

Editorial

The essence of India's inflation problem

Apathy continues

Africa is not getting mpox vaccines despite the disease's endemicity

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared mpox to be a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) for the second time in two years following its outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and its spread to over a dozen countries in Africa. The multi-country outbreak in Europe, in 2022, had led to a declaration of a PHEIC. WHO's announcement comes a day after the Africa CDC declared the outbreak to be a public health emergency of continental significance (PHECS), also marking the first time a regional and global health emergency has been declared for a disease outbreak. If this is first such declaration in Africa of a PHECS since 2017, it is also the first time that WHO has declared a PHEIC for a disease outbreak in Africa on the very first time the emergency committee met to decide on the matter. Though WHO claimed in August 2014 that the Ebola outbreak in West Africa was declared a public health emergency in the very first meeting of the emergency committee, an Associated Press investigation revealed how WHO resisted calling it a public health emergency for a few months. In the second Ebola outbreak in Africa in 2018-19, WHO declared it a public health emergency only when the emergency committee met for the fourth time.

If the 2022 mpox outbreak in the U.K. that spread to over 400 countries, was caused by the milder clade 2b virus — primarily affecting men who have sex with men, with limited cases among children and adolescents — the current outbreak is driven by a new and more lethal clade 1b, spread effectively through sexual and non-sexual contact. There have been 2,863 confirmed cases and 517 deaths this year, primarily in the DRC. The clade 1b emerged in the DRC in September 2023, with human-to-human transmission ongoing since then. In the DRC, around two-thirds of infections are in children under 15 years. Vaccines are again in acute short supply. As against 10 million doses needed to control the outbreak, just about 0.21 million doses may be supplied immediately. Even when vaccines were used to blunt transmission in Europe and the U.S. earlier, vaccines were not supplied to Africa despite mpox being endemic there for years. Currently, only the DRC and Nigeria have granted emergency use authorisation for the vaccine. The regulatory hurdle can be sidestepped if the company expresses interest for WHO's emergency use listing, which will allow international agencies to supply the vaccine to all African countries. Even then, Africa will have to wait till the end of 2025 for the 10 million doses.

Regional troubles

Thailand's royalty-military establishment thrives on instability

Thailand's youngest Prime Minister, 37-year-old Paetongtarn Shinawatra, was elected by the Parliament on Friday after the constitutional court ousted Srettha Thavisin. Ms. Paetongtarn is the youngest daughter of former Thai Prime Minister and tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, and the fourth member of her family to hold the position. Mr. Thaksin was removed in a coup in 2006, while Ms. Paetongtarn's uncle Somchai Wongsawat was dismissed by the constitutional court in 2008, and her aunt Yingluck Shinawatra was also dismissed, again by the same court, in 2014. The latest change of Prime Minister mirrors several such sudden dismissals of the past that are attributed to Thailand's conservative establishment. Mr. Srettha was among more than a dozen Prime Ministers appointed since 2001. Significantly, the court held Mr. Srettha guilty of ethical violations for appointing a Cabinet Minister who had been convicted for attempting to bribe a judge overseeing Mr. Thaksin's corruption cases more than a decade ago. Mr. Srettha was himself only elected in 2023, when the reformist Move Forward Party, which won the most seats in the elections, was disqualified from forming a government and banned for suggesting changes to the strict laws governing criticism of the monarchy. As a result, Ms. Paetongtarn's chances of a smooth term in office, and making radical changes to the system seem bleak. Her most important task would be to help nudge Thailand's sluggish economy back into shape while averting the fate of her predecessors. Given her age and lack of experience, she is expected to be guided mainly by her father, who is back after his exile in the UAE over corruption charges, following a compromise with the establishment.

The developments come at a time of instability in India's Indian Ocean neighbourhood to the east — the ouster of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has sent the country into a period of uncertainty, which the interim government must contend with. The developments follow a spurt in violence between militant groups and Myanmar's embattled junta that imperil India's investments as well as peace along the border with India's north-east. With Sri Lanka also heading for presidential elections in September, Thailand's crisis has cast another shadow over plans to hold the BIMSTEC summit in Bangkok on September 4. Many agreements to be adopted on digital payment mechanisms, connectivity, and maritime cooperation have already been negotiated, and it is to be hoped that the summit will now not need to be put off. While Ms. Paetongtarn's election may suggest some stability in the short term, New Delhi must keep its shock absorbers on, to deal with other surprise crises and seemingly chronic instability in the neighbourhood.

The Economic Survey that preceded this year's Union Budget presentation makes a suggestion which has implications for inflation control. It is that the price of food be taken out of the inflation target that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is mandated with. In technical jargon, this would amount to targeting 'core' instead of 'headline' inflation, which is the practice now. To appreciate fully the implication of such a move, were it to be implemented, would require recognition of two aspects. These concern the recent experience with inflation in India and the current policy for inflation control.

Food price and inflation trajectory

First, of late, food price inflation has been very high by historical standards. In June, the year-on-year increase in the price of food was close to 10%. Food price inflation has been elevated since 2019. Note that this is before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, not to mention the Ukraine war, implying that domestic factors are at work. With food inflation high and food accounting for a large part of the consumer price index, overall inflation has been higher than usual too.

Now to the second aspect that needs to be understood. Since 2016, by an act of Parliament, controlling inflation in India has been hived-off to the RBI, which is expected to control it through variations in the interest rate, a practice termed as 'inflation targeting'. The term conveys a sense of both capacity and precision, that a central bank can choose the level of inflation. Actually, this is far from assured. The RBI has missed the targeted 4% every year in the past five years. In the United Kingdom, the Bank of England's record has been patchy too. Finally, in the United States, where the Federal Reserve aims at 2% inflation, it shot up to over 8% in 2022. Since then it has plummeted to a level close to the target. In all these economies, the recent trajectory of inflation has been undergirded by fluctuations in the price of food globally.

Two questions arise when we consider the suggestion made in the Economic Survey. First, is the move to remove the price of food from the inflation target justifiable in terms of the goals of economic policy? Second, is the RBI likely to be any more successful in controlling core inflation than it has been in its efforts to control headline inflation? The answer to both the questions is 'no'. India is an economy in which the share of



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The rising price of food lies at the core of India's inflation

food in household expenditure is close to 50%. This is very high by international standards. For instance, in the U.S., it is less than 10%.

Generally the food share is taken as a proxy for the standard of living — and, therefore, of poverty. A high share of food in a household's expenditure leaves it vulnerable to a rise in the price of food. Given this, to ignore changes in the price of food, by adopting an inflation target which excludes it, amounts to ignoring what matters most to a very large section of the Indian population. A technical justification is given to such a proposal by asserting that food price fluctuations are 'transitory', that is, increases are inevitably followed by a downward movement. Well, this certainly is not true for the Indian economy.

Food price inflation has not been negative in any of the 13 years since 2011-12, the base year for the current consumer price index. In fact, it may be said that "India has a food inflation problem", and the assertion that food prices may be ignored as the spikes are only transitory is not credible.

Targeting core inflation

This takes us to the second issue — whether the RBI can be expected to be any more successful if it were to confine itself to targeting core inflation. This question may be answered quite easily. In the past 13 years, the annual average core inflation has been within the targeted 4% in only one year, that too barely.

This does not surprise us, for our statistical investigation yielded two reasons why this must be so. First, a rise in the RBI's repo rate does not dampen core inflation as claimed. In fact, increasing it is seen to lead to a rise in the inflation rate. This is not without economic logic. As the higher interest rate chokes off demand, which is how it is meant to work, firms may well raise prices to guard their profits. After all, firms face a double whammy now. Working capital costs would have increased and revenues fallen as aggregate output contracts. We found something else to be the case — that food price inflation is a determinant of core inflation, which, again, is only to be expected. After all, food prices determine wages, which are a part of a firm's costs, the other being materials. So, wages rise as there is food price inflation.

The finding that food prices affect core inflation renders this measure of it without operational significance. It also leads to a deeper understanding. As labour enters all lines of

production to a greater or lesser extent, changes in the price of food determine the inflation rate across an economy. Monetary policy working via changes in the interest rate cannot control inflation as the central bank has no control over the price of food.

If all this is so widely known among discerning economists, why does economic policy in India have to persist with the idea that inflation can be left to the central bank? This is because of an ideological shift that occurred globally after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The view that got installed was that production was to be left to the market and inflation alone was to be controlled by the central bank.

Since 1991, all political parties in India have been eager to demonstrate that they follow closely practices adopted in the West, no matter that they may be irrelevant or, worse still, damaging, to this country. Leaving food price inflation out of the inflation target is one such practice.

Focus on agricultural production

The rising price of food lies at the core of India's inflation. The proposal to take the price of food out of the official measure of it is no solution to the ongoing inflation. For reasons explained here, if for whatever reason the price of food was to keep rising, as it has for the last five years, the RBI will not be able to control core inflation either. The current inflation in India can only be handled through supply-side measures that raise the yield in agriculture. The challenges are serious, though not insurmountable for a country that ended chronic food shortage over half a century ago. But success would require a comprehensive approach to agricultural production, one that keeps costs in check so that supply is forthcoming at a steady price as the population and economy grow.

Taking food inflation out of the inflation target without any plan for its control would leave India defenceless against an ever-present threat to the standard of living of its population. The Economic Survey suggests that the adverse welfare effect of food price inflation may be taken care of by income transfers to households. However, if food prices keep rising faster than the overall inflation rate, as they are right now, such transfers would absorb a rising share of the Budget, leaving less and less for public goods. This is undesirable. There is no alternative to controlling the rise in the prices of all goods, which currently is the avowed policy.

Ensuring social justice in the bureaucracy

During his parliamentary address on July 29, 2024, the Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, regretted that there were no Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) officers among the 20 who assisted in framing 2024 Budget proposals. He said that there was only one officer from the minorities and another from the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category involved in the exercise. His purpose in doing so was to highlight that those who originally belong to poor and deprived sections of society do not have a role in the framing of a crucial aspect of government's economic policy. He couched his assertions in colourful political language.

The Union Finance Minister also responded to Mr. Gandhi's charge by pointing to the absence of persons from these traditionally deprived backgrounds in the the Rajiv Gandhi Charitable Trust and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. A serious issue was converted into political tit for tat.

Upper caste domination continues

These political charges and counter-charges missed the real reason for the absence of SC/ST officers in the Budget-making exercise. The cause is the continuing domination of the so-called upper castes at senior levels of the civil service. This was evident from the answer by Minister of State Jitendra Singh to a parliamentary question on December 15, 2022.

This daily in a report carried the next day, quoted Mr. Singh as saying, "Out of a total of 322 officers currently holding the posts of Joint Secretaries and Secretaries under Central Staffing Scheme in different Ministries/Departments, 16, 13, 39 and 254 belong to SC, ST, Other Backward Classes (OBC) and General category, respectively." Mr. Singh further clarified that the number of Secretary and Joint Secretary-level officers stood



Vivek Katju
a retired Indian Foreign Service officer

The solution lies in having a fixed tenure, irrespective of age of entry

at 4% and 4.9%, respectively. Clearly, there is an absence of reserved category officers in sufficient numbers at policy suggestion levels in the government. Unless this situation is remedied, Rahul Gandhi displaying photographs will only remain empty political gestures, for there is no reservation for promotions in Class A services.

In order to increase the representation of SC and ST officers at the senior most positions in government, a complete departure from the traditional concept of the age of retirement would be necessary. This writer had advocated a new approach to retirement in an article in these columns in September 2012. If the Leader of the Opposition is truly interested in ensuring social justice in the civil services, he should, at least, ponder over the ideas presented in the subsequent paragraphs.

Eligibility and age factor

General category candidates between the ages of 21 and 32 years are currently eligible to appear for the civil services examination. They are allowed six attempts in all. SC/ST candidates are permitted to take the examination till the age of 37 years and there is no restriction on their number of chances. For OBC candidates, the upper age limit is 35 years and they are allowed nine attempts. The upper age limit for Persons with Benchmark Disabilities (PwBD) is 42 years. They have unlimited chances if they are SC/ST and nine if they are from other categories.

This means that SC/ST and PwBD candidates, irrespective of how well they perform as civil servants, are unable to reach the top because they generally join late and retire before reaching the top. They have to retire at lower or middle levels. This is the obvious implication of Jitendra Singh's answer. The fact is that the civil service is

a race in which those who join at a young age remain around to reach the top even if their performance is not as good as those who join later. This is simply because of the age factor. Logically, the government's focus should be on the official's efficiency and competence and not on when he/she made it to the civil services within the prescribed age limits.

If this proposition is accepted, it follows that the present retirement pattern should yield to a fixed tenure of years for every entrant to the civil service, irrespective of his age of entry within the prescribed limits. A possible fixed tenure could be 35 years.

If it is considered that persons should not be working in their seventies, then the present age limits can be lowered to ensure that all candidates would retire by the time they reach around 67 years of age. The average age of men and women is rising in India. Besides, stringent medical fitness examinations can be conducted annually after the age of 62. This age is being mentioned because even today, some officers' tenures take them to this age. Indeed, some persons who are holding responsible positions today, after their retirement from government service, are well into their seventies.

Have a committee

It is only if a fixed tenure is prescribed for all officers, irrespective of their age of entry, that SC/ST and OBC officers in larger numbers will fill the senior-most positions in government. That will contribute to a dream of Viksit Bharat, with social justice for all. As a beginning, the Leader of the Opposition should press for an independent and multi-disciplinary committee with adequate SC/ST, OBC, and PwBD representation to examine this proposal with an open mind.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Independence Day speech

It is irrelevant how 'long' the Prime Minister speaks on Independence Day, but how 'relevant' it is for the people of the country (Page 1, "PM calls for 'secular civil code' in Independence Day speech", August 16). India is a country of multi religions, multi languages, multi cultures and multi customs. 'Unity in Diversity' is the hallmark of its ethos. In simple terms, the top leader should concentrate on the real development of the nation — by uniting the people after fulfilling their aspirations for an 'acche din'. What is needed is a peaceful co-existence of people with different faiths. A. Jainulabdeen, Chennai

A few months into the government's third term after forming a coalition government, the top leader talking about a 'secular civil code' — which is a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) — is not what the Prime Minister is a secular nation should be doing on Independence Day. Striking a discordant note that is aimed at bringing people of different religions under a so-called one-size-fits-all code is a flawed idea, leave alone building a consensus on it. It seems that the leader is speaking on behalf of the ruling party, and under the illusion that the coalition partners are extending support to a UCC. Instead of talking about the struggles in our Independence and

emerging people about nation building on a special day, choosing the ramparts of Red Fort for a sharp political agenda is sad. Prabhu Raj R., Bengaluru

The speech sounded more like a speech made at an election rally. While his call to implement a 'secular civil code' is most welcome, the timing and venue have been inopportune. The finalisation of this sensitive issue should be based on a broad consensus by way of widespread deliberations/discussions involving all. Although the Prime Minister is fully justified in taking credit for fulfilling a number of electoral promises, the

speech failed to send out a strong message to address the core issues that haunt the *aam aadmi*. An august occasion of national importance calls for remembering and recounting the struggles and sacrifices of countless freedom fighters who have laid down their lives for the nation. The fact that the venue of such an event was also used to target the Opposition has sullied the sanctity of the solemn occasion. B. Suresh Kumar, Coimbatore

The addition of the word 'secular' to the issue of a common civil code is interesting — perhaps to gain wider public

acceptability. It may also be an attempt to disarm the Opposition. Dr. D.V.G. Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh

Crimes against women

The recent heinous crime in West Bengal, of the torture and murder of a woman doctor, raises concerns about moral decay in our society. In his Independence Day speech, the Prime Minister has rightly emphasised the need for strict laws and swift justice to prevent such crimes. It is crucial to create an atmosphere of fear by imposing severe penalties on perpetrators of crime. Every section of society must unite to voice opposition against these

crimes and enhance community awareness for the protection of women. Dr. Pawan Kumar, Janakpur, Gaya, Bihar

Sports promotion

Winning six medals and standing 71 in the Paris Olympics evoked mixed feelings. But how can we expect a much better performance by India when sports is not promoted well from the school level? Moreover, job worries and financial stability are the main concerns for many. Amisha Bahari, Harma, Ranchi, Jharkhand

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WEST BENGAL

Divided by borders, rivers, and polarising politics

The demand for a Union Territory in Murshidabad, West Bengal, has put the focus on illegal immigration from Bangladesh. Shiv Sahay Singh visits the district to understand the porous nature of the border and the geographic difficulty in erecting fences. Meanwhile, the allegation of a demographic change in religion swirls, aiding both the BJP and the TMC



The char lands beyond the Charbhadrabad outpost, under 146 Battalion of the BSF, where farmers and fishermen cross the India-Bangladesh border for their livelihoods. SHIV SAHAY SINGH

Three days before violent protests erupted in Bangladesh forcing a regime change, India's Border Security Force (BSF) declared a state of high alert along the river Padma, a geographical and political line between the two countries.

Pushing his bicycle, Mukbul Haque, 34, crosses the border outpost (BOP) at Kakmarichar in Murshidabad, beyond the line of BSF deployment. Here, amid a vast web of *chars* (river islands made of silt) and water bodies, he risks hours of torrential rain to spread fishing nets in the Padma, but was not sure if his efforts would yield a catch of hilsa. "Usually, the hilsa comes after July. The best time for a catch is at night, but many times people from Bangladesh get away with what is caught in our nets," says Haque.

A pack of jackals runs past the thick vegetation and a board by the West Bengal Forest Department declares that gharials are being bred in the water. On his return to the border outpost, Haque hands over a diary to the sentry at the gate. The sentry records all the items that he is carrying. To cross the border outpost, Mukbul carries his Aadhaar card, a diary to keep a record of articles brought back in, and a fisherman's card issued by the local panchayat, all carefully wrapped in a plastic pouch in the pocket of his wet shirt.

A few kilometres from the Kakmarichar border outpost lies the Barnabad outpost, where a group of farmers are hurriedly returning before dusk. Most of them are carrying cattle fodder from their fields to their homes. Karbindranath Mondal, a middle-aged farmer carrying cattle fodder on a buffalo cart, complains they have to wait in long queues every day to go to the fields and return from there. "We need permission for everything. Even to go and urinate in our fields," says Charaduddin Molla, another farmer, looking tired.

The Kakmarichar border outpost falls under Saheb Nagar gram panchayat of Jalangi block of Murshidabad district that has a porous border with Bangladesh. The gram panchayat stands out in the State for having a border protection committee. Over the past few years, the committee, led by a villager, Julfikar Ali, and the local panchayat, has been raising the issue of better management of the border with authorities at the State and the Centre. Earlier this year, hundreds of villagers from Saheb Nagar gram panchayat wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, demanding the setting up of an integrated check post (ICP) at Kakmarichar BOP and a border *haat* in the region.

"Hundreds of acres of land of farmers are located beyond the BSF deployment. They should be deployed 150 yards from the zero line as per the BSF Act, 1986, so that the interest of farmers can be protected. It is also in national interest that we don't leave our land unprotected and guarded," Ali says.

A senior official of the BSF posted in Murshidabad district emphasises that the border between India and Bangladesh passing through the district is not a classic border with fencing on either sides and border guards stationed next to the fence. The riverine nature as well as pressure of the population on both sides of the border makes guarding it a challenge.

Large parts of Jalangi block in Murshidabad are manned by 146 Battalion of the BSF. Of the 43-km border manned by the battalion, about 70% is riverine and the border guarding force has to survey *char* land of about 25 sq. km.

A political playground

The office of Saheb Nagar gram panchayat is located about three kilometres from Kakmarichar BOP. Mazibur Rahman Biswas, the *pradhan* (head) of the gram panchayat, agrees with Ali that an ICP is required because their border outpost (Kakmarichar) is located midway between the integrated check post at Petrapole in North



The deployment of the BSF should be 150 yards from the zero line as per the BSF Act, 1986, so that the interest of farmers can be protected.

JULFIKAR ALI
Kakmarichar border protection committee

24 Parganas and the land custom point of Mahadipur in Malda in the south.

"There are no jobs here. If an ICP and a border *haat* is set up, then people can get some work," the *pradhan* says. The 43-year-old tech-savvy village head says of the 26,000 people in the gram panchayat, about 4,000 are registered as migrants working in other States.

Both Biswas and Ali recall former Congress MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury promising a 4-km bridge over the Padma that would help the ICP at Kakmarichar when it was set up and rue the fact that with his defeat, the people of the district have lost a voice in Parliament. In the midst of their parleys, a middle-aged man approaches the *pradhan* with a bunch of documents. The man mumbles that he is there for a "citizen card". The *pradhan* snaps at him, saying, "I cannot commit any illegality".

Rivers have shaped the geography and politics of the region, but now politics is veering towards the issues of demography and infiltration.

Adding fuel to the debate, Nishikant Dubey, Bharatiya Janata Party MP from Godda in Jharkhand, raised a demand on July 25 in the Lok Sabha that a Union Territory be formed with Malda and Murshidabad, the Muslim-dominated districts of Bihar, and the Santal Parganas region of Jharkhand. Two days later, Murshidabad BJP MLA Gauri Shankar Ghosh brought out a rally in the district with hundreds of BJP workers supporting the idea of a Union Territory.

The rally which went through the heart of Murshidabad town raised slogans against the Trinamool Congress government describing it "anti-Hindu" and sought action against Trinamool MLA Humayun Kabir for making communally charged comments. Days later, Ghosh was joined by Baharampur BJP MLA Subrata Maitra who also backed the demand of a Union Territory. "We are doing what people want us to do. There is no rule of law in Murshidabad and things can only be controlled if the Centre takes over the administration. If Kashmir and Ladakh can be made Union Territories why not Murshidabad," says Ghosh. Surrounded by a posse of security personnel, the Murshidabad MLA claims that he has been raising the demand for Union Territory status since 2022.

In the recently concluded Lok Sabha poll, the Trinamool Congress won all the three seats in Murshidabad (Jangipur, Baharampur, and Murshidabad), but the BJP managed a lead in three Assembly seats, including Murshidabad, Jangipur, and Burwan, a change from the party's 2021 Assembly poll when it had won two Assembly seats. Ghosh, who had won the Murshidabad Assembly seat in 2021 by a slim margin of 2,490 votes, says in the 2024 Lok Sabha poll, the BJP candidate secured a lead of 7,961 votes from the Assembly segment.

Amid the raging debate about the division of

West Bengal, the BJP legislators joined hands with Trinamool legislators on August 5 and supported the resolution in the State Assembly opposing any division of the State. Both BJP's Gauri Shankar Ghosh and Trinamool's Humayun Kabir were not seen in the House during the debate.

Communalisation of land

Murshidabad is the only district in West Bengal where the Muslim population, at 67%, is significantly higher than the Hindu population, as per the last Census in 2011. With massive out-migration of people for work, it is an economically poor district of the State; it has one of the highest numbers of child marriages in West Bengal. The NFHS-5 points out that 55.4% of women, between 20 and 24 years, are married before 18 years here.

The demands of creating a Union Territory on the grounds that the region has a high Muslim population has created further schisms. In the last week of July when rallies were held in Murshidabad demanding Union Territory status, scores of houses were washed away by the Ganga in Chanchanda gram panchayat of Shamsheganj block of the district. Amid the demand for a long-term solution to the perennial problem of river erosion, some political groups alleged discrimination on rehabilitation based on communal lines. Experts say that engaging in the debate of a changing demography and illegal immigration from across the porous border with Bangladesh should be looked at in both the historical and geographical context of the region.

On the map, Murshidabad district looks like an isosceles triangle sharing an international border of 125.35 km with Bangladesh, of which 42.35 km is on land and the remaining is riverine. Padma river flows through the entire eastern boundary, separating Murshidabad from Rajshahi district of Bangladesh.

After crossing a stream emerging from the Padma at Charbhadrabad BOP there are several forward posts of the BSF regulating the movement of farmers who go out for daily agriculture work beyond the BOP. A sentry deployed at a forward post on a Sunday afternoon says that about 320 farmers have crossed in the morning and will return in the evening.

Jute crops stand tall in the fields and thick vegetation makes it difficult to see beyond a few metres on the *char*. Like all other farmers and fishermen, Gholam Mustafa complains about the daily checks he faces when he goes to cultivate his jute crops. Asked if there is infiltration, the farmer says, "There are people in the village who have come from the other side, but that is the government's problem, not mine". The BSF personnel say that they use drones and sometimes horses to guard the *char* lands and are hoping that a fencing along the border will be erected soon. At Charbhadrabad BOP, the border guarding force have elaborated maps of the *chars* and villages located beyond the BOP: Muslimpara, for instance, has a population of 1,800 and is 100% Muslim; Hindupara with a population of 200 has 100% Hindus; Natunpara with a population of 2,400 has both Hindus and Muslims.

The office of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) located in the heart of Baharampur town almost 50 km from the BOP has an old political map of West Bengal amid photographs of Lenin, P. Sundararaya, and other communist leaders. Zamir Molla, the district secretary of the party, points to the map and explains how the Padma

serves as the boundary of the district in the east and the Bhagirathi or Ganga fed with a feeder canal from the Farakka barrage flows through the western side of the district reaching Kolkata, to flow into the Bay of Bengal. "The claims that the Muslim population is increasing and the Hindus decreasing does not have much basis and is only part of the narrative of the BJP," Molla says.

As two party workers are typing out a document explaining the party's dismal performance in the recent Lok Sabha poll, the CPI(M) leader says while there is no demographic change, the election was contested on communal lines. "We were confident Mohammad Salim would win from Murshidabad. But after comments by TMC's Humayun Kabir targeting Hindus, the Hindu who we thought would vote for us voted for the BJP. A similar situation happened for Adhir Chowdhury where Muslims did not vote for him," the CPI(M) leader claims. Molla says that except the Katrina Masjid riots of 1998 the district has not seen major riots.

Communal flare-ups, however, are not uncommon in Murshidabad, which often makes headlines for political violence. Shaktipur, a village located on the bank of the Bhagirathi, witnessed a communal flare-up during the Ram Navami festival in 2024. On April 17, crude bombs were hurled on the road outside the house of Sumanta Gani in Shaktipur market. Several people were injured in the incident and a video of the attack triggered panic.

Gani, who works as a homoeopathy practitioner and sells ayurvedic products of Patanjali, has not repaired the window panes of his kitchen that were damaged in the attack. "There were attacks twice in the area, particularly on my house during Ram Navami this year and in June 2022 after Nupur Sharma's [former BJP spokesperson] remarks," he said.

Sumanta insists that we meet Dayal Mondal, the local president of the Ram Navami Utsav Udjapan Committee. Like other parts of the State, Ram Navami processions started in the area in 2016. Sumanta and Dayal say Hindus in the area have come together after the attack and add that a petition has been filed in the Calcutta High Court demanding an investigation by the National Investigation Agency in the attack on the Ram Navami procession. "Why can the Chief Minister not take action against her own party leaders like Humayun Kabir who is making remarks against Hindus?" Dayal says. Along the banks of the river, outside the sanctum of a small temple, stands a 15-foot clay idol of Lord Ram; his devotees say they intend to make the Ram Navami procession bigger in 2025.

The idea of a Union Territory

One of the most well-known scholars from Murshidabad, Shakti Nath Jha, lives on the banks of the Bhagirathi in Baharampur town of the district. The river literally flows only a few feet away from the hibiscus trees of his garden. A leading expert on the Baul and Fakir traditions of West Bengal and Bangladesh, the 83-year-old is preparing a statement where the Bauls would reject the idea of a Union Territory carved out of Malda and Murshidabad on religious lines.

According to the academic, for the past several decades Baul Fakirs, who deny anything beyond the grasp of five senses and denounce organised religion, have been targeted by both Hindus and Muslims in the region. He says recently he had to call a police station and seek their intervention, when a group of Muslims tried to stop a performance of Baul Fakirs in the district.

Jha is fond of quoting one line of Lalok Fakir, a 19th century Baul and an icon of Bengali culture, whose songs reflect the philosophy of Baul Fakirs. "Everyone wonders, 'What's Lalok's faith?' Lalok says, 'I've never seen the face of faith with these eyes of mine!'" Lalok was born in Kushtia (now in Bangladesh) in undivided Nadia district, just about 100 km from Murshidabad.



A villager who crossed a river and the Charbhadrabad border outpost in West Bengal's Murshidabad district to work on his field. SHIV SAHAY SINGH

ANDHRA PRADESH



Messengers of natural farming: Farmers showing the crops grown using the Pre-Monsoon Dry Sowing (PMDS) model at Tippanagunta village of Bapulapadu mandal in Andhra Pradesh's Krishna district. (Below) Aruna, the Regional Project Coordinator of RySS, interacting with farmers as they prepare 'Dhava Jeevamrutham', a natural fertilizer, at a field in Arugolalu village under Bapulapadu mandal. (Bottom) A farmer arranging a temporary fence made with a jute rope along the bund of his field at Arugolalu village. G.N. RAO

Seeding a greener future

Equipped with global recognition, teams of farmers from Andhra Pradesh, under the auspices of AP Community-Managed Natural Farming, are set to visit Global South countries to upskill their counterparts in natural farming techniques, writes P. Sujatha Varma



The rattled bones one gets from a wobbly tractor ride for 2 kilometres on a narrow mud road on a hot and sweaty day are worth the pain when the destination presents a visual treat of lush green fields in organised layouts.

The palpable shift from the cacophony of city life in Vijayawada to the serenity of cultivating crops in harmony with nature in agricultural fields on the outskirts of Tippanagunta village under Bapulapadu mandal of Krishna district in Andhra Pradesh seems a welcome change.

"This patch of land is brought under the Pre-Monsoon Dry Sowing (PMDS) model with 32 varieties of crops," says Akturi Dhana Lakshmi, pointing to the farmland she has acquired on lease. Clad in a pastel pink cotton sari and her head covered with the loose end (pallu) of it, the 44-year-old tenant farmer from Tippanagunta village, along with others of her like, is growing pulses, vegetables and cereals on 2.5 acres of land.

Showing a bundle of freshly-harvested Jeeluga, also known as dhaincha (*Sesbania aculeata*), a leguminous green manure crop that fixes nitrogen in the soil, placed on the bund in a row of other crops like red gram and cereals, she says it is only recently that she stopped using chemical fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides and made the switch to natural farming.

"It took some time for me to get convinced about natural farming but no regrets whatsoever," she says citing its multiple benefits like improved yield, increased income with a minimum cost of production, elimination of chemical inputs and reduced water consumption.

Natural farming got an impetus in the State with the intervention of Rythu Sadhikara Samstha (RySS), a farmers' empowerment cooperation, the implementing agency of the Andhra Pradesh Community-Managed Natural Farming (APCMNF).

"We encourage farmers to undertake the PMDS model as it provides green cover to the land for all the 365 days of the year. It also improves the soil fertility besides serving the bigger cause of environment conservation," says R. Aruna, the Regional Project Coordinator of RySS.

APCMNF supports smallholder farmers to switch from chemically intensive agriculture to natural farming through practices such as using organic residues and minimising tillage to improve soil health, re-introducing indigenous seeds and diversifying crops including trees.

Launched in 2016 by the Government of Andhra Pradesh, the agency aims to find a sustainable solution to farmers' distress caused by the economic crisis in agriculture and climate change.

The APCMNF is aggressively promoting the PMDS model, as it enables the farmer to take

home three crops in a year, even in rainfed conditions in semi-arid areas. This is a paradigm shift since, in normal conditions, farmers in rainfed situations grow only one crop and leave the land fallow for the rest of the year. This mode of agriculture is based on scientific principles and comes into play in the non-farming season or whenever there is no crop cover on the land.

"Additionally, we get financial benefits by selling vegetables and grass from the PMDS fields, which give us income throughout the year," says Padma Ragam, another farmer from the village. In the abutting farm, a group of workers from West Bengal are seen transplanting paddy seedlings into puddled and levelled ground. "Due to severe shortage of farm labour in the State, owners of farmlands rope in migrant workers from West Bengal and Odisha," informs Aruna.

At Arugolalu, a neighbouring village, Sobhila Chalam Prasad has widened his farm bunds and taken up boundary plantation, a low-cost technique that has the dual benefits of soil and water conservation and a means for sustainable agricultural intensification.

"It helps to increase crop yield without expanding farmlands. The border crops of horticulture and vegetables will not only prevent pest attacks on the paddy sown in the field but it will also bring additional income," explains Chalam Prasad.

Nurturing change agents
A few yards from his farmland is the Arugolalu High School campus where students are groomed as change agents by engaging them in developing Nutri Gardens of ATM (Any Time Money) and 'Suryamandalam' models.

A Nutri Garden is a low-cost, scientific model of a kitchen/homestead garden with a variety of nutritious vegetables, fruits and medicinal plants produced throughout the year organically to ensure the nutritional security of the growers in rural areas.

The Suryamandalam model is one where vegetables and leafy greens are grown on 5 to 10 cents of land using only organic fertilisers.

"The objective is to eradicate malnutrition and achieve the goal of nutritional self-sufficiency among kids. Each bed of crop has been allocated to students of different classes and this has triggered a very healthy competition among them," K. Naga Malleswari, Additional Krishna District Project Manager, RySS, says with a smile.

Farmers are constantly educated on the preparation of natural fertilisers and growth promoters such as Beejamrutham, Dhava Jeevamrutham, Ghana Jeevamrutham, Saptha Dhanyankura Dravanam, Dasaparni Kashayam, Agnastaram, Neemastharam and Brahmastram, besides the use of concoctions prepared using fermented buttermilk, seed palletisation (covering the seed with layers of bio-stimulant, fine clay, ash and water to help the seed stay viable for longer duration when sown in dry atmospheric situations), egg amino acid and chilli garlic solution.

They follow the basic principles of natural farming by keeping the soil covered with crops around the year, sowing diverse crops including trees, keeping the soil covered with crop residues in the absence of living plants causing mini-

mal disturbance to soil and minimising tillage.

After attending a series of sessions by a wide network of 'internal community resource persons' at the village level, 'master community resource persons' at the mandal and district levels and 'regional project coordinators' of the thematic leads at the State level, the farmers practising natural farming techniques now prefer to use only indigenous seeds, try and integrate animals into farming and use biostimulants as catalysts to trigger soil biology.

Thatti Satyavathi recognised the usefulness and growing demand for these natural fertilisers and growth promoters among farmers in the village. She therefore opened a mini Non-Pesticide Management (NPM) shop where stocks of the growth promoters stored in large-size drums get empty within no time.

"Initially, I started preparing them for my personal use alone. But after seeing the good result they yielded, I decided to scale up the production and sell them to farmers," she says. Satyavathi now earns an additional income of anything between ₹3,000 and ₹5,000 every month.

At Kanugolu village, senior citizens Chalamasetti Anuradha, Chalamasetti Padmavathi and Vaddi Seetha Mahalakshmi, all three from the same family, have groomed a 365-day kitchen garden using natural farm techniques on a small piece of land acquired on lease.

"Ever since we started this kitchen garden, families in the vicinity have stopped buying vegetables from shops and local vendors. There is high demand for our farm products," says Anuradha with a chuckle.

The trio, which started growing vegetables in a small way for their own consumption, is almost indispensable now for families living around.

World's largest programme
APCMNF is recognised as the world's largest agroecology programme, currently reaching over a million smallholder farmers, predominantly women, across 5,00,000 hectares in Andhra Pradesh.

"The success of this programme relies on four main factors—delivery through an established network of women collectives, farmer-to-farmer learning mode via 'Champion Farmers', progressive technology and government ownership," says T. Vijay Kumar, Executive Vice-Chairman of RySS.

Prior to APCMNF, Vijay Kumar served as the CEO of Andhra Pradesh's flagship poverty alleviation programme, Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), which mobilised 11.5 million rural women into credit-based self-help groups (SHGs). Today these collectives serve as the key pillar for APCMNF, making it a community-powered women-led movement.

Insisting that natural farming is regenerative agriculture that blends sustainable innovation with tradition by focusing literally on the regeneration of the soil and of the planet's ecosystems, Vijay Kumar explains that hitherto, efforts were made to supply nutrients to the soil externally as

it was believed that plants deplete them from the soil. "But the reality is that plants feed the soil and in return, they take these nutrients, available in abundance in the soil," he says, insisting that there's no need to add even 1 gram of urea for the next thousand years.

"Science tells us this. But, it is hard for people to accept this change, as they want to stick to the assumption that we provide food to plants," he says with a wry smile. During the time of M.S. Swaminathan, popularly known as the Father of India's Green Revolution, this concept did not exist and it started only 20-30 years ago, he says.

"When you gain new scientific knowledge, you should put it into practice. Science keeps changing and we should keep pace with it. Plants are soil engineers, as they increase the soil's porosity. We at APCMNF have gone deep into this science like nobody else has," he asserts.

Global recognition

The scientific research and the profound impact it created for the large community of natural farmers in the State has brought global recognition to APCMNF, which was the joint recipient of the 2024 Gulbenkian Prize for Humanity, a €1 million prize award given by Portugal-based Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in recognition of outstanding contributions to climate action and solutions that inspire hope and possibility.

A team of representatives from APCMNF and officials of the Agriculture Department received the award presented in Lisbon at a function held on July 12, 2024.

Soil scientist Rattan Lal, USA/India and a conglomeration of NGOs called Sekem (Egypt) share this year's Gulbenkian award with India's APCMNF.

Champion farmer

Nettem Nagendramma from Ghanapuram village in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, recognised as the 'Champion Farmer Coach' by the APCMNF for the pivotal role she played in mobilising SHG members into natural farming, was part of the delegation to Lisbon, where she shared her success story in natural farming.

"A team from RySS visited our village in 2016 to explain how women members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) were now diversifying into natural farming and supplementing the income of their spouses. I did not pay heed to it," she recounts.

Subsequently, in 2018, representatives of APCMNF caught her attention and she decided to give it a try in an 800 square meters of land.

"It did not take long for me to realise the difference natural farming can make. Besides improved crop yield, the food produced has higher nutrition density and offers better health benefits. I observed a marked improvement in the health of my nine-year-old anaemic daughter," she says with a glint in her eyes.

She scaled up the cultivation area and received increased yield, compared to chemical farming and at a lower cost and shared the surplus produce with other SHG members and neighbours who were convinced of the benefits of natural farming.

In 2019, Nagendramma was appointed as a trainer to mobilise more farmers to adopt natural farming and in 2023, she was elevated to the Model Master Trainer position and tasked with mentoring other trainers across the district. Today, Nagendramma, along with her husband, practices natural farming on two hectares and earns more than 50% of the village's average farmer income.

Currently, the APCMNF is implementing natural farming in 4,116 gram panchayats and 7,746 village organisations through 2.31 lakh SHGs across 662 mandals of Andhra Pradesh. The government aims to reach out to all the 8 million farmer households in Andhra Pradesh in the next 10 years and inspire the programme's replication in other States too.

The model is already being incubated across 12 States in India. The programme receives funding from Central schemes like Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana and Bharatiya Prakriti Krishi Padhati. The recently announced National Mission of Natural Farming is also expected to provide funds from this year.

Other donors include KfW Bank Germany, which extended a 90 million euro loan to the government of Andhra Pradesh for supporting APCMNF's work during 2020-2027, Azim Premji Foundation which has been extending financial assistance for programme management and technical support during 2017-27 and Co-impact, an international donor assisting in systems change for deepening natural farming in Andhra Pradesh and seeding it outside the State during 2022-2027. "Delegations from 45 countries have visited the State to see our work. Many nations are eager to embrace natural farming and we are equipping our farmers to spread the seeds of our success far and wide," says Vijay Kumar.

The first batch of farmers from Andhra Pradesh will leave for Zambia this August-end to share their knowledge and upskill their counterparts in that country, while another group is headed to Indonesia later this year.



AI phones will erode trust in everything



PARMY OLSON

or moving their positions. You'll be able to record phone calls, albeit with a disclosure to the person on the other line, and get a detailed summary of the conversation. These cool, if creepy, features put AI tools are taking us in as they get built into more phones. The easier it is to manipulate the content we capture on our devices, the harder it'll be to trust what we see on them too.

For the new Pixel 9 phones, which go on sale on August 22, Google has concentrated most of its AI prowess on the abetted by the powerful G4 chip inside the phone — on the camera. The Add Me feature is billed as an alternative to the awkward angles and poses of the selfie. You take a photo of a friend, then get them to take a photo of you. Google's AI stitches the two so it looks

like you were standing together. In the age of social media, where the statistical probability of looking at an untouched photo has diminished considerably, isn't that going to make it even harder to determine what's real? Not at all, according to Google's Rick Osterloh, who took charge of Google's Android platform earlier this year. In an interview with The Wall Street Journal, he said Google was simply allowing people to edit their real-life moments, and "store the memory how they want" — no different than Photoshop, he added.

It is, in fact, very different. The vast majority of people who take photos with their phones don't pay \$23 a month to use Adobe Photoshop. But millions of people who are likely to buy new AI-enabled phones from Apple Inc., Samsung Electronics Co. and Google will

be able to manipulate photos with a few taps. Apple's forthcoming iPhones will have a Clean Up tool to remove objects and people from photos. Samsung will let you move someone in a photo so it looks like they're facing someone else.

These features are marketed as conveniences, but they'll also make us more likely to question the accuracy and reality of photos far more than we do now. In his interview, Mr Osterloh also defended a TV ad promoting Google's AI tool Gemini during the Olympics, in which a couple encourages his young daughter to use AI to write a letter to an athlete to tell her "how inspiring she is." Google was criticised for being tone deaf to the real reason parents help their kids write fan mail: The process of expressing gratitude. But according to Osterloh, this is just like the transition people made from

sending hand-written thank you notes to emails. "This is a way to touch more people," he said.

Of course, the flip side of connecting with more people is that those people won't know if they're being "touched" by a human being at all.

Until now, the price of tech's latest conveniences has been money, personal data and attention. Use Google's services and you'll be subject to an online auction for your eyeballs that shares your personal data — a location, browsing history, videos you've watched and more — with an array of different advertising networks for targeting. There's less of that on an Apple device, but you're still likely to have your personal data in one of the most addictive tools in human history if you have an iPhone.

The price we pay for tech's whizzy features seems subtle and abstract at first, but over time become clearer as they mainstream. People around the world now spend about six hours a day on

smartphones, often at the expense of sleep, kids or more fulfilling activities. More than 70 per cent of companies in the US now collect personal data, according to Statista, and two-thirds of consumers around the world feel tech companies have too much control over those details, according to YouGov research. What will the price be for a broader rollout of artificial intelligence tools? Will we end up with more surveillance, more high up there, and not just of technology companies but increasingly of what we see online, including things that are real. When Donald Trump claimed that official photos of crowds at Kamala Harris rallies were AI generated, the rumour — which was false — spread to vast numbers of other social media platforms because of its plausibility. Like it or not, the growing ubiquity of AI phones will force us to become more wary of what we see and hear — unless we want manipulated versions of reality to be the new normal.

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ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Respect thy neighbour

Bangladesh is just the latest example of disquiet in India's neighbourhood. We need to junk victimhood, domestic politics, and excessive religiosity to show renewed respect to our neighbours

The dramatic events in Bangladesh bring the focus back to India's neighbourhood, and the Modi government's record in dealing with it. To take a deeper look at what's immediate, we need to begin a quarter-century ago, when Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then prime minister with Pakistan by taking the bus ride to Lahore. You can choose your friends, he said, but you can't choose your neighbours. It followed that improving ties with them was imperative.

In 2008, Manmohan Singh took it a step forward with his call of "neighbourhood first". In 2014, Narendra Modi added his stamp on it with his characteristic style, inviting all the leaders of the extended subcontinent to his swearing-in. He followed this up with visits to the neighbours, often marked by a mood of resurgent euphoria and in one case, with an extraordinary sense of drama.

This is when he surprised all by breaking a journey in Lahore to greet then prime minister Nawaz Sharif on his granddaughter's wedding. There was hope now. If India's first leader with a majority in 25 years was showing such commitment to improving relationships in the neighbourhood, so would his successors. As Narendra Modi's third successive terms get under way, how does his scorecard look? Bangladesh is in the biggest crisis. For 15 years now, Dhaka had been India's closest ally. The pivot to a secure northeast for India is located in Dhaka, especially as nobody knows where the centre of gravity is in Myanmar.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has seen dramatic changes, with its new regime almost fully breaking off from India after the August 5, 2019 changes in Jammu and Kashmir. Nepal has ratcheted up distrust to a level where it altered its national maps to incorporate strategically important Indian territories, through which a pipeline route to Khashi-Manassu. As always happens with competitive and prickly nationalism, the map also got unanimous endorsement in Nepal's Parliament.

Sri Lanka had its own version of a "colour" or "rain" revolution following an economic meltdown, as well as the Chinese acquisition of the prime minister on behalf of an "India Out" campaign is a more recent story. Bhutan is under

intense pressure from the Chinese to "settle" its border, ideally on the basis of "never mind India's interests".

Is this dramatic turnaround for the worse or the better? India is in a vicious circle: how can India claim victimhood when it is such a dominant force? Its gross domestic product (GDP) today is four times that of the rest of the region put together. Its population three times, and global power multiple times.

Its people have also earned for their republic that which should be applauded: a stable constitutional democracy where every transition has taken place democratically, peacefully and credibly. Junk that idea of victimhood.

Ours is among the most unstable neighbourhoods in the world. Most neighbours are highly populous, with crowded cities, youthful demographics, and have tasted democracy — unlike messy regions in Africa. The combination of a large, young, aspirational population, with a taste for democracy, means that public opinion matters.

In the immediate context, that's why South Asia and India as her friend overlooked in Bangladesh. These are not nations where a dictator, however powerful, can go against public opinion. Each is a more or less imperfect democracy than ours. But these are not nations where, all of the countries, one must deal with the regime, and public opinion.

That public opinion also understands sovereignty. If India is seen as hectoring, it causes a dreadful reaction. We've seen this in Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. That 2015 blockade in an awful way.

The fact is, South Block is mindful of this and mostly correct in what it says. But, what is said in the media seen as friendly to the government — which is almost all our news TV channels, especially in Hindi — is tracked closely. This is exacerbated exponentially by ultranationalist social media handles.

These part out threads of revisionist, often non-factual history of India's ties with the neighbours and their territories. Some recommend sending in the Army to Bangladesh, open the borders for Hindus (there's 41 million of them), and create an enclave in Rangpur.

On the day External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visited to Maldives mostly to pour oil over troubled waters, the canal that Mal had "handed" over 28 islands to India spread. It

much more imperfect democracy than ours. But these are not nations where, all of the countries, one must deal with the regime, and public opinion.

Which really brings me to my hypothesis on Olympic winners and their marketability to brands. Historically, the track record of Olympic medalists making it big with brands has been at best tepid to poor. Abhinav Bindra, despite his 2008 gold at Beijing, did not get a single brand ambassadorship. Over the years, individual Olympic

made it to what passes for prime-time debates on some Hindi TV channels. Somebody even said: "Muizta ne ghatie tek diye." (Muizta has gone down on his knees). We can toss it as a joke but Maldivians won't. A country with about half a million people and a national anthem that sings in the same measure as a rising blemish like India: Sovereignty. Ultimately, South Block had these tweets deleted. Too late.

Put yourself in the *chappals* of a neighbour who's watching this discourse from India. All they hear about Indian policies is "muscular, unilateral, and over-muscularity is great, but who about those other attributes: Cerebral, cultural, scientific, intellectual?" One with the humility to be a teacher to the region, as Swami Vivekananda imagined in his Chicago address.

Are our academic institutions good enough to attract the hundreds of thousands of students from our neighbours who go overseas for education? Do we want them? What about the culture of scholarships, internships, cultural performances and movies instead of hyper-nationalist media insults?

As the sole superpower's record tells you, soft power is not an adjunct but crucial to hard power. Does India have think tanks to house dozens of scholars from all the neighbouring countries, invite them to conferences, run its own track-2 processes? It isn't as if India doesn't know this. That's why we buy power from Nepal and Bhutan but export to Bangladesh. These are vital economic linkages and stakes. Forget Adani.

The other side of the coin is the overlapping of that area. The Prime Minister's visits to Nepal and Bangladesh had temple visits as highlights. The larger reality, however, is that along our longest borders, we face large Muslim majorities. They look at us as we make them ask them to treat their minorities fairly. It is a case of disastrously "perfect" timing that just when the world is engaged in damage control, Assam last Thursday presented its first CAA citizenship to a Hindu from Bangladesh.

For five years now, especially since the war in Ukraine began, India has been talking up multipolarity, strategic autonomy and multi-alignment. Good as all these are, we are engaged in damage control, Assam last Thursday presented its first CAA citizenship to a Hindu from Bangladesh.

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The fundamental construct of India's neighbourhood policy still needs to be what Vajpayee postulated, Manmohan Singh embraced, and Modi endorsed. It's just that we need to junk domestic politics and excessive religiosity, while acquiring much humility and a renewed respectfulness towards our neighbours.

Recognition and recall are the essential qualifications of fame, hence the basis for any celebrity endorsement. Most Olympic medalists actually fail to be as essential text itself. There is a lack of universal recognition for most of them. Unlike cricket, which is beamed on television for almost 250 days a year, and hence makes the cricketers famous, even when they hardly get a few hours of "famous" airtime, and then a smattering of pictures in the newspapers the next day. For the most part, they are unknown and invisible to consumers and brands. The inevitable question is why? To answer that question, it would be best to look at a recent hoarding put up by batteries brand Eveready featuring Neeraj Chopra. Besides the usual creatives and a big picture of the brand ambassador, Eveready also carried the full signature of Neeraj Chopra. It is not difficult to guess why. Research must have told the client that a vast majority of their consumer audience did not recognise Chopra Hence, the need to state

Key question in Tamil Nadu



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

eventually returned to the bosom, is anxious to show the bond has been cemented. Earlier this month, at a public function he referred to Udhayanidhi as deputy chief minister, quickly corrected himself, and said people could refer to him thus but after "August 19". Mr Muthusamy, also from the AIADMK (though he joined the DMK in 2010 when Karunanidhi was still alive), has echoed the view that it should be Mr Udhayanidhi. But Mr Nehru has to be taken seriously. He has been a five-term member of the Legislative Assembly elected from Tiruchy and has never wandered from the DMK. He has his share of differences with Mr Stalin, whom he considered a Johnny come lately at the time. That he was part of a committee formed in the DMK after the Lok Sabha elections to recommend Udhayanidhi as deputy chief minister is not surprising. But he suggests that all has been forgotten and forgiven. But clearly, he doesn't want to make the same mistake in judgement when it comes to Udhayanidhi. He too said party cadres were keen to see Udhayanidhi as deputy chief minister. He said, "I am not responsible for perpetuating the caste system and that he equated with infectious diseases that needed to be eradicated, not just treated. He was hailed up by the Madras High Court as well as the Supreme Court. He is fighting court cases all over the country.

He is a moderately successful Kollywood star who branched out into running a film production company, Red Glans, and took the plunge into electoral politics in the 2021 Assembly polls. He was elected from the Chepauk-Tiruvallikeni constituency in Chennai.

Mr Stalin, however, seems to have his own doubts about his son's capacity for gravitas and acceptability. He has said more than once that Udhayanidhi is "not yet ready" for the job, while acknowledging that the demand for his elevation in the party "has risen". DMK patriarch M Karunanidhi had indicated his interest into the Cabinet only when Stalin was in his 50s, and then as deputy CM in 2009, when he was 55. Karunanidhi remained at the helm of the party till he died in 2018.

So, if it is not to be Udhayanidhi, who is the next in line? Mr old Duraimann, currently water resources minister with clearly nothing to worry about; Because even at that age, his hair is jet black. Later in August, he will complete 53 years as an MLAs. He represented the Katsadi constituency in 1971, was elected to the assembly eight times and represented Ranipet constituency twice. There are few in the party who can challenge his seniority or his loyalty.

But don't write off Udhayanidhi. His seniors might think he needs to mature as a leader. But even leaders from alliance partners like the Congress believe he will be a natural choice for successor in a party where succession battles have turned into extended soap operas. Always interesting to note that he is going to get even more absorbing in the days to come.

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Higher, faster, stronger, weirder Brand deals for Olympians?

EYE CULTURE

KANIKA DATTA

Barely an extra 100 gm (roughly the weight of a tennis ball) Phogat made history by becoming the first international wrestler to defeat the Japanese Yū Susaki, the number 1 seed who had been unbeaten for the past 82 matches. More to the point, Phogat stepped in a blue ring event that has been on the Olympic calendar since its modern edition in 1896.

Since at least the 1980s, the list of sporting disciplines included under the rubric of the Olympics has grown increasingly questionable. From rhythmic gymnastics, which made its debut in the 1984 summer games in Los Angeles, one of the few women-only events, to surfing, synchronised swimming, trampolines and skateboarding and, finally, breakdancing, the new Olympic motto could as well be Faster, Higher, Stronger, Weirder, where subjectivity trumps objectivity at the judges' table.

Let's start with rhythmic gymnastics, which was introduced in the 1984 Olympics at Los Angeles. As distinct from artistic gymnastics, which has been a discipline at the games since 1896 and involves challenging routines on different types of apparatus, rhythmic gymnastics appears to be a set of specified dance exercises done within a time limit. It is difficult to distinguish from the rigours of jazz

baller or modern dance. Competitors in designer outfits and heavy make-up cavort with hoops, ribbons, balls and ropes. It's great to watch, for sure. Yet each event has a number of lingering suspicion that any judgments concerning the complexity of the callisthenics are overlaid by subjective assessments on the aesthetics of the performance, with originality and dance steps combining to form the score.

Ditto with synchronised swimming, also introduced at the LA Games. Lovely to watch, but can it be called sport? Evidently, the Olympic Committee thinks so. In its infinite wisdom, it introduced a new event at the 2021, 2022, and more leisure activities made their debut as Olympic disciplines. One was surfing and the other was skateboarding, an offshoot of surfing that was said to have been invented by California surfers as a substitute for when the sea waves

were flat. One judge who was asked about the basis on which skateboarding is scored admitted that judging is "an impossible task" because it entails "allocating a hard which needs to be made that is completely subjective".

That explanation could apply to the newest "sport" introduced at the Paris Olympics: Break dancing (or breaking), the spellbinding African-American street dance form with its origins in Brooklyn. Competitors here are apparently judged on "vocabulary, execution, musicality and originality". If that's the case, how about awarding Michael Jackson a posthumous honorary gold?

As it was, the event attracted the wrong kind of attention, with an Australian woman who goes by the stage name of Rayyan scoring precisely zero points for performing a "kangaroo dance", a routine that has created a serious rift in the dynamic world of breakdancing competitors. No surprise, the event is unlikely to find a place in the 2028 Games in Los Angeles.

When LA28 comes round, there'll be five new team sports but all of them are unexceptionable choices. There'll be baseball/softball, flag football (a less violent variation of American football), increase squash (how come this never figured before?) and, best of all from India's point of view, T20 cricket. Given Asia's rise, it's a pity kabaddi isn't on the roster. It certainly has a stronger claim than breakdancing, skateboarding or synchronised swimming.



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

Earlier this week, Coca-Cola signed Paris Olympics medals winner Manu Bhaker for ₹1.5 crore for a one-year endorsement deal for Thums Up. So far, Bhaker had just one endorsement deal — with Performax, ostensibly at ₹25 lakh. According to IOS, her handlers, they have received over 40 enquiries and are likely to soon close at least half-a-dozen more deals on the back of her double bronze medalist. Good for her!

Neeraj Chopra fell short of gold at Paris this time. But his gold at Tokyo three years ago had opened the endorsement floodgates for the javelin champion. JSW, Noida, BPCL, Eveready, Visa, Under Armour, Tommy Hilf, Omega, Tata AIA ... all queued up to sign him on. In fact, Yes Bank and Samsung ran campaigns to support him and wish him well just ahead of the Paris

games. Neeraj Chopra has been really lucky to encash his Olympic achievements. The silver may not further enhance or embellish Chopra's personal brand, but it is a possible goal, likely to remain in active demand with marketers.

Who else is likely to gain from the recent Olympic glory? Sarabjot Singh, Swapnil Kusale, and Aman Sehrawat all brought home bronze medals, and did the men's hockey team, with Captain Harmanpreet Singh and goalie PR Sreejesh standing out. And then there was the valiant Lakshya Sen who made it to the badminton semi-finals but fell short of a medal. Vinus Phogat, poor girl, lost a possible gold by a mere 100 grams. Plus she is the long list of fourth place finishers: Arjun Babuta, Ankit Bhatral, Dhairaj Bommadrevar, Maheshwari Chauhan, Anant Jeet Singh Naruka and Mirabai Chanu. All of them would surely be looking at monetising their Olympic endeavours — medal or no medal.

Which really brings me to my hypothesis on Olympic winners and their marketability to brands. Historically, the track record of Olympic medalists making it big with brands has been at best tepid to poor. Abhinav Bindra, despite his 2008 gold at Beijing, did not get a single brand ambassadorship. Over the years, individual Olympic

FIRST COLUMN

THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF ARROGANCE

Arrogance can lead to both greatness and self-destruction. The key lies in mastering it



RAVI VALLURI

Our mythology (particularly The Ramayana and The Mahabharata) is brimming with several well-stocked illustrations in respect of characters plagued with hubris, hurling them down to their nemesis. We are aware of the conceited Ravana and the unbridled ambitions of Duryodhana. An angry and arrogant mind gets blurred and smudges the vision of an individual. Consequently, he behaves in a groundless manner, which has calamitous and baleful consequences for the person and those in his companionship. Is it possible to associate with such individuals who are prone to flustering and arrogance?

The answer is an emphatic NO since there is no dialogue, only a monologue or a harangue by the self-conceited person. This drains our energy levels, a situation we would like to circumvent to save ourselves and our minds. The human mind assumes unnatural patterns and behaves in a volatile manner. A volcano of anger and arrogance erupts unexpectedly. Such individuals are veritable prisoners of their image, which is conceited and egotist. Mike Tyson, who earned epithets like Iron Mike, the Baddest Man on the Planet and Kid Dynamite outside the Ring, was convicted of rape and consuming marijuana and suffered from bipolar disorder.

He has had several brushes with the law. Tyson strongly felt that he was stigmatised by American society and that US society has not been constructed on the principles of justice, but on rape, grime, slavery, and injustice. He married thrice, besides various dalliances and philandering. He underwent reformation. He was proselytised and sought refuge in Allah.



He converted the raw energy of anger and arrogance in the boxing ring where he was extremely successful. The mythological figures mentioned earlier, who were victims of anger and arrogance, bore bruised egos resulting from bruised feelings and emotions, alongside a deep sense of hurt and resentment. Ravana lusted after Sita and felt slighted that his sister Surpanakha was cold-shouldered and disfigured by Lakshmana. All his life Karma bore the cross of being called a shudra, his many talents, and abilities notwithstanding. Duryodhana remained perpetually infatigable, given to juvenile behaviour.

Besides, he was under the delusion that the powers that be of Hastinapur would have never agreed to his accession after his father Dhritarashtra abdicated the throne. The feelings of hurt, playing a victim, jealousy, and injury, get metamorphosed in such personalities into deep-seated vexation and anger, leading to false bravado and arrogance.

The anger and arrogance get vitiated into negative thoughts, leading to self-destruction under the strain of self-delusion. However strange it may appear, there is a flip side at the end of the spectrum, where individuals have deployed emotions of anger and arrogance to become achievers. "Anybody can become angry—that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose and in the right way—that is not within everybody's power and is not easy," wrote Aristotle.

Who does not miss the swagger of Vivian Richards, and the ferocity of the pace of Dennis Lillee and Thomson? Several politicians, industrialists, writers, artists, kings and monarchs could channelise this energy of anger and arrogance to become highly victorious and triumphant. "To be a tennis champion, you must be inflexible, you must be stubborn, you must be arrogant, and you must be selfish and self-absorbed. Kind of tunnel vision almost," says Chris Evert. Therefore, arrogance is a double-edged sword. Often it subsumes the personalities to self-destruction as they lack the power of self-discrimination and self-examination, thus becoming victims of guilt and persecution complex.

(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)

Afghanistan's struggle after the US withdrawal



NILANTHA LANGAMUWA

As Afghanistan observes the third anniversary of the contentious US withdrawal, the country continues to face upheaval, struggling with a severe humanitarian crisis under Taliban

Experts from the United Nations have issued a statement regarding the situation in Afghanistan, commemorating three years since the United States and its allies' shameless and disgraceful withdrawal, betraying the Afghan people. Based on historical patterns, this represents yet another instance of a nation being abandoned, leaving its people in a dire state while the US and its proxies maintain indirect control. The irony is striking: the very group once branded as terrorists by the West is now, paradoxically, expected to govern, despite having been considered freedom fighters not long ago. The UN experts express grave concern over ongoing human rights violations under the Taliban regime, highlighting systemic discrimination, segregation, and severe marginalisation of women and girls.

As we confront three years of this precarious status quo, it is evident that isolationism is inadequate. The international community must seek effective engagement strategies to address the complex realities in Afghanistan, moving beyond mere diplomatic or punitive measures. In this context, it is crucial to reassess Afghanistan's historical trajectory, where the land has been used as an instrument by powerful actors, often at the expense of one of the most vibrant and resilient human communities. In the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks, the world bore a heavy cost as the United States' war on terror led to the deaths of over a million unarmed civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, ostensibly in pursuit of justice for the three thousand lost lives. This tragic toll exposes the brutal reality of US foreign policy, which relies on organised violence against perceived threats to its dominance, highlighting the need for a significant realignment. The disgraceful withdrawal from Afghanistan, marked by the abandonment of billions of dollars worth of weapons, exemplifies the catastrophic failure of this approach.

Meanwhile, a recent UNICEF report reveals the severe mental health crisis afflicting Afghan children, with over 24 per cent suffering from anxiety—ten times the global average—and 15 per cent battling depression, underscoring the profound psychological trauma inflicted by the ongoing conflict. Western civilisation often positions itself as the pinnacle of human development, a hubris that has led to immense destruction. The US's quest for global dominance sowed the seeds of terrorism; groups now labelled as terrorists, such as the Afghan Mujahideen, were initially supported by the US through covert operations like Operation Cyclone, with British intelligence aiding in what became one of the most costly US operations. During the Cold War, the US, in its zeal to counter Soviet influence, allied with any force against the USSR, turning a blind eye to human rights and legal norms. While seeking to replicate the Soviet Union's Vietnam misstep, the US supported the Mujahideen in Afghanistan via Pakistan. In 1987, President Reagan praised Mujahideen's progress and promised ongoing support for a free Afghanistan.

Yet, subsequent US actions revealed stark hypocrisy and a readiness to use ruthless tactics for political advantage. The Afghan crisis offers crucial insights into global power dynamics. Understanding the Soviet invasion requires recognising its complex



background and the rise and fall of Afghanistan's communist regime from 1978 to 1989. The communist ideology, as practised under Stalin, evolved into a form of tribal feudalism, which some in Afghanistan found more appealing than Western market economies. This alignment facilitated political power for those who exploited socialism for their ends, illustrating how political ideologies can be distorted to serve specific interests, ultimately leading to their downfall. The introduction of communism into Afghanistan profoundly impacted its social structure. Afghanistan, a fragmented region with diverse tribal groups, was ill-suited for a unitary political system. Federalism might have been more effective, but this reality was often overlooked, leading to ongoing violence that the Taliban would inherit. In the 20th century, reformist movements emerged, bringing communist ideologies to Afghanistan. Abdulrahman Mahmudi, an early communist figure, founded the newspaper Nida-yi-Khalq (Voice of the People) and the Hezb-e Khalq (People's Party) in the late 1940s. Although imprisoned and later dying in 1963, Mahmudi's legacy continued through his family until the 1970s, eventually evolving into a Maoist movement. Prominent leftists like Mir Muhammad Siddique Farhan and Noor Muhammad Taraki also played significant roles, with Taraki becoming a key communist leader after returning from India.

“ DURING THE COLD WAR, THE US, IN ITS ZEAL TO COUNTER SOVIET INFLUENCE, ALLIED WITH ANY FORCE AGAINST THE USSR, TURNING A BLIND EYE TO HUMAN RIGHTS AND LEGAL NORMS

The Afghan monarchy, led by Mohammad Zahir Shah, was overthrown in a coup by his cousin General Mohammad Dawood Khan on July 17, 1973. Dawood established the Republic of

Afghanistan but was ousted in 1978 by leftist leaders Noor Mohammad Taraki, Babrak Karmal, and Hafizullah Amin, following the assassination of Mir Akbar Khyber. Taraki's presidency and Amin's prime ministership attempted significant social reforms, but their rapid implementation in a culturally resistant society led to widespread protests.

The political struggle culminated in a coup by Amin, who ousted Taraki, later reported as dying of an 'unknown illness' but suffocated by guards. Key figures in pre-Taliban Afghan politics included Mohammad Zahir Shah, Mohammad Dawood Khan, Mir Akbar Khyber, Noor Mohammad Taraki, and Hafizullah Amin. Mohammad Zahir Shah, king of Afghanistan from 1933 to 1973, oversaw significant social reforms and modernisation efforts. Educated in Kabul and France, Zahir Shah returned to Afghanistan at age 19 and took on various roles within the monarchy. By the early 1960s, he was a respected ruler who embraced democratic principles and established a new parliament, working to modernise Afghanistan and improve living standards. Many nostalgic images of pre-Taliban Afghanistan reflect the successes of his administration.

In 1973, while Zahir Shah was in Italy for eye surgery, his cousin Mohammad Dawood Khan overthrew the government and established a new regime. Zahir Shah spent decades in Italy, during which Afghanistan's progress towards democracy was undone. Dawood's regime, followed by the leadership of Noor Mohammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, marked a shift towards Cold War-era conflicts. The assassination of Mir Akbar Khyber, whose killer remains debat-

ed, facilitated Taraki and Amin's rise to power. Taraki's government, which came to power in April 1978, was seen as a new dawn but soon became mired in violence and discord. The administration's failure to address the needs of Afghan refugees and internal dissent led to widespread dissatisfaction. Taraki's efforts to implement rapid social reforms, aimed at expediting the revolution, only intensified internal strife and fuelled extremist opposition, further destabilising the country. In August 1978, Noor Mohammad Taraki, addressing the growing Islamic protest movement, remarked, "From the moment our party assumed power, capitalist and reactionary forces have sought to undermine us using religion as a weapon against our progressive agenda. This tactic is outdated and flawed. These forces, driven by imperialistic agendas, aim to overthrow our government, believing they can succeed swiftly. But we are resilient, and their conspiracies are merely remnants of failed efforts against progressive movements. Taraki's statement reflects the early resistance he faced, which he struggled to address effectively.

Internal strife within his party, particularly with Hafizullah Amin, compounded his challenges. Taraki, who once praised Amin's ambition, soon discovered Amin's dangerous intentions. Despite Taraki's belief that Soviet support would safeguard his power, his political naivety and disregard for social realities created a fertile ground for extremist groups nurtured by Pakistan. This eventually led to Amin's rise and the Soviet intervention. To be continued

(The writer is a journalist and author. Views expressed are personal)

Brutality against female doctors raises questions on safety in govt hospitals

The brutal assault on a resident doctor in Kolkata has sent shockwaves across the nation raising questions about systemic negligence

In 1973, Aruna Shanbaug, a 25-year-old nurse at Mumbai's KEM Hospital, was brutally assaulted—raped and strangled with a metal dog chain—which left her in a vegetative state for the next 43 years. Five decades later, history has repeated itself with the horrific rape and murder of a 31-year-old resident doctor at Kolkata's RG Kar Medical College. Both crimes occurred within hospital premises, underscoring the vulnerability of female medical staff in supposedly secure environments. The question is inevitable: has the state failed these women—and society—yet again?



RAHUL KAMBLE

disrupted medical services, as they demand justice and action. While a 'civic volunteer' was arrested, there is growing suspicion that more individuals were involved in this gruesome crime. What's particularly alarming is that the assailant may have been a regular visitor to the hospital, raising the likelihood that he had prior interactions with the victim. The nature of her injuries, as revealed by the

post-mortem report, suggests that this was not only an act of sexual violence but also one of intense personal vengeance. Crimes of this brutality—especially those involving rape—are not isolated incidents in India. In 2022, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported an average of 90 rapes per day. However, authorities acknowledge that the actual number could be much higher, as many rapes go unreported due to societal taboos. Unofficial estimates suggest that over 100 rapes occur daily in India, with a staggering 80% of them classified as brutal. Despite the shocking frequency of such attacks, society and the state have failed to address the root causes effectively. The 1973 case of Aruna

Shanbaug was a grim precursor to today's epidemic of violence against women. After being raped and left for dead by a ward boy, she remained in a coma for 43 years, lovingly cared for by her colleagues. Her assailant, however, served only seven years in jail. Aruna's case remained in the media spotlight for decades, yet no sweeping reforms were made to improve the safety of female medical staff. Hospitals like RG Kar Medical College continue to lack basic security protocols, leaving women vulnerable to heinous acts of violence. Despite the public outcry that followed Aruna's case, and the more recent protests in Kolkata, most state-run hospitals have not implemented adequate safety measures. The issue of relying on 'civic



volunteers' instead of trained security personnel has long been a problem in government-run hospitals. These volunteers are often paid meagre wages and supplement their income through unofficial means. Many have political affiliations, which give them a degree of immunity from disciplinary action. Year after year, issues related to hospital safety—such as malfunctioning CCTV cameras, poorly lit areas, and inadequate

security staff—are flagged but seldom addressed. These failures have made doctors, especially women, increasingly vulnerable to attacks. The horrific gang rape of a young woman in Delhi in 2012 led to promises of reforms, yet most of these remain unfulfilled. The Nirbhaya Fund, created in the aftermath of that tragedy to improve women's safety, remains largely underutilised. Between 2013 and 2022, less than half of its allocation was spent. The gap between intention and outcome remains wide, and women continue to pay the price for this failure. The implementation of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act of 2013 has been half-hearted at best. Women in the

medical profession are especially vulnerable—not only to sexual assault but also to intimidation and violence from patients, hospital staff, colleagues, and even senior faculty. In many government hospitals, security is virtually non-existent in certain sections, leaving female staff, including doctors and nurses, at the mercy of anyone who wishes them harm. There is a pressing need for the government to regulate security protocols in medical institutions across the country. Promises on paper are insufficient; action must follow. Hospitals must invest in safe lodging for female doctors, and legislation protecting doctors from violence must be passed without delay. The Supreme Court of India, in May 2023,

criticized authorities for failing to ensure a secure workplace for women. Such failures are not just administrative oversights—they are a direct threat to the lives of women in the medical profession. The case in Kolkata, where the city ironically ranked as the safest in India in 2024 according to NCRB data, exposes a troubling disconnect between official statistics and the grim reality on the ground. The tragic deaths of women like Aruna Shanbaug and the young doctor in Kolkata serve as stark reminders that much remains to be done to protect women in India. Their stories should not just be a cause for temporary outrage but a call to action for systemic change. (The author is a freelance writer; views are personal)

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PAPER WITH PASSION

PM roots for women safety

PM calls for strictest punishment for crimes against women amidst protests over rape and murder of resident doctor

The streets of Kolkata have erupted in widespread protests following the heinous rape and murder of a young resident doctor, a crime that has left the entire nation in shock and sorrow. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has expressed his firm stance on the issue, calling for the strictest possible punishment for those involved in crimes against women. The victim, a 28-year-old resident doctor at a prominent Kolkata hospital, was found murdered under gruesome circumstances after being raped. The brutal crime has triggered widespread anger, as doctors, students, and activists have taken to the streets to demand swift and severe action against the perpetrators. Placards reading 'Justice for our sister' and 'Stop violence against women' are being carried by hundreds of protesters across the city, while candlelight vigils continue to spread across the nation. The medical community, in particular, has expressed its fury, with many health professionals going on strike, calling for stronger protection and justice for female healthcare workers, who often face threats and harassment in the course of their duties.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in response to the national outrage, has unequivocally condemned the horrific crime. In his address to the nation on Independence Day, he emphasised the government's commitment to ensuring the safety of women in the country. Modi reiterated his stance that there must be zero tolerance for crimes against women, and perpetrators should face the most stringent punishment under the law. But it is not that we do not have strict laws for crime against women but the problem is their execution. The new amendments to criminal laws have additional features to expedite such cases. The new provisions include the death penalty for rape, video recording of crime scenes, and a witness protection program, etc. all of which could prove to help resolve such cases. However, only time will reveal how effectively these measures will be implemented on the ground and the guilty punished speedily. Women's safety has been a recurring concern in India, and incidents like this continue to raise questions about the effectiveness of existing laws and preventive measures. The Prime Minister's call for the strictest punishment has been widely welcomed, but it remains to be seen how these words will translate into concrete legal reforms. However, having laws is one thing and reforming the society is quite another. The attitude of society towards women must change. Most cases go unreported as the victims are often blamed by society; questions like 'why were you there?', 'what were you wearing?' and so on are posed to her to hold her responsible. The process becomes punishment and the victim has to live with the stigma for the rest of her life. The nation now awaits justice—not just for one young doctor, but for all the women who have suffered in silence.



Artists perform at Jawahar Stadium on Independence Day in Jaipur

How to make disaster relief truly effective

While people across the nation have come together to help, challenge remains in ensuring that assistance truly reaches those in need

The jury is still out on whether the recent landslides in Wayanad is a result of human callousness or nature's own waywardness. Two weeks after the deluge, there is still no confirmed count of lives lost. Survivors and search teams are continuing to sift through the debris to find remains of those swept away. With everything lost, scores are starting at the challenge of finding some means to take life forward. Monsoon doesn't evoke tender sentiments of love and romance any longer. It now denotes death and destruction. It shows how hapless man is before fate and it also bears testimony to human resilience in the face of catastrophe. Like it happened once in 2018, when the whole of Kerala stood up and held hands to rescue and rebuild those caught in the floods, people came together in the aftermath of the recent landslides too. Helping hands were extended from far and wide and relief materials dispatched at short notice. And from hundreds of donors came loads of unwanted



to perishables that cannot be used optimally. A social media post showed volunteers grappling with heaps of material that reflected collective compassion and magnanimity, but also underlined the difficulty of harnessing people's largesse effectively. An appeal was made to the public to avoid sending vegetables and bread, and instead dispatch other essentials. It was misconstrued by a segment of people and sent wrong signals that the hundreds who had taken shelter in relief camps did not need help anymore as much of it was languishing in the collection centres. Nothing

truth. Whether in the tragic instances of natural calamity or in war-ravaged parts of the world where people have had to flee and seek refuge in makeshift camps, there is a colossal need for human kindness and generosity. But we often make mistakes in the way we express and extend this willingness to help and save people from aftermaths of misfortunes. The first thing that comes to our common mind when we talk of aid is heaps of clothes that we dump in collection centres. Although the amount of second-hand wear that people dispose in the name of charity has decreased with awareness campaigns, there still is a huge dearth of information and knowledge regarding the kind of assistance people in relief camps need - be it after a natural calamity or in strife-ridden communities. There is also scepticism with regard to monetary help: trust is lacking and not many believe that the funds are allocated rightly and to the needy because there are no

trail. That a lot of cash gets siphoned off is the public perception. Given this, how do good-natured people who are willing to lend a helping hand to the afflicted make a contribution? What is a trusted channel? It is hard to say with certainty, but the only choice we have is to trust the people who take up such endeavours or be part of volunteer groups that initiates such action. It is indeed a shame that some devious minds take advantage of this opportunity to make a quick buck and instances of wrongdoing are not unheard of. But at the end of the day, it is one person's misery meeting another person's magnanimity. Creating safe and guaranteed channels of help and support will make more people come forward to restore the lives of those affected. The onus of winning public trust through transparency lies with community leaders, politicians and philanthropists. Even the kindest thoughts and actions can go to waste if they are not done with discretion. (The author is a Dubai-based columnist writing



ASHA IYER KUMAR

TUNGABHADRA DAM BREACHED

Madam — Tungabhadra dam crest gate has swept away in the water after its chain link snapped. The ancient name of the river Tungabhadra was Pampa. In the epic Ramayana also, this river was called by name Pampa. Construction of the dam started in 1949 and completed in 1953 is said to be irrigating 12 lakh acres of land. It is more than 70 years since the dam was dedicated to the nation. The fall of 19th crest gate has led to the release of over 1 lakh cusecs of water into the river. By the time the new gate is fixed, much more water will be lost to the river. It is said that the water level has to be brought down to 60 cmt for installing new gate. This incident must open the eyes of all the riparian states to inspect the dams which have been built decades ago. It goes without saying that like any other national asset, the dams have also their own life. Dams always face water pressure and it would be too high during the rainy season when the rivers carry unprecedented quantity of water. Any laxity shown in the proper maintenance of dams reduces the life of dams. It is said that the crest gate swept away during midnight. Had it happened during day time, there would have been the possibility of people and animals falling victims to the sudden gushing of water. Former Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai has blamed the state government for ignoring the recommendations of the dam committee that came from centre. If it is true that the state government has not taken seriously the recommendations of the committee, the state government must accept the blame. KV Seetharamaiah | Bengaluru

DISAPPOINTING VERDICT

Madam— It is both sad and disappointing that the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) has dismissed Vineish Phogat's appeal to be declared a joint sil-

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Independence Day pledge

The editorial, 'Happy independence day' (15-8-24) presents a positive note and it is welcome. India has marched ahead from a scrap level to the level of this day. Right from the day the country got freedom a lot of committed efforts have been put in by successive governments. There is no scope for any individual or a particular party to claim credit. However, independence day is a day to identify the important tasks and

commit to achieve them with all sincerity and national spirit. The crucial task before the country is not opening a space station but providing employment to the educated youth who are longing for a job, providing a viable livelihood for the 81.55 crore poor who are depending on free rations, provide easy access to the poor quality education and healthcare. If these tasks are attended to the rest of the developments will happen on their own. The development we are trying to glorify now is creating billionaires on one hand and forcing the poor mass and the middle class sections to keep on tightening their belts. Continuing this trend carries the potential of landing the country in a social and economic crisis. On this day we should also take pledge to improve the country's ranking in global indexes like hunger index, malnutrition, freedom of expression etc. A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

performance and the fact that her disqualification was a result of an unfair rule. Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

RESPECT THE NATIONAL FLAG

Madam — On August 15, all Indians celebrate by singing patriotic songs, posting quotations on social media, and staging emotional plays to instill patriotism in young minds. However, the enthusiasm often wanes the next day. Selling flags made of paper and plastic, only to have them treated disrespectfully, is wrong. This disrespect must cease. Our focus should shift to the country's needs beyond just one-day celebrations and songs. Though an individual can't change the entire system, collective efforts can. After so many sacrifices by our great leaders, we must question if we're truly an independent nation or only in name. Md Imadullah | Muzaffarpur

Terrorism resurges amid shifts in strategy



SUSHIR HINDWAN

With militants shifting their focus to Jammu and adopting more aggressive strategies, concerns over national security are once again at the forefront

The recent terrorist attack on Army Captain Deepak Singh, tragically killed a day before India's 78th Independence Day, must be condemned unequivocally. This act of violence, along with the discovery that at least three terrorists were hiding in the Doda district of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), underscores the persistence of militant activities in the region. Unfortunately, this incident is not an isolated one but a continuation of the long-standing saga of terrorism in J&K. Recent attacks in Jammu indicate a significant shift in terrorist activities due to several factors.



Firstly, terrorists want to send a message that despite the abrogation of Article 370 and the central government's commendable efforts, the situation in J&K remains unstable. Secondly, Jammu's vast forest areas provide an ideal base for militants to launch guerrilla attacks and evade security forces. Thirdly, the improved law and order situation in Kashmir has led to a shift in insurgent focus toward Jammu. Lastly, while terrorism in the region had been suppressed for a time, it has not been eradicated, and militants are now re-emerging with increased vigor. J&K has long been a target of insurgents. Over the years, numerous terrorist attacks in areas like Sopore, Budgam, and Doora Shahbad have raised serious concerns for security agencies. What is particularly alarming about the recent upsurge is the shift in strategy. Terrorists are no longer just targeting the military and police but are also attacking civilians, indicating their desperation to gain attention. Additionally, there has been no respite between these attacks, as militants seem relentless in their mission of destruction. Unlike in the past, Jammu has now become the epicenter of this terror onslaught due to its proximity to the border. Religion has once again resurfaced as a significant motivating factor for terrorists. The primary goal of these terrorists is to destabilize the region and create a vulnerable atmosphere. The involvement of a neighboring country with a hidden agen-

da cannot be ruled out. For many militants, terrorism provides a livelihood, with individuals willing to sacrifice their lives for monetary compensation. Ajmal Kasab, the infamous terrorist involved in the 2008 Mumbai attacks, is one such example of someone misled into committing heinous acts in exchange for money. Despite efforts by the central government to address the issue through dialogues with Pakistan and engaging with separatists, insurgent activities continue unabated. Policymakers must recognize that terrorism directly impacts the nation's well-being. Anti-terrorism policies must be flexible and responsive to changing threats, utilizing the latest recommendations and technologies to ensure security. Today's terrorists are far more organized and professional than those from a decade ago. Although new security measures have been implemented, the threat remains unpredictable. The region's geography provides an ideal base for guerrilla activities, and the militants have become more sophisticated in their strategies, acquiring advanced weapons from across the border. Their use of automatic weapons, grenades, and low-intensity bombs demonstrates meticulous planning and execution. This modern breed of terrorists no longer hides in the

shadows. They openly attack, targeting financial hubs and other vital locations, as seen in recent global terror incidents. Terrorists exploit advances in transportation and weaponry to expand their networks. Suicide squads, in particular, have shocked the security apparatus with their boldness and brutality. Terrorists meticulously plan their attacks, aiming to inspire fear and manipulate the public to achieve their objectives. In his famous work, 'Why Men Rebel', Ted Robert Gurr argues that people driven by intense motivation toward a goal often resort to violence. This is evident in modern terrorism, where militants see their acts as justified sacrifices for a cause. William Henry also noted that some politically motivated acts of terrorism are so deeply rooted in commitment that no sanctions can deter them. International experts like Professor Yonah Alexander have analyzed the evolution of terrorism. Modern terrorists differ from their predecessors in their use of technology and tactics. Small, sophisticated groups now employ increasingly violent methods to create a psychological impact, aiming to instill fear in the public and force governments to react. The ultimate goal of terrorism is psychological, not practical. Terrorists seek to alter behavior and bring about societal or governmental changes through fear. There is an urgent need for preventive measures to address the grievances fueling terrorism, improved security strategies, and an understanding of the social and cultural factors driving people to insurgency. Effective counter-terrorism efforts require not just government action but also community involvement. Citizens can play a critical role in improving security by cooperating with law enforcement agencies. Beyond strict anti-terrorism laws, programs aimed at addressing the root causes of terrorism, such as poverty and lack of education, are essential. Several nations have taken steps to combat state-sponsored terrorism, including economic sanctions, but consensus remains elusive at both the national and international levels. The nexus between drug smuggling and terrorism further complicates matters. To address this, judicial procedures must be streamlined to ensure speedy trials for those involved in drug trafficking and terrorism. India, in particular, can learn valuable lessons from the counter-terrorism efforts of other nations, such as the United States, which has effectively prevented major terrorist attacks since 9/11. (The author, a recipient of the Bharat Gaurav award, is a professor and expert on strategic affairs; views are personal)



THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF TERRORISM IS PSYCHOLOGICAL. TERRORISTS SEEK TO ALTER BEHAVIOR AND BRING ABOUT SOCIETAL OR GOVERNMENTAL CHANGES THROUGH FEAR

Opinion



● PROTECTING IP IN INDIA
Vice president Jagdeep Dhankhar
India has made significant strides in strengthening its IP regime. Our legislative framework...has been progressively aligned with international standards, ensuring robust protection

Horror at the workplace

The brutal incident in Kolkata exposes a lack of faith in institutions, stemming from inefficiency and complicity

THE FACT THAT it took a brutal rape and murder of a young trainee doctor at Kolkata's RC Kar Medical College to rouse public anger shows how injured we are as a nation by gender-based violence. If the 2012 Nirbhaya case unmasked the horror on the street, last week's incident in Kolkata exposed the lack of safety for women at the workplace. Several cases over the years that have caught media attention and outraged people to demand justice have turned into bigger tragedies because of a lack of swift action, cover-ups, and shielding of the accused by the police and local administrations. So, the first and most urgent step on the part of the West Bengal government and the police is to fix a broken law and order machinery. The vandalism of the hospital on Wednesday night by a mob had insulted to injure as peaceful protesters, largely women-led, marched to "reclaim the night" across cities in West Bengal and elsewhere in the country, forcing the Calcutta High Court to launch a scathing attack of the state administration.

Institutional failure is evident in the Kolkata episode, starting with the hospital authorities' attempt to mislead the victim's family to a tardy progress in police probe, which prompted the high court to transfer the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation. It reflects poorly on chief minister Mamata Banerjee, whose Trinamool Congress boasts a healthy representation of women Members of Parliament and has been appreciated for women-centric schemes. Kolkata police commissioner Vineet Goyal has blamed a "malicious media campaign" for the loss of public trust in the police. While it is difficult for the layperson to separate the wheat from the chaff when rumours circulate widely on social media, it is also undeniable that a lack of faith in public institutions stems from inefficiency and, at times, complicity. Such systemic rot is unfortunately true across India, especially a politicisation of the police. On that account, long-due police reforms are the only way out to unshackle the law enforcers from being dictated by their political masters.

The medical fraternity has held national-wide strikes to draw attention to the vulnerabilities faced by doctors, especially women, and demand safety inside hospitals and campuses. The Centre should fulfil the assurances of health minister JP Nadra to doctors, which included introducing a law to curb attacks on them, and hospitals should ensure safe zones as sought. At a time employment trends report a narrowing of gender disparities in India, an unsafe workplace threatens to undo the progress and deter women from seeking employment of their choice. As things stand, India already has among the lowest female labour force participation rates in the world.

Legal experts have observed how despite amendments to criminal law—which widened the definition of rape and brought in severe punishments for less serious offences as well—after the Nirbhaya case, poor implementation has resulted in a lack of meaningful change. An empowered police and quick delivery of justice are necessary to set it right. At a deeper, societal level, however, we need a cultural shift. An entrenched patriarchal mindset is increasingly being challenged by women today, who are vocal about being treated as equal citizens. We cannot hope to achieve a more gender-equal society by continuing to condone or promote aggressive masculinity with a "boys will be boys" justification. It creates the ground for the use of violence with impunity and its normalisation.

THE POPULAR INSURRECTION

that ousted Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League government offers important lessons for the international community and neighbouring India. While the unrest was undoubtedly fuelled by the regime's repressive and increasingly anti-democratic tactics, exemplified by its brutal crackdown on largely peaceful student protesters, the underlying causes of public discontent are often overlooked.

The student protests initially focused on ending the job-quota system that reserved 30% of government jobs for veterans of Bangladesh's 1971 War of Independence and their descendants. Although Hasina's government abolished all quotas through an executive order in 2018, the High Court reinstated it in June this year, triggering mass demonstrations. A month later, the Supreme Court intervened, overturning the lower court's decision and ruling that quotas must be reduced to 5% and that 93% of government jobs must be filled on the basis of merit.

By then, however, the government's brutal crackdown had claimed the lives of more than 300 protesters, including student activist Abu Sayed, fuelling public outrage and calls for Hasina's resignation. On August 5, Hasina resigned and fled to India after the military refused her demand for even harsher measures.

The sad irony is that Hasina—the daughter of Bangladesh's first president, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—was once a student leader and pro-democracy activist opposing a military regime. During her four terms as prime minister, she presided over a remarkable economic transformation, driven by a dramatic surge in garment exports and significant infrastructure investments that also spurred a sharp increase in women's employment. Over the past two decades, poverty rates have been halved, and Bangladesh's per capita GDP (in current US dollars) surpassed that of India in 2019. The country is

● WAKE-UP CALL

THE KEY POLITICAL LESSON IS THAT AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS LIKE HASINA ARE NOT INVINCIBLE

Lessons from Bangladesh's uprising



JAYATI GHOSH
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poised to graduate from "least developed country" status in 2026.

But Hasina's authoritarian tendencies ultimately overshadowed her economic achievements. The execution of alleged "extremists", along with the arrests and disappearances of lawyers, journalists, and indigenous-rights activists who dared to criticise the government, creating a climate of fear that intensified during the 2018 election.

After further erosion of Bangladesh's democratic institutions, the 2024 election was an outright sham. With most opposition parties either boycotting the vote or effectively barred from participating, Hasina won an overwhelming majority and secured a fourth consecutive term. Despite her government's lack of popular legitimacy, the outcome was quickly recognised by India and other major powers.

The country's sputtering economy also played a pivotal role in the recent uprising. Over the past decade, rising inequality and unemployment, together with skyrocketing prices for essential goods, have intensified public anger over nepotism and rampant corruption. The government's stubborn refusal to confront or even acknowledge these issues aggravated popular sentiment further.

A key lesson from Bangladesh's experience is that rapid GDP growth and robust exports alone cannot ensure broad-based prosperity. When the bene-



fits of economic growth are concentrated at the top, most citizens see little improvement or even find themselves worse off, frustrating their rising expectations and underscoring the need for a fairer distribution of wealth and income.

Another crucial lesson is that employment matters. Creating jobs is important, especially for young people, but so is ensuring fair wages and decent working conditions. When most people's incomes stagnate or decline, the public tends to lose faith in official narratives of economic dynamism.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government would be wise to heed these lessons, given India's glaring inequalities of income, wealth, and opportunities. But Bangladesh should also serve as a warning to international organisations and external observers, who are often overly influenced by aggregate growth figures and openness to foreign investors.

Crucially, analysts often overlook the role that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has played in Bangladesh's recent economic struggles. In 2023, Bangladesh secured a \$4.7-billion bailout from the IMF; a move that some observers argued was unnecessary. Initially, these funds were intended to shore up the country's foreign-exchange reserves, which had been depleted by the Covid-19 shock and the global spike in food and fuel prices. But the deal attached to the IMF loan, which included greater exchange-rate flexibility, led to a sharp

depreciation of the Bangladesh taka and the introduction of a new pricing policy for petroleum products, both of which triggered a surge in domestic inflation. The IMF also demanded that Bangladesh reduce its budget deficit, leading to fiscal retrenchment that affected essential public services, including critical social programmes. Meanwhile, the central bank tightened monetary policy and raised interest rates to curb inflation, putting enormous pressure on small and medium-size enterprises and exacerbating the employment crisis. In June, the IMF approved the loan's third disbursement, totalling \$1.2 billion, and imposed 33 new conditions that Bangladesh must meet to receive the remaining disbursements. While these measures are purportedly designed to enhance economic "efficiency" and bolster investor confidence, history suggests that such outcomes are highly unlikely. On the contrary, the austerity policies championed by the IMF have fuelled economic insecurity and public anger across the developing world. The mass protests and political instability that have roiled countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana—all of which have implemented IMF programmes—underscore the urgent need for the Fund to reconsider its approach.

But the key political lesson here is that authoritarian leaders like Hasina are not invincible. They may suppress democratic protests, muzzle the media, undermine independent institutions, and attempt to control the judiciary, but they cannot remain in power indefinitely. In fact, the more ruthless such regimes become, the more they risk a popular backlash. Thus, Hasina's downfall should serve as a wake-up call for Modi, a close ally with authoritarian tendencies of his own. Global leaders should also take note: the long-term costs of aligning with undemocratic regimes for geopolitical gain often outweigh the short-term benefits.

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AI phones from Google and Apple will erode all trust

ALPHABET INC.'S GOOGLE is racing to stuff its products with the most advanced artificial intelligence features, including some that will make you question everything you see and hear online. Its new Pixel phones make it easy to manipulate photos, adding people who weren't in the original shot or moving their positions. You'll be able to record phone calls, albeit with a disclosure to the person on the other line, and get a detailed summary of the conversation. These cool, if creepy, features point to a disconcerting direction that AI tools are taking us in, as they get built into more phones. The easier it is to manipulate the content we capture on our devices, the harder it'll be to trust what we see on them too.

In the age of social media, where the statistical probability of looking at an untouched photo has diminished considerably, isn't that going to make it even harder to determine what's real? Not at all, according to Google's Rick Osterloh, who took charge of Google's Android platform earlier this year. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, he said Google was simply allowing people to edit their real-life moments, and "store the memory how they want"—no different than Photoshop, he added.

It is, in fact, very different. The vast majority of people who take photos with their phones don't pay \$23 a month to use Adobe Photoshop. But millions of people who are likely to buy new AI-enabled phones from Apple Inc., Samsung Electronics Co., and Google will be able to manipulate photos with a few taps. Apple's forthcoming iPhones will have a Clean Up tool to remove objects and people from photos. Samsung will let you move someone in a photo so it looks like they're facing someone else.

These features are marketed as conveniences, but they'll also make us more likely to question the accuracy and reality of photos far more than we do now. In his interview, Osterloh also defended a TV ad promoting Google's AI tool Gemini during the Olympics, in which a father encourages his young daughter to use AI to write a letter to an athlete to tell her "how inspiring she is." Google was criticised for being tone deaf to the real reason parents help their kids write fan mail: the process of expressing gratitude. But according to Osterloh, this is just like the transition people made from sending hand-written thank you notes to emails. "This is a way to touch more people," he said.

Of course, the flip side of connecting with more people is that those people won't know if they're being "touched" by a human being at all. Until now, the price of tech's latest conveniences has been money, personal data, and attention. Using Google's services and you'll be subject to an online auction for your eyeballs that shares your personal data with an array of different advertising networks for targeting. There's less of that on an Apple device, but you're still likely spending hours scrolling on one of the most addictive tools in human history if you have an iPhone.

The price we pay for tech's whizzy features seems subtle and abstract at first, but over time become clearer as they go mainstream. People around the world now spend about six hours a day on smartphones, often at the expense of sleep, kids, or more fulfilling activities. More than 70% of companies in the US now collect personal data, according to Statista, and two-thirds of consumers around the world feel tech companies have too much control over those details, according to YouGov research. What will the price be for a broader rollout of generative AI tools? Trust seems high up there, and not just of technology companies but increasingly of what we see online, including things that are real. Like it or not, the growing ubiquity of AI phones will force us to become more aware of what we see and hear—unless we want manipulated versions of reality to be the new normal.

A balancing act in climate goals

ANANDAJIT GOSWAMI
Independent research fellow, Ashoka Centre for a People-centric Energy Transition

THE 2024 ECONOMIC SURVEY has, for the first time, raised a valid concern about the prioritisation and attainment of India's climate and development goals. Chapter 6 cited the work of Mike Hulme, professor of human geography, University of Cambridge, to state, "It is quite easy to imagine future worlds in which global temperature exceeds 2°C warming which is 'better' for human well-being, political stability, and ecological integrity, for example, than other worlds in which—by all means and at all costs—global temperature was stabilised at 1.5°C."

The Survey, therefore, highlighted the point that prioritising only the temperature-bound climate goal of 1.5°C without balancing the development costs on low-income and developing countries might not be ethical when viewed from the lens of human well-being, political stability, and ecological integrity. This is particularly true while considering the work done by economist Richard Tol in 2024, who showed that the welfare-equivalent income loss due to a 2.5°C warming relative to pre-industrial times is always significantly higher for developing countries.

A focus on income, wealth, equity, and distribution goals is equally important for developing countries to create resilience to fight the adverse impacts of climate change. Hence, a blind focus on temperature goals can

often be biased against aspects like equity and distributive justice of developing countries. Therefore, a non-aligned, non-holistic approach and focusing on climate action through the renewable energy (RE) transition can be detrimental to the development goals of developing countries. This is particularly true because any energy transition from one dominant fuel to another on a national, global, or local scale is inherently a protracted affair, as stated by scientist Vaclav Smil in 2014. It might take 50-60 years to materialise, with constant perseverance by generations. A transition from fossil fuels to RE is not an exception.

Moreover, often such transitions are fraught with conflicts, and knowingly and unknowingly might not be people-centric. A study by Sovacool et al. (2022), of which the author was also a part, shows that different actors, tactics, and outcomes are at play for the clean energy transition in seven carbon-intensive regions in Asia, Europe, and North America. Based on a data set of 130 case studies, the research shows how tactics (such as litigation or protest) impact outcomes (remuneration, policy change, concessions, or labour protections) for different fossil fuel to clean energy (like solar, wind, hydro, and nuclear) transitions. The study highlights the importance of actors and nudges by them in terms of tactics (like litigation, meetings, protests), and national and international institutional responses to national, supra-national, and global pressures impacting the fossil fuel to clean energy transition. The study, through a cultural, socio-technical, and comparative perspective based on the data of 130 case studies, proves that the goals of people-centric clean energy transition are often refracted through local, sub-national, and national institutions. They are catalysed through local mobilisations which either support or oppose the clean energy transition.

These findings further substantiate Smil's 2014 work and strengthen the need to have strong social enablers and nudges for a clean energy transition in developing countries, which are generally time-consuming and can last for 50-60 years. However, while the countries move in such a time-consuming pathway, the wiser strategy can be to reduce energy and material consumption of countries with an equitable wealth and income distribution between the

developed and developing countries as well as within developing countries. This, in a way, can, in the long term, be useful to create ecological integrity, political stability, and equity for fighting the adverse impacts of climate change on poverty and development.

India's Mission LIFE primarily focuses on such a clarion call through an ethical and moral lens, and it finds a mention in the 2024 Economic Survey. The global literature on reducing such a demand for energy and material consumption has already been outlined in "degrowth literature". It mentions a steady state of economic growth by progressively reducing emission intensity, resource, and material consumption in the growth path. India has, on average, achieved an economic growth rate of 7.8%, with an emission growth rate of 4%. It is on track to become a country that can "degrow" while following its economic growth. However, the long-term success of such a path will only depend on social nudges, which can progressively reduce energy and material consumption in the production and demand cycle of the country. Once such strong nudges to facilitate ecologically friendly behaviour from both supply and demand sides are in place, India can attain its Viksit Bharat goal of 2047 while being a front runner in global climate action goals.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Walking the talk?

Apropos of "PM's 150th Day speech: Many new beginnings" (FE, August 16), the speech, that lasted for around 100 minutes, mostly resembled one in an election campaign and it had more slogans than solutions. But among all the points he had touched upon, two stood out—one nation, one election and the Uniform Civil Code, which are the ideologically committed aspects of his party. These two should not be

the priority of a nation where 81.35 crore people are dependent on free ration, educated youth are hopelessly unemployed, the poor and the middle class are finding it difficult to tighten their belts, and national wealth is being generated by a minuscule few. From the day he assumed office, all his activities are focused on two major areas—enriching the affluent and implementing ideological aspects without any sentiment. To calm down the voters, freedoms and communal

opiates are placed before them. Not addressing burning issues like Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir, and hostile neighbours is yet to be explained. Anantapur

Gender violence

On Wednesday night, candlelight vigils, rallies, and protests erupted across cities in response to the brutal rape and murder of a trainee doctor at Kolkata's RC Kar Medical College.

Despite efforts, sexual violence remains a widespread issue, keeping women on constant alert and often deterring them from fully participating in the workforce. To drive economic growth and address gender imbalances, it is crucial to improve workplace safety and challenge societal norms that limit women's roles. —Marjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Write to us at feedletters@bavindia.com

The quest for a piece of the Bangladesh pie



ABHIJIT BHATTACHARYA
COLUMNIST AND AUTHOR

SHEIKH Mujibur Rahman's legacy has been consigned to history. Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus has taken over after Sheikh Hasina's ouster. What next for Bangladesh? Will it be a civil war or a period of prolonged instability that provides a fertile ground for foreign operators to play the 'Great Game East' in South Asia? Indeed, the game has been going on within for decades, with rival political players vying for power through any means — elections, mass uprisings on the streets or the assassination of Presidents (Mujibur and Gen Ziaur Rahman). Regrettably, from democracy to dictatorship or a fundamentalist religious state, Bangladesh has seen it all in the past half a century since its birth.

In a throwback to the bloody Partition of British India in 1947, Muslim-majority Pakistan saw itself being dismembered in 1971 to give birth to another Muslim-majority but profoundly secular, liberal and linguistic

Bangladesh. In 1947, the British were the sole foreign player. In 1971, during Pakistan's civil war, China, the US, the USSR and India were the four direct actors and the rest of the West was an indirect factor. The lesson of history, however, is seldom learnt by the fighters, even if they chase a mirage at the risk of their territory being inexorably and inevitably parcelled out. Pages of history are replete with instances of internal political wars turning into an alluring arena for outsiders.

Today, four foreign players are again direct stakeholders in the geopolitics and geo-economics of the turbulent nation of Bangladesh: India, the US, China and Pakistan — all with different purposes, though. Resultantly, Bangladesh has to reckon with and reconcile itself to the fact that none of the four is likely to give up its respective strategic interests as long as this young nation burns.

Three of these four nations (the US, China and Pakistan) do not share a border with Bangladesh. It's only neighbouring India whose fortunes are intertwined with the rise and fall, prosperity or poverty of Bangladesh. Hence, the biggest stakeholder in that country is indisputably India; the leaders in Dhaka need to recognise that.

Bangladesh juts into India as its underbelly,



TURMOIL: What next for Bangladesh? Will it be a civil war or a period of prolonged instability that provides a fertile ground for foreign operators to play the 'Great Game East' in South Asia? REUTERS

directly or indirectly affecting the demography of 12 states ('seven sisters' of the North-East, Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha). The nearly 30-month-old Ukraine war owes it to the West's NATO-EU combine's determined expansion bid through Kyiv to Moscow's indisputable territorial underbelly Russia's fear of being shrunk and robbed of its resource-rich land is a supreme factor in the bloody intra-Slav fratricidal fight leading to the devastating Black Sea-

Balkan battle. India already faces a two-front war owing to the Sino-Pak axis stretching from Kamkoram to Kameng and beyond to Walong Now, stretched further because of the Bangladesh crisis, there will be greater pressure on troops along the McMahon Line to Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh, thereby resulting in a colossal rise in costs. And that's exactly what China is up to: to bleed the Indian economy without firing a shot. Chinese stratagems in Bangladesh have been going on since the days of

Gen HM Ershad in the 1980s. So much so that today virtually all main combat ships of Dhaka are built by China's Wuhai Shipyard (Ming-class sub) and frigates and corvettes by Hudong Shipyard (Shanghai) and Wuchang Shipyard, Wuhai. The Belt and Road Initiative, too, has helped China make deep inroads into dual-purpose ports with the reported setting up of the PLA Navy base in the near future. No wonder the US had sought Hasina's nod for a proposed naval base at St Martin's Island off Cox's Bazar, which is adjacent to Myanmar's restive Rakhine state's coastline. The refusal of Hasina to set up a naval base certainly didn't endear her to the US; it upset Washington's calculations to keep an eye on the Bay of Bengal trio of Dhaka, Yangon and New Delhi. The Chinese quest for at least two ports from Chittagong, Chalna, Khulna, Mongla, Barisal and Cox's Bazar, too, didn't amuse America.

Thus, Bangladesh today has become a frontline state for a conflict between overlapping interests of Beijing and Washington. Lately, the US also has been resentful of India's refusal to take sides in the Ukraine war as Delhi displayed her 'strategic autonomy'. For the US, any mass movement against Hasina, a friend of

India, understandably wouldn't have had been bad news at all. Similarly, Dhaka's reduced dependence on Delhi would certainly make China happy. What's the result? Both the US and China are fierce rivals in Dhaka, but both are happy at India's discomfiture after Hasina's exit and the arrival of the perceived anti-Hasina and anti-India ruling class in Bangladesh.

Now, how does Pakistan fit into this Bangladesh game of the giants? Well, one just has to visit the Pakistan Military Academy in Abbottabad, where the 'revenge' mantra is inculcated into every trainee officer over India's role in the 1971 war and the humiliation suffered by the Pakistan army in Dhaka. The idea is to create a permanent state of war without a direct fight — a war of terror to bleed India with a thousand cuts.

Thus has begun the 'Great Game East' in which India has got entangled. Pakistan, the US and China would all be happy to see post-Hasina Bangladesh in a prolonged state of instability. The prospect of more nations getting involved in the quest for a piece of the Dhaka pie has increased manifold. Hence, the question: is Hasina's departure from Bangladesh a prelude to a fresh deluge or a new chapter in the 'Great Game East' in South Asia?

Bangladesh today has become a frontline state for a conflict between overlapping interests of Beijing and Washington.

Let's reawaken as a nation to sing the song of freedom



ASHWANI KUMAR
FORMER UNION MINISTER FOR LAW AND JUSTICE

SEVENTYSEVEN years after its 'tryst with destiny', India has much to celebrate today. As the fastest-growing economy and the world's largest pluralist democracy that has succeeded in lifting millions of its citizens above abject poverty over the years, its voice is heard with respect in the chanceries of the world. Its imminent rise as the world's third largest economy, demonstrated scientific prowess, democratic resilience and an exceptional cultural heritage of harmonious coexistence are reason enough for every Indian to rejoice.

And yet, as we salute the 'Triranga' in reverence on Independence Day and thereafter, we cannot forget that the road to national glory must navigate the harsh truth of unfreedom, violence and injustices that have scarred the soul of the nation. The heart-

rending sight of a man dragging his wife tied to his motorcycle with none showing the courage to stop the horrendous ordeal of the helpless woman, the rape and murder of a young doctor inside a Kolkata hospital, the unspeakable pain of the nation and of its wrestler daughter who lost an Olympic medal over 100 grams of body weight despite her unremitting toil and discipline in the service of her chosen sport, and the forced migration of our youth to foreign lands for want of gainful employment, leaving behind old and often untended parents in the twilight of their lives, tell a painful story. Recurring and aggravated discrimination on account of widening disparities in incomes, shameful display of wealth mocking the poverty of the wretched, continuing suicides by the impoverished, custodial torture of the helpless and murderous police encounters in and outside custody interrogate our claims as a welfare and liberal state.

The economic and social plight of the elderly on account of their neglect by children who caught up in the pursuit of unguided ambition and material gains, loss of



COMMITMENT: Let us answer the summons of the 'Triranga' and honour its command without appropriating it for partisan ends. AN

dignity of the marginalised even in death, the wrecking of reputations, privacy and dignity in the media without a meaningful recourse and social consciousness generally immune to the misery of the destitute — this is not the Bharat of Bapu's dreams who, along with his compatriots, had envisioned an egalitarian society in which we could live in the shelter of each other, joined together in empathy. Heightened religious strife, escalating

religious strife, escalating caste & regional conflicts and the abuse of state power to settle personal scores question the health of our democracy.

caste and regional conflicts, bitter political animosities beyond ideological contestation and the abuse of state power to settle personal scores question the health of Indian democracy. Having celebrated the anniversary of Independence — the day when we unshackled ourselves from the yoke of British colonialism and were reborn to freedom — we must ask ourselves whether we have vindicated the aspirations of a

free people for justice and dignity. We must also reflect on whether the present state of our democracy can translate into reality the vision of our founders and ask ourselves whether the conduct of an elevating democratic politics is at all possible without its anchor in public and constitutional morality, as the Father of the Nation never tired of reminding us. The need to reappropiate the nation's politics is compelling, and lest we forget the lesson of history, there can be no democracy without humanity; both are integral to each other. While we celebrate our freedom, let us think of the marginalised masses whose sufferings question our gains' beyond apology. Let us shed a tear for their unbearable pain born out of undeserved deprivation, denial and unending injustices.

In drawing attention to the bitter truth of our reality 77 years after freedom, the idea is not to apportion blame but to correct the nation's course for the future, as also to remind ourselves that the purpose of human life and freedom is to battle for succour to those bearing the brunt of misery in a life without hope.

While I yearn to sing the song of freedom aloud, I find my voice muffled by the deafening cries of pain and grief that 'well up like a lump in the throat'. The reality of hunger, poverty, exploitation and misery of the multitude does not leave me free to exult at this moment. My thoughts take me to the tireless exertions of our founding fathers who sacrificed themselves so that we may live with honour today and hereafter. They now lie in the dark, their dreams unrealised and memories maligned.

Let us endeavour collectively to ensure that our politics is inspired by magnanimity, without being held hostage to the 'vice of shallowness' and is inspired by high purpose. Let us answer the summons of the 'Triranga' and honour its command without appropriating it for partisan ends. Indeed, this must be the moment of national reawakening, to shed the intellectual amorality of our politics and invest the powerless with power to script their destiny. Only then can we sing together the song of freedom. Only then will the power of joy overcome the stillness of despair.

Views are personal

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 1 An obsession (5)
- 4 To support (7)
- 8 Fixed (3)
- 9 An exacting assignment (4,5)
- 10 Unlawful (7)
- 11 Untethered (5)
- 13 Insubstantial (6)
- 15 Fragment of talk (6)
- 18 Authoritative doctrine (5)
- 19 Momentous (7)
- 21 Relaxed in manner (9)
- 23 Poke fun at (3)
- 24 Fit of petulance (7)
- 25 Stringent (5)
- 25 Negotiate (5)

THURSDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Run-through, 8 Waken, 9 Vertigo, 10 Lampion, 11 Get up, 12 Optics, 14 Strain, 17 Pious, 19 Heroism, 21 Rockies, 22 Blind, 23 Raring to go.

Down: 2 Unkempt, 3 Tango, 4 Raving, 5 Upright, 6 Hoist, 7 Hop-ping mad, 8 Walk-on-part, 13 Cashier, 15 Abiding, 16 Chopping, 18 Occur, 20 Robot.

SU DO KU

THURSDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

AUGUST 17, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samant 1946
- Shriyan Shaka 26
- Bhadrabad Purnimite 2
- Hijan 1446
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 12, up to 8.06 am
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 13, up to 5.52 am
- Pitru Yoga up to 10.47 am
- Purvashadha Nakshatra up to 11.49 am
- Moon enters Capricorn sign 5:29 pm

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	35	27
New Delhi	35	26
Anritsar	35	28
Bathinda	35	28
Jalandhar	34	27
Ludhiana	35	27
Bhiwani	34	27
Hisar	34	27
Sirsa	35	29
Dharamsala	25	19
Manali	24	18
Shimla	24	17
Srinagar	29	19
Jammu	32	24
Kargil	30	20
Leh	27	12
Dehradun	32	21
Mussoorie	20	17

THURSDAY'S SOLUTION

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

The Tribune ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Polls in J&K

Vital to ensure peaceful campaigning and polling

JAMMU and Kashmir's decade-long wait for the Assembly polls is over, with the Election Commission announcing a three-phase polling schedule for the state-turned-UT President's rule, abrogation of Section 370, bifurcation of the state—J&K has seen it all. The delimitation exercise necessitated by the reorganisation has altered the electoral landscape—the Jammu region's seat count has risen sizeably from 37 to 43, while the number of Assembly constituencies in Kashmir has gone up from 46 to 47. This will have a bearing on the election outcome and pre- or post-poll alliances.

The upcoming poll battle will be held against the backdrop of a series of terror attacks and encounters in the Jammu region. Terrorists have changed tack: they are targeting Hindu-dominated areas, while Muslim-majority Kashmir is no longer the epicentre of turbulence. In view of this shift, there is greater pressure on the BJP-led Central Government to ensure peaceful campaigning and polling. Elements inimical to India will try to disrupt the proceedings. The key is to create an environment conducive for the voter to come out and vote without fear. It will be a straight-forward contest between the BJP and the Congress in Jammu. In contrast, the field is wide open in Kashmir, where the Abdullahs' National Conference and the Muftis' PDP will be in the fray along with Sajjad Lone's J&K People's Conference, Altaf Bukhari's J&K Apni Party and former Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad's Democratic Progressive Azad Party; independents with radical leanings can make the fight tougher.

In poll-bound Haryana, where the BJP has been in power for a decade, the Congress is looking to capitalize on the anti-incumbency factor. Both are fancying their chances, having won five seats each in the state in this year's Lok Sabha elections. If the mandate is not decisive, things will boil down to the support of parties such as the Indian National Lok Dal and the Jannayak Janta Party. The kingmakers will then come into play.

Mango exports

Chinese ascendancy a cause for concern

INDIA produces 40 per cent of the world's mangoes and has a large domestic market. The fruit was largely unknown in China till some saplings were sent as part of India's mango diplomacy in the 1950s. Both in 2022 and 2023, China's exports of mangoes, including Indian varieties, have been higher than India's. Government officials are hopeful of seeing the reversal of this unusual—and decidedly embarrassing—trend this year. Export figures from January to May, they point out, have already exceeded what India exported in the entire 2022. It is inevitable that comparisons will be drawn about the business and trade ecosystems in both countries. The mango data is a reminder of how timely market interventions and a policy reset can make a difference.

As India sets its sights on expanding its share in global supply chains, it is best to weed out the misplaced notion of decoupling from China. The challenge is to strike a balance between national security and industrial policy. How to do business on favourable terms despite the underlying distrust after the Galwan clash in 2020 has to be the primary concern. Last month, the Economic Survey advocated increasing foreign direct investment from China to boost exports. This is a recognition that selective Chinese investments can only help and not derail India's growth story. Taming the burgeoning trade deficit is imperative. An ideal scenario to aim for would be allowing more investment of the desired kind in exchange for increased exports to China of items manufactured in India.

There's much symbolism attached to China stealing a march in the export of mangoes. It's a moment to objectively reflect on industry policies, business models and export promotions. It would be self-defeating to not aggressively address the quality deficit.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune LAHORE, SUNDAY, AUGUST 17, 1924

Lala Harkishan Lal's evidence

GREAT importance attaches to the evidence of Lala Harkishan Lal before the Reforms Committee not only because of his recent official experience, but because of his eminent position as a public man of many years' standing in this Province. There is, indeed, no other public man in Punjab with the exception of Lala Lajpat Rai who has either so intimate an acquaintance with public life in all its phases or can speak with so great an authority on public questions. It was for this reason that the appointment of Lala Harkishan as a Minister was almost universally welcomed in this Province as the putting of the right man in the right place. It was for the same reason that the failure of Lala Harkishan to make his mark as a Minister caused such profound disappointment in the public mind. Let there be no misunderstanding as to what we mean when we speak of his failure. The great evil in Punjab during Lala Harkishan's ministerialship was the communal policy of his colleague. What the public noticed with growing dismay, as the first "reformed" regime advanced from one step to another, was that Lala Harkishan Lal was neither able to resist the evil nor went out. From a purely personal point of view the great importance of Lala Harkishan's evidence is that for the first time he has now told the public why neither of these things took place. He could not resist the evil because although "he objected very strongly to Mian Fazl-i-Hussain's political views," he was told by the Governor that the impression of the law was that each Minister should act on his individual responsibility."

Laapataa ladies & opportunistic BJP

Amid outrage over Kolkata rape-murder, Trinamool MPs in danger of being called 'goongi gudiyas'



THE GREAT GAME JYOTI MALHOTRA

THE Trinamool Congress' 'laapataa ladies', a sarcastic reference to the Hindi movie by the same name, finally showed up at a march led by their leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in Kolkata on Friday in support of the female doctor gruesomely raped and murdered a full eight days ago at a state-run hospital in the city.

Mahua Moitra, Saayoni Ghosh, Dola Sen, Satabdi Roy, Sharmila Sarkar, Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar, June Maliah—all women MPs—and minister Shashi Panja were among those flanking Mamata as they walked from Motilal to Doria crossing in Kolkata, seeking to wrest back the narrative that India's only woman chief minister at present seems to have clearly lost in the last one week.

For the first time in years, Didi seems to be on the back foot. She knows she's faltered. Her 11 women Lok Sabha MPs, many of them stars on social media, are keenly aware that when they refused to speak up in support of the victim, except for former journalist Sagarika Ghose, in the all-important hours and days after the grisly murder—the Trinamool allowed the creation of an information vacuum into which the Opposition BJP walked right in.

These smart women, the bane of the BJP in Parliament and in Kolkata, know that when they shut themselves up against their better judgement—perhaps, as they waited for the Kolkata Police to carry out its investigation, or perhaps, waited to hear what their Dear Leader, Didi, first wanted to say on the subject



FURORE: For the first time in years, West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee seems to be on the back foot. m

—they waited too long. That, at least for the moment, that sense of trust that politicians constantly strive for in the minds of women and men they claim to lead, seems to be faltering. That for the first time in more than a decade, an element of doubt seems to have crept in.

Here's what we know: The rape-murder of the young woman took place between 3 and 5 am on August 9, when after working for 36 hours straight in the hospital, she decided to get some rest in a seminar room. The post-mortem report details the horror—that she was throttled to death (the thyroid cartilage was broken due to strangling), that there were deep wounds on her private parts which were, ostensibly, caused by 'perverted sexuality' and 'genital torture'. That she was bleeding from her eyes and mouth too. Pictures doing the rounds show her legs at awkward angles to each other—some say that that can't be possible unless the pelvic girdle is broken.

Strangely though, for the next six days, all these bright young politicians, a galaxy of shining stars that include Mamata's nephew Abhishek Banerjee,

The Trinamool allowed the creation of an information vacuum into which the Opposition BJP walked right in.

occupied themselves in a variety of matters, including the fell blow to Vinesh Phogat in Paris. Didi, herself, is said to have spoken in Kolkata—a bit like a peacock dancing in a dense jungle which few saw, and then disregarded. By then, events were taking on a life of their own. The principal of the medical college resigned but was within hours given another plum assignment. Rumours about the police calling it a 'suicide' (they didn't) or that they cremated her without telling her

parents (it was the family that cremated her) blew into the information gap. The X handles of all these women MPs, rightfully most vocal about things gone wrong, were strangely silent. Even when more than half of Kolkata was out on the streets that fateful night of August 14-15, seeking to "reclaim the night", thousands of women and men demanding justice, a right to life and safety, the Trinamool was missing in action. Their anger passion and ardour that often stir up the Lok Sabha had either been spent or mispent.

TV gave the girl a name: Abhaya, the Fearless One, invoking the name that was awarded to the girl, Nirbhaya, brutally raped in Delhi 12 years ago. Everyone remembered how that winter of 2012, when the Congress government of Sheila Dikshit sought somehow to save the girl, had turned out. Two years later, led by the Manmohan Singh government had lost power at the Centre, paving the way for the BJP. Nirbhaya, many said, had shown the way for the fortunes of one political party. Clearly, the BJP believes Abhaya can do for it today what Prime Minister

Modi has failed to do in the last 10 years, which is to persuade Bengal to vote for the BJP or at least turn in its favour since there are no elections on the horizon. Not for nothing has Smriti Irani returned to the TV screens for the first time since she lost Amethi to the unfancied Kishori Lal Sharma in the recent Lok Sabha polls.

But the BJP may still find that Bengal is somewhat different from the Hindi heartland states it has experience of conquering. Despite the growing admiration for Hindutva, the outrage on the streets of Kolkata today is less about the BJP and more about the sheer anger and helplessness it feels against the Trinamool. It is Didi, not the BJP who invokes Bengal's women as its primary audience and asks for their votes. On August 14, hours before the midnight mob ransacked the hospital where the girl's murder took place, Saayoni Ghosh was applauding Mamata's 'Kanyashree' project which is full of schemes for the girl child.

For the moment, Mamata and the Trinamool are the focus of Kolkata's anger against the sheer corruption and mass helplessness that have begun to pervade the city as well as the state. Nothing seems to work, little seems to have changed. If this mass anger spreads to other parts of Bengal, Mamata knows what can happen—it's happened before, in Nandigram in 2007, when the CPM, then in power, refused to listen to the angry voices from the ground and lost power some years later—when she became the welcome beneficiary of that anger.

That's why Mamata led a march in Kolkata on Friday, along with her most articulate women MPs and MLAs. All of them understand that they must fight for Bengal again. That if they don't—and notwithstanding Mahua Moitra—the Trinamool MPs are in danger of being called Bengal's 'laapataa ladies' and its 'goongi gudiyas'.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Young men need to show women the respect they deserve and do their part to stop sexual assault. —Barack Obama

The world after a rape

TANISHA SINGH

THERE are protests that don't make an impact. Instagram stories that don't seem to move people. Sometimes, there are candlelight marches. Rape survivors relive what happened to them through a new headline—it's an everyday story.

Someone like me will cry on the train on her way home, reading about what happened to a girl. A young doctor with her entire life ahead of her, snatched away cruelly, just like that. No one can fathom what she went through in her last minutes. The fear, rage, helplessness, the struggle. One lapse. Was it even a lapse, though? Wasn't she at her workplace, going about her business, getting rest because she was doing a 36-hour shift?

If we are lucky, the men will only stare at us. If not, they will pass a vulgar remark or even attempt to 'mistakenly' brush past us. It's truly lucky when they let us live after they have ravaged us.

The autopsy revealed that there was 'genital torture, deep wound in victim's private parts'. Her mouth was filled with blood. Her father saw her like that. His thoughts? Maybe the parents, for a brief moment, thought if she had to be taken, at least it could've been peaceful.

Fortunately, we can all choose not to read about it. The principal of the Kolkata medical college didn't take too long before questioning what she was doing alone in a seminar hall. I feel sorry for his wife. I worry about the kind of children he is raising.

A man who had been arrested allegedly returned to the scene of the crime, washed his clothes, destroyed evidence and then went to sleep. He had a history of physically abusing his wives. Why was he roaming about freely?

When such incidents happen, the authorities prattle off dos and don'ts—don't head out after dark, even if that means 5 pm in winter; don't wear anything that could be remotely enticing, don't attract attention, stay hidden. Just remain in the background.

Do they talk about keeping men indoors or hidden? A ridiculous idea. Yet, it's all right for women. No one talks about teaching boys young, or the detrimental effects of a 'harmless' sexist joke.

We live in a country where lawmakers accused of sexual harassment are allowed free rein, where women are looked at so poorly that the reaction is to blame the victim.

Do the men understand this fear? How many men ask the women in their lives about the trauma they have faced? How many try to create a safe space? How many listen? It's not all men, but what are the rest doing?

It's business as usual in the world after a rape takes place. Unless you are the victim. Or her family. Or a girl.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Vinesh messed it up

Refer to the news report 'Vinesh Phogat loses appeal, won't get Olympics silver medal'; the grappler has led the whole country down. The Court of Arbitration for Sport has understandably turned down her petition to be jointly awarded silver in the 50-kg freestyle category. Vinesh already knew that she was overweight by over a hundred grams when she went in for the weigh-in. Why could she not see the disqualification coming? Notably, though the Haryana girl had led protests against the government over a year ago, she was still given the opportunity to represent India in the Games. But she still messed it up. Also, the fact that Vinesh earlier used to participate in the 53- and 55-kg categories but eventually shifted to the 50-kg category has raised a lot of eyebrows.

ASHOK KUMAR GOEL, PANCHKULA

No silver lining for wrestler

It is extremely unfortunate that Vinesh Phogat will not be receiving a silver medal at the Paris Olympics. She had stormed into the women's 50-kg final on the back of three impressive wins, only to be disqualified for being overweight by over a hundred grams. World-class wrestlers like Vinesh must not be let down like this. It is time to tweak the rules that could cause athletes mental agony or demoralise them. Amending Article 11 of the International Wrestling Rules to relax the norms and criteria will be a step in the right direction.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

A mockery of justice

With reference to the editorial 'Astain on justice' it seems like the common man and well-connected bigwigs like Ram Rahim are not equal in the eyes of the law in this country. The frequent paroles and furloughs granted to the Dera Sacha Sauda chief are a blot on the justice delivery system. This will further erode public confidence in the judiciary and law enforcement agencies. Allowing the sect leader to walk out of jail from time to time reflects a trend of brazen leniency towards a hardened criminal like Ram Rahim.

RC GARG, KOTKAPURA

Babas have the world at their feet

Refer to 'A stain on justice'; babas have long enjoyed special privileges in India. They profit off the blind faith that the masses repose in them. Everybody knows that Gurmeet Ram Rahim is a criminal. He raped his female disciples and got a journalist who had dared to expose him killed. And yet, he is let out of prison every now and then. It is no coincidence that he has been released on furlough ahead of the Assembly polls in Haryana. After all, it is common knowledge that politicians have long courted the influential godman to win over the voters. It is a shame.

SAROJ BANYAL, HAMIRPUR

Mayhem at Kolkata hospital

The Calcutta High Court recently handed over the RG Kar Medical College and Hospital rape-murder case to the CBI. The HC also rebuked the state government on Friday for failing to prevent mob violence on the premises of the medical facility, rightly describing it as an "absolute failure of state machinery". The Bench also expressed shock over how a mob of 7,000 hoodlums could manage to throng the hospital and create a ruckus there. Imposing the President's rule in the state for a while can defuse the situation.

LALIT BHARADWAJ, PANCHKULA

Setback for medical aspirants

Apogee of the news report 'MBBS fee hiked by 5%'; the decision to raise the course fee at all government and private medical colleges in Punjab by 5 per cent must be rolled back. The move is a setback for medical aspirants belonging to financially weak families. It is worth recalling that, ahead of the last Assembly elections, AAP had pledged to uplift the poor by making education more affordable. The Bhagwant Mann-led state government continues to issue public advertisements from time to time to tout the achievements of his administration on various fronts, including healthcare and education. But making medical education out of reach for thousands of aspirants exposes AAP's real agenda.

VITULL K GUPTA, BATHINDA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be neatly written and can be sent by e-mail to: letters@tribune.com



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Making it Right

State governments have been undermining Right to Education. Bombay HC verdict could help bring change



KRISHNA KUMAR

IT'S LIKE THE proverbial, unwilling horse: You can somehow take him to the pond, but cannot make him drink. Our system of elementary education had resisted compulsory universal enrolment for a century. And now, more than a decade has passed since the Right to Education (RTE) was promulgated, but the system continues to elude its full implementation. Historically, it was the first law in school education to be passed by Parliament. Its promulgation conveyed great promise for millions of children. A new chapter in India's social history appeared to have opened. Early portents were bright — despite grim inter-state disparities in provision and performance, the overall picture suggested that elementary education and other child rights had at last gained social and systemic acceptance. That pleasant picture no longer looks either clear or bright.

The recent verdict given by the Bombay High Court indicates the kind of spanners that state governments have thrown in the RTE's track. That court set aside a government order issued earlier this year. Through this order, the Maharashtra government attempted to circumvent a major provision that RTE offers to children of the poorer sections of society. This provision calls upon unaided private schools to reserve one-fourth of their seats for the poor. The Maharashtra government's order said that private schools need not implement this provision if there is a government school within a distance of 1 kilometre.

Maharashtra is not the only state where the bureaucracy came up with this cleveridea. The government gave two arguments in support of its order. One was about resources. If they are being spent for providing easy access to a government school, why should they be duplicated? This argument is rooted in the rule that the government will reimburse a private school for the cost of enrolling a poor child. Not the entire cost was to be reimbursed under this new rule; it was supposed to be equal to what the government spends per child in its own schools. The Maharashtra gov-

ernment's argument about avoiding duplication of expenditure refers to this rule.

The other argument put forward was about the Right to Education itself. It was not "absolute" in the sense that other fundamental rights are. This logic is quite popular; what is surprising is that a state government is using it, thereby revealing its lack of commitment to a law enacted by Parliament as a follow-up to a constitutional amendment. That the government of Maharashtra is not alone in its view of the RTE as a merely quasi-fundamental right indicates how difficult a journey awaits India's children in their search for justice. After the Bombay High Court's verdict upholding the RTE's sanctity, other state governments may well expect similar challenges to practices that are not compatible with RTE and its guidelines.

When the RTE was promulgated, it was expected to serve as a conscience raiser. The idea of giving every child the right to be at a school has waited for a long time. Gopal Krishna Godbole tried to get approval for it in the Imperial Legislative Assembly in 1911. He failed. RTE's approval by Parliament in 2010 was historic, but there was something even more historic in the RTE's provisions. They offered a rich pedagogic picture of what our elementary schools should be like. RTE turned the tenets of progressive pedagogy into law. Its greatest social gift was the mandate it gave for mixing children from different socio-economic backgrounds. It did this by compelling private unaided schools to allot one-fourth of their seats to children from economically weaker sections (EWS). Never before had such a bold measure been legislated to build long-term bridges in a stratified social order.

This provision was neither appreciated nor understood. It jarred with the entrenched belief in social hierarchy. Private schools saw RTE as an intrusion and they sought legal and political help to avoid implementing the EWS reservation. Some evinced willingness to do so, provided they could create a separate section for the EWS children rather than let them

study with the others. Quite a few wanted to run afternoon classes. RTE did not allow any of these bypasses.

According to modern pedagogic theory, mixing of children from different backgrounds enriches learning. Few private schools saw it that way. They invoked all kinds of dark portents, such as adjustment problems that EWS children would face. They missed the potential RTE offered for an enriched classroom environment. To their credit, there were some teachers who worked hard to translate RTE's vision into classroom reality and their effort created a new kind of ethos.

The RTE's progress is far from reassuring. Amendments to the original Act have denied several key aspects that were intended to make elementary education experientially deep for children across the socio-economic divide. The biggest failure of the system to live up to RTE's vision is in teacher training. It has remained the weakest link in the policy chain. About 15 years ago, the J S Verma Commission, which was appointed by the Supreme Court, gave clear-cut guidelines to revamp teacher training. Our system has ensured that interest in these guidelines wouldn't last long. Interest in RTE itself has been waning for some time now. What seemed like a new chapter in India's social history now looks like an aberration.

The Bombay High Court's verdict has dented the air. Will other states like Karnataka and Punjab also act on the verdict? In these states, a parent can apply for the EWS category only if there is no government school within a one-km distance. Punjab's injunction is bizarre. Only if parents can't get admission to a government school can they take their child to a private school and claim the EWS quota. An Act that was designed to protect the rights of children is now being used to enable private schools to exclude the poor with the state's help and connivance.

The writer is a former NCEERT director and the author of 'Thank You, Gandhi'

BACK TO THE PEOPLE

Assembly elections after a decade in J&K, long overdue, are an important step forward, will break a political standstill

ANNOUNCING THE dates for the Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), to be held in three phases on September 18, 25 and October 1, Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar referred to "awam ki ummedein" (the people's hopes) to change their destiny and script their futures. Five years after the reading down of Article 370 and the end of "special status" — a period in which the political process had come to a standstill — this reference to the people's aspiration is enormously welcome. It is an important step forward. It offers an opportunity to recalibrate and reset the terms of asymmetry that had resulted from J&K's changed status as a Union Territory by Delhi in a way that was seen to by-pass the people.

In the aftermath of the abrogation, the restrictions on civil liberties had raised disquieting questions on the democratic deficit that seems to be the perennial inheritance of J&K. There has been no assembly election in the state-turned-Union Territory since 2014 and the last assembly was dissolved in 2018. Elections for District Development Councils were held towards the end of 2020, in which Delhi's experiment to set the field for the emergence of new political actors, having disempowered and relegated the state's old leadership, had gotten off to a stuttering start. At the same time, a stricter clampdown on terror and greater investments in economy and governance have yielded cautious optimism. For instance, the 'New Central Scheme for Industrial Development in Jammu and Kashmir', announced in January 2021, has seen private investments worth nearly Rs 7,000 crore; tourism has increased more than two-and-a-half times to 2.11 crore last year, according to government data. These transformations have shown up, as the CEC put it, in the people turning their back on "boycott" and the "bullet" in favour of the "ballot". The Lok Sabha elections earlier this year saw a heartening turnout in J&K — at 58.46 per cent, it was the highest in the last 35 years. In an interview to this paper on the eve of the abrogation's fifth anniversary earlier this month, the J&K LG, Manoj Sinha, had spoken of the impact of the high turnout — "People's faith in democracy has strengthened, and they believe jamhooriyat is the way forward" — while assuring that panchayat and local body elections would follow the elections to the Assembly. Given that key powers now rest with the L-G, the onus is on him, too, to ensure that the Assembly gets the space that is its due.

Of course, tough challenges lie ahead. Cross-border terror remains a threat — in recent days, the theatre has moved south of Pir Panjal, to the Jammu region. A series of reports in this paper earlier this month had pointed out J&K's excessive reliance on funds from the Centre, low agricultural productivity, power deficiency as well as insecurity over jobs and land. For change to take seed, it is imperative that these concerns are addressed by a government that is responsive and accountable, and that people are made a part of the processes of governance that allow their voices to be heard and heeded. The CEC mentioned that there are 3.71 lakh voters who will vote for the first time this year. The Centre must pay heed to their aspirations and anxieties to ensure that the alienation that has haunted past generations does not become their burden as well.

BAD WEATHER REPORT

Dealing with a warming planet will require addressing knowledge gaps and co-relating global, national and local data

THE NATIONAL OCEANIC and Atmospheric Administration's latest data, released on Thursday, shows that the world has experienced its hottest July ever recorded. The American institute's measurement differs slightly from the EU's Copernicus Observatory which clocked last month as the second hottest July on record. Some of the warming is due to El Niño and there is a distinct possibility that September will be cooler if La Niña keeps its date. However, given the staggering difference between the temperatures of the last 12 months and earlier records, there is now near unanimity on one thing: The world is entering uncharted territory on climate change. This will not only require hastening mitigation measures but also plugging knowledge gaps in diverse realms — weather reporting, making agriculture climate resilient, healthcare and urban planning.

Climate modelling has traditionally been a slow and reactive process. While such studies are, by and large, accurate in simulating global and national trends, they tend to underestimate regional variations. This makes it difficult to plan adaptation to local weather variables — for example, switching to crops that can withstand higher temperatures. In recent years, scientists have faced another challenge — hyper-local weather conditions. In India, for instance, the IMD predicts weather at the state, district or city levels. Increasingly, however, it's becoming apparent that blocks and localities within cities and districts require information on the magnitude of heat or rainfall. Delhi, for instance, witnessed its hottest July in 10 years. At the same time, parts of the city went under water after being lashed by torrential rain. Microclimate forecasting is a nascent field of study, and at most places it is heavily reliant on historical data that doesn't account for vagaries like those experienced by Delhi.

One solution is to increase the number of meteorological stations to monitor weather in different urban and rural zones. In India, the Centre plans to set up a weather station in each panchayat to provide granular data on rainfall, frost and humidity. Another imperative is to develop information-sharing mechanisms within countries and across national borders. Several extreme weather events — including the recent Wyanand tragedy and the Pakistan floods of 2022 — have underlined the urgency to co-relate the warming of seas with local climatic conditions. Scaling up projects under the UNFCCC's aegis — the decade-old Lima Adaptation Knowledge Initiative for instance — could go a long way in weathering uncertainties. The world needs a better response to the growing number of floods, droughts, forest fires and glacier loss.

PERMISSION TO FAIL

There are no performance appraisals for hobbies. That is why they contribute more to well-being than a job

NOBODY REALLY ENJOYS having to get out of bed at daybreak and sleep to the gym, even if it's pursuit of a trimmer waistline and better cardiovascular health. And almost certainly no one enjoys counting calories and weighing out the right amount of "macros" for every single meal. But nearly everybody enjoys painting or knitting or pottery or any of the dozens of activities that fall under the broad category of "arts and crafts". As recent research from Anglia Ruskin University says, engaging in these creative endeavours can deliver greater well-being than a job.

While the benefits of having a hobby, especially one that engages the creative faculties, have long been known, at a time of global economic slowdown, with many countries yet to recover from the unemployment and cost-of-living crisis of the pandemic years, how much mental well-being can come from a homemade ash-tray or scarf? It may be true that over-identifying with one's job is a recipe for anxiety and depression. But not having one, even when knitting tea cosies, contributes as much, if not more, to these malaises.

The difference lies in what therapists like to describe as "permission to fail". To allow oneself to perform below a certain standard may not be a great idea at the workplace, but does not in performance appraisals for hobbies. No one needs to be a Pablo Picasso or Dayanita Singh in their weekend pursuits, because even the sloppiest hand-painted ceramic mug or blurry photograph of a sunset can bring one a moment of joy and make for a #humblebrag post on Instagram — that is the luxury of being a hobbyist.

ANSWERS ARE IN OUR HISTORY

On women's freedoms, the needle of progress has not moved enough in a century



ANAGLICA ARIBAM AND AKASH SATYAWALI

MORE THAN A century ago, Indian women activists started campaigning for female social, political, and economic empowerment. Working across rural and urban areas, they saw that women couldn't exercise their agency without the approval of male family members. One of the main reasons for this was their financial dependence on men. To address the systemic oppression women faced, they put forth progressive ideas — some of them were far ahead of their times and are yet to be achieved.

The rights of women workers in the informal sector and recognition of unpaid household work were key agenda items. Almost eight decades later, the needle of progress has not moved much. The World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Gender Gap Index places India at 142 amongst 146 countries on economic participation and opportunity. Without economic freedom, there is no freedom for women. In our patriarchal society, they have to follow the dictates of the male breadwinners. As we celebrate this 78th Independence Day and reflect on the road ahead, let us also turn to history for answers.

Founded in 1917, the Women's Indian Association was the first national women's organisation that aimed to address the various challenges faced by women. Sri Dharmaji's mouthpiece, carried regular articles highlighting the plight of women including factory workers. There were around 2,53,000 women factory workers in 1927. Their activism led to banning of night working hours for women, and the Bombay Maternity Benefit Act, 1929 which gave benefits of eight weeks' wages — four weeks each before and after delivery.

The women activists further asked for time off during the advanced stages of pregnancy, six weeks' leave after delivery, and for medical supervision of the female employees. But these were rejected citing lack of public support, the migratory nature of workers, and difficulty in supervision across industries. They still hear some of these when advocating for rights of women workers in the informal sector.

"It is in the economic sphere that women will have to fight hard to establish her position," Hansa Mehta said in her presidential address at the annual conference of the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1945. The members decided to study various constitutions, and prepare a rights' agenda to address the challenges faced by women.

Mehta also broached the subjects of unpaid household work and the right to leisure — issues that remain relevant even now. In 1946, the AIWC notified the Indian Women's Charter of Rights and Duties. The charter had some overarching suggestions. It called for doing away with overcrowding in houses and fixing a minimum standard for homes, ensuring separate kitchens and bathrooms in every house. On the work front, it demanded no bar to employment of women and recommended that maternity benefits should be part of a comprehensive social insurance scheme.

To ensure the financial security of women, it was recommended "that the husband shall have no right to dispose of his entire property without the consent of his wife" and that a homemaker be given the right to a part of her husband's income — to be used as she pleases. In 1947, the sub-committee on women of

the National Planning Committee, formed in 1939 by Subhas Chandra Bose, echoed these sentiments in its report. It called for equality of opportunity in employment, advocated a common civil code, and also proposed that inheritance laws be made gender-neutral.

Since then, inheritance laws have been amended to grant women some autonomy. However, social conditioning often renders laws ineffective. Women who receive equal benefits, mandated by law, end up facing slanderous attacks. The issue of unpaid domestic work is still unresolved.

Recognition of unpaid domestic work must not be limited to paucity about women's resilience. There should be economic compensation in the form of income support for homemakers. Several state governments provide a monthly financial allowance to women — Griha Lakshmi (Karnataka), Ladli Behna Yojana (Madhya Pradesh), Kalaigarn Magalir Urmatl Thogal (Tamil Nadu), and Lakshmi Bhandar (West Bengal). These need to be replicated across the country and indexed to inflation.

The policy prescriptions from almost a century ago are relevant even today. It behooves us to reflect about the slow progress towards equity. The common thread between then and now is the opposition rooted in an archaic mindset. It is high time we work to fulfill the leftover aspirations of the visionary women leaders from our history. Let us not wait for another century to mould a better future.

Arbamb and Satyawali are authors of the book 'The Fifteen: The Lives and Times of the Women in India's Constituent Assembly'

AUGUST 17, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

NTR GOVERNMENT

THE ANDHRA PRADESH Governor, Ramlal, dismissed the Telugu Desam ministry headed by N T Rama Rao and immediately administered the oath of office of Chief Minister to the former finance minister, N Bhaskara Rao. Rama Rao maintained that he continued to enjoy majority support in the Assembly. The governor took the extreme step of dismissing the ministry as Rama Rao refused to resign.

OPPN ON TDP

THE OPPOSITION LEADERS and members of Parliament strongly reacted to the dismissal

of the N T Rama Rao Ministry in Andhra Pradesh and called the action of the Governor "politically immoral and constitutionally invalid." The strongest criticism of the dismissal came from the general secretary of the Communist Party of India, C Rajeswara Rao, who said it was yet another instance of "murder of democracy" and attributed it directly to the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi.

NEW DPCC PRESIDENT

THE ALL-INDIA CONGRESS Committee's general secretary, Kajendra Kumar Bajpai, announced that Tajar Bada, Deputy Chairman of the Delhi Metropolitan Council, has been

made president of the Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee. In place of Dalip Singh with immediate effect. Singh's removal has brought to the fore the infighting in the ruling party.

100 DEAD IN ACCIDENT

OVER A 100 persons were killed when five bogies of the Jabalpur-Gondia passenger train fell down from a bridge, which was reportedly washed away into the swollen Narmada river nullah on the Jabalpur-Gondia narrow gauge line. Around 25 bogies had been fished out from the water, the director general of the Madhya Pradesh police, B K Mukherjee, told ENS.



14 BIG PICTURE



After Hasina

A mural of former Bangladeshi prime minister Sheikh Hasina being vandalised in Dhaka. Reuters/Pile

Bangladesh is a country in the throes of a transition — student-led protests, a clampdown followed by over 500 deaths, and a prime minister deposed. From Dhaka, Diplomatic Editor SHUBHAJIT ROY reports on the new set of stakeholders, the challenges of the regime change and the road ahead, the most fraught since the 1971 Liberation War



Muhammad Yunus, who heads the interim government in Bangladesh, has his task cut out.

PANNI LAGBE, paani (do you need water?)? A Master's student at a private university in Bangladesh, Mir Mahfuzur Rahman Moghbo was distributing water among student protesters in mid-July, when he was shot dead by the police. The protests — in which students played a pivotal role in bringing down a government that has been in power for more than 16 years — mark a turbulent chapter for a country that has had more than its share of upheavals in its 53 years as an independent country. Today, wall after wall carries writings, graffiti and art that stand witness to what has been a bloody battle against the authorities — arguably the worst since the 1971 liberation war that led to Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan.

The clampdown

By all accounts, Hasina's authoritarian turn came after her win in the 2014 elections, her second term in power since her win in December 2008. In her first term, she had been feted for bringing in political and economic stability as the country grew at the rate of 7 per cent. She had also cracked down on the far-right Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh for their alleged involvement in terrorist activities directed against India. She soon turned the screws on the BNP, the principal Opposition party that was in alliance with the Jamaat, pursuing corruption cases against BNP chief Khaleda Zia, her bête noire and widow of former army chief Gen Ziaur Rahman who had plotted the assassination of her father and Bangladesh's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Over a decade, starting 2014, Hasina tightened her hold over almost all national institutions — including the judiciary, police, election commission, civil administration and the media — filling them with those aligned with her party, the Awami League. In Dhaka, they say she would do a "DNA test" — metaphorically, a forensic examination of the individual's past associations. If a dotted line linked someone to any of her rivals, the person would not be considered for posts and positions. One of Hasina's top advisors on investments, Salman F Rahman, who is now among those arrested since the fall of the Awami League government, is accused of allegedly using his influence to get bank loans for his business group as well as for others. "His reputation took a severe hit as many familiar with his wrongdoing described him as the 'father of loan delinquencies' in Bangladesh," *The Daily Star* report said. The media also came under severe attack — major newspapers, including *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*, faced the brunt. Soon, space for dissent shrunk, government advertisements were cut off, and access to the Prime Minister's Office and its events were allegedly blocked. One of the top editors of a popular daily, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that one fine day, they realised their subscriptions in all government offices, universities and colleges, *Ami* establishments, and gov-

ernment-run hotels were stopped. *Prothom Alo* Editor Matiar Rahman said, "After 2009 and especially after the 2014 elections, Hasina's government slowly and gradually started to curb press freedom. They stopped ads, jailed journalists... they did all this through the intelligence establishment. During this time, 45 cases were filed against me and I was asked to go to different districts for court hearings." *Daily Star's* Editor Mahfuz Anam wrote in a column on August 16, "The student-led people's movement toppling an autocratic government reminds me of a song by Sabina Yasmin: 'Shob kora jomala khule dao na, ami gabo gabo bjoyer gan' (Open all windows, I want to sing the song of victory)." Though it was in praise of our Liberation War, it resonates in my heart today. Suddenly, we are living in a world without barriers of thought. Many of us had forgotten how to speak freely. We would always either switch off or put our mobile phone in the adjoining room, because of the surveillance regime that we lived under. Self-censorship became embedded in our subconscious. Her critics say Hasina made the party about herself and her family, projecting themselves as the sole contributor to the liberation of Bangladesh. Prof Taseem Siddiqui, professor of political science in Dhaka University, said, "She had this language — my father, my family and I... in every speech of hers... there was no 'we' in her language." BNP leader Emran Saleh Prince said, "She portrayed her father as the mahanyak (super hero), and everyone else as maha danab (monster)." **How it all began** It was in this backdrop that the quota protests — against reservation in jobs and educational institutions for descendants of freedom fighters — took place. By the end of July, at least 150-200 people were killed in clashes between the protesters and the police. Besides the police, the government unwielded the Chhatta League, the ruling Awami League students' wing, on the protesters. Given their clout, the Chhatta League was already un-

popular among a large section of students. They say that in most universities, students wouldn't get a bed or a room without being on the right side of the Chhatta members. Amid reports of indiscriminate firing at protesters and common people, the toll rose. Graffiti on the walls of Dhaka memorialised the new 'martyrs' — among them a four-year-old girl and Mahfuzur Rahman Moghbo, the youth who was shot dead while distributing water on the streets. On August 3, Army chief Waz-uz-Zaman called a meeting of senior officers — while generals and officers based in Dhaka attended in-person, those who were posted outside Dhaka attended by video conference. In the meeting, a woman officer from outside Dhaka raised the issue of children being killed. That day, the message to the Army top brass from their own officers was clear: they cannot fire at their own people. From there on, events unravelled at a rapid pace: more protests and deaths followed on August 3-4, the protesters thronged the streets of Dhaka on August 5 defying curfew orders and the Army drew the line at firing on the protesters. Eventually, Hasina was left with no choice but to make a hurried exit. Having landed in Delhi and denied refuge in the UK, she plans to stay in India as long as it takes. "This was the first Gen Z revolution," Rehana Sultan, a private university student in her 20s, said as she painted graffiti on the walls at Bjoy Soroni, where a golden statue of Sheikh Mujib was brought down. More mayhem followed. The police — until then the face of the state machinery — faced the brunt as police stations were burnt and personnel beaten up. The mob also attacked houses of Awami League leaders and their offices, pro-Hasina government media houses, and the Indian cultural centre, which was looted and burnt down. Reports of attacks on minorities were also reported. At the Dhaka airport immigration, this correspondent heard police officers discussing how they have to come to the airport in plain clothes. The law and order system had completely broken down. "Since there were no policemen at the police stations, some of these miscreants got a free run. They took advantage and looted the people, especially vulnerable minorities," said Kishore Kumar Roy, an advocate and a Hindu minority leader. Revenge became the order of the day. On August 16, a BNP leader announced that if any television channel or newspaper aired or published pictures of Hasina, they would "be set on fire". His logic was that earlier, during the Hasina regime, photographs of Tarique Rehan (Khaleda Zia's son) could not be published. The interim government led by Prof Muhammad Yunus, who took over on August 8, has tried to set the house in order. Yunus urged students to ensure that minorities are not targeted. *The Daily Star* quoted him as saying, "You have been able to save the country. Can't you save some families?" Soon, he got down to business at Jamuna

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guest house — a white colonial-era building meant for state guests. While the PM's residence is still being repaired and renovated, with the students working on restoring and recovering the looted items, he formed a new Cabinet of 'advisors'. Parallely, a 'clean-up' of the system has begun. Since August 5, many of the officials seen as aligned to Hasina were forced to resign — the chief justice, top officials in the police, army and civil service. Many stepped down on their own. The Awami League leaders, meanwhile, have gone into hiding and a hit list of intellectuals have also been circulated. Many spoke to *The Indian Express* and said that their lives and that of their families were in danger. **What next for Dhaka?** The interim government under Prof Yunus, meanwhile, had started asserting itself. "I am absolutely amazed how Yunus is asserting his independence. He has the confidence, he has the aura to tell the army to back off," BNP leader Abdul Moynin Khan said. Alex Counts, who has worked with Yunus, 84, for decades as co-founder of the Green Foundation, said, "Yunus is eager to implore and empower the next generation of politicians, political parties, and leaders. He believes that the old guard needs to step aside and make way for new ideas and new leaders who will be focused more on the future than on the past." Counts calls Yunus "both a big-picture and the details guy". "I have worked with him for 40 years now, and he is very demanding at times, but he is also forgiving if you make mistakes. He is especially forgiving of emerging young leaders who are committed to learning from their mistakes," he said. Despite the formidable reputation he brings to the table, Yunus faces the daunting task of rebuilding the country's political setup in a short span of time. He has the unenviable job of heading an army-backed government while navigating demands from the student-people alliance, which has, since the protests, emerged as a dominant pressure group. But Counts seemed confident that Yunus was up for the task, as he called him "an incrementalist by nature". "He understands that progress most often results from making small steps in the right direction every day. His main question seems to be, are we doing at least a little better than we did yesterday," he said. A revitalised Opposition, led by the BNP, has been holding meetings, and is getting on the streets. Although weakened after a decade-and-a-half of being crushed by the Hasina regime, it flexed its muscles on August 15, prevailing upon the interim government to cancel the national mourning day to mark the day Mujib was assassinated. The Jamaat-e-Islami, which was de-registered in 2013 and was banned on August 1 (at the peak of the protests), is also eyeing a return. Mia Golam Farwar, secretary general of Jamaat-e-Islami, said, "We have asked the interim government to revoke the ban order." Then there is another player in the mix: neighbour India, which has been quietly and warily watching the transition of the country. Hasina's critics view India as her only ally and benefactor, one which supported her during her 16-year rule and where she has now sought refuge. BNP leader Abdul Moynin Khan said, "Rather than insisting and sticking to the notion by a segment of Indians that their policy towards Bangladesh was correct and should be pursued more vigorously even after the pathetic ouster of the despotic Awami League Regime in Bangladesh, it is high time for them to reconcile with the reality on the ground in Bangladesh and reformulate it. Otherwise India will continue to be side-tracked by Bangladeshis like in other countries in the South Asian region." A Bangladesh analyst said that some bit of anger towards Hindus is also because of the anger towards India and Hasina. "...that these Hindus have kept her in power, along with India," she said. But for now, India has its hands tied. While it is hosting its "preferred partner", it also has to deal with the new players in the neighbourhood. In his first meeting with the Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka, the interim government's foreign affairs advisor Touhid Hossain conveyed that Bangladesh wants to work closely with India to promote bilateral relations but added that deposed premier Sheikh Hasina's public statements from India are "not conducive" towards that. *Prothom Alo* Editor Rahman said, "If Hasina is active politically from Indian soil, there would be an impact on bilateral relations... this has been conveyed to (India) by the Bangladesh government." Back in Dhaka, the path ahead appears tricky. As Ashkur Rehman, a political analyst, said, "The role of the interim government is critical. They must focus on comprehensive institutional reforms focusing on strong institutional checks and balances. They must rid institutions of partisan bias, bring in a referendum on a strong accountability-focused constitution and introduce a possible limit of four years and two terms for the prime minister. In short, we must remove the fangs from a draconian state." Counts, a long-time associate of Yunus, says, "Yunus believes in the power of creating social fiction — that if you think a social problem can have a solution, even if it sounds highly implausible, maybe by talking or writing about it, you can plant the seed in the mind of a young innovator, or groups of young innovators, who can work for decades to make it a reality."

A SPIRAL OF EVENTS

- JUNE 5:** Protests erupt over quota for descendants of "freedom fighters".
- MID-JULY:** Protests turn violent after then PM Sheikh Hasina compares protesters with razzakars (collaborators during the Liberation War of 1971). At least 150-200 people were killed by end of July as protesters clash with police
- AUGUST 4:** Protests escalate, more than 100 people killed. Protesters give a call for people to march to Dhaka on August 5
- AUGUST 5:** Defying curfew orders, crowds throng the streets. As protesters march towards PM's residence, Hasina flees Bangladesh, flies to Delhi
- AUGUST 8:** Nobel winner Muhammad Yunus takes over as head of interim government



[OUR TAKE]

State polls, with national fallout

They will test the INDIA bloc's cohesion, and the NDA's mettle against a strong Opposition. In J&K and Haryana, they will be an informal referendum on the Centre's decisions

The announcement of assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), and Haryana might have come just months after the general elections but the contours of the poll narrative are likely to be entirely different — with significant local and national ramifications.

Nationally, the impact is likely to be twofold. One, this is the beginning of a string of assembly polls that will also involve Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Delhi — all regions where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is up against strong Opposition coalitions. Its reverberations, therefore, will be felt in Delhi where the party is dependent on allies for the first time in a decade. Two, these elections will be just as important for the Opposition coalition because though it fought the Lok Sabha as a unified bloc, both J&K and Haryana will likely see individual parties in the fray. The results will determine the balance of power in the national Opposition bloc and shape the bargaining power of the Congress, which still rules only three states on its own.

In Jammu and Kashmir, the polls are the first electoral exercise in the erstwhile state in a decade. Since 2014, the region, already among the most volatile areas in the world, has undergone tectonic changes. It has seen the collapse of its state government, the controversial imposition of the Governor's rule even as two parties rushed to Raj Bhavan to lay claim to power, the landmark-but-politicising abrogation of Article 370 and the bifurcation of the state into two Union Territories, and the near-curfew conditions in the Valley that saw mainstream politicians detained and political activity suspended. Five years have passed since the abrogation but Kashmiris have voted in only one major election, that too three months ago. The UT polls, therefore, will be an informal referendum on the Centre's decisions and a test of whether its stated objectives — unification, curbing terror, and boosting development — have worked. In Jammu too, there are signs that the initial enthusiasm around the abrogation has dimmed as terror strikes have spiked over the last two years and authorities have scrambled to ensure adequate security.

Expect thorny questions about the controversial delimitation process and the recent expansion of the lieutenant governor's authority to feature as prominently as local issues of development. More than in any other election, local identity and pride will feature as a key poll narrative. If the elections are free of violence and see a spontaneous turnout, it will be in itself — irrespective of the results — a triumph. The Centre has promised that statehood will follow.

Though Haryana is next door to Delhi, its politics are a world apart. Here, the general elections saw a neck-and-neck battle between the BJP and the Congress. Here, the government's controversial short-service scheme in the armed forces, Agnipath, is likely to play a big role in shaping the electoral narrative, as will old cleavages of caste and agrarian discontent. The BJP-led government has survived a tumultuous year where the chief minister was abruptly changed after an ally, the Jannayak Janata Party, pulled out, and will battle anti-incumbency.

The 2024 polls threw up surprising results and vigorous debate around evolving political dynamics based on the shifting sands of caste, economic distress and aspiration. The elections in Haryana and J&K will be its first real test.

[THIRD EYE]

Barkha Dutt



A rape, a cover-up, and a mysteriously powerful principal

In the Kolkata rape, and its attempted cover up, every Indian woman sees a shade of her own reflection, either from an experience already lived, or the dread of one just around the corner

Like millions of Indian women, I am angry, sad, exhausted and haunted. I am haunted by the thought of a young woman brutalised at her place of work, possibly by men she knew. I cannot shake off the horrifying details we now know about the condition of her corpse. Found half naked, her legs were wrenched open and she was bleeding profusely, including from her private parts and both her eyes. Her body was badly scarred from head to toe. Doctors have convinced this evidence points to a gang rape. These details have been shared by her father who had to plead three hours before he was allowed to see his daughter's body.

He took a photograph as proof. Imagine being that father. Imagine that being the last memory you have of your child. What has unfolded in the RG Kar Medical College in Kolkata — the rape and murder of a young doctor — is a horrific illustration of institutional misogyny and malevolence. And if it is at all possible to think anything could be worse, well, what has happened after the rape has been even more repulsive. Cover-up attempts have compounded the crime.

To understand this case, we have to speak about a man called Sandip Ghosh, the (now removed) principal of the medical college where the rape took place.

First, as the captain of the ship, he is answerable for the fact that the assault took place at all, especially since doctors have argued that

this is not the work of an outsider, but an inside job. An outsider, if he had been pointed out by doctors, would not have even known about the whereabouts of the seminar hall, where the victim was resting after a 36-hour shift. Protesting doctors say that the victim's car was also vandalised on the night she was raped and killed. Was she silenced for knowing something? Ghosh is answerable for the rape taking place on his watch. But what he does next is astounding. In his initial remarks, he blamed the woman. He faulted her for being in the seminar hall at that time of night, in the worst sort of victim-shaming and victim-blaming.

If that callousness was not enough, officials of the RG Kar Medical College led to the family and said their daughter had died by suicide. This was outright and unacceptable deceit. First, why was Ghosh not personally communicating with the family? Secondly, he can't give ignorance of what the family was told. Family members have now told doctors that they were offered money by the police, for silence.

Shockingly, though he later claimed the young doctor was like his daughter, Ghosh did not even file a complaint. Why were the police not summoned immediately? Why was an FIR not registered for murder and rape that very night? Even the Calcutta high court (HC) has now raised this very question about his behaviour.

These bizarre responses were magnified by suspicions of evidence tampering. A renovation video surfaced showing routine construction and repair work taking place very close to the

WHAT MAKES SANDIP GHOSH SO POWERFUL? HE HAS BEEN TRANSFERRED THREE TIMES IN THE PAST AMID CONTROVERSY BUT ALWAYS MANAGES TO COME RIGHT BACK



Women have to battle a thousand demons to pursue professional dreams. If their place of work is also unsafe, fewer women will be incentivised to join the workforce

crime scene. Did Ghosh not think to ringfence the area for forensics? Or was the entire idea for the evidence to be irrefutable?

You would think Ghosh would at the very least be sacked, right? Guess what happens instead. He is transferred as the head of another medical college. Students at this college, Calcutta National Medical College (CNMC), ensured that his office was locked and did not allow him to start his new gig. But why was he given another job within hours of his resignation? Not just that, West Bengal media reported how two Trinamool Congress (TMC) politicians — a legislator and a state minister — arrived at CNMC to talk to students and urge them to call off their protests against Ghosh.

What makes Ghosh so powerful? He has transferred three times in the past amid controversy but always manages to come right back. Students and doctors speak of him as some sort of local mafioso whom it was impossible to take on. It has finally taken the HC to have him sacked, but not before asking why a government lawyer was sent to defend him. Other questions are mounting too.

Who sent a mob of thugs to assault protest-

ing doctors at RG Kar Medical College on the eve of Independence Day?

The nursing staff has told us that the mob threatened to rape them in the same way as the victim had been violated. Young female doctors I spoke to said the police fled, leaving them to fend for themselves. They saw mobsters breaking everything in sight, including destroying the emergency room. They saw an overturned ambulance. They saw men climbing up pipes and walls to try and enter towers.

The police failure is evident, irrespective of who these mobsters are revealed to be. Women have to battle a thousand demons to pursue professional dreams. If their place of work is also unsafe, fewer women will be incentivised to join the workforce.

In the Kolkata rape, and its attempted cover-up, every Indian woman sees a shade of her own reflection, either from an experience already lived, or the dread of one just around the corner.

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

Films as representations of history & social reform

Maharaj, a Hindi film being streamed on Netflix, fictionalises a Gujarati documentary by Sandip Ghosh that carries the same name. Both "semi-fictions" are constructed from existing documentary accounts and evidence of the now-famous *Maharaj Libel Case* of 1862 and the real-life story of the social reformer Karsandas (also spelled Karsandas) Mulji (Mulji is his father's name and not surname). An otherwise superficial audio-visual spectacle, read between the frames, provides us with some crucial insights into the pantheon of porn and politics in religion, besides the play of sectarian conflicts on the mosaic chessboard of Hindu rituals, prevailing then as also now.

The film also depicts the deception of regulation camouflaged as reform, which keeps the status quo (patriarchy) intact. Entrenched within are the dogmatic domains of social-religious traditions we celebrate as parampara. In its niche, *Maharaj* is a contemporary film. At the time of its release, enough babes (call them *mahants* or *maharajs*) were behind bars for their illicit and immoral acts in their ashrams. Around the same time, 121 poor women and children died in a senseless manner at a *satsang* (spiritual preaching) in Uttar Pradesh's Hathras. *Maharaj* is an ongoing phenomenon, as *aduh* and *shaitan* have been a staple for Indian popular cinema.

In the Karsandas Mulji centenary volume,

Karsandas Mulji: A Biographical Study, editor-anand BN Motiwalla writes about the Vaishnav-Shaiva sectarian dispute over some ritual, prologuing the *Maharaj Libel Case* in Bombay (now Mumbai, of course). To my mind, this resonates with what eminent historian Romila Thapar has been arguing about intra-religious conflicts happening across history, often violent and untimely, in *Havelis*. The film avoids such historical references. Though it generalises, what we see is the particular community of Hali Bhatias, hailing from around the region of Jamnagar.

Nevertheless, it nudges us to look retrospectively into the social-religious reformist oeuvre of Indian cinema, which, in fact, is substantial. Leading film production companies such as Prabhat Film Company (PFC) and New Theatres (NT) released bilingual (Marathi-Hindi, Bengali-Hindi) films that were re-comprehending the reformist Bhakti Movement. For instance, NT's Bengali-language *Chandidas* (1932) was about the legendary 15th-century Bengali Vaishnavite poet, Purnan Bhaag (in Hindi, 1933) was about the mythical Punjab prince-saint. In PFC's Marathi-Hindi *Dharmavira* (1935), Bal Gandharva essayed the life of Sant Eknath, who became an outcast thanks to the evil machinations of a *mahant* (this was the only male role Gandharva played in his entire career). Sant Tukaram (Marathi, in 1936) was about the 17th-century saint-poet who led a major emancipatory movement against Brahminical caste domination. There were all path-breaking B&W sound films. The 1952 Tamil language film *Parasakti* is still cited as an example of cinematic representation of priestly sexual rampage and superstition. The film still resolutely provides us with the broad context in which socio-religious reformist films were made. Several such films can be found in Malayalam and Kannada, too.

The island city of the 1860s remains unexplored in *Maharaj*, which could have evolved it as the container of the historic event. Most of its architectural heritage still exists in the Kalbadevi-Bhuleswar neighbourhood, dotted with many Hindu temples that retain their gorgeous architectural edifice. I call this unique district of Bombay, a Hindu Vatican. The exact whereabouts of one of Karsandas's key witnesses is given by Vajufi (the wife of the *maha-*

MAHARAJ, A HINDI FILM BEING STREAMED ON NETFLIX, DEPICTS THE DECEPTION OF REGULATION CAMOUFLAGED AS REFORM, WHICH KEEPS THE STATUS QUO (PATRIARCHY) INTACT

raj in *Maharaj*) when Karsandas meets her in her *haveli*. The address, written in Gujarati, on a slip of paper she gives to Karsandas is "Prasadh Chaturvija, near Banda Khatara's shop, second house from right, Kumbharwada." The still-existing Kumbharwada was then a sprawling potters' colony. Dhavari came up later in 1884.

There are two differing opinions about Karsandas's place of birth. In his memoir (1934), author Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth mentions Vadai, near Mahua in Gujarat, but he is unsure about it. On the other hand, Motiwalla categorically tells us it is Bombay where Karsandas was born. *Maharaj* begins with Vadai and not Bombay. The location, in the film, shifts to Bombay in 1862 when Karsandas was ten years old. This movement of history is drowned in the ubiquitous drone. According to Motiwalla, between 1838 and 1843, Karsandas studied in the Primary Vernacular School. At the end of the film, as if they were an epilogue, documentary images of the real Karsandas and Mulji, Dadabhai Naoroji, Bhan Daji Lad and others, as well as the newspapers *Rast Gofar* (Truth Seeker), *Surya Prakash* (Light of Truth) and the buildings of the Supreme Court of Bombay, come to us as only a limping patchwork, failing to save the film's necessary historicity. However, what is remarkable is Bhabhu, the widow, who makes the winning entry into the courtroom, as a witness in favour of Karsandas. In some sense, she is like *Lagaan's* Kachra, who scores a hatrick in the game of cricket. In the sense of social ostracisation, both are untouchable in the caste-ridden, hierarchical society, but you can't ignore them. They can change the balance.

Amrit Gangar is a Mumbai-based author, curator and historian. The views expressed are personal

[ANOTHER DAY]

Namita Bhandare



Flawed responses to rape underpin Kolkata case

All she wanted at the end of a 36-hour shift was to rest. Since Kolkata's RG Kar Medical College and Hospital does not have such a designated space for doctors, she did what the others do, find a quiet place for a nap — in this case, a seminar hall.

The complete facts are yet to emerge but the autopsy report makes for gruesome reading. There is evidence that she was raped and then killed. The police have arrested a civic volunteer, Sanjay Roy.

How did he access the seminar hall? Was he alone? How could there have been such a major security lapse? Who is responsible for a safe work environment for all medical staff? How do you explain the callous phone call received by her parents informing them their daughter had died by suicide?

The Calcutta high court has ordered a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe and, hopefully, we should now have some semblance of professionalism, if not answers.

Beyond the details of this crime, there is a horrible sense of déjà vu. Already, they're recalling the 32-year-old postgraduate doctor "the second Nirbhaya" in a sort of lazy shorthand that reminds us that, 12 years later, we are hearing the same story.

Perhaps, the fault lies in assuming that our job was done after the law was changed in 2013. That we didn't need to do the hard work with boys and men to change attitudes. That we need to start seeing women as empowered citizens and not hapless creatures who need protection.

Perhaps, the fault lies in how we respond, channeling our anger against some rapist, but ignoring the child in the slum, the Dalit girls in Hathras and Unnao. We have turned rape into sport to score points. Those who struggled off the violation of an eight-year-old Muslim girl in Kathua are directing their outrage towards Mamata Banerjee.

Perhaps, the fault lies with a State that believes some rapes are less heinous than others. So, the men serving a life sentence for murder and the gang rape of Bilkis Bano

walk out of jail after serving 14 years. Another rapist "Baba" Ram Rahim, sentenced to 20 years in jail, is out on his eighth furlough in three years.

Perhaps, the fault lies in our failure to recognise the rapist is not just a deranged stranger. Sexual assault takes place at sporting federations, in offices, in schools and coaching classes, and by husbands. But these are the rapes we don't talk about.

I have no doubt that justice will be served in this case. The main accused, like the convicts in the December 2012 gang rape and murder, is expendable. It will take time to get through the legal process from conviction to appeal but, if his guilt is established, it will happen.

Our blood lust satisfied, we will go back to the business of pretending not to notice the everyday misogyny and the fact that women are not safe anywhere, not at home and certainly not at work.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

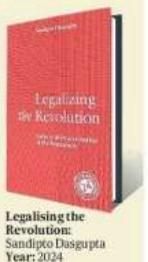
[EDITOR'S PICK]

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

FREEDOM AND THE CONSTITUTION

The British rule over India ended in 1947 after an anti-colonial struggle spanning around a century. The Indian anti-colonial movement was among many in the first half the 20th century. This week, we recommend academic Sandip Dasgupta's *Legalising the Revolution: India and the Constitution of the Pastors*. This book explores the unique promises, challenges, and contradictions of the task of giving institutional form to the audacious idea of freedom that the anti-colonial movements generated.

It is also an account of India's Constitution-making. The book theorises the distinctively post-colonial Constitution through a synthesis of the history of decolonisation and constitutional philosophies, in contrast to the familiar liberal constitutional templates derived from the British. It explores the unrealised futures imagined during decolonisation and offers an understanding of the present crisis of that order.



Legalising the Revolution: Sandip Dasgupta Year: 2024

GROUND ZERO



The 'Reclaim the Night' protest in Kolkata on August 14. About 500 meters away, a mob vandalised the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital, where a trainee doctor was raped and murdered. SHRABANA CHATTERJEE

Violence and vigil in Kolkata

The brutal rape and murder of a trainee doctor inside a government hospital in the city has brought people across the country out on the streets in outrage. The incident shows multiple lapses by the hospital administration and the West Bengal police. It also exposes the terrible conditions in which trainee doctors work. **Shrabana Chatterjee, Moyurie Som, and Shiv Sahay Singh** report on the incident and its aftermath

Trigger warning: This article has disturbing details about rape and murder.

At the stroke of the midnight hour, on the eve of India's 78th Independence Day, tens of thousands of women gathered across the streets of the country. With anger that bubbles up only after a ferment, they protested the brutal rape and murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata's state-run R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital a week earlier. This mass outrage was not just about the crime, but also about the larger lack of safety of women and doctors across India, where there are more than 80 rapes every day on average, as per the National Crime Records Bureau data of 2022. A common refrain was: "What freedom do Indian women really have?"

On August 14, WhatsApp was flooded with messages calling women to gather at midnight across different cities. The protesters marched to chants of 'Reclaim the Night', a reference to the fact that the 31-year-old doctor was attacked in the middle of the night while she was taking a break from duty, and also to the 1970s movement, where women occupied public spaces at night, marching against sexual violence and for gender equality. At least 50 protest marches have been held since the incident on August 9.

For many, the mass demonstrations were reminiscent of 2012. Then too, a young woman who had stepped out at night was raped and murdered in New Delhi. Then too, thousands took to the streets demanding justice for the victim, as well as safe public spaces.

"The 'Nirbhaya' incident (as the rape and murder in Delhi is often referred to) occurred 12 years ago," said Indrani Banerjee, a social worker. Wearing a T-shirt with 'Feminist' inscribed in bold letters, she was protesting at Kolkata's Jadavpur area. "Has anything changed since then?"

Going on the rampage

That night, hundreds of people, including doctors, gathered outside the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital too, in peaceful protest. However, a few minutes past midnight, mayhem broke out. A mob of about 100 people tore through the police barricades erected outside and chased away doctors who were about to join the midnight march.

According to witnesses, the mob comprised intoxicated young men, who went on the rampage. They smashed medical equipment including ventilators, broke hospital beds, and tore posters demanding justice for the victim, which had been put up on the gate of the emergency wing. It was in the seminar hall on the fourth floor of the same building that the trainee doctor had been sexually assaulted and killed on August 9.

Terrified health workers, protesters, and journalists scrambled for safety. A second-year postgraduate trainee doctor said he ran into an auditorium with many others. They stacked up heavy furniture against the door of the room to prevent the mob from barging in.

"When the mob entered the premises, we ran for our lives," he recalled. "We were unable to

contact many of our friends. Those men did not spare patients or doctors; they beat everybody up. We didn't recognise any of them."

As chaos ensued, a person in the crowd shouted at the female doctors gathered there: "The girls should return to their hostels immediately. It is dangerous out here."

Outside the hospital, the police used tear gas shells to disperse the mob, much like in 2012. Several personnel were injured in the clash. The pungent smell of tear gas lingered in the air around the hospital as the mob tried to regroup at several key intersections of R.G. Kar Road.

The situation was defused a couple of hours later when the Kolkata Commissioner of Police, Vineet Kumar Goyal, arrived with a large contingent of police and Rapid Action Force personnel. "What has happened here is because of a malicious media campaign against the Kolkata Police," Goyal alleged.

Hours after the incident, the Kolkata Police claimed on social media that the scene of crime had not been tampered with. "Don't spread fake news. We will take legal action," the police handle posted on X. This sparked more anger on social media. One user posted, "Find the rapists, murderers and the goons and take legal action (rather) than issuing threats online." By the night of August 16, the State Police had arrested 25 people for vandalism at the hospital.

No room to rest

On August 9, after a grueling 36 hours of duty, the female doctor, a second-year postgraduate trainee in the chest department of R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital, had gone to the seminar hall at about 2 a.m. to take a break, said the former principal of the hospital, Dr. Sandip Kumar Ghosh. Many departments do not have designated on-duty rooms for doctors to rest after long hours of work, several doctors said. This leaves them with no choice but to sleep in patient beds, waiting rooms, or empty halls.

The previous night, the trainee doctor had spoken to her parents on the phone. "She was in good spirits as usual," they said.

On the morning of August 9, her semi-naked body was found on a blue mattress in the seminar hall. It bore multiple injuries and signs of sex-

ual assault and torture. At 10.53 a.m., the victim's parents received a call from an assistant superintendent informing them that their daughter was unwell.

"My wife started crying inconsolably. She suspected that something grave had happened to our daughter," the victim's father said.

After an agonising wait, they received another call 22 minutes later. The caller claimed that the trainee doctor had died by suicide within the hospital premises. The shocked parents rushed to the hospital.

The inquest report, which was prepared at 4.40 p.m. on August 10, at the direction of the Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate, Sealdah, revealed gruesome details of the incident. It pointed to 10 injuries on the victim's body including bleeding from the vagina, both eyes, and mouth; and injuries on the face, neck, nails, right hand, left leg, and stomach.

In their petition to the Calcutta High Court demanding a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the parents said that they were not allowed to see their daughter's body for three hours and alleged that the delay was intentional.

While speaking at a press conference on August 9, Dr. Ghosh revealed the identity of the victim, which is prohibited by law. To the protesting doctors, he said, "It was irresponsible of the girl to go to the seminar hall alone at night."

His comment sparked outrage. Under pressure from the protesting doctors, Dr. Ghosh resigned on August 12. However, hours later, he was reappointed as the principal of the National Medical College and Hospital, Kolkata.

Soon after the incident, the hospital administration allegedly started renovating the building where the rape and murder had occurred. Allegations that there were attempts to cover up the crime gained ground.

In its August 13 order, a division bench of the High Court noted that it was disturbing that a case of unnatural death had been registered by the police on August 9 at the Tala Police Station. Despite the victim being a trainee doctor, the principal or the hospital had not lodged a formal complaint with the police, the court observed. "This, in our view, was a serious lapse, giving room for suspicion," it noted.

On August 16, the High Court rapped the State government and asked what the urgency was in reassigning a new posting to the principal, who has been accused of several lapses. The Court directed that Dr. Ghosh be sent on leave and not be appointed as principal of any other medical college and hospital. The Court also asked the State government about the renovation at the hospital. The State government's counsel told the Court that allegations that the place where the incident took place was demolished were incorrect.

The accused, a civic police volunteer

Within 12 hours of the crime, the Kolkata Police arrested Sanjoy Roy, 35, a civic police volunteer since 2019. Roy was active with the Police Welfare Association. He lived in the barracks of the Calcutta Police's 4th battalion and used a motorbike marked 'police'. He had "no business" to be in the seminar hall that night, the police said. Roy was arrested and later handed over to the CBI.

The Mamata Banerjee-led government began appointing civic police volunteers about 10 years ago, to assist the police. Civic police volunteers are expected to have studied at least until Class VIII. They are paid ₹9,000 a month. Over the years, the force has been growing.

"Civic police volunteers have helped the Trinamool Congress (the party in power) get more footing in the Bengal regime. There is no permanent work, only contractual, so they remain loyal to the ruling party. There is no proper process for appointment. No norms are followed. That is why the party can appoint their own cadre. It also uses the civic volunteers to conduct election work," said Biswanath Chakraborty, a professor at Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata.

The strength of the Kolkata Police is 37,000. Of them, 7,200 are civic police personnel. The police have been hesitant to admit that the accused



It takes a year to prepare for NEET after we get our MBBS degrees. We get paid ₹50,000 a month to work long hours in horrible conditions.

First-year postgraduate trainee doctor

had any association with the force. When asked about the job profile of the accused, the Kolkata Police Commissioner merely said, "To us, he is a criminal of the highest order."

Even after the arrest of Roy, there has been widespread speculation that multiple people may have been involved in the crime given the horrific nature and extent of the victim's injuries.

People began sharing the names of doctors of the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital as some of the other accused, online. Soon, misinformation was rife. The family of a medical intern from a village in West Bengal was forced to lodge a police complaint when his name began doing the rounds as an accused person.

"Rumours are being floated that someone is associated with the crime. He is an intern and comes from a small place... This is pathetic. I cannot on the basis of some rumours arrest an intern. It is against my conscience," said Goyal. He added that the police never said that there was only one person involved in the crime. Scientific evidence requires time, he added.

Misinformation is not the only problem online. Many doctors have been sharing photos and videos of the victim on social media, which is also in violation of the law.

'This could have been me'

Since August 9, postgraduate trainee doctors everywhere have decided to stop work and seek justice for the victim and security for doctors in hospitals. Medical services across several hospitals in West Bengal have been severely affected. Despite pleas from the State government, the trainee doctors have refused to resume work.

On average, nearly 2 lakh patients visit the outpatient departments (OPD) and 12,000 patients are admitted every day in State-run hospitals in West Bengal. R.G. Kar Hospital, which has about 1,600 beds, treats over 3,600 patients in the OPD every day. It admits 245 patients daily. In certain parts of the State, people have been losing patience with the disruption of medical services and have started holding demonstrations outside State-run health facilities. With the postgraduate trainee doctors on strike, the State is finding it difficult to keep hospitals functional.

The anger of medical personnel is not confined to Kolkata. The Indian Medical Association, the largest organisation of medical staff in the country, has announced a nationwide strike from August 17 to August 18. Most hospital departments will be closed in both public and private hospitals on that day, it said. Only essential services will remain operational.

Far away from the protests, in the suburbs of Kolkata, journalists have been flocking to a quiet neighbourhood. A memorial with the photograph of the victim with her face blurred and name scratched out has come up near her house.

"If we take any compensation from the government, our daughter will not get peace," the victim's father said. The victim's mother believes that the mob attack at the hospital on August 14-15 was an "attempt to destroy evidence."

Banerjee visited the victim's house on August 12 and demanded the death penalty for the culprits. The Chief Minister had made controversial statements following earlier incidents of rape. In 2012, she called the rape of a woman in the bustling Park Street in Kolkata "a staged incident". In 2013, when protests broke out against the abduction, gang rape, and murder of a college student in Kamdini, she described the protesters as "Maoists". This time, Banerjee assured the family that the case will be handed over to the CBI if the Kolkata Police fails to crack it. On August 13, the High Court transferred the case to the CBI.

However, on August 14, when protests started gathering momentum and women called for a march to 'reclaim the night', Banerjee saw it as a ploy to remove her from power, similar to what she said had unfolded in neighbouring Bangladesh. When the mob ransacked the hospital, she said that "Baam and Ram (the Left and the Bharatiya Janata Party)" had joined hands to do this.

Banerjee holds the portfolio of both the Home and Health Ministries. This is the first time in her 13-year-long regime as Chief Minister that the Opposition has demanded in one voice that she resign. At the time when the Chief Minister was meeting family members of the victims, a number of women postgraduate trainee doctors sat in protest at R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital.

A first-year postgraduate trainee doctor from Rajasthan said, "Such violence against women is common in my State. My parents and I thought Kolkata would be a better option for me since it is often said that this is a safe city for women. That belief has now completely vanished." When crime records for 2022 came out earlier this year, Kolkata was declared the safest city for women.

"My parents are asking me to return home," said a postgraduate trainee doctor in chest medicine, who had graduated with an MBBS degree from Madras Medical College, Chennai. "They are saying an MBBS is enough, and I should not risk my life for a postgraduate degree."

The trainee doctors said they worked hard to clear the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NET) and are now forced to slog for a low salary. "It takes a year to prepare for NEET after we get our degrees. We get paid ₹50,000 a month for long hours of work in horrible conditions," said a first-year postgraduate trainee doctor.

A teary-eyed second-year postgraduate trainee doctor who was working that night in the same hospital in a different building heard about the incident after completing 30 hours of duty. "It could have been me, instead of her," she said, her voice shaking.



The 'Nirbhaya' incident occurred 12 years ago. Has anything changed since then?

INDRANI BANERJEE

Social worker



The gate of the emergency building of the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital, which was forced open by the mob. SHRABANA CHATTERJEE

KARNATAKA



Dump yard: Garbage, collected from different wards in Bengaluru, being dumped in the Mittaganahalli landfill. There is often a long queue of compactors and the vehicles have to wait for hours to unload at the site. SUDHAKARA JAIN

The journey of Bengaluru's waste

From homes early in the morning to Mittaganahalli on the far side of Bengaluru, mixed waste from the city makes a long journey. **Shreyas H.S.** chronicles the process, following the stakeholders involved in the task from start to finish

In the bustling tech hub of Bengaluru, residents strive to maintain pristine homes, quite unaware that their tidy spaces come at a hidden cost. The burden of keeping countless households clean and smelling fresh is quietly borne by the labour of people and the earth itself, both stretched to their limits to manage the ever-growing waste.

On the far side of the city at Mittaganahalli, about 360-370 compactors turn up every day carrying 3,200 metric tonnes of unsegregated garbage (both dry and wet) to dump at the 50-acre landfill. Located about 40 km away from the Central Business District (CBD) is the only active landfill for the mixed trash generated from 198 wards of the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). The rubbish and stench may be out of people's homes, but they travel through the city to land at Mittaganahalli.



The long journey of the muck begins from the homes around 8 a.m. every day. Even before that, workers who collect it from homes and black spots (public places where people discard garbage) gather at a designated place in every ward around 6.30 a.m., along with auto tippers, to mark their attendance. For every auto tipper, two workers are assigned: one to collect the rubbish from homes and streets and another to drive the vehicle.

The *Hindu* followed the journey of the trash, along with the stakeholders involved in the entire chain.

All mixed up

In ward number 177, on a Tuesday morning, the auto tippers dispersed to collect wet and mixed waste from homes after completing formalities. The tipper has a dedicated space to put the wet ones and two more sacks for the mixed.

BBMP rules mandate residents to segregate wet and dry garbage. While wet trash is collected daily, dry junk is picked up by vehicles handled by the Dry Waste Collection Centres thrice a week.

At a house in J.P. Nagar 3rd phase, when the worker opened the dust bin, he saw both wet and dry garbage mixed. He left the bin and moved on to another residence. Worker Ramayya (name changed) complained that despite informing the resident about the need for segregation, nothing had changed. "The simple task of dumping wet refuse in one bin and dry in another is not carried out by some residents in the area which is known to be populated by educated people," he lamented.

●●
We have to endure the foul smell from 3.30 p.m. to 10 p.m. at the landfill. Now, garbage and the smell have become my companions. GANGANNA, DRIVER



A large lake-like structure, which is filled with leachate and mixed waste, at the Mittaganahalli landfill. (Left) BBMP workers clearing waste from a street. SUDHAKARA JAIN

On the first trip, the tippers collect only wet waste, and on the second trip, the mixed one is picked up. After this, the vehicles travel again to collect the rubbish from the black spots. From 6 a.m. to 1 p.m., those who work under the contractors are engaged in collecting junk.

The residents place the bins filled with wet waste on the streets for collection. A few come out of the homes, hearing the whistles blown by the workers. Vegetables, meat, and food rejects are key components of wet garbage. Each auto tipper in 177 wards collects refuse from about 1,200 houses. There are about 17 auto assigned for this ward. In the 2012 survey, 750 residences were demarcated as one block and assigned to one auto. Now, the number of homes has increased. Ramayya, while collecting the waste, said he also had the responsibility of collecting the leaves and other rubbish swept aside by pourakarmikas in the morning. As soon as the tippers are filled with garbage, the same will be transferred to compactors.

Unbearable stench

Ningappa (name changed), another worker, said the worst part of this work was having to bear the stench constantly. "We have masks given by the BBMP, but it is difficult to work wearing masks as they do not allow us to breathe properly as we work," he said.

Anand Reddy, a wet waste contractor, said, "This ward is far better than other wards in the city as 60% of the households segregate. While the wet garbage collected from the homes is transported in compactors to processing units, the mixed one is sent to landfill. Many say contractors are minting money, but many challenges make this job hard."

Mr. Reddy said some people who do night shifts or wake up late do not give away their waste in the morning when the vehicles arrive at



Garbage being shifted from a tipper to a compactor. SUDHAKARA JAIN

the landfill at Mittaganahalli from their respective wards. Navigating the city traffic on the Airport Road is another herculean task.

As the trucks move through the city, the leachate leaks through the tiny gaps and falls on the roads. The commuters in other vehicles moving near the trucks grimace and pinch their noses, unable to bear the stench emanating from the waste. The trucks have to move slowly on the roads to avoid accidents as many accidents involving the trucks had earlier raked up controversy.

Gannanna said, "We have to be extra cautious while driving. If I start my journey at 1 p.m., I reach the landfill around 3.30 p.m. The travel time is two and a half hours. Before 4 p.m. we have to reach because, after that, the movement of heavy vehicles is restricted. We are always anxious to reach the destination on time."

The landfill

It's a different world, a world of waste, at the landfill. The stench is so strong that one can sense the landfill 1 km away.

From the gate to the large dumping pits at the site, compactors stand in a queue waiting for their turn to dump the mixed waste consisting of food, plastic, cardboard, clothes, plates, paper and just about everything one can imagine. The vehicles have to wait for hours to unload the junk at the site. Gannanna, who arrived at 3.30 p.m., managed to unload the vehicle around 7 p.m.

The vehicle, before dumping, has to pass through a weighing bridge to weigh the garbage. After weighing, the vehicle is allowed to move to the dumping site, where one can see heaps of trash in large pits.

While a large portion of the landfill has an asphalted road in bad condition, a small portion is not asphalted as it is private land. The vehicles get stuck here sometimes during the monsoon. This further delays the journey. The BBMP dumps mud on the slushy stretch to facilitate the smooth flow of vehicles.

Even after dumping the waste, the vehicles have to be parked on the premises as heavy vehicle movement is allowed inside the city only after 10 p.m. Gannanna said, "We have to endure the foul smell from 3.30 p.m. to 10 p.m. inside the landfill. Now garbage and the smell have become my companions."

The landfill has a large lake-like structure which is filled with leachate and mixed waste, exposing chinks in trash management. An employee at the site said the leachate has no doubt mixed with water going to the households in the area.

The leachate treatment plant at the site treats 1 lakh litres to generate 80,000 litres of water, which can be used for non-drinking purposes. On the other hand, the BBMP is also constructing a methane plant to produce methane from the waste.

The landfill is now left with five acres of land for dumping the garbage underground. About 45 acres of land is exhausted. The ground level in this area is slowly coming down as waste is composted. In about a year, the landfill may be shut for use, said an employee.

A full circle

An IT employee, whose L5 crore house stands 300 metres from the landfill, is now ready to sell it at a throwaway price. But there are no takers for obvious reasons. The trash generated from the homes is also impacting the lives of the better off and real estate in the area, besides causing environmental hazards and heaping misery on the likes of Ramayya, who is spending a lifetime with trash. The flats here are sold at ₹50 lakh despite the market price being ₹80 lakh.

But 45 km away, people who throw mixed waste at black spots may have absolutely no idea what people are undergoing at Mittaganahalli.

City to landfill
The fully loaded compactors are set on their jour-

13 THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Bangladesh has yet to fully establish some of the basic principles that Mujib and other leaders advocated for. So, going forward, the best way to honour their memory would be to work tirelessly to establish the Bangladesh that they struggled and sacrificed so much for." — THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

The necessity of a secular UCC

From Red Fort, PM Modi shone a light on the unfinished agenda of the Constitution



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's Independence Day address from the ramparts of the Red Fort this Thursday demonstrated that he is in full control of the government. Dispelling misconceptions, if any, about the stability and strength of his coalition, Modi displayed the same energy, commitment and determination as in every preceding year in the last decade. He reiterated that "Viksit Bharat 2047 are not mere words, but a reflection of the resolve and dreams of 1.4 billion people". He talked about making India the third largest economy in the world. He talked about the agriculture sector, women's safety, and the designs of external forces to create instability in the country.

Referring to the unfinished agenda of the Indian Constitution, the PM called for promulgating a uniform civil code in the country. "The Supreme Court has repeatedly held discussions on uniform civil code, given orders, because a large section of the country feels, and rightly so, that the current civil code is a communal civil code, a discriminatory civil code", he said, adding that "laws that divide the country on religious lines must be done away with. They have no place in a modern society. The times demand a secular civil code. And then we will be free of religious discrimination". Interesting to note was the use of the phrase "secular civil code".

Modi's pitch for a secular civil code for all Indians is perfectly in line with the arguments made by BR Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly. On November 23, 1948, when Article 35 of the draft Constitution, that called for a uniform civil code, came up for discussion before the Assembly, Ambedkar took the firm stand that it shouldn't get mired in communal discourse.

Rejecting amendments proposed by members like Focker Sahib, Hussain Imam and Muhammad Ismail Sahib, Ambedkar reiterated that there was no merit in their argument that the "Sharia law was immutable and uniform throughout India". He reminded them that many other laws like the criminal procedure code, law of transfer of property and negotiable instruments act were applicable to all Indians, covering every aspect of their lives. He argued that until the Sharia Act was passed by the British colonial government in 1937, most Muslims in provinces of British India followed Hindu law.

The NWFP (today's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) was not subject to Sharia until 1935. Until 1937, in the rest of India, including provinces where Muslims lived in large numbers like the United Provinces, Central Provinces and Bombay, they were governed in matters of succession and others by existing Hindu laws. Ambedkar refers to a law in North Malabar region called Marumakkathayam Law that was applicable to both Hindus and Muslims by which matrilineality was followed by the people of Kerala.

Ambedkar's argument in the Cons-

tituent Assembly was that the uniform civil code should be seen in the same light as a secular law applicable to all. "Therefore if it was found necessary that for the purpose of evolving a single civil code applicable to all citizens irrespective of their religion, certain portions of the Hindu law, not because they were contained in Hindu law but because they were found to be the most suitable, were incorporated into the new civil code projected by Article 35, I am quite certain that it would not be open to any Muslim to say that the framers of the civil code had done great violence to the sentiments of the Muslim community".

The Uniform Civil Code should have been implemented after the formation of the first government in 1952. MC Chagla, who rose to become the education minister in Jawaharlal Nehru's government, insisted that "Article 44 is a mandatory provision binding the Government, and it is incumbent upon it to give effect to this provision". However, Nehru couldn't muster the courage when the best opportunity came during the reform in the Hindu law in 1954. He evaded the issue, arguing that "I do not think that time is ripe in India for me to try to push it through".

The issue lingered on since then. Cases of Hindu men indulging in polygamy by converting to Islam were taken to the courts numerous times. Rejecting the contention that Sharia compliance was a matter pertaining to Islamic faith alone, the courts repeatedly told the government that civil law reform is not just a matter concerning any one religion and hence a uniform code is essential.

In *Sarla Mudgal vs Union of India* (1995), the Supreme Court had held that "when more than 80 per cent of the citizens have already been brought under the codified personal law, there is no justification whatsoever to keep in abeyance, anymore, the introduction of Uniform Civil Code for all citizens". In the *Willamratnam vs Union of India* case in 2003, the SC had again said that "It is a matter of regret that Article 44 of the Constitution has not been given effect to". Highlighting the prevailing confusion due to various personal laws, the SC asked the government in October 2015 if they were willing to implement a Uniform Civil Code. "What happened to it? Why don't you frame and implement it?" it asked.

Based on the SC's observations, Noorjahan Safia Niaz and Zakia Soman, co-founders of the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, wrote a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in November 2015, stating that "Certain orthodox and patriarchal males have stonewalled any attempt towards reform in Muslim personal law. In the past, Muslim women have been denied their Quranic rights as well as their rights as equal Indian citizens. Almost all Muslim countries the world over, such as Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and even Bangladesh and Pakistan in our neighbourhood, have codified personal laws governing marriage and family matters... Indian Muslims are denied this opportunity".

In the BMMMA leaders urged, codification of personal laws has nothing to do with religion. It is a step towards gender justice, and a secular necessity, as pointed out by Prime Minister Modi.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the RSS. Views are personal

All that freedom has given us

The road ahead will not be easy, there are shackles of a different kind, but there's hope that things will get better

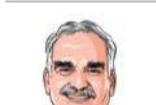


HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR

WHAT INDEPENDENCE COULD I talk about? I was born in a free country in the 1980s. My country, my motherland, my India, gained her independence in 1947, over three decades before I came into this world. By the time I was born, Independence had translated into freedom — our Constitution had shaped our rights and entitlements; our circumstances of birth had called out our obligations.

Even before I could figure out what freedom might feel like, liberalisation taught my generation to dream new dreams. I reaped the benefits of all of these. I did not have to go through the grind my parents did. No walking for miles for me to get to school or relying on an old bicycle for distant — certainly of a far superior kind than the one many in my community may have received — and, finally, I found myself recruited for a job which, in the eyes of the fairly judgemental middle class of this nation, is relatively

As a beneficiary of the affirmative action outlined in our Constitution, I found education — certainly of a far superior kind than the one many in my community may have received — and, finally, I found myself recruited for a job which, in the eyes of the fairly judgemental middle class of this nation, is relatively



D SIVANANDHAN

THE HEART-WRENCHING INCIDENT of the rape and murder of a 31-year-old trainee doctor in the R G Kar Medical College and Hospital in the wee hours of August 9 has, once again, shaken the collective conscience of our country. The crime is brutal and the fact that it happened to a woman doctor inside a government hospital has caused anger and frustration across the country.

So far, the police have arrested one person, a 33-year-old civic worker who reportedly had unfettered access to the entire hospital. As per media reports, the postmortem report of the victim indicates the possibility of gang-rape. Pulling up the police for its mishandling of the case, the Kolkata High Court has now transferred the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which took over on August 14.

The incident brought back painful memories of the horrific rape of Aruna Shanbaug, a nurse in the KEM Hospital in Parel, Mumbai, who was brutally raped by a ward-boy in 1973. It left her in a vegetative state with severe brain damage and paralysis. She remained in a vegetative condition for 42 years and breathed her last in a small room in KEM Hospital in 2015. When she died, her assailant was already out of jail having served his prison sentence and living

respectable. Does that sound like luck? Perhaps, it is. When you are among a small fraction of your community — a people with a history of migration and displacement — to have had the privileges that I did, you learn to count your blessings. You learn to cloak hope for the future with humility, and a touch of anxiety. Is this a dream? Have I done enough to achieve this? Will this last?

It is believed that one appreciates the value of something only when that is denied to them. Freedom, the sort our ancestors attained at midnight, has, to the best of my memory, never been denied to me. Perhaps I will never be able to rejoice and cherish Independence the way our forefathers did, even though holding up this Independence as a talisman as we fumble our way into the future is in the hands of my generation and the generations to come. I can only bow in gratitude to our forefathers for freeing us from the shackles of colonialism, for enabling us to live and breathe in a free nation.

Yet, our generation finds itself in the shadings of a different kind of servitude, one that barely manifests signs of overt violence. It comes wrapped in what we are taught to believe is ambition but what, in reality, is a compulsion to excel. In a country of a billion plus, with so few job opportunities, what do you do but lull yourself into believing that striving can get you greater glory? At least, it can only be for the better, for you and your family. If you dream king-size or believe in a higher purpose, you tell yourself, it can be for the good of the nation, too.

Anxiety is built into these shackles. It announces its presence through our incessant obsession with the phone, the non-stop onslaught of WhatsApp notifications. It is there in the pressure of targets and ELAs (expected levels of achievement), in shifting goalposts

As a beneficiary of the affirmative action outlined in our Constitution, I found education — certainly of a far superior kind than the one many in my community may have received — and, finally, I found myself recruited for a job which, in the eyes of the fairly judgemental middle class of this nation, is relatively respectable. Does that sound like luck? Perhaps, it is. When you are among a small fraction of your community — a people with a history of migration and displacement — to have had the privileges that I did, you learn to count your blessings.

and the frenzied desire to upskill or whatever new jargon that has been made fashionable by peddlers of dreams. We tell ourselves that the crushing deadlines and energy-sapping penalties are par for the course. After all, aren't all these markers of an independent nation whose time has come to lead the world? A leader among high fliers. A decision maker among doers.

The pacifist in me assures me that there is nothing unusual about the grind. It is what progress looks like. That issues arise when ground realities are ignored — lack of infrastructure and manpower, the inevitable presence of corruption and whataboutery. These are the kind of things that people like me skip with practised nonchalance — talks of political interference, lack of support systems, all the things that can and do hold people back. We saw it recently with a woman wrestler whose gritty fight against the system over alleged sexual harassment has all but exhausted her. We see it in the rape and murder of a woman doctor at a government-run medical college and hospital in Kolkata, where the administration first tried to pass off the incident as death by suicide. Power without accountability is a terrible thing. Its interference mounts and rumbles from subtle, innocuous demands to forthright galling to a complete lack of empathy.

Can we live down these shackles in our lifetime? Break free like those who gave us what we take for granted, I wonder. I am not sure what the future holds. I know the road ahead will not be easy but I have also inherited hope. The belief that things will get better. That they have to. And then there's gratitude, an overwhelming thankfulness for all that we have. For all that freedom has given us.

Shekhar is a writer and translator

When the system fails women

Kolkata incident shows that they may need to defend themselves

a peaceful life in his village. The Kolkata incident also brings back memories of the horrendous gangrape in Delhi in December 2012. Such was the brutality of that incident that it sparked protests and outrage across the nation. The recent incident has also sparked a nationwide outrage and strikes by doctors demanding justice for the victim as well as better working facilities and security for doctors in hospitals.

According to reports, the 138-year-old R G Kar Medical College and Hospital does not even have dedicated and safe restrooms and toilets for female doctors. If true, it is alarming and shameful. It was because of this very reason that the victim had to go to the seminar hall to rest after a 36-hour shift. Violence against doctors is a raging issue and protesters have demanded the enactment of the Central Protection Act, intended to protect medical professionals from violence. The act was proposed in the Lok Sabha in 2022 but it is yet to be cleared.

However, it is time to look at the larger picture and take hard decisions keeping in mind the safety of women doctors. Crimes against women, especially sexual crimes, are rampant in India. As per statistics available with the National Crime Records

Bureau (NCRB), close to 90 rape cases were reported every day in India in 2022. The numbers rise each year.

In 2015, the Indian Medical Association (IMA) conducted a survey which revealed that more than 75 per cent of doctors in India have experienced some form violence at their workplace. It also revealed that women, who make up more than 30 per cent of doctors, are more vulnerable to violence as compared to their male counterparts.

Authorities should now seriously look at the safety of women doctors — and women in general. While it is working on the Central Protection Act, the central government should consider arming women doctors with taser guns and/or stun guns, especially those working on night shifts in government and civil hospitals. A separate budget should be allocated by the central as well as state governments to procure these devices for working women doctors. They should be trained in close-body combat and in self-defence techniques, and, like some hospitals in Haryana, bouncers should be deployed in hospitals, especially during night shifts. Girls should be trained in self-defence techniques in school and college, so that they are empowered to defend themselves.

The establishment has failed to provide adequate security to women doctors — in fact, all women. Whenever a Kolkata-like incident occurs, the authorities make false promises and nothing ever happens. Women are again forced to work in an insecure environment. There is a lull, until the next incident. It is quite clear that women will now have to take matters into their own hands.

Even the Indian Constitution and the Bharatiya Nyaya Samhita (BNS), known as the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in its earlier form, give rights and powers to an individual to defend herself if she is being subjected to violence or is being made a victim of a violent crime. The law is clear that the victim in this situation is within her rights to defend herself.

If there is to be an effective change in the country's fight against the violence that doctors, including women doctors, encounter, then it is time to arm them with techniques, methods and means to defend themselves.

The writer is the Director General of Police (DGP) (Retired), Maharashtra, former police commissioner of Mumbai and ex-chief of the elite Mumbai Crime Branch

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FITTING HONOUR

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No 16' (IE, August 16). Before the legendary Sreejesh, goalkeeping in hockey had never caught the fancy of the nation. The attacking forwards or, at best, the drag flickers would hog all the lime-light. Sreejesh brought romance into goalkeeping. His presence was an assurance that the goalkeepers were there. Nobody like him. His jersey number will no longer be seen on the hockey field. It's a fitting honour.

Vijpal Pandey, Nainital

A COMPLEX CODE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Speech and listening' (IE, August 16). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech from the Red Fort on August 15 invoked secularism to underscore the need for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC). He quoted Article 44, and the Supreme Court's observation in support of a UCC. But calling the existing diversity in personal laws a gain for religious communities, which governs their marriage, inheritance, divorce, and adoption as communal is uncharitable. The UCC is a complex issue with social, political, legal and constitutional implications

for the entire citizenry. It entails engagements with all stakeholders across religious communities, given the 21st Law Commission's observation that a UCC is "neither necessary nor desirable at this stage". Instead it recommended a series of reforms in the personal laws of all religions as well as the secular laws that place women and children at a disadvantage.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

DELHI AND DHAKA

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Keep social peace' (IE, August 14). The student movement has taken over under the leadership of Mohammad Yunus in Bangladesh. The first priority before the new regime should be to restore law and order, which was the first casualty after the outbreak of violence. Fresh elections will pave the way for their democracy to thrive. India should, as a friendly nation, aid the interim government's efforts at revival of democracy. It will help undercut the anti-India narrative gaining ground in Bangladesh. The immediate task for India should be to ensure that bilateral agreements for economic cooperation are honoured by the new government in Dhaka.

Arvind Waze, Mumbai



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

THIS WORD MEANS

SMALL SATELLITE LAUNCH VEHICLE

SSLV is a new category of low-cost launch vehicles, with a use case for commercial missions

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 16

THE INDIAN Space Research Organisation (ISRO) successfully launched the third developmental flight of the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota on Friday. The SSLV-D3 placed the Earth-observation satellite EOS-08 precisely into orbit.

This marks the completion of ISRO and the Department of Space's SSLV Development Project. NewSpace India Limited (NSIL), ISRO's commercial arm, and India's private space industry can now produce SSLVs for commercial missions.

What is an SSLV?

ISRO's Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) is a three-stage launch vehicle configured with three solid propulsion stages. It also has a liquid propulsion-based velocity trimming module (VTM) as a terminal stage, which can help adjust the velocity as it prepares to place the satellite into orbit.

Essentially, the aim behind SSLVs is to produce low-cost launch vehicles with short launch schedules and minimal infrastructural requirements. The SSLV can launch satellites weighing up to 500kg, and accommodate multiple satellites.

Before SSLVs, smaller payloads had to be sent into space using other launch vehicles carrying multiple, bigger satellites. Smaller payloads were dependent upon the launch schedules of those satellites.

With the entry of more and more businesses, government agencies, universities, and laboratories in the business of launching satellites in recent years, the constraints of such 'piggybackrides' have started to hurt the development of the space sector. These organisations also

usually need to launch smaller payloads, aligning with the capabilities of SSLVs.

Former ISRO chairman K Sivan had said in a 2019 press conference in the space agency's headquarters that "The SSLV is the smallest vehicle at 110-ton mass at ISRO. It will take only 72 hours to integrate, unlike the 70 days taken now for a launch vehicle. Only six people will be required to do the job, instead of 60 people. The entire job will be done in a very short time, and the cost [of a launch] will be only around Rs 30 crore. It will be an on-demand vehicle."

What are ISRO's other major rockets?
ISRO has earlier launched payloads using the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicles (PSLVs) and the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicles (GSLVs).

PSLVs are the third generation of Indian satellite launch vehicles, first used in 1994. More than 50 successful PSLV launches have taken place to date. It has also been called "the workhorse of ISRO" for consistently delivering various satellites into low earth orbits (less than 2,000 km in altitude) with a high success rate. The PSLV-XL can carry around 1,800 kg of payload.

On the other hand, GSLVs have been instrumental in launching communication satellites in the geosynchronous transfer orbit. Telecommunications satellites are usually placed in geostationary Earth orbit (GEO). It is a circular orbit 35,786 kilometres above Earth's equator.

GSLVs have a higher capacity because sending satellites deeper into space requires greater power. Therefore, cryogenic engines consisting of liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen are used as they provide greater thrust. The GSLV Mk-II can carry satellites weighing up to 2,200 kg, while the Mk-III has a capacity of up to 4,000 kg.

Questions in cosmic history

Images from the James Webb Space Telescope are puzzling — instead of newborn galaxies, the early phases of the Universe appear to be full of adult-sized galaxies. The standard model of the Universe had to be patched up earlier — could a more comprehensive rethink of cosmic history be in order now?

EXPERT EXPLAINS

BIMAN NATH

IMAGES FROM the largest and most powerful telescope in space have dazzled everyone, but they have left astronomers rather non-plussed. The jigsaw puzzle of the history of the Universe is getting more difficult than ever to solve with the pieces that the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) is gathering.

With its huge mirror — five times bigger than that of its predecessor, the Hubble Space Telescope — the JWST, which was launched on Christmas Day in 2021 and arrived at its destination, the Sun-Earth Lagrange point 2 in January 2022, has been peering at the early epochs in the history of the Universe, when the first galaxies had barely formed.

Its images were, however, very different from what astronomers had thought they would see.

They had expected to find newborn galaxies — instead, the early phases of the Universe appear to be full of adult-sized galaxies. And if that is not enough of a puzzle, the rate at which the Universe is expanding, as measured by the space telescope, appears to be at odds with other pieces of data.

Ways to measure expansion

The rate of expansion of the Universe has been a subject of scientific debate for quite some time. Two different methods of determining the rate have yielded results that differ by as much as 10%.

One method is based on phenomena in the early Universe — which implies events at a great distance, because the light we see from distant objects started its journey long time ago. The other method relies on local celestial objects — although "local" means a region spanning billions of light years.

Some stars vary their brightness in a periodic manner, and the duration of this change tells us something about how bright they really are. From this, one can figure out their distance and, in turn, how the Universe has been expanding.



James Webb Space Telescope's mesmerising picture of Carina Nebula, which is located approximately 8,500 light-years from Earth. NASA

The new space telescope was expected to nail the reason for the mismatch between the results obtained by the two methods. But its measurements seem to have only increased the discrepancy. Its deeper inspection of the local method of measurement gives a rate of expansion that is somewhat faster than that based on early Universe measurements.

The question is, which method is more reliable?

The early Universe method relies on a relic radiation from the primeval epochs, when the Universe was hot. The radiation has now cooled down as the Universe has expanded, and has become a microwave "hum" that pervades everything. If you make a fist, hundreds of photons from this relic radiation will pass through it every second!

A detailed analysis of this radiation can tell us how fast the Universe has been expanding. In other words, one method depends on how well we know our stars, and the other on how well we understand the history of the Universe.

'Adults in a kindergarten'

There have been problems with the early history of the Universe as well.

The space telescope was designed to peer

at toddler galaxies. Galaxies such as our Milky Way contain roughly a hundred billion stars. But around 13 billion years ago, when the Universe was less than a tenth of its current age, small clumps of matter began to gather together and create suitable conditions for lighting up the first stars.

Those baby galaxies were supposed to be relatively small. But the data coming out of JWST seem to show full-bodied galaxies at the dawn of the Universe! Most of them seem to contain billions of stars. It has been a mind-boggling as, say, finding a bunch of adults playing in a kindergarten.

Some galaxies that JWST has imaged and analysed date back to when the Universe was barely a few hundred million years old. Yet, they seem to contain billions of majestically bright stars. They could have been exceptions, but then such objects should be rare — which they are not. Even if they are to be treated as exceptions, one would have to come up with an explanation for such exuberant formation of stars at the dawn of the Universe. Although astronomers still have to find some explanation, even if one has to push the limits of astrophysical processes, some have begun to wonder if there was something wrong after all with our basic

ideas of the Universe.

Crossroads of knowledge

There is only one Universe. And we are a part of it. We can't change it, tweak it, or experiment with it. Which makes it unlike any other topic of research in science. Yet, beginning with the last century, equipped with Einstein's theory of gravitation and large telescopes, physicists made ambitious attempts to study and explain the Universe.

Over the decades, a 'standard model' of the Universe has emerged, which is appealing in its simplicity, and also flexible enough to accommodate complexity. Based on it, a history of the Universe has been sketched out — barring the very first moment, which remains elusive.

However, the so-called 'standard model' has needed quick fixes in more than one aspect. Faced with a mismatch between the inventory of matter and the observed pull of gravity, scientists have invented "dark matter", although no one has any idea what it is made of. The Universe also appears to be in a hurry while expanding. In order to explain this, we have brought in "dark energy" — but we remain clueless about its nature.

Some astronomers have begun to think that the gaps in our understanding may not be just a matter of details — and may warrant a comprehensive revision of what we think of the Universe. There have been occasions in the history of science when scientists have held on to existing ideas by introducing patchwork to accommodate contradictions between theory and observations. The Greeks for example, kept introducing complexities to the orbits of planets around the Earth, disregarding suggestions that their basic geocentric model of the Universe was wrong.

Scientists sometimes behave as though their conventional model is the only possibility, and ignore the conflicting measurements, until a tectonic shift changes everything. It is not possible to predict how, if at all, a paradigm shift will take place. Only time will tell if the puzzling results from the space telescope will be explained away by another patchwork, by inventing another "dark something", or if they will lead to a rethink of cosmic history.

The author is an astrophysicist at the Raman Research Institute, Bangalore.

Streetlights running all night make leaves inedible to insects: Study

ARTIFICIAL LIGHTS which run all night, such as streetlights, can make leaves grow so tough that insects cannot eat them, which could threaten urban food chains, according to a study published in the journal *Frontiers in Plant Science* earlier this month.

To carry out the study, the researchers focused on two common species of street trees in Beijing: Japanese pagoda and green ash trees. They picked 30 sampling sites on main roads that are usually lit by streetlights all night. The researchers then measured illuminance — the amount of light — at each site and collected around 5,500 leaves to evaluate the impact of light on their traits such as size, toughness, water content, and levels of nutrients and chemical defence compounds.

If the leaves were larger, it would mean that plants directed their resources (such as nutrients, water, and energy) to growth.

If the leaves were tougher and contained high levels of chemical defence compounds like tannins, it would indicate that the resources were allocated for defence.

The researchers observed that for both species of trees, the higher the levels of illuminance, the tougher the leaves. Moreover, the tougher the leaves, the less evidence of insects eating them.

They also noted that artificial lights altered the levels of nutrients and chemical defence compounds in the leaves that were analysed.

According to the study, this could be a bad sign for the ecosystem. Shuang Zhang, co-author of the study, told *The Guardian* in an interview: "Lower levels of herbivory imply lower abundances of herbivorous insects, which could in turn result in lower abundances of predatory insects, insect-eating birds, and so on."

ALIND CHAUHAN



Jet went bust, why Goibibo must issue refund

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM

NEW DELHI, AUGUST 16

A FAMILY of three had to abandon their travel plans to Canada after Jet Airways went bankrupt and ceased operations in April 2019. Five years later, the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (National Commission) ordered Goibibo, the online travel agency through which the tickets were booked, to issue a refund.

Chronology of the case

The Jaiswal family, which had planned to fly from Delhi to Edmonton, Canada, in October 2019, approached Goibibo multiple times for a refund of the ticket amount (Rs 1,83,140), and even served a legal notice on the company with their demand.

After failing in their efforts, the Jaiswals filed a complaint with the District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission, Moga (District Commission), saying Goibibo's actions amounted to deficiency of service and unfair trade practices, which

are punishable offences under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019.

The District Commission on June 7, 2022, directed the travel agency to refund the ticket amount with interest at the rate of 8% per annum from the date the tickets were booked. Goibibo appealed this order before the State Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (State Commission). After the appeal was rejected on August 17, 2023, Goibibo approached the National Commission.

Competing claims

Goibibo argued before the National Commission that the company was "merely a facilitator between consumer and service provider" and had "nothing to do with the entire dispute" as it had discharged its obligation after booking the tickets.

It argued that the original complaint should have been filed against Jet Airways instead, relying on the case of *Ajay Travels v Pulak Jain and Ors* (2019) to substantiate these arguments.

In this 2019 case, the National Commission had dealt with a situation where two doctors missed an exam after their Jet Airways flight was rescheduled. The court had held that the travel agency — Ajay Travels — was "only an agent of Jet Airways for the purpose of booking the tickets", and that there was "no obligation on cast to intimate the change in the time of the flights to the complainants".

The Jaiswals on the other hand argued that Goibibo's guidelines stated that they would manage the refund of the tickets in case of a flight cancellation. They said that "there is no communication between the respondents/complainants [Goibibo] and Jet Airways regarding the tickets which were purchased".

What Commission ruled

Like the State Commission before it, the National Commission referred to the fine print in the "Goibibo's online flight booking policy" to arrive at its decision. On "Refunds", the policy states: "It is mandatory to contact Goibibo for all refunds, as the air-

line will not be able to refund your tickets booked at www.goibibo.com."

The National Commission also referred to a circular issued by Jet Airways which said that in cases where tickets are booked through a travel agent or an online aggregator, "customers should claim refunds from" the travel agent or travel aggregator as applicable."

The National Commission agreed with the State Commission's "well reasoned order". The State Commission had held that Goibibo "has failed to produce any cogent and convincing documents regarding the fact that they passed that payment of Jet Airways and Jet Airways was to refund the same. Without the relevant evidence they cannot escape from their liability for the payment which is received by them".

The State Commission had also observed that "The appellant-Goibibo may be an intermediary but they are also a commission agent and they are not giving their services as charity... Goibibo cannot escape from their responsibility in case bookings are cancelled, and they are bound to refund the amount received by them from the consumers."

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Why scarce rainfall restricted the passage of ships through Panama Canal

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 16

THE FIRST ship passed through the Panama Canal in August 1914. One hundred and ten years later, one of the most important shipping lanes in the world faces an existential threat from climate change.

The 82-km canal, one of history's greatest engineering feats, cuts through the Isthmus of Panama in Central America, shortening the voyage between New York on the Atlantic Ocean to San Francisco on the Pacific by about 12,600 km.

At least 36-38 ships pass through the canal every day on average. Last December however, traffic fell to 22 ships a day, with more than 160 stuck in anchor or either end of the canal. The reason: following a drought, the level of Lake Gatun, the artificial water reservoir that is vital to the operation of the canal system, fell significantly.

Traffic has since been restored to more than 35 ships a day, but many experts fear this could be only a temporary respite. How does the Panama Canal work?

Water elevators

The canal is not a simple channel between two larger water bodies — it is a highly-engineered system of locks and elevators to carry ships across.

The system is needed because the Pacific at the canal's southern end is slightly higher than the Atlantic on the other end. This means that a ship that enters the canal from the north must gain elevation during its journey. This is achieved using a lock system which lifts and drops vessels to the required sea level at each end of the canal.

The locks act as water elevators that are flooded or drained to help ships gain or lose elevation respectively. The three sets of locks — 12 locks in all — are serviced using artificial lakes and channels. Here's how a set of locks works.

■ The ship approaches the first, lowest chamber of a lock, which lies at sea level.
■ The gate is opened to allow the ship into the chamber, and shut behind it.
■ The valve between the first and second chamber (at a higher elevation) is opened to



raise the level of water in the first chamber;

■ Once the water level is equalised, the gate between the chambers is opened, and the ship enters the next chamber. The process is repeated to gain elevation, and the opposite process is used to lower the vessel. Ships entering from the Atlantic side gain 26 m in elevation at Lake Gatun, before losing some elevation closer

to the Pacific side. (See illustration)

almost 200 million litres of water. Every day, the canal uses two and a half times the volume of water consumed by the 8 million residents of New York City.

Last year, less water in Lake Gatun meant fewer ships could pass through the canal every day, and so many that did make the passage could do so only after cutting their cargo load. While water from the oceans can be used to work the system of locks, this increases the salinity of Lake Gatun, which is also the source of drinking water for more than half of Panama's 4.4 million people.

Better rainfall has led to the situation improving this year. However, experts caution that the problem remains. "Rain not only washes the streets, it washes our minds and we think the problem is gone," Carlos Uribe, president of SSA International, which operates shipping terminals around the world, including at the Panama Canal, told *The NYT*. "The problem of water is a permanent one."

Falling water level

Most of the water needed to facilitate the passage of ships through the system of locks is supplied from Lake Gatun by force of gravity (no pumps are needed).

According to a report by *The New York Times*, the passage of a single ship requires

"Historically there has been a [rainfall] shortage on average once every 20 years due to major El Niño events. In the last 26 years this is the third major rainfall deficit. So it seems that something is changing our rainfall patterns." Steven Paton, climate change expert at the Panama-based Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, told *The Guardian* in 2023. "What happened last year statistically 'has no analogue in the previous 100 years of data', he said.

A contentious solution

The Panama Canal authorities have proposed to create a second source of water for the canal by damming the Rio Indio river. Last month, Panama's Supreme Court struck down a law that made the river untouchable, opening the doors for the construction of a \$1.6 billion dam that is projected to fix the problem for at least the next 50 years.

But the dam's reservoir will also flood the homes of about 2,000 predominantly poor people. "They want to relocate us, but we don't think that way," Olegario Hernandez, one of the many people who will be displaced by the Rio Indio dam, told *The NYT*. "There's no place better."

the hindu businessline.

SATURDAY • AUGUST 17, 2024

On the slow lane

India Inc Q1 results provide little fuel for market rally

India Inc's earnings juggernaut, which took off after Covid, is showing signs of losing speed. After strong double-digit growth from FY21 to FY24, profit growth has dwindled to low single digits in Q1 FY25. An analysis of results from over 1,715 companies for April-June 2024 shows their revenues expanding by 8.4 per cent compared to 10.1 per cent, 7.1 per cent and 6.2 per cent in the previous three quarters. This could be explained by slower decision-making during the general elections.



Even the lower revenue growth did not trickle down to the bottom-line. Growth in net profits (adjusted for one-off items) slowed to an anaemic 1.6 per cent in Q1 FY25, from 16 per cent, 24 per cent and 52 per cent in the previous three quarters. A surge in prices of fuel, metals and industrial feedstock led to a spike in production and operating costs this quarter, denting profit growth. The sectoral performance offers pointers to uneven growth in the economy. Banking provided a big lift to the overall numbers, with total income expanding at over 22 per cent and profits at 14 per cent. The rest did not measure up. Engines of the core economy such as steel, cement and metals saw 2-6 per cent contraction in sales. Sectors that are proxies for fixed investments such as realty (16 per cent growth in sales), capital goods (14 per cent), infrastructure (9 per cent) grew much slower than the previous quarter too. If this was an account of pause in decision-making due to the general elections, one can expect a pick-up this quarter onwards.

More worrying is consumer-facing sectors displaying a mixed trend. Essentials such as FMCGs, retail trade, apparel, healthcare, etc., managed a slight pickup in revenue and profit growth, as the rural consumer loosened her purse strings. Sustainance of this growth would depend on the monsoon doing better this year. But discretionary spending which has been powering consumption since Covid, seems to be stalling now. Hospitality, e-commerce, alcohol, aviation and entertainment saw 8-10 percentage point dip in sales growth. Profit growth across sectors was also sharply polarised with declines in refineries, steel, metals and oil and gas, only partly offset by strong growth in logistics, textiles, capital goods, durables and construction. After flaring up in April/May 2024, prices of natural gas, crude oil and metals cooled off in July. But hostilities in the Middle-East can stoke these prices. This casts doubts on whether margins and earnings growth can revert to FY24 levels.

Overall, the earnings report card for Q1 does not provide fuel for the stock market even to sustain at current levels, forget moving higher. The Nifty50 price earnings (PE) of 23 is beginning to look out of sync with the likely profit growth this year. The broader universe of small- and mid-cap stocks is looking positively frothy with the Nifty500 PE at 26. Analysts have been pegging their Nifty targets to earnings growth of at least 10 per cent for FY25, but Q1 numbers make them look lofty.

FROM THE VIEWROOM.

India's Olympic challenge

Anjana PV

The recently concluded Paris Olympics saw the Indian contingent return with six medals, sparking a debate on the effectiveness of the training and funding provided to the athletes. The Ministry of Sports and Sports Authority of India reported an expenditure of ₹470 crore across 16 disciplines for athlete training.

Despite Neeraj Chopra securing a silver medal following his gold in Tokyo 2020, and Manu Bhaker winning two bronze medals in shooting, as well as a bronze from the hockey team, several disciplines, including badminton and weightlifting, fell short of expectations. India's performance in badminton was particularly disappointing, with no medals won, and athletes like Mirabai Chanu narrowly missing the podium with a fourth-place finish in weightlifting.

A particularly disheartening moment came when Vinesh Phogat was disqualified from the

women's 50 kg wrestling category after being 100 gm overweight before the finals. Although Phogat appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Paris for a joint silver, her petition was dismissed. India's overall ranking, 71st out of 84 countries, highlights the discrepancy between investment and outcomes.

However, the rise of new stars such as Aman Sehrawat, Sarabjot Singh, and Swapnil Kusale offers a glimmer of hope and suggests that India is on the right track in nurturing young talent. The effectiveness of the Khelo India scheme was evident, with 28 of the 117 athletes representing India in Paris being Khelo India athletes. Despite the encouraging signs, India's total tally of 41 Olympic medals since its debut in 1900 is a stark reminder of the need for introspection and strategic planning. With a population of over 1.4 billion, it is crucial to analyse why India struggles to secure more medals at the Olympics and how to improve its global standing in sports.

CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICH MISHRA

A non-asked question after successive oil and gas exploration rounds put on offer by the government has been: Why some of the big global giants, particularly American, have been missing from the scene? The response has been that the players want a policy system that is not tough on the explorer as it is a high-risk business.

On August 5, 'The Oilfields Regulation and Development (Amendment) Bill, 2024' was introduced in the Rajya Sabha amending the Oilfields (Regulation and Development) Act, 1948, which regulates the exploration and extraction of natural gas and oil. The Act is aimed at strengthening petroleum operations through rules framed for monitoring aspects like grants of leases or licences, extension and renewal, sharing of facility and infrastructure, dispute resolution, and so on.

The Bill proposes to address many long-pending areas requiring improvement and is expected to encourage FDI as well as boost the confidence of upstream players. It has introduced proposals in new and critical areas, such as greening upstream value chain, combined development of subsurface and surface energy sources, etc.

But the question is why now? Why wasn't it done when the exploration policy had transitioned from New Exploration Licensing Policy (NELP) to Hydrocarbon Exploration and Licensing Policy (HELP)? Besides, the Bill proposes that the changes will be effective prospectively, so what happens to the existing producing assets?

Let us look at some key changes. To begin with, the definition of mineral oils has been expanded. While the Act defines mineral oils to include petroleum and natural gas, the Bill proposes to expand the definition to include: any naturally occurring hydrocarbon, coal bed methane, and shale gas/oil. It clarifies that mineral oils will not include coal, lignite or helium. This puts to rest the past debates and is in sync with Uniform Licensing Policy.

The Bill has also introduced the concept of petroleum lease. The Act provides for a mining lease — for various activities such as exploration, prospecting, production, making merchantable, and disposal of mineral oils. The Bill replaces the mining lease with a petroleum lease, though it covers similar set of activities. However, existing mining leases granted under the Act will continue to be valid.

Expanding the scope of the rule-making powers of the Central Government, the Bill proposes that

Oil exploration space set for churn



New Bill delves into many critical areas and should help attract FDI in the sector. But there's uncertainty on extension of contract terms for existing projects

rules can also be made on: merger and combination of petroleum leases, sharing of production and processing facilities, obligations of lessees towards protecting environment and reducing emissions, and alternative mechanisms for resolving disputes in relation to the grant of petroleum leases. Thus, bringing in further clarity and proposing to avoid future litigation arising out of the said situations. It also talks about decriminalisation of offences. The Act provides that violation of rules will be punishable with imprisonment up to six months, a fine of ₹1,000 or both. The Bill envisages that the above offence will be punishable with a penalty of ₹25 lakh. It has also added the following offences — undertaking activities related to mineral oils such as exploring, prospecting, and production without a valid lease, and non-payment of royalty — punishable with a penalty of ₹25 lakh. Getting together, it stipulates that continued

Since the Bill once passed and adopted will be implemented prospectively, this would mean the exploration business in India will operate again in different regimes.

violation for all offences will attract a penalty of up to ₹10 lakh daily.

For adjudication of penalties, it provides that the Central Government will appoint an officer of the rank of Joint Secretary or above. Appeals against the decisions of the Adjudicating Authority will lie before the Appellate Tribunal specified in the Petroleum and Natural Gas Board Regulatory Board Act, 2006. The 2006 Act designates the Appellate Tribunal for Electricity, constituted under the Electricity Act, 2003, as the Appellate Tribunal. All these moves guarantee policy stability and also indicate easier clearances of projects as well as of any dispute resolution.

FRAMING OF RULES

While these sound good, the players and industry observers would like to see how the rules are made to implement these changes.

Critics say that while the move appears positive, it will also depend on the awards under consideration. The shift from mining lease to petroleum lease is significant as the former was for a particular mining activity and concerns were more with regard to safety. The proposed definition is more elaborate and clearly defines that activities which will come under petroleum lease.

But it remains to be seen whether it

will subsequently talk about extension of lease or licence on the same terms and conditions under which the contract would have been signed for the purpose.

The extension provision as demanded by the industry during the stakeholders consultations had two issues — extension till the period of commercial production; and terms and conditions including fiscal regime should be the same as of original period.

Since the Bill once passed and adopted will be implemented prospectively, this would mean the exploration business in India will operate again in different regimes.

Overall, most industry watchers see this as a way to lure the larger global players into India's exploration space and that it would bring in certain kind of stability. But since it is silent on extension of the contract terms, it does leave room for uncertainty.

In exploration activity extensions are granted depending on the prevailing situation and reason due to which the explorer has not been able to complete the task. However, if the extension is not granted on the same terms then it will create uncertainty and the explorers may not like to take these risks.

While one would say better late than never, the devil is in detail and how exactly the rules are worded and implemented will decide the success or failure of these proposed moves.

What does a Kamala Harris presidency mean?

With Democrats leading in the polls, the Vice President must spell out the party's stance on economic policy, immigration

Sridhar Krishnaswami

By the third week of August the Democratic National Convention will be over in Chicago minus perhaps the rancour had Joe Biden stayed on the ticket. All talk of a fractured party and a contested Convention literally evaporated the moment Biden pulled out and Vice President Kamala Harris established herself as the undisputed candidate. Even a few murmuring party elders quickly fell in line, with nearly everyone simply in awe with the kind of money that was raised, not just from traditional donors but first-timers.

Democrats were not the only ones stunned at the dramatic rise of Harris. The campaign of Donald Trump is still looking for ways to get over the shock. The former President's usual tactic of hearing insults on his opponent is not working. Seasoned Republicans are asking Trump to change his strategy and quickly at that. Strategists of the Grand Old Party are desperately asking the former President to get over the

obsession with crowd size at Harris' campaign rallies — which he believes is the handiwork of artificial intelligence — and get down to issues that matter.

The Harris campaign is undoubtedly delighted where it is, barely 80 days to go for the November 5 showdown. National polls are showing the top Democrat ahead of Trump and has taken the lead in most or all of the seven battleground states. And the "bounce" in the aftermath of the Democrats' Convention is to be seen.

CHEAP TACTICS

There is some talk of the Republicans hitting the panic button seeing Trump faltering at the switch and indulging in cheap attacks or escalating fake news to the point of ridicule. The former President is lashing out at Harris as being solely responsible for all those lunatics, rapists and drug dealers somehow impacting the Presidential elections.

What goes around comes around. For a long time the Trump campaign was making the case of Biden's mumbling, fumbling reflecting the President's



MUCH TO DO. Kamala Harris must make clear what she really stands for

mental acuity. Now listening to Trump's rants many Republicans are quietly asking whether the former President has lost his marbles. In fact, Trump has gone to the extent of saying that Biden would spring a surprise by getting back on the Democratic ticket — all this after the "coup" theory that Harris et al pulled in getting Biden out of the way! And the fear is whipped up, of what could happen if Trump loses.

Getting past laughs and giggles, there

is no doubt that Harris has work cut out for her: that is, in defining what she really stands for, quite apart from that of the Biden administration. In terms of economic policy and immigration,

Harris must define what her Presidency will be like for even Democrats to be comfortable. Casual remarks on social security and not taxing tips would be seen as borrowed ideas. How a Harris administration is going to deal with inflation and jobs on one hand and foreign policy issues pertaining to West Asia, Russia and China is of prime interest.

Former Republican Presidential contender Nikki Haley asked her party folks to "stop whining" about Harris and go after her positions. There is much at stake for Democrats: the party is banking on Harris to keep the 51-49 majority or better than in the Senate and get the House of Representatives back from the Republicans. All this can happen only if there is a clear agenda, not fancy memes and attack ads.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

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

Controlling inflation

This refers to "inflation" shouldn't exclude food' (August 16). The RBI's inflation targeting focuses on core inflation, excluding food and fuel, as it reflects persistent demand-side pressures that can be controlled using tools like the repo rate. Although inflation targeting addresses both demand-pull and cost-push factors, the RBI prioritises core inflation for its long-term impact. In contrast, food and fuel inflation are considered transitory, driven by supply-side factors like government spending, subsidies, and tax adjustments, which are more influenced by fiscal policies and beyond the RBI's control. Managing food and fuel inflation may require greater fiscal policy involvement, especially with

geopolitical factors driving price fluctuations. Given the spillover of rising food prices into core inflation, it's time for the RBI to also consider headline inflation when shaping monetary policy, as these shocks are no longer temporary. Rather than placing the entire burden of controlling inflation on the RBI, it is imperative that the government plays a more active role in addressing inflationary pressures through appropriate fiscal measures.

Srinivas Velamuri

Chennai

Thrust of 'FM' to review PSBs

This refers to 'FM to review PSBs' performance on August 13' (August 16). While public sector banks (PSBs) need to be given credit for their stellar performance, it is

doubtful whether they have headed to the Finance Minister's appeal that they concentrate on fraud prevention pertaining to both large corporate frauds and willful defaults. Also, it is time PSBs did away with penalty for not maintaining 'minimum balance', passed on the benefit of better rates to small deposits, and focused on the core concepts of banking.

Jose Abraham

Vikom, Kerala

Curbing household debt

This refers to 'Is our household debt high or low?' (August 16). People know their level of income and also future earning capacity, and hence it is imperative that they keep their expenses under control. Educational expenses consume a major portion

of their nominal income. Most people want to educate their children in popular schools and colleges, as they are under the illusion that 'high costs mean high quality'. Often, over-ambitious households are the ones that are indebted. Of course, if the state provides quality education and private institutions are also not avaricious, then there could be financial relief for the poor and the salaried.

S Ramakrishnasayee

Chennai

Ease the path for MSMEs

This is with reference to 'Voices of MSMEs remain unaddressed' (August 16). Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) face numerous challenges that hinder

their sustainability. Understanding these challenges is necessary for policymakers, business owners and stakeholders to formulate effective strategies and support mechanisms. The government should play a critical role in creating an environment that is favourable to skill development. Financial incentives like subsidies and tax breaks can motivate MSMEs. The challenges posed by compliance procedures, along with low resources and capacity, also affect MSMEs. The compliance burden has many facets — from tax obligations to labour laws and environmental regulations. Addressing these comprehensively is vital for the sustenance of MSMEs.

P Sundara Pandian

Vivekanagar, TN

Rise above petty politics to usher in Viksit Bharat

In his 98 minutes long Independence Day address to the nation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched upon several topics, right from freedom fighters, corruption, growth of India over years, atrocities against women and the current unrest in Bangladesh. "We are proud that we carry the blood of 40 crore people who had uprooted the colonial rule from India. Today, we are 140 crore people, if we resolve and move together in one direction, then we can become 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047 by overcoming all obstacles in the way. Viksit Bharat should not remain a mere slogan," he said in an impassioned plea to the citizenry of

India. True, but then to make it a reality, a major change in the mindset of the political parties is must. There should be less of slugfest between the ruling party and the opposition both at the central and state levels. Not just the governments, even the industry has a major role to play in it. It is not enough for trade organisations to simply appreciate what the PM said and the vision outlined by him to transform India into a global manufacturing hub. It requires action on further improving ease of business and reducing the cost of doing business in the country while adhering to sustainability objectives. All this requires extra

firepower to propel the country in its efforts to scale up our position as a global leader across various sectors of the economy. While the industry should take up innovation and research on mission mode to galvanise the country towards becoming a global leader, the opposition should also rise above petty political considerations, go in for total reinvention by separating politics from issues related to national development. They need to play a more serious role in policy matters. Instead of slamming the government day in and day out, they should participate in discussions related to develop-

mental policies of the government, point the flaws and shortcomings. They should motivate the youth to be proactive and give greater importance for skill development and guide them. "Tu Tu Mein Mein," on smaller issues can continue, but the focus of opposition should not remain confined only towards such acts or stalling proceedings of the Parliament and wasting public time and money. Flexing biceps will not help. They need to go. The industry on its part should not keep on making demands beyond a limit. At least, the top 10% of the industrialists should set an example of

adopting some of the bottom 20% people and take up the responsibility of bringing change in their lives. Instead of piecemeal CSR programmes, they can adopt villages or group of families and take up the responsibility of handholding so that change can begin at the grassroots level at various levels including agriculture which is the backbone of the country. If the government, the industry, the opposition parties at the national and state level do not think on these lines and if they continue to indulge in attacking each other, the danger of Viksit Bharat remaining a mere slogan cannot be ruled out.

LETTERS

'Secular' pitch to uniform civil code
 In his Independence Day address to the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort, Prime Minister has made a pitch for a 'secular civil code' without giving enough indication that he is willing to repudiate Hindu majoritarianism and Hindu nationalism and embrace secularism and Indian nationalism. Usually, he and other Hinduva proponents don't use the term 'secular' as freely as proponents of secularism do. It sticks in their throat for whatever reason. The replacement of the word 'uniform' with 'secular' before 'civil code' is significant in the present political situation. It could be his way of securing the support of parties like the JD(U) and the NDP for the impactful legislation and downplaying it as part of the RSS Hindutva agenda.
 G David Milton, Maruthanode, TN

PM said secular civil code is the need of the hour. In a secular country any code that demotes the identity of any religion loses its right to be called secular. Moreover, the need of the hour is rescuing the unemployed youth by providing employment, relieving the 81 crore poor who are dependent on free ration, giving a relentless war against corruption at every level. Whereas the Electoral bonds exposed the quid pro quo nature of donations to the ruling party which speaks volumes about efforts to legalise corruption instead of rooting out corruption.
 A G Rajitham, Anantapur

IN 2014, the PM urged parents to hold their sons to the same standards as their daughters. Unfortunately, societal attitudes remain unchanged. Women and girls continue to face excessive scrutiny, especially when working late. Discrimination persists, and political parties often fail to act collectively against violence toward women. Despite claiming solidarity, parties frequently politicize these issues instead of uniting in genuine action. In Kolkata and elsewhere, a unified stance against such atrocities is lacking. It's essential for society to come together, regardless of political affiliations, to ensure the safety and rights of women.
 N Nagayyasan, Hyderabad

MODI has failed to perform well as PM of India. He did well as PM in his first two terms, but in the third term he lost confidence of the people. Rahul Gandhi gained confidence of his alliance parties and he is the right candidate to rule the country. NDA and BJP is facing anti incumbency wave throughout the country and Modi should hold the responsibility for it and he should resign. INDIA bloc should vote JD(U) and TDP to form the government at the center.
 VRK Valmukey, Hyderabad

Lessons for India from Paris Olympics
 Paris Olympics have left India in disappointment. The medal tally has gone down and also without a single gold than that of previous Tokyo Olympics. The five medal winners had shown a great deal of professionalism and did it. That Vincent Phogat, the real fighter for justice in sports world being disqualified on technical grounds in final bout stage is a great dampener of spirit for sport lovers in India. Anyway India have many lessons to learn for Paris Olympics. There should be all-out efforts to increase its pool of world-class players.
 Dr V G Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

Hindenburg agenda to weaken economy
 The opposition Congress has announced a nationwide agitation from 22nd August, over US short seller Hindenburg's latest report claiming a nexus between the SEBI chairperson and the Adani group. Congress wants the removal of SEBI chairperson Madhabi Buch, demanding a JPC probe. This is not the first time Hindenburg has come out with such a story to disrupt the Indian stock market, involving Adani group. In fact, this has become a pattern with Hindenburg lending arsenal to the INDI group, to engage in anti-government activities to destabilise and weaken the economy.
 K V Raghunam, Wayanad

Make India organic food basket of world
 PM Modi underscored the need for transformative reforms in India's agricultural sector, particularly by championing organic farming. He highlighted the government's initiatives to enhance the livelihoods of farmers through improved access to loans, advanced technology, and better valuation of their produce. He expressed a vision of India becoming the "organic food basket of the world," aligning with a broader commitment to sustainability and environmental stewardship. His remarks suggest a future where the agricultural sector is integral to India's journey towards sustainable growth and prosperity.
 Dr Krishna Kumar Vepakomma, Hyderabad

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BENGALURU ONLINE

2,000 new vehicles hitting Bengaluru roads every day

BENGALURU: One lakh vehicles come and go to Bangalore every day. Traffic congestion problem has increased by 20 percent in the last two months. Thus the number of vehicles has increased but it may take 15 minutes to cross the small signal in Bangalore. IISC experts have prepared a report that it takes 22 minutes to cross the big signal. The number of vehicles is increasing beyond the capacity of Bangalore roads.

Bangalore is the 2nd most congested city in the country. If the number of vehicles increases further, Bangalore will become an air polluted city like Delhi. Bangalore's current roads are fit for only 50 lakh vehicles. But now the number of vehicles in the capital has exceeded the limit. 2 lakh new vehicles will be added to the city in the next four months.

Till 31 March 2024, over 25,13,294 lakh cars, and 78,33,390 lakh bikes were on the road in Bangalore, and a total of 1,03,46,684 crore cars and bikes were registered.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Have an ear to the ground



FOR THE PEOPLE WITH THE PEOPLE
 LAXMA VINAYAK SUBRAMANIAN

THE institution of District Collector was born in 1772 by an official order of Governor General Lord Warren Hastings. District has always been most convenient administrative unit. In 1923, the Prime Minister of United Kingdom, Lloyd George, described the British civil service as steel frame. We know that appointments to Indian civil services were undertaken under the Government of India Act 1858. It is members of this elite service that were going as the District Collectors and their role then was only regulatory that too in defence of British crown and to exert pressure on the Indian subjects to get their compliance. India lives in its districts. District, therefore, became the crucial unit of administration. Over the last three centuries, the place of district administration in the hierarchy of authority remained unchanged. Several attempts were unsuccessfully made in independent India to jettison the institution and the expression of 'Collector' citing its colonial past. Even the conclusion of Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2005) headed by Veerappa Moily examined this issue whether there is any need to do so for the office of District Collector in

its present form. In this exercise, the commission submitted in all 14 reports. In its report on 'local government', the commission made the following observation. "He is the functionary who would provide overall leadership in the district in the task of nation-building. Hence, the Collector would remain a key figure in the scheme of administration at the field level." It is, therefore, pertinent for governments to give all the training opportunities that are available to young recruits to enable them to take the mantle of District Collector in a capable manner. 'Palampur' was the name of this district before the reign of Nizam. The age-old sobriquet of the workers from the district was 'Palampur labour'. Since the irrigated area was so sparse, a large number of households depended on monsoon for their farming success. They have few tanks in the district that enabled a single crop of paddy. So, after harvesting of paddy, most of these families migrated to urban areas or to project sites where manpower requirement was huge. I was told that these labourers would spread all over the country, leaving behind the old and children. I prepared a project report to create wage employment in the district and forwarded it to the ministry of rural development for funding. Around same time, Sandhu Bar was posted to the district as Joint Director of Agricul-



District Collector, a key figure in the scheme of administration at the field level, provides overall leadership in the district in the task of nation-building. It is, therefore, pertinent for governments to give all the training opportunities that are available to young recruits to enable them to take the mantle of District Collector in a capable manner. He coordinates between different departments and engages civil society, too, in rolling out programmes. Two experiences are related here to drive home the point

ture. It goes to his credit that he started galvanising his staff in a fitting way and helped in preparing a vision document for 10 years to improve agricultural yields and to contribute to improving the economic status of those families. He actively collaborated with campus of agricultural university at Palern. This vision document was very helpful to prepare district credit plan by the lead bank officer, besides the help it rendered in creating training programmes. He took initiatives to enrich soil with distribution of bio-green algae. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) played an important role in reaching benefits of development planning to the needy besides empowering them. There were

more than 30 to 40 of them spread over the district. Several of them received grants from overseas and were 'well off'. It was a task to know about these organisations. DRDA PD was in the know of things, though not in any substantial way. In a conversation with an NGO called 'Villages in Partnership' (VIP) ably led by Dr T Nagendra Swamy, I realised that the NGOs were desiring to have interaction and association with government departments. We soon formed an association and called it 'Confederation of Voluntary Organisations of Mahabubnagar (COVOM)'. It was agreed that on a day fixed every month, the Collector and his team of district officers would visit an NGO and spend time with that NGO. In

that interaction between the NGOs and the government, the host NGO would make a presentation of their activities in forenoon. Then after a common (frugal) meal, all of us would visit the areas of activities of the host NGO. The interaction was improving awareness both in NGOs and in government officers including Collector. The haunting suspicions in the air were also dispipated due to this regular interaction. Another exciting programme that I fondly recollect was the total literacy campaign (TLC) that we launched in the district. Special mention must be made of Lakshmidhar Misra, IAS, National Mission Director, who was spearheading this programme in an admirable manner. Several districts like Chittoor, Visakhapatnam, Kurnoor, Kadapa, Medak, Hyderabad etc., took up the programme. My good friend M Nagaraja, the Collector of Chittoor, spoke to me and motivated me to prepare a proposal. I was scared to even think of attempting per cent literacy having the lowest literacy levels in the state. But I yielded to peer pressure. In conformity with the ground reality, I proposed to take up the campaign in two municipal areas of Wanaparthy and Narayanpet and in seven rural mandals. I got proposals ready but could not go to the meeting in Delhi due to some law and order problems that suddenly erupted. Was Appa Rao as the Collec-

US green groups cheer wind, solar power overtaking coal

JESSICA CORRETT

US climate advocates this week are celebrating new federal data that show wind and solar have generated more power than coal during the first seven months of 2024 and are on track to do so for the rest of the calendar year. "This is the kind of news we need," Food & Water Watch said of the data on social media. "Ensuring a livable climate for all depends on us making a swift and just transition to clean energy like wind and solar."

The group shared reporting from E&E News, which noted that "the milestone had been long expected due to a steady stream of coal plant retirements and the rapid growth of wind and solar. Last year, wind and solar outpaced coal through May before the fossil fuel eventually overtook the pair when power demand surged in the summer." Renewables' growth has been driven by a surge in solar production over the last year, the news outlet continued. "The 118 terawatt-hours generated by utility-scale solar facilities through the end of July represented a 36% increase from the same time period last year, according to preliminary US Energy Information Administration figures. Wind production was 275 TWh, up 8% over 2023 levels. Renewables' combined production of 393 TWh outpaced coal generation of 388 TWh."

Sierra Club executive director Ben Jealous said in a statement on Wednesday that "wind and solar energy has long been the most cost-effective choice for utilities, but now it has also outpaced coal generation as the top source of energy, further demonstrating that clean energy is critical to a reliable and affordable grid." "This historic milestone marks a significant win for clean energy advocates, for ratepayers, and for people and communities across the country that simply want to breathe clean air, drink safe water, and worry



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less about climate disasters like floods and wildfires," Jealous continued. "For decades, the Sierra Club has fought to move America Beyond Coal and onto a clean, reliable, and affordable grid," he added. "To date, the Beyond Coal campaign has secured the retirement of 385 coal plants and counting, and on August 16th, we celebrate the

two-year anniversary of the Inflation Reduction Act, which made historic investments in clean energy and clean energy jobs. Together, families across the country are saving money, enjoying good paying jobs, breathing clean air, and drinking safe water."

Along with celebrating the federal legislation signed in 2022 by President Joe Biden, Sierra Club highlighted a state law signed the previous year by Democratic Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker. "Illinoisans should be proud of the work we've done to close our largest coal plants and leverage the power of clean energy to drive economic growth while reducing pollution that's harmful to public health and our planet," said Jack Darin, director of the Sierra Club's state chapter. "Thanks to the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act of 2021, Illinois workers are now building the clean energy that is replacing old, dirty fossil fuels and bringing a brighter future to communities across our state."

Celebrations over the "major power mile-

stone" come as Americans prepare for a November presidential election in which Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz—who are endorsed by a range of climate groups—are set to face former Big Oil-backed former Republican President Donald Trump and US Sen. JD Vance (R-Ohio).

During an April event in Florida, Trump told fossil fuel executives that if they invested just \$1 billion into his campaign, he would gut the Biden-Harris administration's climate regulations. The Washington Post reported on Tuesday that billionaire Continental Resources founder then "called other oil executives and encouraged them to attend fundraisers and open their wallets." While Hamm is reportedly sharing Big Oil's priorities with the Trump-Vance team, their approach can be summed up by a phrase they've said on the campaign trail: "drill, baby, drill."

Although the Republican candidates have tried to distance themselves by the Heritage Foundation-led Project 2025, the right-wing policy agenda—crafted by many Trump allies—has also alarmed climate campaigners.

Noting the new data, Antonia Juhan, a senior researcher on fossil fuels at Human Rights Watch, said Tuesday: "This transformation is due in large part to federal government policy which has specifically incentivized renewable energy development and deployment and increased regulation on the harms of fossil fuels. All of which are specifically targeted for removal in Project 2025."

As Common Dreams reported earlier Wednesday, an analysis from the think tank Energy Innovation shows that a GOP administration implementing the Project 2025 plan would increase US greenhouse gas emissions by 2.7 billion metric tons by 2030 compared to the current trajectory.

(<https://www.commondreams.org/>)

