finances, and holiday prices, developed. TUI, the world's biggest tour operator, has sold about 60% of the vacations available this summer.

That's broadly in line with last year, but it's still a lot of sunny breaks to shift in an uncertain environment.

European travellers are also shopping around. At Thomas Cook, now reborn as an online tour operator, bookings to Spain's Balearic and Canary Islands are flat year-over-year. This reflects cost—you can get more for your money in Turkey, mainland Spain and Egypt—where sales are up. But anti-tourism protests in the Canary and Balearic islands may also be playing a part.

European consumers are still prepared to pay as much for their package holiday—well, almost. TUI's summer pricing is up 4%, close to the 5% increase reported a year earlier. But budget airlines Ryanair Holdings and EasyJet show that when it comes to air fares, consumers are reaching their limit.

Michael O'Leary, chief executive officer of Ryanair, forecast that fares across its network this summer would be flat to 5% ahead, down from his previous prediction of a 5% to 10% increase, surprising given that capacity is constrained by delays to Boeing deliveries. Europe's largest low-cost carrier has begun to cut ticket prices to fill its fleet.

There are signs that the US travel recovery, now in its third year, is maturing too. For example, Marriott International said US leisure revenue per available room, a



Global travel demand has begun to soften after an extraordinary boom. ISTOCKPHOTO

key measure of hotel performance, was flat in its first quarter. Airbnb forecast that revenue would expand by 8% to 10% in the second quarter, the lowest level for three years. It's possible this is a blip—Easter was earlier this year—and Airbnb expects a bounce in the summer months.

Indeed, the picture is complex. Some of the US domestic weakness may reflect Americans travelling to Europe, emboldened by the strength of the dollar. This will likely have been boosted by one-offs, such as Taylor Swift's concerts.

And this isn't the only factor that makes the travel temperature so difficult to take. After wildfires in Greece last year, climate concerns are at the forefront of consumers' minds. Yet this is spurring some unusual behaviours, such as some European customers booking long-haul flights to destinations such as Mauritius, where summer temperatures are more predictable, and, after price increases at some traditional Mediterranean resorts, the cost differential has narrowed.

As in other parts of the consumer economy, it may be that travel is polarizing, with the wealthy still splashing on trips further afield and top-notch accommodation, while those pressured by inflation and higher mortgage costs stick to a budget.

After the West's travel boom—and potentially a return to more pedestrian levels—the industry is now looking East, to the return of Chinese visitors, particularly to Europe.

But for the coming weeks, short-term factors, such as elections in the UK and weather patterns—TUI said the winter season ended particularly strongly, likely boosted by cold and wet conditions—will matter most.

Being unable to spread our wings during the pandemic has reinforced our love of getting away and we may never return to a situation where we are prepared to stay home. That doesn't mean we won't alter our behaviour, like skipping a week away in spring or autumn, or, for example, forgoing a city break to preserve our main vacation.

There is much riding on this year's peak summer season. Not only will it determine the level of profits at tour operators, hotels and airlines, but it will give the first glimpse of what a more settled post-pandemic travel market looks like. ©BLOOMBERG

GUEST VIEW

Menstrual leave can lift women's labour participation

BISWAJITA PARIDA & ANJANA AJITH



are, respectively, an assistant professor at the Department of Management Studies, IIT Delhi, and a joint doctoral scholar at IIT Delhi and University of Queensland, Australia.

On 13 December 2023, India's Upper House of Parliament debated menstrual leave at workplaces, sparking widespread debate. The key point of discussion was the importance of menstrual leave in empowering individuals across various job roles and workplaces.

In 2023, of 3.4 billion global employees, men outnumber women heavily. In India, women are estimated to constitute around 40% of the service sector's staff. The female labour force participation (FLFP) rate in India was 37% in 2023, with a clear trend indicating more women joining organized workplaces. A rising FLFP is a growth driver for any economy, especially for a developing one such as India. However, encouraging greater participation is as crucial as ensuring incentives are aligned to retain women in the labour force across various sectors. Despite unique challenges in each industry and role, all workplaces should prioritize the physical, mental and emotional well-being of their employees for better retention.

Most women in India's labour force are aged 25-54 and a large proportion of them menstruate. Hence, menstrual leave arises as a need for multiple reasons. Menstruation can be a matter of great discomfort, with particular vulnerability to migraines, abdominal pain, backache, bloating, breast pain, fatigue, mood swings and conditions like endometriosis, pre-menstrual syndrome and pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder. These experiences, often suppressed, affect menstruating employees' comfort at work. They can lead to loss of focus and drops in performance and productivity, even office absenteeism and resultant marginalization. The American Psychological Association describes these limitations as "handicaps."

Workplace well-being factors constitute 'decent work,' a concept propounded by the International Labour Organization that looks at jobs from employee perspectives. In this context, menstrual leave can be seen as a rights-based provision for female labour force retention, one that supports menstruating employees physically and emotionally. Menstrual leave provisions can compensate for the lack of menstruation amenities at most workplaces, a common violation of menstruating employees' rights. Menstrual-leave policies aim to reduce inequalities that

arise from differences between those who menstruate and those who don't, fostering equity. Viewing workplace provisions through a menstrual equity lens could help organizations achieve gender equity. Paid menstrual leave is a sign of equal respect and appreciation for all employees. Several countries—including Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines and Vietnam—have policies of paid menstrual leave. In India, Bihar introduced menstrual leave in 1992. In 2021, the governments of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh announced menstrual leave for female employees. In 2023, Kerala granted menstrual leave for female university students. Private companies like Culture Machine, Gozoop, Swiggy, Byju's, Zomato and Viacom also have menstrual leave policies. An International Monetary Fund paper estimates that equal female workforce participation could boost India's GDP by 27%, adding an impressive \$700 billion.

This finding underscores the parallel paths of economic growth and gender equality. Menstrual leave, a gender-sensitive policy, could enhance menstrual health, working conditions and thus favour gender equality. In the past, adaptive measures for women like providing toilet facilities in schools have significantly improved girls' attendance and participation in education.

As India needs to boost female labour force participation for growth, the pursuit of diversity, equity and inclusion should place a special focus on menstruating individuals. This approach can help create more inclusive workplaces. It is a step towards acknowledging and addressing the unique needs of menstruating employees in a manner that makes for a more equitable work environment overall.

As there are concerns about the potentially discriminatory nature of a menstrual leave policy, it needs close evaluation. To weigh all aspects and assess its impact on

Menstrual discomfort can be severe enough to hit employee productivity and menstrual leave should be a standard provision to achieve a more equitable and inclusive work environment.

High female labour force participation is an important driver for any economy but raising it requires prioritizing the physical, mental and emotional well-being of women employees.

Menstrual discomfort can be severe enough to hit employee productivity and menstrual leave should be a standard provision to achieve a more equitable and inclusive work environment.

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women's participation and retention, here are steps that can be taken.

Conduct research studies: Comprehensive research findings can help decision-makers understand the effect of menstruation on women's work performance and well-being.

Run pilot programmes: Implement pilot menstrual leave schemes in various workplaces to evaluate their impact on productivity, employee morale and retention rates.

Get feedback: Regularly collect feedback from all employees, not just menstruators, to understand their perspective.

Review policies: Review such leave policies used in other countries and companies to adapt successful practices.

Do an inclusion test: Consider alternative policies that are inclusive. For instance, 'flexible leave' or 'wellness leave' can be used by all employees who don't feel well enough.

Educate everyone: Promote education and awareness of menstruation to reduce stigma and ensure everyone understands why menstrual leave might be necessary. We should also consider improving workplace conditions, menstrual hygiene infrastructure, access to safe menstrual products and emergency care facilities.

The goal is to create a supportive and inclusive work environment for everyone.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Hearth over heart

Taking Ram temple credit couldn't help BJP win Ayodhya; voters wanted development instead

The BJP slogan 'Jo Ram ko laaye hain, hum unko laayenge' (We will support those who brought Ram to Ayodhya), though catchy, failed to resonate in the very city where the temple was built. The BJP's shocking loss on the Ayodhya seat underscores a fundamental principle: Development must take precedence over religious agenda. Coming just months after the grand consecration, the BJP's defeat underscores the nuanced dynamics between religious fervour and tangible progress. Ayodhya holds profound significance in the cultural and religious ethos of India. The temple was a promise long-awaited, one that the BJP fervently championed. However, it could not harvest the political spoils and its nominee from Faizabad — which includes Ayodhya — Lallu Singh was defeated by Samajwadi Party's Awadhesh Prasad by 54,567 votes. Ostensibly, apart from the Dalit vote favouring the INDIA bloc, the pressing issues of development and unemployment trumped religion. The loss has ignited a discourse questioning the efficacy of prioritising religious symbolism over pragmatic development initiatives. It also underscores the evolving priorities of the electorate. While religious sentiments undoubtedly hold sway, voters increasingly demand from their leaders tangible improvements in the quality of life, infrastructure and economic prospects. The discrepancy between the monumental religious symbolism and on-the-ground developmental realities became starkly evident during the elections.



We Indians are without a doubt God-fearing, but we are logical and rational as well. In Ayodhya, the grandeur of the new temple failed to resonate with the local populace, which was hurt and disappointed in the aftermath of demolished homes and ruined businesses, and inadequate compensation. The disconnect between the monumental temple inauguration and the pressing concerns of Ayodhya's residents highlights the need for a more balanced approach to governance. In Ayodhya, as in any other region, the electorate seeks more than symbolic gestures; they yearn for substantive change that enhances their livelihood and fosters inclusive growth. The BJP's loss in Ayodhya serves as a caution to political parties across the spectrum: While symbolism may evoke transient fervour, only concrete progress resonates with voters in the long run. The BJP's Ayodhya setback should serve as a wake-up call for all political stakeholders. Furthermore, the Ayodhya episode underscores the crying need for secular governance in a diverse and pluralistic democracy like India. While respecting religious sentiments, the State must maintain a principled stance of impartiality, ensuring that policies and initiatives benefit all citizens irrespective of their faith or belief system. Let us not forget the Constitution drafters wanted that the State must keep its hands off religious matters and, though added later, 'secularism' is still there in the Preamble. Invoking Gods in campaigns is not a done thing. Let Ram remain apolitical, in the name of Ram. Please.

Married women tie threads to a banyan tree as part of rituals of 'Vat Savitri Puja', in Ranchi

PICTALK



Married women tie threads to a banyan tree as part of rituals of 'Vat Savitri Puja', in Ranchi

Indian voters deliver a resounding verdict



B K JHA

Voters reject Modi's divisive politics, empowering the Opposition to safeguard democracy and reflecting a nuanced view of the ruling party's tenure

India's electorate has delivered its verdict, and the message is crystal clear. The voters have used the ruling party's performance over the past decade as a mirror, reflecting both approval and disapproval. On one hand, they have rejected Prime Minister Narendra Modi's divisive politics. On the other hand, they have empowered the opposition, enabling it to play the role of a robust guardian of democracy. This impartial decision signals that the public is weary of divisive, communal politics and rejects any attempt to split the nation along religious lines. This sentiment is evident in the defeat of the BJP candidate in Ayodhya, a place where the BJP had grand visions of surpassing the 400-seat mark by building the Ram Temple. However, while the electorate has not completely dismissed the BJP, which has ruled the country for the past ten years on a platform of negative politics, it has significantly reduced its stature. The public has made it clear that their primary concern is the nation's welfare, and they will not tolerate the continued burden of rising prices, economic strain, and jobless growth. The opposition's strengthened position in the Lok Sabha elections sends a similar message: the ruling party must not envision a Lok Sabha devoid of a vibrant opposition.



The results of this election highlight several key issues, such as the Agniphath scheme for the military, inflation, unemployment, Hindutva, and the narrative of constitutional changes. Throughout the campaign, Prime Minister Modi, despite giving nearly a hundred interviews, avoided addressing these critical issues faced by the public. Meanwhile, the opposition concentrated its narrative on these very concerns. This contrast has shown that no government can keep the populace in an illusory world for long. Ultimately, any government at the Centre or State must measure up to the people's real-life experiences and struggles. By denying the ruling party a clear mandate after ten years of absolute power, the electorate has signalled to both the government and the opposition

that if they do not prioritize public interests, they will not be spared in the future. The results also convey a strong disapproval of derogatory language. The voters have punished those MPs of the ruling party who used unparliamentary language against opponents both in the Lok Sabha and on public platforms. This outcome manifests the public's demand for civility and respect in political discourse. Furthermore, this election has reaffirmed the credibility of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). Opposing parties, which had been casting doubts on EVMs for the past decade, emerged victorious through the very same machines, suggesting that the allegations were unfounded. However, despite these results, the Election Commission of India (ECI) remains under scrutiny regarding its impartiality. This election became the first in India where the ECI failed to enforce the Model Code of Conduct effectively. Moving forward, it is hoped that the ECI will learn from these results and ensure that future elections adhere strictly to the Model Code of Conduct, without fear or favouritism. The ECI needs to take a page from



THE PUBLIC HAS EXPRESSED THAT THEY ARE NOT SWAYED BY NOISE AND DIVISIVE POLITICS BUT ARE FOCUSED ON TANGIBLE ISSUES AFFECTING THEIR DAILY LIVES

TN Seshan, the former Chief Election Commissioner, who enforced strict adherence to the code in the late 20th century, compelling politicians to use appropriate language and behaviour. The autonomy and integrity of the Election Commission are crucial elements in motivating opposition parties to participate in elections without fear and with impartiality. These are the main pillars that contribute to the credibility of the democratic exercise. The electorate's wisdom in this decision deserves profound congratulations. It has demonstrated a commitment to democracy and a keen understanding of the issues that matter most. The public has expressed that they are not swayed by noise and divisive politics but are focused on tangible issues affecting their daily lives. This election is a testament to the strength of India's democracy, where the people's voice continues to be the ultimate authority. As India moves forward, the onus is on both the ruling party and the opposition to heed this clear mandate. They must address the real issues—economic stability, employment, inflation, and social harmony—over rhetoric and

divisive policies. The electorate's message is unequivocal: governance must be about the people's welfare, and any deviation from this path will not be tolerated. Notwithstanding the results, the stock market's rollercoaster moves in the last few days only reflect India's growth story, which remains intact. Driven by sentiments and global triggers, it will surely take its course towards an upward move, albeit with a few ups and downs. Finally, this election marks a turning point in Indian politics. It is historical in the sense that everyone is happy. The NDA is happy with a clear majority, though the BJP is not. I.N.D.I.A. consolidated its position as a formidable opposition, and Congress is on the revival path. Hence, the General Elections of 2024 are a reminder that democracy thrives on accountability and that the electorate's power is paramount. The people prefer an inclusive and issue-based political discourse. This momentous decision by India's voters is a celebration of democratic values and a beacon for future governance. (The author is a New Delhi-based Senior Journalist. Views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OKHLA SANCTUARY FACING CRISIS

Madam — Apropos the news story "Okhla Bird Sanctuary sees over 90 per cent decline in winged guests," published on June 6, this is my response. Reading about the drastic decline in winter migratory water birds at Okhla Bird Sanctuary is deeply troubling. This sanctuary, once a haven for diverse bird species, has seen a staggering 90% drop in bird arrivals over five years. The causes are multifaceted, including climate change, but a significant factor is mismanagement by local authorities. Transforming the sanctuary into an entertainment park has introduced severe human disturbances, disrupting bird habitats.

Additionally, wetland degradation has exacerbated the problem, with water levels dropping and invasive plant species spreading. It's alarming that a sanctuary designated under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 could deteriorate to such an extent. The sanctuary's decline is a stark reminder of the importance of effective environmental management and the dire consequences of neglect. Immediate action is necessary to restore and protect this critical habitat, ensuring it remains a refuge for migratory birds and biodiversity.

Anaya Bhatt | Faridabad

ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES DEMAND ACTION

Madam — Apropos the news story "Fight to preserve our fragile ecosystems," published on June 6, this is my response. Reading the daily headlines, one can't help but feel the pressing weight of our environmental crises. Delhi's record-breaking heatwave of over 50 degrees Celsius and the rampant forest fires in Kashmir are glaring reminders of our climate emergency. As politics overshadow meaningful action, forest fires and extreme temperatures devastate wildlife and human communities alike.

In Dehradun, the battle to save 2,000 trees in Khalanga forest from being felled for a reservoir underscores the conflict between development and conservation. Activists advocate for sustainable alternatives,

BJP's clean sweep in Delhi



Regarding the news story "Will win Delhi Assembly polls next year, say newly elected BJP MPs," published on June 6, here are my thoughts. The recent Lok Sabha elections in Delhi showcased an impressive clean sweep by the BJP, marking their third consecutive victory in all seven parliamentary constituencies. As an avid newspaper reader, it's striking how the BJP, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, has solidified its stronghold in the national capital. This triumph is not only a testament to the

party's organisational prowess but also reflects the public's endorsement of Modi's governance and policies.

The unity within the INDIA alliance, comprising Congress and AAP, couldn't deter the BJP's momentum. The newly elected MPs' dedication to addressing Delhi's issues, such as water scarcity and slum rehabilitation, is commendable. The emphasis on development, digital inclusivity, and public welfare initiatives resonates well with the electorate's aspirations. The BJP's strategic focus on local issues and promises of concrete actions in the next 100 days, like the introduction of a startup hub and a grievance portal for government employees, showcases a proactive approach. This clean sweep, coupled with the party's ambitious plans, suggests a strong potential for continued dominance in the upcoming Assembly polls.

Anvi Dubey | Dhanbad

stressing the ecological importance of these ancient trees. Meanwhile, the construction of the Delhi-Dehradun Expressway at the cost of 7,500 trees raises questions about our commitment to environmental preservation. Even as the world celebrated Environment Day with the theme "Our land. Our future," the stark realities of deforestation, wildfires, and climate change demand immediate and sustained action. In the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi and James Lovelock, it is time we recognise our intrinsic connection to the Earth and commit to sustainable development, or risk losing our planet's delicate balance forever.

Meera Shukla | Solapur

THE CHARM OF SPOKEN WORDS

Madam — Regarding the news story "Virtual communication over spoken words," published on June 4, here are my thoughts. Reading this nostalgic piece brings back a flood of memories. It's touching how the nursery rhyme, modified to include letters, encapsulates the essence of longing and connection that handwritten correspondence provided in the past. In

1974, with the absence of modern communication tools, letters were lifelines, bridging the gap between hostel students and their homes. The anecdote about the long-distance courtship through letters is particularly poignant. It's a beautiful reminder of how relationships were nurtured with patience and anticipation, each letter carrying the weight of love and longing. This methodical exchange of thoughts served the same purpose as modern-day dating, fostering understanding and connection. As time has marched on, so has the way we communicate. The shift from handwritten notes to digital messages reflects the broader changes in our society. Yet, the essence of meaningful communication remains unchanged. Even amidst technological advancements, the need for personal, heartfelt interaction endures. While we adapt to new forms, the core human desire for connection and validation persists.

Riya Bansal | Jalandhar

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

India's green power policies come of age

India emerged as the third largest solar power generator in 2023, thanks to its ambitious policies and regulations

From the MNRE's Surya-Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana guidelines for residential rooftop solar to the adoption of green energy open access regulations by State regulators for the C&I sectors, proactive efforts are being made across all areas to make RE more accessible and adaptable. Let's delve into a few of the recent government policies, regulatory changes, and judicial interventions that have significantly influenced this evolving sector.



Rules: The GEOA Rules were notified in 2022 to streamline the overall approval process for granting OA. Time-bound processing by bringing uniformity and transparency in the application as well as approval of OA through a national portal has been mandated. Moreover, SERCs have been instructed to implement the GEOA Rules notified by the MoP and align with the State OA regulations. Accordingly, various SERCs including Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana have issued their respective GEOA regulations.

Amendment to the Electricity Rules, 2005: The MoP has introduced a comprehensive set of amendments to the Electricity Rules, 2005. These new rules enable consumers with specified energy loads and ESS to establish, operate, and maintain their dedicated transmission lines without requiring a license. In cases where CGP is established by an affiliate company, the captive user must hold 51% ownership of that affiliate. This provision facilitates the establishment of group captive plants through subsidiaries, providing greater flexibility for companies to manage their energy needs. Green Energy Open Access

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Surya-Ghar: The primary goal of this initiative is to help provide free or low-cost electricity to 10 million households with up to 300 units of electricity per month by installing rooftop solar. The scheme will be implemented until March 31, 2027.

State RE Policies: According to recent reports, Rajasthan is spearheading India's transition to green energy with the production of 39,300 million units of green energy in early 2023-24. Gujarat, the second-largest RE producer, generated 36,184 million units during the same period, marking a doubling of its 2019-20 output and narrowing the gap with Rajasthan's leadership position.

Judicial intervention The court's interpretation of the laws and governmental policies wields substantial influence, particularly in cases where legislative ambiguity or changing circumstances exist. In such cases, judicial authorities undertake broad interpretations to enhance the effectiveness of the laws.

Rule of Proportionality: After a conundrum on the issues surrounding ownership and consumption within captive power plants, the Supreme Court clarified that a captive user has to maintain unitary qualifying ratio throughout the year to meet the captive qualification.

GIB Order: The Supreme Court, vide a judgment dated March 21, 2024, recalled its

earlier injunction order dated April 19, 2021, in M.K. Ranjitsinh & Ors. V. Union of India & Ors. whereby it imposed a general prohibition regarding the installation of overhead transmission lines in both Priority and Potential Areas. The court's decision helps stalled projects. Despite progress at the central level, states struggle to follow directives, causing regulatory divergence and exceeding legal boundaries. These discrepancies, exemplified by GERCC imposing restrictions on purchase and sale agreements in captive power transactions and escalating banking charges, are clearly at odds with the GEOA Rules. Therefore, ensuring uniformity in the adoption of laws and conducting thorough discussions and public hearings before formulating regulations are imperative steps to address the concerns of all stakeholders effectively and promote holistic development within the RE sector and its associated aspects.

(The writer is AGM- Legal at AMPIN Energy Transition; views are personal)



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RAVI VALLURI

Harilal Gandhi (1888-1948), Manilal, Ramdas and Devdas were the four sons of Gandhiji and Kasturba. However, the children could not accept their father. They resented the fact that the illustrious father did not impart formal education to the children.

Harilal Gandhi, became an alcoholic, an embezzler, known for public drunkenness and destitution, and was an apoState. He converted to Islam and was known as Abdullah Gandhi. Though he loved his parents, he could not accept his father's ideology of parenting.

What do we mean by acceptance? Acceptance in human psychology is a person's assent to the reality or situation, recognising a process or condition (often a negative or uncomfortable situation) without attempting to change it or protest.

A woman is married into a family and brings with her the baggage of her ideology. Similarly, the family she is married into have their own thought process. Are they able to accept the lady?

A rich person during the times of Buddha, was desirous of becoming a monk and joining the Sangha. Buddha the Compassionate One, was willing to accept the person in the fold but made it clear that he needs to accept everyone in thought and deed. The wealthy person with all abundance meditated and returned to Buddha and accepted the condition. But added that he could accept everyone save two people. Buddha smiled and said, that the Sangha would make an exception in the case of the individual, that he need not accept 98 persons, but accept only those two individuals. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, elucidates further that there is a concept of active and passive acceptance. In case there is corruption in society, we may just tolerate the corruption and do nothing about it. However, in case of active acceptance, we take a stand.



In our minds, we need to create a space where we are willing to accept all the qualities (be they acceptable or not) of a person. Only through unconditional love can we accept a person. But this is possible only if we can live in the present moment. A meditative mind would be in a State to accept situations, conditions and people. The locale and circumstances keep changing thus our minds should be trained in such a manner, that it is willing to accept those situations. As Buddha says, the only permanent thing in life is its impermanence.

By not accepting people and situations we are only torturing our minds. Our minds need rest and peace. Unnecessary thoughts keep cropping up in our system as to what the other person feels about us without discerning that the concerned individual is not even bothered about what our State of mind is.

To my mind, all religions and faiths need to accept each other to maintain sanity in the world. Political barriers have collapsed with increasing globalisation and technology. The world has become 'flat', thus individuals and nations need to accept all ideologies, to avoid conflict. We need to intellectually and emotionally accept people.

John Lennon penned those iconic lines,

'Imagine there's no heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us only sky

Imagine all the people'

"The art of acceptance is the art of making someone who has just done you a small favour wish that he might have done you a great one," wrote Martin Luther King Jr.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

Rejuvenating Indian social work, culturally



VINEET PRAKASH

Integrating modern and indigenous methods enhances the relevance of Indian social work, providing it with greater depth and effectiveness



Every profession is unique and essential for societal growth and development. Social work, however, carries an added responsibility - to serve people and communities, striving to uplift them. It involves working with people and their surroundings, considering external and internal factors simultaneously. Social work is not just about empathizing with others' circumstances but also about reflecting on potential solutions and alternatives.

In today's India, social work as a profession is emerging as one of the crucial sectors. Over the last decade, this profession has expanded its horizon and established itself across the country. It is encouraging to see a growing number of young professionals choosing this career path. India needs more such young minds and professionals who can work on the ground and formulate policies to address critical societal issues. However, it is essential to question whether we are truly fulfilling this need.

The Evolution of Social Work: Global and Indian Contexts

Social work as a profession has a rich history globally. It was formalized in the early 20th century with the establishment of social work education programs in universities. The United States and Europe played pivotal roles in the development of social work, focusing on scientific methods and systematic approaches to address social issues.

In India, social work has deep roots that can be traced back to ancient times when the concept of "seva" (selfless service) was integral to societal life. The profession, in its modern form, began taking shape during the colonial period with the establishment of formal training programs. The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), established in 1936, was one of the first institutions to offer professional social work education in India. Since then, the profession has evolved, adapting to the country's unique social, economic, and cultural contexts.

The Need for Indianising Social Work Recognising Diversity

India's strength lies in its diversity, with various languages, food habits, cultures, and climates. The country is home to numerous religions, castes, and tribes, each facing unique social issues. Solutions to these problems cannot be one-size-fits-all; they

must be tailored to the specific community and location. India's indigenous approaches have shown success in overcoming tough challenges, and integrating these approaches into modern social work practices can preserve and promote these valuable traditions.

Influence of Great Reformers

Great social reformers like Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, Savitri Bai Phule, Sayyid Ahmed Khan, Pandita Ramabai, Vinoba Bhave, and many others have not only addressed complex issues of their time but also laid down principles that continue to guide us. However, the current syllabus and course content of social work in India reflects more of a colonial-era influence than Indigenous perspectives. It is time to introspect and make necessary corrections. After 75 years of independence, it is imperative to Indianize social work education and practice, ensuring that it is relevant to the Indian context. While the exchange of ideas is valuable, it should be multidirectional, incorporating India's rich social work heritage.

Historical and Traditional Engagement Areas of Social Work in India

Historically, social work in India has been deeply rooted in community development, public health, education, disaster response and relief, as well as advocacy and human rights, with practices that reflect indigenous approaches. Before independence, the Cooperative Movement emerged as a powerful tool to address rural indebtedness and enhance agricultural practices, empowering farmers through access to credit and collective bargaining power. Post-independence, the Chipko Movement exemplified community-driven environmental activism, with villagers, especially women, embracing trees to prevent deforestation, highlighting the importance of community involvement in sustainable development.

Integrating Modern and Indigenous Approaches in Social Work for Sustainable Impact

The intersection of modern and Indigenous approaches in social work is vital for creating a sustainable impact in communities. Pre-independence, traditional

healthcare practices like Yoga, Ayurveda, and Unani played vital roles in providing accessible healthcare, particularly in rural areas, with practitioners significantly contributing to community health. Post-independence, the Pulse Polio Immunization Campaign demonstrated effective public health social work, with extensive collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and local communities playing a crucial role in eradicating polio. In education, pre-independence, the traditional Gurukul system emphasized holistic, value-based education, fostering physical, mental, and spiritual development through personalized learning. Post-independence India has implemented educational initiatives reflecting indigenous social work approaches, such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and the Right to Education Act, all emphasizing inclusivity and community participation.

Pre-independence, social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated against social evils like sati and child marriage, leading to significant changes in societal norms and practices. Post-independence, the Right to Information (RTI) Movement empowered citizens to hold the government accountable, promoting transparency and good governance. These examples underscore the rich history of social work in India, deeply intertwined with indigenous practices and values, emphasizing community participation, sustainability, and cultural relevance. Integrating these indigenous approaches into modern social work practices can help preserve and promote these valuable traditions while addressing contemporary social challenges.

Integrating Modern and Indigenous Approaches in Social Work for Sustainable Impact

The intersection of modern and Indigenous approaches in social work is vital for creating a sustainable impact in communities.

Modern methodologies bring innovative ideas and technologies, emphasizing evidence-based practices and data-driven decision-making for measurable outcomes. Indigenous approaches, on the other hand, offer valuable insights rooted in local contexts, emphasizing community participation, traditional knowledge, and cultural relevance for long-term impact and resilience. By integrating these approaches, social workers can leverage the strengths of both, building trust, respecting local traditions, and empowering communities for more sustainable and impactful interventions.

Proposing "Bhartiya Samaj Karya Diwas": Celebrating India's Legacy in Social Work

Every year, the 3rd Tuesday of March is celebrated globally as World Social Work Day. This year, it was celebrated on March 19, 2024. Given India's long history and significant impact in the field of social work, it is time to consider declaring and adopting a day as "Bhartiya Samaj Karya Diwas," i.e., Indian Social Work Day. This would not only celebrate the legacy of Indian social workers but also promote indigenous practices to serve the people of India better. This will also lead to promoting and recognizing the efforts of local social workers, and they can be role models for others.

Revitalizing social work in India by integrating indigenous approaches and perspectives is not just a necessity but a responsibility. By doing so, we can ensure that social work remains relevant and effective in addressing the unique challenges faced by our diverse society. It is time to revive the Indigenous methods, honour our rich heritage, learn from our great reformers, and adapt our practices to serve the people of India in the most authentic and impactful ways.

(The writer is currently working as an American India Foundation Banyan Impact Fellow; views are personal)



HISTORICALLY, SOCIAL WORK IN INDIA HAS BEEN DEEPLY ROOTED IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC HEALTH, EDUCATION, DISASTER RESPONSE AND RELIEF, AS WELL AS ADVOCACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS, WITH PRACTICES THAT REFLECT INDIGENOUS APPROACHES

Modi 3.0: Expectations, challenges and opportunities ahead

The third term will test the mettle of PM Modi because he will be leading a coalition Government for the first time in his political career

The NDA led by PM Modi has registered a modest victory in the general election and it is a historic moment in our parliamentary democracy when a leader won three successive mandates. For record's sake, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru and Smt. Indira Gandhi also won three elections and formed the government but this charisma in India of the twenty-first century holds another significance because now our democracy is more mature and information is easily accessible to the masses. While a lot has already been talked about the pro-people measures taken by the NDA government that led to this victory, it is time to focus on what we should expect from Modi 3.0 because this



SHSHANK SAURAV

term is going to define the legacy of PM Modi. The electoral rebound of the Congress-led alliance should not be interpreted as a decline in the personal image of the prime minister. We are living in an era when the brand Modi is more popular than ever before and people are becoming public representatives with the backing of the PM, then he must use his aura and strength to pro-

mote clean politics. There are apprehensions that slowly our democracy will become an aristocracy where people from humble backgrounds will not find a place to stand. This is a phenomenon that we are seeing in South Asia where political representation is becoming like a hereditary lineage. I am not implying that those who are from humble backgrounds have no place in this set-up but it is increasingly becoming difficult for a common man to withstand the money & might of the established political players.

Rahul Gandhi's ideas are a danger to this country and it was good for the country that the divisive agenda of the INDI alliance came out in the open. However, this

country expects a lot from PM Modi. It was an open secret that this battle was fought in the name of Modi and he was the face of the campaign, irrespective of who is the candidate from his party. It would have been great had PM Modi used this opportunity to free our political set-up from the clutches of dynasts and turn-coats. Regional parties have long back become family-owned private limited companies but BJP always stood different from others when it came to politics of ideology and principles. It has more to do with the ideological influence of Sangh over BJP which sets the moral benchmark higher for BJP than other political parties. This election was Waterloo



for many regional parties and some have fared well while others have perished. Number game has put Modi and team in a position where they will have to negotiate with their allies and the bargain is going to be tough. The next government will also test the mettle of PM Modi because he will be

leading a coalition government for the first time in his political career. Compulsions of coalition politics were one of the major reasons behind corruption during UPA2 led by Manmohan Singh. Now BJP has a strong presence in the southern part of India and very soon it may become a dominant player there as well. Though BJP had formed a government in Karnataka on its own, Modi should be credited for transforming it into a Pan-Indian party. However, this election has also given strong signals on the revival of regional outfits. For example, Bihar has given a message that though the voters trust PM Modi BJP needs a strong local face. Creating a strong leadership line at the local

level has yielded dividends in other States and it is high time to replicate this in States like Bihar. BJP central leadership should nurture youngsters who are aligned with the ideology and have competence. Many people are capable and want to enter politics but they are unable because they do not have the required means and connections. Given that Modi might not get a free hand, another point that would need specific attention in Modi 3.0 will be the handling of the issues that are related to core ideology and cultural rejuvenation. We have seen over the past 10 years that nourishing our roots and development can happen simultaneously. Development is an ongoing

process but civilizational damages are irreversible and we have witnessed this in our history. Many issues are in the realm of law and the BJP often rightly accuses Congress of these blunders. If the NDA government survives by 2029 then BJP will complete more than two decades in power since independence and Modi will become longest-serving PM after Jawaharlal Nehru. There are Himalayan blunders and historical injustices that can be annulled by the Act of Parliament and therefore it would be interesting to see how Modi 3.0 prioritises these.

(The writer is a Chartered Accountant and Public Policy Analyst; views are personal)

Perilous Alliances

As kingmakers Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar commit their respective parties, Telugu Desam Party and Janata Dal (United), to support a third term for the National Democratic Alliance under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the political landscape in India is once again at a crucial juncture. Both leaders have emerged as pivotal figures, ensuring the continuation of the NDA government after the BJP fell short of an absolute majority. The political buzz is rife with speculation about the conditions and concessions the duo might demand in exchange for their support. Historically, the BJP's approach towards its NDA allies has been characterised by a strategic manoeuvring that often leaves its partners weakened. This "use, weaken, and throw" strategy involves leveraging the electoral strength of regional allies to establish a foothold, only to gradually undermine and out-compete them. This tactic has been witnessed across various states and with multiple regional parties, making the stance of Mr Naidu and Mr Kumar fraught with risk. Take the example of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam. Initially, the BJP piggybacked on AGP to topple the Congress-led government. However, over time, the AGP's influence waned as the BJP absorbed its voter base and expanded its own. Similarly, in Nagaland, the Naga People's Front (NPF) was instrumental in giving the BJP a foothold, only to see its power erode as the BJP-supported Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) gained prominence. The Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, a long-standing ally, faced a significant split as the BJP appropriated its core identity and voter base, resulting in a weakened faction.

Mr Naidu and Mr Kumar must navigate these waters with caution. Both leaders have previously experienced the ramifications of aligning too closely with the BJP. Mr Naidu's earlier fallout with the NDA was marked by unfulfilled promises and subsequent political marginalisation, while Mr Kumar's periodic exits and re-entries into the NDA fold highlight his struggle to balance regional ambitions with the alliance's overarching goals. The TDP and JD (U) leaders are likely to extract significant concessions for their support, ranging from key ministerial portfolios to specific policy commitments. However, the long-term sustainability of their political relevance under an NDA government remains uncertain. The BJP's track record suggests that once the need for these allies diminishes, efforts by the party to consolidate and expand its own base at their expense could resume. Moreover, the BJP's strategy of "divide and rule" poses an additional threat. By fostering internal dissent and encouraging splits within allied parties, the BJP has managed to weaken its partners further. The cases of the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in Maharashtra exemplify how internal divisions, often fanned by external pressures, can significantly diminish a party's influence and cohesion.

As Mr Naidu and Mr Kumar embark on this political alliance, they must be acutely aware of these historical precedents. They will be aware, astute politicians that they are, that immediate political gains should not overshadow the long-term implications for their parties.

Market Turbulence

The dramatic fluctuations witnessed in the stock market on counting day, underscore the delicate interplay between politics and investor sentiment. The events leading up to and following June 4 serve as a stark reminder that while political rhetoric can influence market dynamics, it should not form the basis of investment decisions. Investors experienced significant gains and losses within a short period, emphasising the need for critical thinking and a sound investment strategy that transcends political forecasts. The market saw a remarkable surge just before the election results, fuelled by predictions of a sweeping victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party. High-profile political leaders confidently projected record highs, creating a sense of euphoria among investors. However, the subsequent crash, with the market shedding substantial value the next day, was a harsh reality check. The recovery that followed was insufficient to offset the losses, leaving many investors grappling with the volatility. This episode raises pertinent questions about the role of political figures in influencing market sentiments. While freedom of speech is paramount, and leaders should have the liberty to express their views, their statements carry significant weight and can sway market behaviour. The recent events demonstrate the dangers of market predictions based on political optimism rather than economic fundamentals. Political leaders, while free to share their perspectives, should be mindful of the potential repercussions their statements can have on market stability and investor confidence. For retail investors, the key takeaway from this experience is the importance of due diligence and independent analysis. Relying solely on political assurances or speculative predictions can lead to significant financial setbacks. Instead, investors should focus on long-term strategies grounded in fundamental analysis and diversification. This approach helps mitigate the risks associated with short-term market fluctuations and provides a buffer against unpredictable political and economic events. Diversification remains a cornerstone of prudent investing. By spreading investments across various sectors and geographies, investors can reduce their exposure to any single country's political or economic turbulence. This strategy not only offers a safeguard against volatility but also enhances the potential for steady returns over the long term. The market turmoil also highlights the need for improved financial literacy among investors. Understanding the factors that drive market movements and the implications of political events can empower investors to make more informed decisions. Financial education initiatives can play a crucial role in helping individuals navigate the complexities of the stock market and build resilient investment portfolios. Investors must prioritise a diversified, long-term approach grounded in fundamental analysis, and cultivate the discernment to navigate the often tumultuous intersection of politics and markets. By doing so, they can better withstand the inevitable ebbs and flows of market dynamics and achieve sustainable financial growth. Prudent investors must follow the lead set by speculators.

Risks to Peace

The significant rise in China's economic and military prowess for over a decade has changed the geopolitical architecture and global power politics of the Indo-Pacific. China's assertive tone on Taiwan, maritime disputes with the Philippines, efforts to reclaim land in the South China Sea by physically increasing the size of islands or creating new artificial islands altogether in disputed waters, and their unprecedented militarization have caused immense unease and concern not only in the countries of the region, but also in other stakeholders and important strategic players, including the US. While China considers the Indo-Pacific to be its strategic backyard, other players like the United States, Japan, India, and Australia contest this and promote the idea of the region being open for all



Despite some distractions brought about by the ongoing hostilities in Ukraine and Gaza, recent developments indicate that the global geopolitical spotlight on the Indo-Pacific remains solid. Escalating tensions in the South China Sea, compounded by intensifying US-China geostrategic competition, are bound to have a profound effect on security and stability in the Indo-Pacific, which has emerged as a 'new, expanded theatre of power competition' in the recent past, highlighting the remarkable shifts in the world's centre of gravity from west to east.

The Indo-Pacific is a contested geo-strategic construct, imagining the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region as one contiguous area. This comparatively new terminology for a historically thriving region is in fact quite symptomatic of the changing geopolitical architecture and shifting global power politics, recognising the growing importance of India and the Indian Ocean.

Amid rising maritime tensions with China, the Philippines challenged China on May 20 to open Scarborough Shoal to international scrutiny, alleging that China is destroying the marine environment around the shoal. The Scarborough Shoal is a triangular reef encircling a resource-rich lagoon. The Philippines has been repeatedly accusing China of blocking its shipping vessels in and around the Scarborough Shoal. China's Coast Guard had set up a barrier near the Scarborough Shoal, blocking Filipino fishermen from getting closer to the reef, which was fully accessible until China effectively seized it in 2012. However, the Philippine Coast Guards later dismantled this, causing heightened tension between the two.

The most recent incident occurred on April 30, when the Chinese Coast Guard water-cannoned two Philippine patrol vessels as they tried to approach the waters near the Scarborough Shoal, locally known as Bajo De Masinloc, in the South China Sea. Previously, on March 23, the Chinese coast guards reportedly fired water cannons at a Filipino

supply ship, leaving three troops injured. Over the past few years, the behaviour of Chinese coast guards has become increasingly confrontational in the South China Sea. The Philippine President, though, sought to avoid direct military confrontation but insisted on continuing with its non-violent resistance to Chinese pressure by maintaining a presence in Philippine waters.

It is worth noting that despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) sweeping ruling in favour of the Philippines in 2016, China continues to claim sovereignty over the vast majority of the South China Sea, including land parcels, using its so-called "nine-dash line," a U-shaped nine-dash line etched on the Chinese map in the 1940s by a Chinese geographer named Yang Huai-

ren to assert control over the region's waterways, islands, and resources based on perceived historic rights, which conflicts with the claims of neighbouring countries, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, and Taiwan. They have recently experienced aggressive encroachment into portions of their exclusive economic zones (EEZ) by Chinese fishing and maritime law-enforcement vessels, resulting in frequent run-ins and deteriorating relations between China and the countries surrounding the contentious sea.

In its ruling the PCA rejected Beijing's claim of sovereignty over 90 per cent of the South China Sea, saying such claims had no basis under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The PCA also ruled that Beijing's activities within the Philippines' EEZ, such as illegal fishing and artificial island construction, not only infringed on Manila's sovereign rights but also caused "irreparable harm" to the marine environment of the South China Sea. There are several submerged features in the South China Sea

that fall within the Philippines' EEZ that have been occupied by China, and which have been converted into military bases by heaping upon them thousands of tons of sand and concrete.

Amid Beijing's increasingly aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea, especially harassment of Philippine patrols and resupply missions, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin hosted a meeting of the Defence Ministers of the "Squad," which include Japan, the United States,

Australia, and the Philippines, on May 2, in Hawaii, also home to the headquarters of the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). They had met for the first time in June 2023 on the side-lines of the Shangri-La security dialogue in Singapore. The "Squad" members share similar threats and concerns over China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea.

The Hawaii meeting underlined their commitment to "advance a shared vision for a free, open, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific." It must be noted that states like the United States, Japan, India, and Australia have crafted their Indo-Pacific strategies under the banner of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) as a counter narrative directed against a potential Sino-centric reorganisation or restructuring of the region.

Initially, the Philippines tried to play down its tensions with China despite having got a favourable ruling from the PCA. However, under Marcos Jr, who assumed power in June 2022 as President, Manila has not only started asserting its rights over the disputed waters, but has also started publicly denouncing and publicising China's actions, along with strengthening defence and strategic ties with Washington, which has always been looting for credible allies to counter rising China in the region.

In February, Marcos Jr. pro-

vided four new locations for American military sites in the Philippines under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). In April, the Philippines held a joint maritime exercise with the US, Japan, and Australia within its EEZ, demonstrating their commitment "to strengthen regional and international cooperation in support of a FOIP." The increasing defence cooperation with the US and joining security groupings like the "Squad" have emboldened the Philippines in its disputes with China.

The significant rise in China's economic and military prowess for over a decade has changed the geopolitical architecture and global power politics of the Indo-Pacific. China's assertive tone on Taiwan, maritime disputes with the Philippines, efforts to reclaim land in the South China Sea by physically increasing the size of islands or creating new artificial islands altogether in disputed waters, and their unprecedented militarization have caused immense unease and concern not only in the countries of the region, but also in other stakeholders and important strategic players, including the US. While China considers the Indo-Pacific to be its strategic backyard, other players like the United States, Japan, India, and Australia contest this and promote the idea of the region being open for all.

The great power contestation in the Indo-Pacific can best be explained as China's quest to dominate global trade and reshape the global order; the US bid to contain assertive China; India's aspiration for a greater role as an emerging power; Japan's plan to regain lost influence; and Australia capitalising on its role as a balancing power. However, all the major players in the Indo-Pacific must be mindful of the risks that their actions pose to the region and the world. They must be ready for negotiated solutions without compromising their interests or undermining their security, as any miscalculation or coercion could deteriorate the situation further, adversely affecting international peace and security.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Profit from lessons

SIR, I would like to thank *The Statesman* for a very fair and balanced editorial titled "Back to a Coalition" (5 June). The verdict of the electorate in the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections has important lessons for all parties.

First, the verdict affirms the importance of political stability as evidenced by the BJP emerging as the largest party. But by denying the party an absolute majority the verdict also sends out a strong message against authoritarianism and neglect of issues that affect the common man such as price rise and joblessness. Even more importantly, this verdict affirms that parties seeking votes by exploiting religious issues cannot always expect a favourable outcome; this is established by the loss to the BJP of the Faizabad seat which includes Ayodhya, the site of the Ram Temple inaugurated with so much fanfare with a

view to reaping electoral gains.

The common people of India, no matter how poor or illiterate they may be, are strongly rooted in democratic traditions and a solid bedrock of common sense. The late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi learned this lesson in 1977 when she lost the general elections after having imposed a nation-wide Emergency previously. It is to be hoped that Mr Narendra Modi will also profit from this lesson administered by the electorate and adopt a consensual and consultative approach to governance in the future.

Yours, etc., I. Gopalakrishnan, Kolkata, 5 June.

TEMPERATE FACES

SIR, Apropos your editorial, "Back to coalition" (June 5), the reason for the setback to the BJP can, in good part, be laid on its unending combative postures

and a holier-than-thou attitude towards all and sundry. It has even dragged into discourse past leaders who had shaped the nation's destiny. Over time, this frayed not only the overall political ethos but was seen as increasingly clichéd by the common man.

BJP will now be operating with two very unfamiliar backdrops in its renewed performance on the national stage. It has to contend with a much stronger opposition bench and to boot, compelled to anoint a Leader of the Opposition. It performs has to carry along decisive coalition partners. This needs enhanced interpersonal traits to conduct day-to-day governance, both within and outside the house.

It is time to expand its executive hierarchy to include more temperate faces, as also to realise that benches across the aisle is populated not by rivals in a vendetta, but legislators elected and sent in by the people.

The likes of Nitin Gadkari with high performance credentials and greater rapport across the board, could help paint a more acceptable saffron hue. Gadkari would also be useful in reviving the party's currently dipping fortunes in Maharashtra. There would be others too, who must reinforce its bench strength towards an inevitable transition.

Yours, etc., R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai, 5 June.

MEASURED WIN

SIR, I refer to your editorial in today's edition, "Back to a coalition." It was indeed a measured victory for the prime minister. This election was unusual in that the victor was actually mourning a loss and the loser was celebrating an unexpected outcome.

Ten years in power have undoubtedly isolated Narendra Modi and rendered him out of touch with ground realities. How else can one explain the defeat of the BJP candidate from Faizabad

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Opportune moment to reset relations

As neighbors and the two largest developing countries, China and India have more common interests than differences. Seeking common development and prosperity being common pursuits.

With India's parliamentary election result hopefully reducing the jingoism in India, there is no need for the territorial dispute in the border region between the two neighbors to be hyped up and allowed to define the overall bilateral ties.

The two countries should demonstrate they have the wisdom to settle the dispute through negotiations in good faith. To that purpose, while maintaining their close communication through diplomatic and military channels, they should not allow any external power to take advantage of their border dispute to sow discord between them. Some Western countries have encouraged India to become a participant in their efforts to contain China during the past two terms of the Narendra Modi government, seeking to drive a wedge between New Delhi and Beijing. Although the border dispute has flared up and the Indian government has been implementing protectionist measures targeting Chinese companies, investments and imports since 2020, the bilateral trade volume has remained sizable and stable, staying between \$120 billion and \$130 billion over the past three years. This should prompt New Delhi not to let its Western supplicants

CHINADAILY

have its ear.

Relying heavily on China for raw materials for its services and manufacturing industries these years, India should realize that it is unrealistic to seek to decouple its economy from that of China. It should also recognize that China's development does not represent risks, uncertainties or threats to India, but rather growth, development and opportunities, as is true vice versa. China should by no means be made the scapegoat for India's domestic problems, and neither nationalism nor jingoism should be permitted to hijack New Delhi's China policy. Combined, the population of the two countries accounts for about 37.5 percent of the global population. The two neighbors should be open to each other's development and always make joint efforts to approach bilateral relations from a strategic height and long-term perspective.

IN MEMORIAM

BOSE BITHIKA (nee RAKSHIT) — Formerly Head, Department of Chemistry, Lady Brabourne College. In fond remembrance of. — Keka, family and friends.

PERSONAL

THANK You St. Jude for a successful delivery. — DS.

THANK You St. Jude for a successful gall stone surgery. — DS.

PRAYER TO ST. JUDE

(TO BE SAID IN GRAVE NEED)

St. Jude, glorious Apostle, faithful servant and friend of Jesus, the name of traitor has caused you to be forgotten by many. But the Church honours and invokes you as the Patron of things despaired of, pray for me, that finally I may receive the consolations and help of heaven in all my necessities, tribulations and sufferings, particularly (*here make your request*), and that I may bless God with the elect throughout eternity. Amen.

St. Jude Apostle, martyr and relative of our Lord Jesus Christ, of Mary and Joseph, intercede for me!



United, they thrived

Formidable alliance helped the TDP-led coalition win in Andhra Pradesh

Anti-incumbency in Indian State Assembly elections is not rare: governments with strong majorities can lose at the end of a term due to changed expectations from the electorate. Thus, the YSRC's loss in Andhra Pradesh to the grand alliance of the Telugu Desam Party-Jana Sena Party-Bharatiya Janata Party should come as no surprise. Yet, the scale of the defeat – the YSRC could only win 11 seats, a fall of 140 from the 2019 elections, in the 175 constituencies in the 2024 Assembly polls, is astounding. In vote share terms, it suffered a 10 percentage point drop, but still landed a respectable 39.37% tally. But the TDP-led alliance did much better with a collective vote share of 55.3% – an increase of 9.75 points from 2019 and roughly the same as the drop in the YSRC's share. This allowed it to garner a lion's share of the seats – 164 out of 175. It is quite clear that the TDP-JSP alliance allowed both parties to thrive. It helped them stitch up cumulative support from the Kamma and Kapu communities that form their bases and also compete against the YSRC. By roping in the BJP, the alliance managed to also make the election a bipolar race – the Congress has yet to recover from its decimation after the State bifurcation – and make the best use of the first-past-the-post system that can allow parties/coalitions to get a disproportionately higher number of seats on the basis of a decent lead in terms of vote share.

But the electoral system and the mere presence of a competitive alliance alone would not explain the YSRC's loss. The Jagannathan Reddy-led government pumped in money into welfare schemes despite ballooning debt and fiscal health issues and focused on a targeted delivery of subsidies and benefits. But Andhra Pradesh's record on the growth and development front has left much to be desired. Since its bifurcation, Telangana has emerged with the highest per capita income among major States, while Andhra Pradesh is ranked 10th. Even though the government hiked capex spending in the first quarter of FY24, it was the worst performer in FY23. Other unresolved issues such as the capital of the new State also resulted in a perception among voters about the inadequacy of the YSRC government to focus on jobs and development as opposed to its "generous" spending on welfare. Mr. Naidu's incarceration because of a purported scam only increased empathy for the TDP. It is now imperative for the new government to eschew the traditional politics of vendetta and work towards the State's development. Mr. Naidu has a great opportunity; after all, his party is now indispensable in the new NDA government in New Delhi.

Bizarre judgment

Personal law norms cannot be used to invalidate inter-faith marriages

It is an old principle that ignorance of law is no excuse. Evidently, this applies not only to offenders but also to judges. The Madhya Pradesh High Court's order declining to give protection to a couple on the ground that a marriage between a Muslim man and Hindu woman will not be valid, even if registered under the Special Marriage Act (SMA), 1954, reflects an incredible misunderstanding of the law. The judge examined Muslim law treatises to conclude that a Muslim cannot marry an "idolater or fire-worshipper", as such a marriage would be irregular. The SMA was passed precisely to allow inter-faith couples to get married without the requirements of marriage rituals associated with their religions. For a court to dissect the personal law requirements of the parties to enter into a valid marriage, when all they wanted was police protection to appear before the Marriage Registration Officer, is nothing short of bizarre. The question raised by Justice G.S. Ahluwalia – whether the inter-faith marriage that was intended to be registered under the SMA will be valid under Muslim law – is utterly irrelevant to the case at hand. Even though counsel for the couple advanced the correct argument that the Special Marriage Act would override the personal law of their respective religions, the judge chose to examine whether such a marriage would be valid or void or irregular under Mohammedan law.

The judge concedes that when a marriage is performed under SMA, it cannot be challenged on the ground of non-performance of mandatory marriage rituals. The only justifications offered by the judge is that the SMA itself provides that when the parties are within the degrees of prohibited relationship, it shall not be valid. From this, he draws a conclusion that a marriage that is invalid in personal law cannot be legalised by registering it under the SMA. It is clear that this is only a salutary provision that exists to prevent the Act from being misused to solemnise the marriage of those in prohibited relationships, and does not mean that every inter-faith marriage has to be scrutinised for compliance with personal law requirements. It is strange that the court underscores that the woman petitioner in this case did not want to convert to Islam, but at the same time examines the case through the lens of Muslim law. This is nothing but an attempt to impose religious personal law on those opting for a secular marriage. Allowing this judgment to stand will render the entire Special Marriage Act superfluous. It will also undermine any move towards a uniform civil code, and privileges Muslim personal law over the secular Special Marriages Act. In effect, it could drive people to religious conversion just for the sake of solemnising their marriages.

Health regulations need a base to top approach

In the last week of May, an incident of a devastating fire in a private neonatal care nursing home in New Delhi shook us all. Political parties began a blame game and the media coverage was intense, going overboard and reporting incorrectly that a number of nursing homes in Delhi function without a licence. Yet, the incident seems to have been forgotten by most even as the parents grieve. Such tragedies are often followed by a question of who should be blamed, completely missing the point that these are almost always the outcome of a systemic failure – in this case, the failure of health-care regulations.

The subject of regulation has always been of interest to health programme managers but, arguably, is one of the weakest points in India's health-care system. It is not as if there are not enough health regulations in Indian States. Rather, it is a problem of excess. Some States have over 50 approvals under multiple regulations, which need to be followed and complied with by every health-care facility. Still, many officials in government, as well as others, believe that the private health sector in India has insufficient regulation.

The other challenge is unrealistic health-care quality standards. Governments at every level in India – national and States – are known to draft policies which are near perfect. One such case is the Clinical Establishments (Registration and Regulation) Act, 2010, enacted 14 years ago, but not adopted by States. This is because State governments, in discussions with stakeholders, have realised that many provisions in the Act are impossible to implement. Another example is the Indian Public Health Standards, or IPHS, drafted by the government for its own health-care facilities and proposed as essential in order to deliver quality health services. The IPHS were first released in 2007 and have been revised twice since then. Yet, in 17 years of existence, only 15% to 18% of government primary health-care facilities in India meet the government's own standards. Clearly, in the efforts to be aspirational, health-care regulations and standards in India have drifted towards unrealistic standards, and are difficult to implement.

India has a mixed health-care system

There is a binary perception that when it comes to adhering to the rules, the government health sector always does better, and that the private sector always violates them. The fact is that India has a mixed health-care system, where private health-care facilities and providers deliver nearly 70% of outpatient and 50% of hospital-based services. In most States such as Maharashtra or Kerala, the health indicators are better not because these States have outstanding government facilities but because the facilities and clinics in the private sector are fulfilling the



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health needs of the people. People 'vote with feet' by seeking care at these private health facilities.

Yet, when it comes to health-care regulation, there seems to be an unfairness and overzealous attempt to enforce the regulations in the private sector. In 2017, two separate but near identical incidents in two large hospitals in Delhi (a tertiary-care government hospital and a large corporate hospital), had allegedly declared newborn infants as dead; they were alive. This resulted in a temporary suspension of licence in the case of the private hospital, while in the case of the government hospital there was just the setting up of an inquiry committee. Clearly, for effective regulation and adherence, the stakeholder should not feel they are being targeted. In health-care regulation, in the current scheme of things, the burden of responsibility is more on providers and facility owners. Most private nursing homes and clinics have often flagged the issue of approvals being delayed by the authorities for months even when these facilities apply for renewal well in advance. In many examples, applications submitted well on time for renewal (two to three months before the due date), are granted approval months later. The sluggish approval process is a main concern as far as facility owners are concerned.

Affordable care is one need

The private sector is also not a homogenous entity as there is everything from single doctor clinics, small nursing homes and medium-sized hospitals to large corporate hospitals. Single doctor clinics and small nursing homes are often the first point of contact for access and utilisation of health services in India by middle-income and low-income populations, and are the real lifeline of health services. They deliver a large share of health services at a fraction of cost of that of the big corporate hospitals. Why the parents of the babies opted to go to a private nursing home despite government health facilities with free health services is an issue we must reflect on. The single doctor clinics and nursing homes play a key role in health service delivery in India and make services accessible and affordable. Clearly, there needs to be supportive and facilitatory regulations to serve the public purpose of keeping health-care costs low and affordable.

Yet, the tragic incident in Delhi is not something which should be allowed to pass without calm assessment and some concrete plans. First, ensuring quality of health services is essential and the joint responsibility of all stakeholders. However, in an overzealous attempt to ensure having a 'world class tag' or being 'swayed by the lure of medical tourism', the government should not end up making health-care regulations unrealistic. There is a need to formulate guidelines that can be practised and implemented. There is a need to

harmonise multiple health regulations and simplifying the application process. Such applications need to be disposed of in a time-bound manner.

Second, in regulatory aspects, what is possible for large corporate hospitals may not be feasible for smaller clinics and nursing homes, without escalated cost. Expecting smaller facilities to meet the same standard would make it expensive for the smaller facilities – a cost that is likely to be transferred to patients, making health services unaffordable. There is a need for a differential approach for different types of facilities. Yet, there should be essential and desirable points in each category overseen by regular self-assessment and regulatory visits. If thousands of buildings in the city can have safe elevators, why cannot there be equal emphasis on fire and other safety measures in health facilities? For effective adherence and implementation, the government should consider subsidies and funding to increase adherence to regulations.

Third, representatives of doctors' associations and the types of facilities for which regulations are being formed as well as community members should be involved in the process of the formulation of such regulation.

Fourth, political loose talk and sensational media headlines might worsen the mistrust of the common man about doctors and nursing homes and may result in increased violence against health-care providers.

Focus on the primary-care givers

Fifth, and most importantly, India needs to promote single doctor clinics apart from smaller health-care facilities, and nursing homes. These are what deliver primary care and contribute to keeping the cost of health care low. Every such facility and its doctors need to be supported rather than burdened with excess regulations.

In the fire tragedy in Delhi, we should not just treat the symptoms but also aim to find and eliminate the root causes. It is a reminder of the need to have simplified and implementable regulations that have been developed with the collaboration and coordination of key stakeholders. There is a need for fairness in implementations, time-bound decisions and the disposal of applications for renewal of licences, promoting smaller health-care facilities with subsidies, and support for increased quality and safety. India's health-care system is already becoming skewed towards admission based in-patient services. It needs to promote providers and facilities that deliver out-patient care at lower costs. This would contribute to the goal of the National Health Policy, 2017 – to deliver health services that should be people-centric, accessible, available, affordable, and have quality. This requires health regulations being drafted from bottom up and not top down, and implemented in a nuanced and calibrated manner.

Health regulations are essential but their implementation in India needs to be nuanced and calibrated

The return of social justice and 'Marathi Asmita'

Maharashtra has played a crucial role in causing drastic changes to the Lok Sabha seat tally of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – from 23 in the 2019 election, it plummeted to a dismal nine seats this time. The BJP is a powerful political organisation in Maharashtra, and it was expected that the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in combination with the strong rhetoric of Hindutva would get the party good political dividends in the State.

However, the BJP failed to acknowledge the growing resentment against the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the State. The political developments of the last two years were poorly managed by the BJP, leading to its political losses. The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, or the INDIA bloc, on the other hand, had better political rhetoric, gave a voice to anti-incumbency sentiments among farmers, Marathas and Dalits, and built an impressive campaign around Marathi Asmita and social justice.

Machiavellian moves

The BJP invited sharp criticism in 2019 when Devendra Fadnavis tried to form the government by orchestrating defections from the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Though Ajit Pawar's defection at that time did not help and Mr. Fadnavis had to resign soon after, it was a political move that caused the BJP much damage – that the BJP could manipulate political leaders and indulge in political harakiri in order to grab power. In 2022, the BJP was instrumental in causing the split in the NCP and the Shiv Sena which resulted in Uddhav Thackeray being removed from the Chief Minister's post. The BJP then formed the new government with the support of two breakaway leaders, Ajit Pawar and Eknath Shinde. The BJP exhibited cunning in order to dislodge and pressure its political



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In Maharashtra, the BJP's manipulative political strategies only helped consolidate the voter behind the INDIA bloc

opponents into joining the incumbent government. However, such Machiavellian political moves affected the traditional character of the BJP in the most negative way possible.

In the early 1990s, the BJP was celebrated in Maharashtra as a party that was led by humble social elites (mainly Brahmins), and which stood out from the 'ruffian and violent' character of Bal Thackeray's Hindutva. Further, with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) offering the BJP 'moral' character, the BJP was heralded as the party that would challenge the Congress's corrupt political actions by standing for ethical values. However, under Mr. Fadnavis, this image of the BJP was transformed into that of a party that makes compromises and uses manipulative tactics in dealing with its opponents. All this damaged the party's reputation and painted it as a party that lacked political morality.

The BJP's strategies to dislodge a working government only ended up creating a wave of sympathy for Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar. The 'downsizing' of Mr. Pawar at this stage in his long political life was not well received. Mr. Pawar is a stalwart Maratha icon who has the tremendous support of the farming communities. Further, Uddhav Thackeray, when Chief Minister, was seen to be both a popular and effective administrator (especially during the COVID-19 crisis) and a reformist Hindutva leader. These images were used to rouse Marathi sentiment, leading to the BJP's campaign around Hindutva and Mr. Modi's leadership being strongly challenged.

The issue of reservation

One also had the BJP's response to the demand for Maratha reservation. Its delayed reaction to the Maratha reservation agitation led by activist Manoj Jarange Patil was not taken well by the community. Further, when the government decided to endorse Mr. Patil's demands, it evoked

criticism from the Other Backward Communities (OBC). Many OBC leaders, including Chhagan Bhujaal, viewed the government's attempt to give quota to the Marathas as the BJP offering OBC quota to the Marathas. This was enough for sections among the OBCs to vote for the INDIA bloc. The BJP was unable to control the growing tussle between the Marathas and the OBCs, which only harmed the BJP's prospects in the Marathwada region.

Another important development was the consolidation of the Dalit vote in favour of the INDIA bloc. In the last Lok Sabha, the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA), led by Prakash Ambedkar, got close to an eight percent vote share, which helped in the defeat of the Congress-NCP candidates in at least a dozen seats. It was expected that in 2024, Mr. Ambedkar would join the INDIA bloc to stall the BJP's juggernaut. However, his decision to contest the elections independently was not appreciated by the VBA's conventional Dalit votebase which was in favour of political moves that would help defeat the BJP. Dalit voters, especially in the Vidarbha region, reposed their faith in the INDIA bloc and deserted the VBA in several seats.

A strong show

The INDIA bloc fought a charged battle against the BJP by building an impressive campaign around the need to safeguard constitutional values and the pride of the region, i.e., Marathi Asmita. So, the Congress became the focus point for social justice politics, the NCP-Sharad Pawar reemerged as the protector of the interests of the agrarian communities and Uddhav Thackeray impressed voters, especially in the Mumbai region, by reemerging as the true inheritor of Bal Thackeray's legacy and the leader of Marathi Manos. Against such a strong movement, the BJP and its allies failed to perform and ended up losing the election.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Implications of the results

The results of the general election 2024 have proven to be critical. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has failed to secure a majority on its own, and, thereby, is not in a position to unilaterally implement its 'safran agenda'. The BJP can no longer hold its own and will have to rely on coalition partners who

may not give in to its Hindutva agenda. Therefore, the BJP has to become democratic and come to terms with the Constitution. Further, the Opposition parties have improved their electoral performance and are in a position to strongly oppose the unconstitutional policies of the BJP. The Supreme Court of India

too would do well to look upon the results as a welcome change with important constitutional issues such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the like to be decided. A holistic analysis shows that the present mandate should secure a peoples' governance and the fears that existed earlier should

be dispelled.

N.G.R. Prasad,
Chennai

The outcome of the results

is welcome news for the Congress and its allies, but will spell a headache for BJP. There is sure to be hectic bargaining as the BJP

Corrections & Clarifications

In a report, "Modi factor seems to have stagnated over a decade" (Inside pages, "CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey", June 6), a sentence in the fifth paragraph read, "In 2019, two thirds (32%) took this stand..." It should have been "...one third".

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will have to depend on its allies. A very interesting situation lies ahead.
A.S. Thirumalai,
Chennai

The exit polls 2024 will be long remembered for being the funniest. One wonders whether their creators were pollsters or pranksters.
M. Jameel Ahmed,
Mysuru

A thought for today

Opportunities multiply as they are seized

SUN TZU

GOP, Now Fix Org

Cong got much of its messaging right. But BJP won 70% of direct contests. Cong needs better ground game

Genius, the saying goes, is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. Congress's 99 seats reflected the 99% perspiration the party put into making the INDIA idea work. With a Congress rebel who won as an Independent on Sangli LS seat extending support, the party can claim to have touched the 100 MP-mark. This shouldn't lull the party into any complacency. While Congress's strategy to contest on the least number of seats bore fruit as did Rahul Gandhi's insistence on fighting the election on two planks, Constitution-led ideology and party manifesto, the party has much work to do.

Staying rooted | Through five years of turmoil in 48-LS seat Maharashtra, since 2019 assembly election, Congress – the state's weakest party for over a decade – has held its own. It won the largest number of LS seats, high-profile defections had no impact. This, when Congress couldn't find candidates of heft willing to contest on several seats, including in Mumbai. That Congress's Mumbai

North West candidate, Dharavi MLA Varsha Gaikwad, just 49, and a rare Dalit nominee on a general seat, beat BJP's Ujjwal Nikam with 49% vote share, is also a nod to voters' comfort with roping in Gen Next netas into larger electoral battles.

UP & caste | Fielding a Gandhi loyalist in Amethi, choosing Rae Bareilly for Rahul, ceding the UP space to Akhilesh, all paid off. UP results showed Rahul-styled Congress had struck a chord, with an ideology at a distance from GOP's waffling politics that had sent the party into perpetual decline. UP results show there are takers for a New Congress, that's re-inventing itself from being an upper-caste one engaged in 'Dalit uplift', to one that seizes the Constitution's promise of equality to (a) make everyday-caste visible, and (b) pragmatically align with caste parties.

Finding, filling gaps | If intermediate castes, Lingayats in Karnataka, and Jats in Rajasthan, split their votes between BJP and Congress, the party's five Haryana wins were constituencies central to the farmers' protest. Punjab was fought entirely at the assembly segment level, local units winning Congress 7 of state's 13.

Note, though, in 215 seats, where BJP and Congress were in direct fights, BJP won over 70% seats. Congress had its communication pat, but has its task cut out before it can take on BJP seat by seat. That can only happen if it focuses on firming up that '1% inspiration' to recreate its 'missing' organisation, essential if Congress is to convert its support into political assets.

Sharing The Spoils

'Friends' of a coalition's big party jostle to get ministries with high RoI. That's how politics works

What's the big difference this election has produced? Media speculation is not so much about which BJP heavyweight will land what plum ministry. Most interest is around big ministries BJP may have to let go of. Welcome back to coalition govts and frenetic bargaining about how to share the spoils.

Just being practical | Jockeying for ministries is not bad. If voters haven't opted for a single party majority, it's legitimate for members of a coalition to want ministries they prefer. They owe their voters that. Also, politicians are nothing if not practical. They are unlikely to push matters to a breaking point. Who wants to contest elections prematurely? Running a political party is expensive.

Variety of needs | Ministry preferences are best understood in terms of meeting basic political needs. There are ministries like home that allow exercise of huge executive power. Finance, another biggie, has the power over allocating govt's funds to other ministries. And big stock market players are obsessed with what FinMin is doing. Railways employ lakhs of people. These are ministries with real influence. There are also

ministries that potentially provide political parties with a high return on political investment. Think defence – all those arms contracts. Think roads and highways. Politicians love these ministries, and not just because they are important for the country.

Art of possible | Bismarck, the 19th century German politician, described politics as the art of the possible, the attainable and the next best. Coalitions are just that. No majority, no problem. It's possible to form a govt. But politics is also at heart a transaction. For junior partners, joining a govt must be worth the effort. They need bragging rights and, shall we say, bagging rights – the right to bag goodies. Back in 1990s and early 2000s, some ministries used to be called ATMs. That moniker is still valid.

Horse sense

Poll results could put the spotlight on some game-changers, both two-legged and four-legged

Jug Suraiya

Rani and Raju, two shaadi baraats horses, mulling over the poll results.

Raju: The ballot box has once again proved to be a jack-in-the-box out of which pops many a surprise. Not a few have got their comeuppance.

Rani: I've never understood why it should be called a comeuppance when it's really a comedownance, in that it brings someone down from their pride of place. Anyway, I think the results are perfect, by and large.

Raju: Perfect? How come? The NDA lot are disgruntled because they didn't get the thumping majority they'd expected. And the INDIA guys are downcast because they didn't dislodge NDA as they'd hoped to. So everyone's unhappy. What's perfect about that?

Rani: Democracy is perfect about that. If one section is happy it's at the expense of the opposing section, which makes for a zero-sum game. If both sides are dissatisfied, both will work harder to better their standing. Which is perfect for the functioning of democracy, and the benefit of voters.

Raju: So you're saying that with neither side being smug and self-satisfied with its performance, the opposition will be more opposing, and govt will do more governance. That makes horse sense.

Rani: There's another thing that makes horse sense. And that's where we come in, so to speak.

Raju: Us horses? How do we come into the poll picture?

Rani: Well, with no party having got a majority, both sides could try to lure the other side's allies. That's horse trading.

Raju: But that's people trading. Why bring us horses into it?

Rani: Maybe because horses like us are used in marriage ceremonies, promoting matrimonial unions, and horse trading promotes political unions.

Raju: Is that a stable govt? One formed after horses are taken from one stable to another stable? Sounds quite unstable to me.

Rani: I agree. When it comes to trading on our name we should definitely say 'Neigh'...

How MVA Bested Mahayuti

BJP took the fallout of Maratha protests • As also of farmer distress • Ram Mandir didn't click • Sharad Pawar glue proved the strongest • Just as it did in 1998

Abhay Datar



Going into Lok Sabha elections, Mahayuti looked commanding in Maharashtra. BJP had consolidated its position in the state well before elections. Shiv Sena and NCP splits, with their breakaway factions joining BJP, strengthened its position. A number of high-profile defections to BJP, including Congress veteran and former CM Ashok Chavan, followed. Alongside the support of a few minor parties, these seemed to have sealed the deal.

On the opposition side, Maha Vikas Aghadi appeared in disarray. Initially, there was little coordination between its three principal allies. And yet, MVA has beaten Mahayuti.

How did this happen? And what are the consequences?

Opposition unity | Much of the credit goes to NCP's veteran leader Sharad Pawar. A tireless campaigner, he secured the support of major Left parties and other minor political outfits to consolidate opposition votes.

Anxieties about BJP assaults on the Constitution, a perceived threat to reservations and ideas about a growing BJP electoral dictatorship gained ground. After picking up these issues from civil society initiatives, MVA ran with them, putting BJP on the defensive.

Onion woes | Drought that looms perennially over large parts of the state made for a groundswell of agrarian resentment. The rising costs of and falling profits from agriculture have also put farmers under enormous strain.

Maharashtra is the biggest producer of onions in the country; indeed the crop is at the heart of the state's rural economy. So, the state was hit hard by GOI's ban on onion export. Villages across the onion belt in the north of the state even barred candidates' entry early in the campaign. Even central govt schemes, introduced

to alleviate long-standing agricultural distress, were viewed as inadequate. High GST on agricultural implements and consumables was seen as further proof of BJP's ignorance about the countryside and indifference to agriculture.

Maratha protests | Agrarian distress stoked demands for Maratha reservations. The movement's supporters want Marathas to be included among OBCs, who in turn vehemently oppose the initiative. Every party has voiced support for the Maratha demand. But BJP in particular has been perceived as paying it mere lip service, while in fact trying to obstruct the initiative to safeguard the interests of its OBC support base.

BJP's lame bag | Early this year, BJP delivered on its two key promises: CAA and Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. The temple inauguration saw a massive mobilisation of volunteers, who extended invitations to the ceremony to millions. But the Ayodhya euphoria quickly died down, perhaps because it came too early to affect voter choices. As for CAA, despite BJP trying to trumpet its achievement, most voters never came to think of it as a major issue. Nor did the promise of UCC draw in many votes.

The 'real' NCP | Both the Shiv Sena and NCP splits saw the breakaway factions winning the support of a majority of the state's legislators. As a result, EC recognised the breakaway factions as the original parties and allotted them

the respective party symbols. This led observers to write off both Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar.

When the two leaders made betrayal a campaign issue, it garnered a considerable amount of popular support. Both

rendering the Ajit Pawar-led breakaway faction nugatory, with but a single seat, the results are more mixed for Sena.

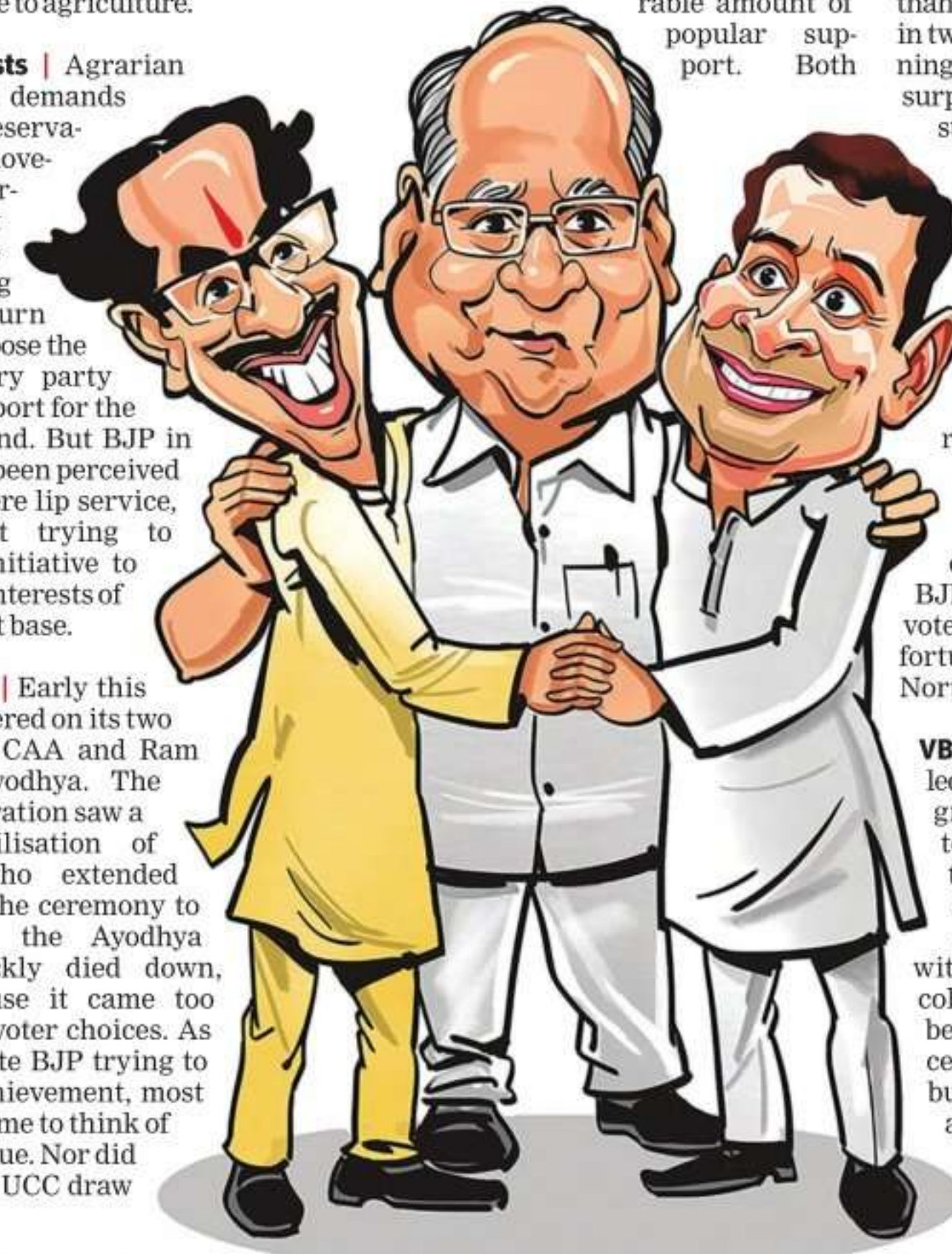
Its breakaway faction, led by the present CM, Eknath Shinde, won 7 seats, only 2 less than Thackeray's Sena. Shinde's success in two largely urban constituencies adjoining Mumbai, Thane and Kalyan, was not surprising since the region has been his stronghold. The surprise lay in Shinde holding his own in other regions, where he roped in many committed Sena voters and activists. All this leaves the question of which Sena is 'real' wide open.

Congress revival | The party's revival is the real surprise. Its third successive defeat may well have rendered the party irrelevant. So its leaders campaigned relentlessly, systematically. Fresh faces, albeit some from political dynasties, coupled with resentment against BJP and the consolidation of minority votes, helped the party revive its fortunes, especially in the Vidarbha and North Maharashtra regions.

VBA collapse | Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi led by Prakash Ambedkar, Babasaheb's grandson, did well in 2019, helping to defeat Congress and leading many to believe that it could emerge as a major political alternative in the state. But this year, refusing to ally with MVA, it has tumbled to a near-collapse, with Ambedkar himself beaten in his constituency. VBA certainly undercut Congress votes, but its own failure marks the end of any independent Dalit politics in the state for the foreseeable future.

This year's opposition unity echoes the 1998 election. BJP and Shiv Sena won in 1996, but by 1998 Pawar stitched together a broad alliance of all other political parties to stop the saffron wave. A quarter of a century on, he has repeated that trick.

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Why Did Cong's Revival Not Reach MP?

Shivraj to CM, state BJP leaders campaigned vigorously, the party's booth-level management was superb. Congress has stayed demoralised since its assembly rout and lacked clear leadership

Prasenjit.Mund@timesgroup.com



'Oh, there was a storm?' You can quite imagine Madhya Pradesh BJP looking out of the window on June 4 evening and asking this with an enquiring eyebrow. How did the heartland remain a saffron island, untouched by the electoral tumult in neighbouring UP, Maharashtra and Rajasthan? Not only did MP go against the current, it also handed BJP its biggest ever Lok Sabha victory: 29-0.

Congress had never before been reduced to zero in MP. Yet, in 2024, with no wave, Congress was swept into oblivion. Neighbouring Chhattisgarh, sharing much the same DNA, handed BJP 10 of 11 seats.

The reasons for the clean sweep in the two heartland states are much the same – and no, Ram Mandir is not one of them. The consecration of Ram Lalla idol in Ayodhya sparked jubilation in these two states, yes, but it wasn't the overriding political factor.

Tall BJP netas with points to prove | BJP's MP campaign was led by stalwarts who each, still, had a point to prove. Shivraj Singh Chouhan – denied a fifth term as chief minister – wanted to tell the party high command he is still the party's tallest leader here. He campaigned with the energy of a first-timer. His victory margin of 8.2 lakh spoke for him. CM Mohan Yadav was on test. Propelled to the top post, he had much to prove, especially since he was stepping into Shivraj's shoes. He campaigned intensively, holding 142 rallies and 56 road shows, and covering 185 Vidhan Sabha segments. With this grand victory, he is on more sure-footing now.

State party chief VD Sharma, the only

one to be given a second term while all other heads were replaced ahead of election, had to come good on expectations. And Kailash Vijayvargiya, reluctant contestant in assembly polls, was given the challenge of breaching Congress's Chhindwara fortress.

He did. In dramatic fashion. Vijayvargiya oversaw the defection of an MLA, several ex-MLAs and ex-MPs and thousands of Congress workers, chipping away at the Nath bastion until it caved in. Then, there was the Indore ambush, where Congress's candidate vanished for hours and popped up in a selfie with Vijayvargiya after withdrawing his nomination. BJP won Indore by a stunning 11.7 lakh votes.

BJP's ardh panna army | BJP's might at the electoral booth level is matched by its micro-management. You only have to look at the victory margins in MP – more than 1 lakh votes on 25 of 29 seats. When Union home minister Amit Shah stays overnight in Chhindwara, 55 hours before voting, to coach booth workers on micro-management, the message ignites the team.

BJP appointed *ardh panna pramukhs*, who were responsible for half a voter-list page or 60-odd names. Their job was to ensure that these 60 votes went to BJP. The

party also appointed *tridevs* – booth level agent, booth in charge, and booth president – to strengthen the electoral machinery at the grassroots. Congress simply had no answer to this.

Congress chaos & daily exodus | From the foot soldier to Congress satrap, everyone had expected to win 2023 polls. So, the rout was devastating to party morale. To add to the confusion, Congress removed Kamal Nath as PCC chief and appointed the much younger Jitu Patwari when Lok Sabha election was just four months away. Patwari was yet to find his footing when, in Feb, surfaced Nath's rumoured bid to join BJP. It was a shattering blow to Congress workers. Nath didn't help matters by taking his time in denying this.

Amid all this chaos, there was the daily exodus of Congress old-timers – MLAs, ex-MLAs, office-bearers and thousands of grassroots workers. Deserted by loyalists, Nath was left to fight a lone defence of his legacy in Chhindwara. Rahul and Priyanka didn't campaign in the constituency and Nath couldn't (or wouldn't) quite step out of his citadel. Chhindwara was lost, so was MP.

There was a clear lack of leadership in MP Congress. Most of its senior and second-run leaders were defeated in the assembly election. Even veterans like Digvijaya Singh were reluctant to contest Lok Sabha polls. It must have been morale-sapping for the ordinary party workers to see stalwarts unwilling to step up. Out of time, out of options, out of leaders and out of breath, Congress just didn't have any fight left in its soul.

Hum to aise hi hain | Madhya Pradesh is the original saffron heartland, not UP or Gujarat. Even when the state wanted change, it did so half-heartedly – voting for Congress but keeping it just short of majority in 2018. In the Lok Sabha election that followed, BJP won 28 seats. In 2014, it won 27. And this time, when PM Modi gave the call for 29 MP obliged.

Calvin & Hobbes



Servant Leadership, The Essence Of Ram Rajya

lections are over. Govt formation has begun. New GOI will want to have a new agenda. Here's a thought for all newly elected public representatives: adopt the idea of servant leadership. The term 'servant leaders', coined by Robert K Greenleaf, refers to leaders who prioritise empowering individuals over their personal gains, focus on well-being of people, and sincerely seek solutions to the electorate's most persistent problems.

Greenleaf says, "The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is a leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve – after

leadership is established."

Gandhi says, "President means chief servant." emphasising that elected leaders must serve those who have reposed their faith in the leaders' ability to govern. A servant leader does not seek power for herself but only to help people better their lives by putting them first. Servant leaders – whether elected members of Parliament, founders of unicorns, or CEOs of large corporations – have empathy towards all, patience to actively listen and help others, an awareness of people they work for, and the ability to find workable solutions and provide a healing touch.

More importantly, servant leaders do not use authority; they rely on consensus-building as the basis for policymaking. They are visionaries focused on long-term gains rather than short-term victories and have foresight to

anticipate future problems and find solutions. Such leaders analyse mistakes to learn from the past, so that they are not bitter and are ready to face the present. Servant leaders are not independent governors/managers in ivory towers but stewards of their organisation/country, conserving resources and acting responsibly. They are willing to invest in and promote others, irrespective of their allegiances. Pettiness has no place in servant-leaders' mental makeup. They believe in fostering a sense of belonging among the community and their organisations, promoting inclusivity and unity.

The world has seen several servant leaders, such as Ram, Bharat, Mahavir, Buddha, Jesus, Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, BR Ambedkar. In the corporate world, Herb Kelleher, Indra Nooyi, Satya Nadella, and Ken

Blanchard, among others, are examples of servant leadership.

Indic philosophy and mythology have several examples of servant leaders. At the centre of Ram Rajya is an empathetic leader with his ear to the ground. Ram is the epitome of justice, and his reign is marked by fairness and equity. He ensured that every citizen, regardless of status, received justice. Ram sacrificed his desires to ensure the well-being of his people.

Virtues synonymous with servant leaders are also reflected in the Buddhist concept of shunyata, emptiness, which says that all phenomena depend on several causes and conditions and are empty of independent existence. So, all phenomena arise through interconnected causes and conditions. Understanding shunyata fosters a sense of humility, interconnectedness and compassion, essentials for a servant leader focused on her constituency's well-being.

Sacredspace



Gone is the trust to be placed in oaths; I cannot understand if the gods you swore by then no longer rule, or men live by new standards of what is right.

Euripides



THE SPEAKING TREE

Birth Better Solutions To Raise Productivity

Dipping working cohort nos can hurt viksit plan

The global fertility rate is currently hovering over the replacement rate, according to the UN's projections, and the world is a few decades away from depopulation. The baby bust-boom traces affluence with rich economies already below the population replacement rate and the least developed nations at considerably higher rates. There are two important caveats here. One, UN has been significantly lowering its estimates with each revision. Two, variations in mortality rates and sex ratios cause a divergence in what constitutes the replacement birth rate. The upshot is the world may be years, not decades, away from depopulation.

Coping strategies involve raising the retirement age and increasing immigration. A more controversial approach is to control access to contraception. Even the more acceptable solutions have their limitations. Higher working-age cohorts are constrained by healthcare costs, while immigration runs into political pushback. Neither is a permanent solution. Older workers can't work indefinitely and immigration targets taper off as more countries depopulate. Declining fertility is a direct fallout of rising female labour force participation (LFP), and economies can't afford to trade in current productivity for gains in the future. Labour-supplanting technologies such as AI are not yet mature enough to arrest declining productivity.

India presents vulnerabilities on all of these parameters. Its fertility rate has dipped below replacement level. It doesn't match up to mortality rates of developed nations. It has an adverse sex ratio at birth. It has a low female LFP. And its success in eradicating poverty also contributes to lower birth rates. This apart, India is among the largest suppliers of immigrants in the world and doesn't have adequate healthcare facilities for extending the working age. Finally, India's population is growing faster in its heat-stressed regions. All of these contribute to accelerated depopulation coinciding with India's ambition to become a developed economy. It needs to plug these leaks in productivity.



Green and Bear It For a Steely Resolve

India is gearing up to fight at WTO over the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which mandates non-EU steel producers to report emissions. There are compelling reasons to address this issue at WTO. India is the only major steel producer experiencing robust growth, with an 8.5% increase in the first four months of 2024 compared to a year ago.

Indian steel has a large carbon footprint. The sector accounts for about 12% of India's CO₂ emissions, with an emission intensity of 2.55 t of CO₂ per tonne of crude steel, compared to the global average emission intensity of 1.85 tCO₂/tcs. Decarbonising is crucial to meet India's climate targets and grow its export market. Earlier this year, the steel ministry began formulating a green steel policy. A task force has been set up to explore using biomass as an alternative in blast furnaces to reduce emissions. The ministry is also betting big on green hydrogen. But that's for post-2030. Major steel producers have decarbonisation plans, but these rely on developing technologies such as carbon capture, utilisation and storage, and green hydrogen.

Meanwhile, new capacity mostly carbon-intensive, is being added to achieve the 300 mn-t goal by 2030. These could become stranded assets. GoI must nudge the industry to go green. India has additional options, such as a green steel procurement policy and targets to encourage market creation and demand aggregation, supporting R&D to advance breakthrough tech and solutions, promoting alternative emissions mitigation actions, and framing mechanisms and frameworks for financing the transition, including mandatory compliance with carbon emissions trading. All these measures could ensure a fit-for-purpose steel sector.



Best Way to Avoid Someone on a Flight

We've all been there — on a plane, settling down for the flight ahead, and then suddenly spotting someone who you really don't want to acknowledge. But you know the person so well that avoiding him or her would be impossible. So, despite being as keen to meet each other and say hi-hello as a cat is on taking a swim, you start rehearsing in your head what you'll say when you do finally exchange feasantries — fake pleasantries. No one knows what words Nitish Kumar and Tejashwi Yadav exchanged during their Wednesday flight from Patna to Delhi. But assigned a seat behind the Bihar chief minister, the RJD leader was visibly awkward. Especially since unlike other public spaces, removing oneself from an airborne plane, not the biggest of spaces to hide away inside anyway, wasn't an option.

Kumar did the smart thing by making the first move when he greeted his former deputy. By making that first move, he took the higher social ground, gaining the confidence to even call his estranged 'bhatija' to sit and chat in the seat next to him. Remember, Kumar hasn't been Yadav's favourite 'chacha' since the former Palu Ram-ed to return to NDA, leaving the JD(U)-RJD-Congress mahagathbandhan seat-belted. So, it's best to grab the narrative and 'get over with it' when it comes to 'seat-sharing' on flights. Avoiding the person only lengthens the discomfort.

STATE OF PLAY Mandate 2024 is about making economic governance GoI's centrepiece Economy is the Real Politic



Pranab Dhal Samanta

The most significant political message from Mandate 2024 is an economic one. The electorate has emphatically rejected any ideological political pursuits by making it numerically impossible to prioritise them, but put enough on the board for BJP-led NDA to spearhead initiatives needed to catapult India's economic profile.

More continuity of existing economic policies won't be enough because economic aspirations are at the heart of this election outcome. The massive drop in BJP's numbers signals both despondency and protest against ineffective articulation of its economic agenda, further clouded by ideological political messaging that set off speculation on whether a thumping majority would end up prioritising other political projects over governance and economic policies.

Importantly, Narendra Modi's electoral victories have been around articulation of his governance model. In 2014, this was pitted alongside an anti-corruption plank that sought to expose the nexus of corruption in UPA. It worked. In 2019, the party reaped the political benefits of cracking the idea of minimising leakage in reaching welfare money directly into people's accounts using digital technology, thus creating the politically active 'labharthi' class that brought together many smaller, less-empowered castes under one rubric across the heartland.

BJP's 2024 campaign was meant to be about fleshing out the idea of 'Viksit Bharat', but it got distracted in a way that the agenda appeared more ideological. Fears set in that a 400-



Speak less, enrich more

plus majority could be deployed to make permanent changes in the country's political and constitutional edifice. BJP sought to proactively clarify its intent and quell any speculation. But its success was limited.

So, what governance agenda should be drawn up from Mandate 2024? This will be dissected in several ways over the next few months as the new government attempts to get its policy mix right in a coalition set-up. Any specific initiative, legislation or regulation will be screened through this prism both within and outside government. But the coalition arrangement could well be a positive in ensuring that priority focus remains on economic issues.

It's easily forgotten in the talk around numbers and lack of majority in Parliament that regional parties have been ardent backers of a progressive economic agenda. The reason that the coalition decades of 1990s and 2000s could move on economic reforms was because of regional parties, who in their own states adopted similar policies. It also delivered them success.

N Chandrababu Naidu was among the first to tread this path, along with H D Deve Gowda and Naveen Patnaik. The latter may have lost this time, but he had a long innings at the helm in Odisha because of his economic and welfare policies.

Therefore, allies might actually act like guard rails for the next government to not detract from the huge economic task ahead of it. Of particular concern will be employment. As per the education ministry's 2019-20 submission to the last Finance Commission, Uttar Pradesh, a state where BJP lost half its seats this election, will be the youngest state by 2026 with a median age of 26.85 years. Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh will also be in the same category.

At a national level, a group of secretaries report on the social sector had assessed in 2019 that by 2031, India will have 58.8% of its population in the 20-59 working-age group, and then onwards

it will plateau. This is India's demographic advantage, which is yet to be fully tapped. That restlessness is playing out in the political theatre, reflected in voting patterns among the youth who are caught amid caste loyalties and aspirational goals.

So, the new government cannot just stay the course on manufacturing, but will need to make it way more attractive. Going by Naidu's own plans for AP, his presence may be an asset for the next Modi government. India has a perplexing problem, where industry across sectors is short of quality labour and still there is unemployment. Clearly, policies are inadequate in preparing trained labour force for the industry today. This problem will only accentuate if not addressed by GoI, as explained by India's demographic trend.

Limits on freebies and doles delivering positive electoral outcomes have also been reached. GoI, for instance, will have to frame and implement policies that bring more women into the workforce. This is also an aspirational issue on the ground as women look beyond basic amenities, free ration and income replenishment through self-help groups.

In many ways, even as India is registering 8.2% growth, the political question to ask is whether it feels like 8.2% growth to the people. There will be differing answers, but the bottom line is the mandate, which conveys that a lot more needs to be done.

It will also be the task of the political leadership to ensure that regional disparities are reduced in this economic pursuit, not widened. And, hence, chief ministers will need to be empowered. This includes BJP CMs. BJP's poor showing in Rajasthan, within months of winning the state polls, conveys that choices need to be made carefully. Here again, economic priorities ought to guide political decisions.

Overall, Mandate 2024 is about depoliticising agendas and making economic governance the centrepiece. Which is why the reinvention of the Modi governance model — its extent and performance, not coalition management — holds the key to the success of the new government.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Winning And Losing

P V VAIDYANATHAN

Winning and losing are a part of life. They are two sides of the same coin. Winning and losing come in cycles; neither is permanent. Today's victor is tomorrow's or yesterday's loser. And today's loser might well be the champion next year or the next. While we are fully aware of this, we continue to crave for victory and live in dread of losing, although we know in our heart of hearts that one is invariably followed, with the passage of time, by the other. The feeling of happiness and joy any victory brings is felt and enjoyed by our ego.

Our true Self knows neither victory nor loss. The atman is beyond the duality of good and bad, right and wrong, winning and losing. But the human mind and ego exult when it can do something better than the other person or other team. And sometimes it becomes difficult to conclude whether our win or their loss causes greater satisfaction. Just as victory brings extreme emotions, so does defeat. How often we have seen that today's heroes become tomorrow's non-heroes or villains?

Such is the price of celebrity status; such is the price of victory. What about the loser? We owe a great deal to the loser, for without a loser, there cannot be a winner. Swami Vivekananda used to say, 'Let not the giver feel proud, for he can give only when there is someone to receive. Let the giver kneel down and let the receiver stand erect, during the act of giving and receiving. For the giver is blessed to find a receiver.'

Chat Room

The Return of Bodyline Bowling

Appropos 'Not Just Chalkas & Chakkas' by Indrajit Hazra (Jun 6), the reason why so many of us are astonished by the low number of BJP seats in the Lok Sabha polls is because the media failed to give us a true picture of the ground situation. Many local pollsters with ear to the ground were more accurate in their predictions than those with better resources. With BJP not used to the compulsions of coalition politics, TDP and JD(U), experienced hands at such calculations, could make the party climb walls to get the government working. The first change within 48 hours after the poll results were declared is Jai Jagannath has replaced Jai Shri Ram due to the solace offered by Odisha.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES
Mumbai

BJP, used to running a majority government for the last 10 years, is on an unfamiliar turf as its future lies in the hands of NDA allies such as TDP's N Chandrababu Naidu and JD(U)'s Nitish Kumar. BJP will need to be pragmatic and listen to the voice of the common people and adopt consultative and deliberative approaches. In the Opposition, kudos to both Congress' Rahul Gandhi and SP's Akhilesh Yadav who emerged stronger than ever; and Mamata Banerjee held her turf well too. With a significant number of seats in its kitty, a robust Opposition, missing since 2014, will come to the fore and should play a constructive role.

BAL GOVIND
Noida

No Change the Best Change?

This refers to 'RBI Unlikely to Cut Rates; Sustained Vigil on Inflation Expected' by Bhaskar Dutta (Jun 3). RBI is expected to present today a foreword on the future course of monetary policy action for the ongoing fiscal year. Growth is looking fine at home while inflation is moderating. From a global perspective, India is relatively better placed to handle all intricacies and external shocks. RBI looks comfortable even as it seeks to draw the right growth-inflation balance. RBI is widely expected to maintain the rates at the present level, and watch the evolving situation, consolidate the gains and take an appropriate call at an appropriate time.

SRINIVASAN UMASHANKAR
Nagpur

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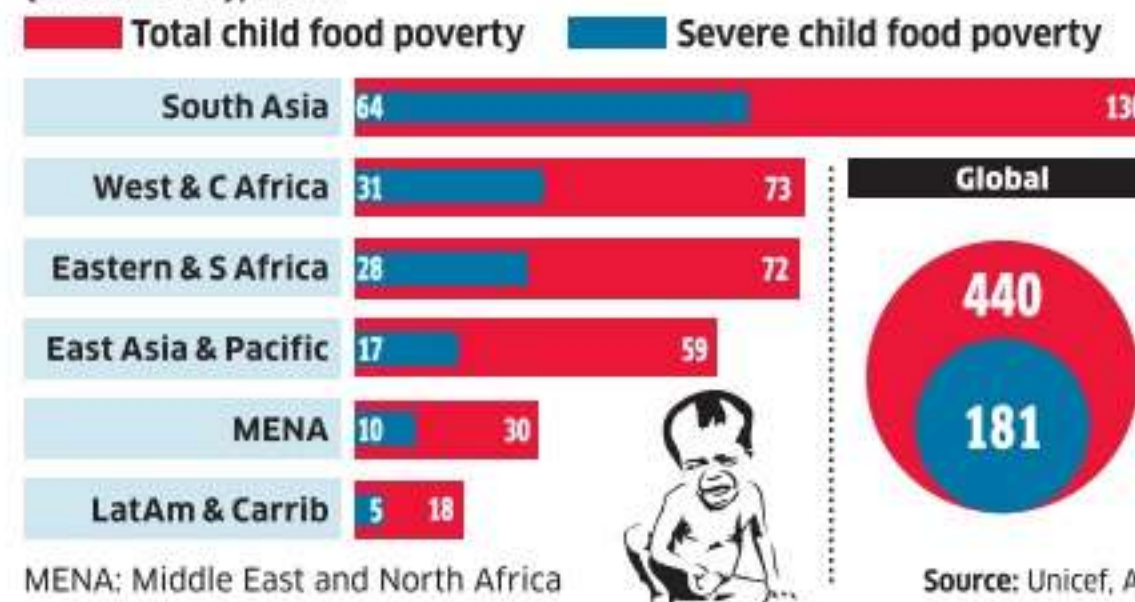
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a biological body so keen,
It could keep talking while digesting the scene.
With a mind that could race,
And a heart keeping pace,
It could even make veggies taste namkeen.

Child Food Poverty

UNICEF recommends that young children eat foods daily from five of eight main groups — breast milk, grains, roots, tubers and plantains, pulses, nuts and seeds; dairy; meat, poultry and fish; eggs; vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables; and other fruits and vegetables. But 440 million children under the age of five living in about 100 low- and middle-income countries are living in food poverty, meaning they do not have access to five food groups each day. Of those, 181 million are experiencing severe food poverty, eating from at most two food groups...

No of children living in food poverty and severe food poverty (in millions), 2022



Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



What? You were following me? But I was following you!

EYES WIDE SHUT

Less Disliked Will Win



Neeraj Kaushal

Americans are saddled with two in-ground presidential candidates: Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Only 38% of Americans approve of Biden, and 42% approve of Trump, as per the average response that psephologist Nate Silver has computed from the polls on public approval of the two. Both have their committed core supporters. But it looks like the November election will be won, not with the help of supporters, but lost, with the help of those — the so-called 'independents' — who want to keep the other guy out.

Last week, a New York jury convicted Trump of falsifying business records for paying \$130,000 'hush money' to adult film actor Stormy Daniels, to silence her on her claim that she had an affair with him. Paying hush money is not illegal, nor is having an affair, which Trump denies, with a porn star. Falsifying business records is. It took the jury only 10 hours of deliberation after six weeks of trial to decide on the charges. There is something to be said about a court system that acts fast.

The jury's verdict was expected. But its unanimity on convicting Trump on all the 34 charges was not. What has surprised many is the deftness with which prosecutors converted what appeared to be charges towards a faulty bookkeeping misdemeanour to a criminal conspiracy to influence the 2016 elections.

Trump's supporters are furious that prosecutors tried to delegitimise Trump's 2016 victory. NY prosecutors, one might say, out-Trumped Trump, who had called for insurrection after the 2020

elections that he and his core supporters believe were rigged. Trump is now a convicted felon. The US constitution does not stop a convicted felon from running for presidency or becoming president. So, will the jury verdict affect voter verdict in the November presidential elections? Trump is the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party. It is a close election, so even a marginal push could be fatal for either candidate.

There's little evidence that the conviction has helped either party. Silver's chart of average electoral prediction, based on various polls, did not even budge after the conviction. Trump continues to enjoy a roughly one-point lead over Biden, which falls within the margin of error. The felony verdict proved a financial bonanza for Trump: his supporters contributed \$54 mn over the next two days.

Trump has shown enormous political survivability. The Senate impeached him, but his support base clings on to him. Felony charges have energised Trump's core supporters and further solidified the Republican Party behind him. They think that Trump is a victim of a political witch hunt. The courts, they argue, are trying to delegitimise Trump's 2016 victory.



Orange could be the new White (House)

For most Americans, the NY court case did not reveal anything new. The verdict shows that Trump has lied, he has falsified business records and he is a misogynist. Voters know that, and some even like him for these reasons. Even his supporters don't deny that Trump has fudged his income-tax, and that he is a racist. Many approve his plan to be vindictive towards his opponents if he wins the elections.

According to one poll conducted before the conviction, about 11% of Trump supporters said that they would not vote for Trump if the Manhattan jury pronounced him guilty. That's a large number for a close election. Still, this response likely suffers from a social desirability bias — respondents are unwilling to admit that even a felony conviction will not change their support for Trump.

Besides, even if some Trump supporters leave him, they may not join Biden, thus reducing the blow of their departure. A conviction in May will likely be less impactful by November. The issue is whether the conviction will affect voters in the six swing states.

One thing we can predict with certainty is that the drama of Trump's court cases and conviction will continue. Trump is sure to appeal, and his appeal could be rejected. If rejected, on June 11, the judge will decide whether Trump should be sentenced to a few days of jail and/or whether he should get probation or conditional discharge.

Many believe Trump's incarceration is not ruled out. Again, seeing a presidential candidate in jail would have some voters turn against him. But many would consider the sentence excessive and switch their loyalty from Biden to Trump. Ultimately, the next US president will be the least disliked of the two candidates. Voters are not paying much attention to ideologies or electoral promises.

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ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Looking Out of Car Window

Gazing out of the window of a moving car can provide a profound pleasure. It engages the senses and the mind in a gentle, almost meditative way. As the landscape flows by, each scene presents a fleeting glimpse into a world that is both familiar and constantly changing.

The view is live, and alive. People, buildings, streets all pass by in a blur of colours and shapes. There's a connection, a feeling of being part of something larger. There's a rhythm to it, too — the steady hum of the engine, the soft whoosh of the car AC, sounds of passing vehicles. They become the



soundtrack of your car ride. For the traveller, this act of looking out is a respite, a way to clear the mind. Thoughts come and go like the miles under the wheels, and there's a sense of freedom in the ability to just watch, to observe without the need to act.

In this quiet space, imagination takes flight. The mind weaves stories about the places and people seen along the way. Each turn of the road brings a new micro-tale, a fresh snapshot. And, sometimes, you can even get happily lost in your mind.