



A wobbly walk

India did well to assert its ties with Russia, but the optics were bad

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Moscow visit was billed as his first "stand-alone" visit during this tenure, with officials laying stress on the purely "bilateral" framework. However, while the visit had strong bilateral components, its impact has been felt globally, with unprecedented criticism from Kyiv and Washington on its timing and optics. On the bilateral front, the visit, his first to Russia since 2019, and the first "annual" summit in three years, resulted in a number of outcomes. There was a reaffirmation of India-Russia ties as well as Mr. Modi's obvious personal rapport with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Mr. Modi also received Russia's highest civilian award. He praised Mr. Putin's efforts to strengthen bilateral ties, that had appeared to be flagging, given the war in Ukraine, and growing Russia-China ties. In formal talks, the leaders focused on bettering the economic and trade relationship, which has often been a neglected part of the largely government-to-government engagements, and announced a bilateral trade target of \$100 billion by 2030, which should be easily met given India's massive increase in oil imports from Russia specially discounted due to western sanctions. Mr. Modi also won an assurance from Mr. Putin that Indian recruits enlisted in the Russian Army will be allowed to return to India. Unlike in the past, the visit lacked any announcements of military purchases that have been the mainstay of ties, due partially to Russian delays in supplies of deals already announced after the invasion of Ukraine and to also avoid international censure. Mr. Modi's statement that there was "no solution on the battlefield" to the conflict, as well as his decision to travel further to Vienna, were seen as attempts to balance the trip, his first since the conflict began.

In an increasingly polarised world, this was easier said than done, especially as Mr. Modi's visit happened even as Ukraine was hit by a devastating missile attack. There were also NATO, western alliance leaders and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy converging in Washington for a summit that was aimed, albeit unsuccessfully, at showing Russia's isolation. It is another matter that the stance reeks of hypocrisy, as the NATO countries have failed to show similar concerns over the killing of innocents in Gaza due to Israel's relentless bombardment. The U.S. State Department and Ukraine have been openly critical of Mr. Modi's visit, and New Delhi's task will be to limit the damage in ties with the U.S. and Europe. In the long term, India will have to assert its interests and convince the West that it is futile to force India to choose, or to push a country known for its independent stance, to become a camp follower in this conflict.

Crash course

There must be better monitoring of the road-worthiness of transport vehicles

On July 10, in Uttar Pradesh, a private double-decker bus collided with a milk tanker, killing 18 people. Local reports claimed the bus's insurance had not been renewed and that it lacked an alarm system to alert the driver if the bus drifted from its lane, among other issues. Should the State government's inquiry bear these details out, they will highlight the importance of the multidimensional nature of road safety, which banks on road and highway design, presence of roadside businesses, speed and access control, and visibility, among other factors, to protect lives. The details should also highlight the reluctance of municipal authorities and local bodies to scrutinise public and licensed private infrastructure until lives are lost. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, 1.71 lakh people died and 4.23 lakh were injured in 4.46 lakh road accidents in 2022. A 2023 IIT Delhi report estimated there were 11.3 road-accident deaths per lakh population in 2021, which, after accounting for official data inconsistencies and underreporting, is constitutive of a public health crisis. Speed control is particularly important: it is implicated in most deadly road accidents in the country. Following the bus accident, police also told news agencies the collision had flung passengers out of the bus. Public officials know how to control speed in urban and rural areas — with strategically placed speed-breakers and roundabouts and increased police monitoring, for example. Similarly, it should be clear which portions of the Automotive Industry Standards that the bus's condition at the time of the accident violated.

There are three ways forward. First, local authorities must enforce existing standards and have skilled personnel and proper equipment for this purpose. They must also be allowed to impose harsher penalties on transport service operators who fail to meet safety requirements. Municipal bodies must also be prevented from diluting standards painstakingly specified by engineers in order to, say, facilitate local businesses. Second, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways needs to collect and publish better, ideally complete, data on vehicle registrations, safety certificates, testing centres, criteria, and reports and audits. It also needs to improve the quality of data about injuries and deaths, both of which remain undercounted. Finally, there is a need for greater public awareness of how the health of transport vehicles is ascertained and for access to each vehicle's latest test report. This may be a bridge too far given both the generally complacent attitude towards quality control and unscrupulous operators' ability to escape sanction — but it remains the bridge that will have to be crossed.

The verdict of 2024, its amplified message

The final turnout in the 2024 general election (66.2%) is a clear indication of the continued interest in, engagement with and participation of the Indian voter in India's democratic processes. This has put to rest the initial and rather hurried speculation about the disenchantment of the Indian voter with Indian elections, going by the initial figures of a lower turnout. The turnout in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was only 1% lower when compared to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, but this was still the third highest turnout ever in an Indian national election.

An engagement with the electoral process
Voter turnout is the most robust indicator of voter's electoral participation, and the turnout figures for 2024 only indicate a high level of participation among Indian voters, more so among women voters. There were issues with regard to the schedule and the long duration of the election period. But, finally, voters braved the heat, set aside other important engagements and participated in the general election with great enthusiasm.

The enthusiasm shown by Indians for the 2024 election continued even after voting was over. There was keen interest in the exit poll predictions. That there was much debate among Indians on these on the evening of June 1, 2024, is a clear indication of this. The actual results — which were contrary to the exit poll estimates — resulted in continued discussion about the verdict and its fallout. This goes to indicate the intense and continued engagement of Indians with the electoral process. There is not even the smallest hint of any disenchantment with elections and the electoral process, despite anxieties about the reliability of the electronic voting machines (EVM), increasing defections from one party to another, the declining role of ideology in elections and the quality of representatives getting elected to Parliament, election after election. A Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) survey indicates 17% of Indians showing no trust in EVMs, while another 43% indicated some trust in it. Nearly 30% of Indians also mentioned decreased trust in EVMs.



Sanjay Kumar

a professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and a political commentator

The composition of the 18th Lok Sabha is a reflection of people's views on the various issues related to governance

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged as the single largest party but as it fell short of a majority, it formed the government along with its allies. Clearly, larger numbers of people are in support of the ruling BJP, but there is a plurality of opinion among Indians which the new government must take into considerations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi still remains far more popular when compared to any other leader, his popularity rating being 41% when compared to the Congress's Rahul Gandhi at 27%.

Some of the concerns, key issues

But in the Lokniti-CSDS survey, 28% of Indians mentioned that Mr. Modi's image has dented to a great extent. Another 33% mentioned that his image has dented to some extent due to the BJP's induction of leaders from various political parties which has tainted this image.

Findings of the Lokniti-CSDS survey clearly also indicate an anxiety about the nature of vindictive politics which has risen in the last few years. In the survey, 44% of people mentioned that Opposition leaders have been arrested due to political reasons but only 23% negated this view. In the survey, 67% of Indians also expressed the view that citizens should have the right to ask questions to their elected leaders; 20% did not hold this opinion. It is important to note that 58% of Indians believed that change of government is important for development of the country, while 32% said continuity of the same party in government was better for development. The importance of courts/the judiciary needs to be taken into account, as in the Lokniti-CSDS survey, 58% of Indians mentioned that courts are important in checking the powers of the government. Only 27% believed this may not be necessary. There was a strongly shared view (66%) that people should have the power to oppose the decisions of the government if necessary, while only 19% were against this view.

The verdict of 2024 has also indicated that issues of national pride, national identity, and national security are important. But at the same time, and equally important, are the day-to-day issues of the people such as unemployment and price rise which no political party can afford to ignore for long. The findings of the Lokniti-CSDS

survey indicate that unemployment and price rise were the twin issues of disenchantment with the Modi government; a large number of them also did not want this government to be re-elected. The BJP emerged as the single largest party but suffered a major setback in Uttar Pradesh, the State where the Ram Mandir was built and inaugurated with much pomp and show. This development is an indication of the mistake the BJP made in depending too much dependence on the issue of Hindutva at the cost of the bread and butter issues. The defeat of the BJP's candidate in the Faizabad constituency (Ayodhya) goes to strengthen this point further. The verdict of 2024 has indicated that there is a limit to identity politics, whether it is about caste or religion.

More or less an ideal democracy

In a functioning democracy, it is important to have a strong Opposition along with a stable and strong government. The verdict of 2024 resembles the true character of an ideal democracy. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has a majority in the Lok Sabha with 293 seats, with the BJP being the single largest party with 240 seats. The INDIA bloc/alliance has a strength of 234 MPs in the Lok Sabha with the Congress being the largest Opposition party with 99 seats.

The numbers in the 18th Lok Sabha are a reflection of people's views on various issues related to governance. In theory there could not be a better government than this in a functioning democracy, though we know there lies a difference between theory and practice, glimpses of which were seen in the tussle between the ruling coalition and the Opposition on the issue of election of the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha. There are many other issues which are likely to be a bone of contention between the ruling party and the Opposition. This writer only wishes that the views expressed by the people of India are taken seriously and both the ruling party and the Opposition work in tandem for the next five years, trying and resolving issues rather than complicating them.

The views expressed are personal

The PDS impact on household expenditure

The Public Distribution System (PDS) is an important social security programme in India. Its objective is to ensure food security. Today, up to 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population are eligible for subsidised foodgrains under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013. If the cost of consuming foodgrains from the PDS is subsidised, this then frees up resources for a household to spend on other items such as vegetables, milk, pulses, egg, fish, meat and other nutrient and protein-rich food items. It is an empirical question whether households indeed diversify their food consumption. With the release of data from the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES):2022-23, there will be renewed interest in the above line of inquiry, i.e., the impact of consumption of free food items from the PDS on expenditure on items other than foodgrains.

On representativeness

To the extent possible, the HCES:2022-23 canvassed information on food and non-food items received by households free of cost through various social welfare programmes. In the HCES:2022-23 report published by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and available on the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation website, there is detailed information on pages 15 to 18. The objective of the survey is not to provide precise estimates of the proportion of households receiving benefits under every scheme. In most cases, survey estimates of coverage of a programme will be lower than that suggested by the administrative data. A common conjecture in the literature on the PDS is inclusion error (when an ineligible household consumes from the PDS) and exclusion error (when an eligible household is not consuming foodgrains from the PDS). For this purpose, researchers will compare the proportion of households consuming PDS items with the coverage under the NFSA. While care should be exercised in terms of interpreting the estimates, one advantage of the survey data is that it allows us to examine the characteristics of households that report benefits from the programmes.



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The Household Consumption Expenditure Survey Data offers the scope to analyse the impact of social transfers

Unless detailed information is sought on the nature of an ailment or disease in the case of health shocks, and waiver of fees or reimbursement in school or college, imputing the value of free medical services and education services received by the households is not possible. In the case of education and health, the NSSO conducts separate surveys where detailed information is canvassed on out-of-pocket expenditure and free services that are availed by a household. One might ask why one cannot use data on information paid by households to impute the value of medical services. Insurance products are treated as an investment and not consumption. The relevant information is sought as part of the All India Debt & Investment Survey, and not as part of the HCES.

In order to provide guidance to analysts and researchers, the NSSO, for the first time, decided to impute the value figures of selected food and non-food items which were received free. This allows us to compute two metrics. The first is the Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (MPCE) of a household, which is the ratio of monthly consumption expenditure to household size. The second metric is the value of household consumption in a month considering the imputed value of free food and non-food items, i.e., 'MPCE with imputation'. Both metrics are published by the NSSO in its report.

Imputation of values

The NSSO has suggested two sets of values for each State and by sector (rural, urban) for imputation of food and non-food items received free of cost — modal unit price and the 25th percentile unit price. Consumption expenditure refers to out-of-pocket expenditure while value of consumption would include free and subsidised items consumed by households. In the report published by the NSSO, imputation has been done using the modal price only for items received free. The operative word is free and not subsidised. Thus, no imputation is done for the purchase of food items from the PDS at nominal regulated prices.

The main item that a large proportion of households received free was foodgrains from the PDS. Not surprisingly, at the all-India level, we

find that in rural and urban India, about 94% and 95%, respectively, of the value of imputed items is attributable to food items. When we consider all the households, i.e., even those who did not receive any free items, the imputed value for food is ₹82 and ₹59 in rural and urban areas, respectively.

The report published by the NSSO has the average value of MPCE among those in the bottom 5% of distribution by the MPCE, 5-10, 10-20, 30-40, 40-50, 50-60, 70-80, 80-90, 90-95 and top 5% of distribution. Each interval is called a fractile class. The average MPCE of those in the bottom 5% of MPCE distribution is ₹1,373 in rural and ₹2,001 in urban. This means that the MPCE of 5% of Indians is less than this cut off. When we focus on the imputed value of consumption of those in the bottom end of the rural distribution, we find that 20% of those in this fractile class, or about 1% of India's rural population is actually in the next fractile class, i.e., 5%-10%. In absolute terms this is about 86 lakh individuals in rural India. Similar patterns are observed till the sixth fractile class. In urban areas too, we see upward movement. There are different patterns observed across the major States. Needless to say, depending on their use case, researchers can impute the modal value for calculations for purchases from the PDS at the subsidised rate. This will increase the average MPCE with imputation. In short, there is evidence that even a limited imputation exercise establishes that in-kind social transfers help increase the value of consumption of poorer households.

Implications for poverty

Ever since the release of the report, there have been calls for a larger discussion on where the poverty line should be drawn. Among the issues that need to be considered is whether one needs to estimate the number of poor households based on the expenditure or based on the total value of consumption which includes the value of free items consumed. Needless to say, in-kind social transfers have implications for the well-being of households that are at the bottom end of consumption or income distribution.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Myanmar and democracy

I commend *The Hindu's* recent coverage of Myanmar and the question of how peace can be achieved. The old approach of Myanmar's neighbours was to indulge the murderous and venal Sit-tat/Tatmadaw for fear of complete anarchy. However understandable that view was, the Sit-tat is now the principal source of chaos. Some in India — *inter alia* in this daily's pages ('Parley' — Opinion page, "Should India review its Myanmar policy in view of the humanitarian crisis?"; July 5) — have started to

demand a less passive Indian policy. They should, more boldly, embrace the cause of a federal democracy as the only path to peace. Caution but prolongs the agony. Today, the people of Myanmar are bombed, beaten, robbed, and raped. But they have shown that they can only be governed by consent.

J.P. Loo,
Oxford, U.K.

On NEET

In settling for NEET counselling from the third week of July, the government seems to have

assumed that there will be a favourable judicial order. It was not long ago that the Chief Justice of India had said that cancelling the examinations already held could affect the lives of 23 lakh students. Choosing IIT Madras to look into the extent of malpractices was a wise move.

The data from a credible agency like the IIT would certainly help the top court in its decision making. However the National Testing Agency should treat the entire episode as a warning to set its house in

order. The conduct of such examinations must not be taken lightly and there should be the required checks at all levels.

Gopalaswamy J.,
Chennai

There is much space being given to 'pro-retest for NEET 2024' letters, without understanding the ground-level reverberations. The voices of students who appeared for the test well prepared and who scored high marks in NEET 2024 need to be heard too.

Dr. P. Suresh,
Namakkal, Tamil Nadu

The examination system

Nothing seems to be going right as far as competitive examinations are concerned. The trajectory of events in examinations from NEET(UG) to the UPSC-civil services now (Inside pages, "Controversial probationary IAS officer joins duty, July 12) is appalling. These issues should be scrutinised and the facts presented to the public. The question 'why is this happening with the education sector' needs to be answered.

Sreyas M. Purackal,
Kozhikode, Kerala

The NEET scandal has highlighted the need for systemic reform in India's education sector. The centralised exam model has exacerbated the pressure on students. India's diverse educational landscape needs a more flexible and nuanced approach. Decentralising exams and empowering State boards could foster a more equitable system. India's future depends on it.

Lakshminarayanan P.,
Chennai

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

GROUND ZERO



The Shaanxi mosque in Yining, which is built in the traditional palace style of Chinese architecture. (Right): Abud Rakev Tumunyaz, the Imam at the Xinjiang Islamic Institute at Kuqa, Xinjiang. RADHIKA SANTHANAM

Freedom and control in Xinjiang

The north-western province in China is home to more than 50 'ethnic minorities', most of whom are Uyghur Muslim. For several years, the Chinese Communist Party has been accused of persecuting the community and attempting to erase their culture. **Radhika Santhanam** reports on the overarching emphasis on assimilation and nationalism in Xinjiang, a rapidly developing province which is crucial to the country's Belt and Road Initiative

Nine musicians dressed in bright outfits assemble on stage at the centre of an accordion museum in Yining city in Xinjiang province, China. It is June 17, the day of Eid-Ul-Adha, and everyone is in celebratory mood. Thousands of tourists and locals have gathered on Liuxing street despite the heat to enjoy street food, watch graceful performances, and drink chilled fresh juice and beer.

In the museum crammed with instruments, each musician holds an accordion. Before bursting into song, they introduce themselves, not by name but by ethnicity - Uyghur, Kazakh, Mongolian, Uzbek, Xibe, and Russian, who are all termed "ethnic minorities" by the state. The vast province is home to followers of many religions such as Islam, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

The proclamation of national unity and the carefully curated diversity on stage, particularly on the occasion of Eid, is significant. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, located in north-western China, is home to 56 ethnic groups, including the Uyghur, Kazakh, Mongol, Manchu, Uzbek, Xibe, and Russian, who are all termed "ethnic minorities" by the state. The vast province is home to followers of many religions such as Islam, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

For years, China has faced accusations from human rights groups of committing crimes against humanity of mostly Muslim ethnic groups in the region. According to several reports, including by the United Nations Human Rights Office, and Human Rights Watch, the Chinese were detaining Uyghurs, who form the majority of the ethnic minorities, in "detention centres" and subjecting them to abuse.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has rubbished these claims. It has repeatedly argued that these are not "detention centres" but "education and vocational training centres". A booklet issued by the State Council Information Office says these centres were established with the "goal of educating and rehabilitating people guilty of minor crimes or law-breaking, and eradicating the influence of terrorism and extremism." In 2019, however, the Chairman of the Xinjiang regional government announced that these centres would be gradually wound down "if society no longer needed them."

Various studies have also claimed that the population of the Han Chinese, the country's dominant ethnic group, has grown in the region, while the Uyghur population has declined ever since the People's Republic of China took over the province in 1949.

However, official data show that the Uyghur population, which was 3.6 million in the first national population census of 1953, grew to 11.6 million (222%) in the seventh census of 2020. The increase has been attributed in part to the fact that Uyghurs and other minorities, along with the rural population, were exempt from China's decades-old one-child policy.

The 'Sinicisation' of religion

At the Shaanxi mosque, an important heritage site in Yining, the Imam, Ma Jirong, says all these accusations are "greatly exaggerated". He points towards the mosque, where 1,300 Muslims had

Chinese people belong to the People's Republic of China, so religion should adapt to socialism in China.

ABUD RAKEV TUMUNYAZ
Imam, Xinjiang Islamic Institute at Kuqa

assembled to pray that morning. "Since you are here, you can see for yourself," he says. "Foreign countries have a hatred towards China. It is like a tumour in their body."

The centuries-old mosque behind him, painted in red and dark blue, is built in the "traditional palace style of Chinese architecture," according to the guide. The structure is made of wood and brick and showcases the characteristically Chinese upturned eaves. The dome and minarets, commonly found in several mosques around the world, are missing. The call to prayer can be heard only within the premises. The ceiling is painted with flowers and plants, and journalists from West Asia wonder loudly about the absence of Arabic script on the inside walls.

Ma shrugs off these observations. "It is a Chinese mosque," he says. "Mongolian, Uyghur, and many other ethnic communities participated in its construction. It shows that Xinjiang is an inseparable part of Chinese territory."

This adaptation of religion to Chinese characteristics, and specifically to Chinese socialism, is what Abud Rakev Tumunyaz, the Imam at the Xinjiang Islamic Institute at Kuqa, 280 kilometres away, refers to as "Sinicisation".

"Religion has no national boundaries, but believers have a motherland. Chinese people belong to the People's Republic of China, so religion should adapt to socialism in China," Tumunyaz, 62, contends.

Ma believes there is no contradiction between Chinese socialism and Islam. "Both prioritise the happiness of the people," he says.

The mosque at Kuqa has a dome and minarets. Inside the Islamic Institute's sprawling library, which houses about 30,000 books, the Imam flips through the copies of the Koran laid neatly on a table. The bound books look new and the pages crackle when flipped. There are copies in Uyghur, Arabic, and Chinese. Newspapers in Mongolian, Uyghur, and other languages are stacked in a rack in the reading area.

However, just like the rest of the country, Xinjiang promotes standard Chinese in public edu-

cational institutions; students say lessons are not taught in Uyghur or other languages. Uyghur is spoken everywhere, but shop signs are mostly only in Chinese.

A government booklet claims that ethnic minorities are "enthusiastic" about learning and using standard Chinese. It says ethnic groups are "encouraged to learn spoken and written languages from each other..." (emphasis added) and ethnic languages are "extensively used in areas such as judicature, administration, education, press and publishing, radio and television..."

A small newsroom and the printing press of a county-level newspaper called *Chabuchur Daily*, brought out in the Xibo or Xibe language, are showcased as evidence of this. The four-page tabloid, which translates newspaper reports into Xibo, which is closely related to Manchu, a nearly extinct language, is brought out twice a week for the 30,000 speakers of Xibo in Xinjiang. "As you can see, the government cares about ethnic cultures and languages," says one of the editors, Zhao Jinxiu.

Deradicalisation programme

Both Ma and Tumunyaz emphasise the importance of "laws and regulations" and firmly state that Islam should "develop accordingly". When asked to cite an example of how the law dictates the practice of religion, Tumunyaz says, "The government designates areas where prayers and other religious activities can take place."

At the Islamic Institute at Kuqa, students are given religious education, which includes learning to recite the Koran. They are taught Chinese culture and history, and Islamic history from the time it was introduced in China about 1,300 years ago. They study lessons about the civil code, and laws and regulations regarding religion. They also undergo a "deradicalisation programme".

The Chinese argue that this stems from Xinjiang's troubled history. In the last two decades, the region has seen many terror attacks. In 2012, knife-wielding terrorists attacked civilians in Kashgar, leaving 15 dead. In May 2014, attackers crashed cars into shoppers and threw explosives, killing more than 30 people in the capital city of Ürümqi. In July the same year, an Imam in Kashgar was stabbed to death. China has blamed the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which was founded by militant Uyghur separatists, for some of these attacks.

The fight against what the government calls the "three evils of extremism, terrorism, and separatism" is also China's rationale for the "education and vocational training centres." In written communication with the media, the CCP says through these centres, Xinjiang has "destroyed 1,588 violent and terrorist gangs, arrested 12,995 terrorists..., punished 30,645 people for 4,858 illegal religious activities, and confiscated 3,45,229 copies of illegal religious materials" since 2014. The curriculum at the centres, it says, "begins with learning standard spoken and written Chinese language, then moves onto studying the law, and concludes with learning vocational skills".

Waiting for freedom

However, several Uyghurs have publicly spoken and written about how they did not choose to go to these centres. Many critics have also raised questions about why prominent Uyghur intellectuals, writers, and artists were sent to places that purportedly provide "vocational skills".

Many ethnic minorities have also fled China fearing ill treatment at these centres. In 2013, three Uyghurs - Adil, Abdul Khaliq, and Salamu - from Kargilik in southwest Xinjiang crossed the border into Ladakh in India without any travel documents. They were apprehended by the Indian Army, which handed them over to the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. Later, the three of them were handed over to the local police. They have been in jail since.

"All the three young men, one of whom was a minor then, fled to India saying Uyghurs were being persecuted in their country," says Mohammad Shafi Lassu, a lawyer in Leh who is representing them. "They said they had seen all kinds



All the three young men, one of whom was a minor then, fled to India saying Uyghurs were being persecuted in their country.

MOHAMMAD SHAFI LASSU
Lawyer

of atrocities. They came to India because they knew that Pakistan would hand them back to China. But in India, after completing their sentence, they were booked under the draconian Public Safety Act in 2015." The Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act, 1978, is a preventive detention law under which a person is taken into custody so that they will not act in a manner that is prejudicial to "the security of the state or the maintenance of public order".

Lassu sounds tired. "I have little hope for their future," he says. Apart from the stringent law, he also cites India's neutrality on the Uyghur question as a reason for his despair. In 2022, the country abstained on a draft resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Commission on holding a debate on human rights in Xinjiang, arguing that it "favours a dialogue to deal with these issues" instead.

It is common refrain in China that "international forces were influencing people over the web"; this is why the government also further tightened its control over the Internet, a move defended as 'cyber sovereignty'. Confident now that terrorism is a thing of the past, Xinjiang also has an 'exhibition of anti-terrorism and anti-extremism'.

The fear of attack had turned Xinjiang into a security zone by all accounts. This seems to have mostly dissipated, except in parts such as the International Grand Bazaar in Ürümqi, where men in uniform check foreigners' passports at the entrance and a security van with armed men is permanently stationed outside.

Tumunyaz says "religion is not extremism and vice versa"; yet displays of overt religiosity are clearly frowned upon and could land people in prison. "The deradicalisation programme is not about targeting any religion or ethnic minority," he says. "We will strike down any separatist."

Tumunyaz, who is also the president of the Xinjiang Islamic Institute and vice chairman of the Chinese Islamic Association, is expecting two more delegations in the afternoon. He says delegates from the United Nations visited him last week. He appears to be the designated point person in Kuqa for all Islam-related questions.

Thrust on development

The message that the nation comes first, before ethnicity and religion, is assertive also given Xinjiang's strategic location. The province borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and India. As a consequence, it is of great importance to China's mammoth Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which facilitates trade and commerce across the ancient Silk Road routes that connected Asia, West Asia, and Europe for about 1,500 years, from the beginning of the Han dynasty in 130 BCE. Xinjiang was an important section of the ancient Silk Road, which is why the province, characterised by three mountains and two basins, is now called the core area of the Silk Road economic belt.

This has always been one of China's poorest regions, but the thrust on development is clear to the eye. Ürümqi, Yining, and Kuqa all boast excellent infrastructure, delivered with what the guide calls "Chinese efficiency". There are wide roads with cycling and walking paths lined with trees. Industries including textiles, power, manufacturing, and petrochemicals have sprung up everywhere. Xinjiang's GDP rose from about \$167.2 billion in 2017 to \$278.4 billion in 2022.

Being central to the BRI has also meant that Xinjiang now generates significant revenue from tourism (\$14.1 billion in 2022). In Jiayi village in Xinhe county in Yining, tourists flock to an exhibition centre of musical instruments, which is presented as 'intangible cultural heritage'. In Kuqa Qiuz Alley, a sprawling old Uyghur home, whose residents have long since moved out, has been converted into an area for tourists to "experience Uyghur culture". The Grand Bazaar contains a museum of giant naans, and shops selling Uyghur caps and outfits made of Atlas silk. Professor James Leibold at La Trobe University, Melbourne, who is an expert on the politics of ethnicity and race in China, refers to this as "museum-style multiculturalism", while the Chinese in Xinjiang are at pains to point out how this is in fact "protection of ethnic minority culture".

Everywhere journalists are taken, there is an emphasis on how ethnic groups are part of the BRI. At the assembly workshop of the Automobile Guangzhou Car Motor Company, where staff and robots work together, the General Manager, Luo Haitian, says, "Our staff is diversified; about 20% of them are ethnic groups."

At the Xinjiang Software Park, established in 2015, Yang Qing, director of the department of communications, says, "The development of this park is part of our strategic plan to develop five hubs in the economic belt of Xinjiang. Our goal is to be a carrier of the Digital Silk Road. We provide technical support for the stability of society of Xinjiang and for high-quality economic development."

Yang points to various products and applications that have made both the daily lives of the people as well as surveillance by the state and the people - of traffic, grazing cattle, movement, etc. - easier.

Her point on high-quality economic development is borne out by data. But how does technical support ensure stability? "This region was once influenced by terrorism," Yang explains. "So now, we monitor everything."

The writer travelled to Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region as part of a delegation of international journalists from 16 countries hosted by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China



An assembly workshop of the Guangzhou Automobile Group Co Ltd, Xinjiang. The province is crucial to China's Belt and Road Initiative. RADHIKA SANTHANAM

the hindu **businessline.**

SATURDAY - JULY 13, 2024

Boosting bank deposits

There's a case for trimming tax incidence

With credit offtake racing ahead of deposit flows, banks are seeking an unusual fix to their problem in the Union Budget. SBI's economic research wing has argued that there is an immediate need to bring about parity on taxation between interest on bank deposits and gains on shares/equity mutual funds, given rising investor preference for the latter.



The view seems to be that the 15 per cent short-term capital gains tax rate and 10 per cent long-term capital gains tax rate on equity helps it trump deposits on returns. While this argument is a little tenuous, there is a genuine case for lowering the incidence of tax on interest income, not only from bank deposits but also fixed income products such as small savings schemes. These products are the go-to vehicles for less-affluent savers and the main source of income for seniors. It is true that the younger cohort of the population has been allocating a higher proportion of its incremental savings to equities. However, it is doubtful if tax policies have played a big role in this shift. Inexperienced investors always chase the asset class with the highest recent returns. With the stock indices more than trebling from Covid lows, stocks and equity mutual funds have been the beneficiaries of this returns chase in the last four years.

Should stock markets correct or equity returns revert to their long-term average of 12 per cent or thereabouts, newer investors are likely to shy away. While comparing their term deposits with other products on taxation, banks also need to introspect on whether they're offering a fair deal to savers when tax considerations are left out of the equation. Despite ostensible competition for CASA (Current Account Savings Account), most large banks have not seen it fit to revise their sub-3 per cent rates on savings accounts for decades now. On term deposits, they have opted for snail-paced transmission in a rising rate cycle. Reserve Bank of India data as of end-June showed that the weighted-average interest on term deposit balances has risen by just 125 basis points between April 2022 and now, while the policy rate is up by 250 basis points. The weighted average interest rate of about 6.28 per cent on banks' outstanding term deposits offers a slim real return to the depositor.

Having said this, there are macro payoffs to be had from taxing interest income on deposits and small savings schemes at a flat rate of say 10 or 15 per cent, as opposed to taxing them at the investor's slab rate. Parity in taxation of fixed income and equity products may ensure that savers with a low risk appetite don't allocate to equities purely for tax reasons. Lower tax on interest can also boost real returns on deposits, which are the largest component of household financial savings. Redefining "long-term" for equities from 1 year to, say 3 years, can lift tax collections while nudging equity investors towards a long-term orientation.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



B SAMBAMURTHY

Our Constitution has served us well for over 75 years despite some challenges. It reinforced values of unity in diversity and harmony. It has largely fulfilled our socio-political aspirations. All the political parties swear by the Constitution, a product of socio-political consensus by the great minds of those times with opposing ideological dispositions.

Now, we need a similar consensus for an 'Economic Constitution' that will help fulfil the economic aspirations of our people (not just political parties) to be a developed nation by 2047, with a per capita income of about ₹15 lakh. Mere rhetoric and mathematical modelling won't do. There's need for a well-articulated long term development path, strategy and action. Economic aspirations are no less important than political and social aspirations.

The Indian Constitution drew insights from the constitutions of several other countries. For instance, concept of Republic from France, Directive Principles from Ireland, Fundamental Rights from the US, Fundamental Duties from USSR, Concurrent List from Australia, etc. These have been adapted to our historical and cultural perspectives.

In this context, let us examine some of the successful economic development experiences and models.

Washington Consensus: The main principles are primacy of markets, free trade with minimal tariff of around 10 per cent and foreign direct investment on a level playing field with local entrepreneurs, property rights, fiscal discipline, and deregulation. This model works best in an ecosystem of political democracy and free markets.

Jake Sullivan, US' National Security Advisor, advocates a New Washington Consensus and active industrial policy, and some of these are aligned with their foreign policy. Joseph Stiglitz, American economist and Nobel Laureate, argues that while markets are at the centre of a successful economy, government has to create a climate for business to prosper and create jobs. It has to create physical and institutional infrastructure.

Beijing Consensus: State capitalism is central to this philosophy. Private entrepreneurship, markets and competition also thrive hand in hand. Innovation, experimentation, equity, self-determination, high savings and investment are among the important features. Flexibility and adaptation are



PERASAMY M

India also needs an 'economic constitution'

NEW PATH. With political consensus, it can help chart a long term development plan to fulfil people's economic aspirations

the key. Most economic and investment decisions are decentralised and this coexists with centralised political authority. Shared prosperity is another objective.

Barcelona Development agenda: This advocates balanced role for the state and markets. It reminds of the need for micro-economic interventions to redress market failures and improve productivity. Government shall promote development and protect the poor as well. High quality institutions and experiments in policy making are other features.

Santiago Consensus: This is characterised by inclusivity, transparency and governance.

Berlin Consensus — forum for new economy: A group of economists have started working on a new paradigm to address new challenges. This questions the wisdom of overly relying on markets

Our reforms are halting and hindered by electoral cycles. There are quite a few solutions but no comprehensive development path.

to resolve the problems of today like increasing inequalities, climate change, fragile global supply chains, recurring financial crisis and decreasing role of the State.

The dominant focus on efficiency, driven by technology, is creating social strife. Many liberal democracies are under threat or serious pressure. A new paradigm is being deliberated that, among other things, redefines the role of the state, markets and puts people's interest at the forefront.

INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT PATH

Over the last three decades, India has embarked on several economic reforms and cumulatively these helped us attain a GDP of \$4 trillion. But China, which was on economic reform path just a decade earlier, has raced ahead to attain a GDP of \$17 trillion.

While varied political systems partly explain this huge difference, there are other important factors like second generation reforms, massive investment in R&D, high savings and investment, investment in education and primary health and, not the least, accountability of bureaucracy for economic development.

Our reforms are halting and hindered by electoral cycles. There are quite a few

solutions but no comprehensive development path.

While we may draw on the development experiences of other successful countries, we need to contextualise them to our opportunities and challenges.

India has a huge pool of brilliant economists with hands-on experience in macro, micro, trade, and development areas. Maybe we can create something similar to a constituent assembly with these economists and help lay out a long-term plan for development. To kick-start this process, the government may organise a series of hackathons to generate ideas. Group think does not help.

Political bipartisanship is fundamental to this process. The two main political formations, NDA and INDIA bloc, represent nearly the entire gamut of the political spectrum. There can be no better time to strike economic development consensus, where both sides exhibit statesmanship. This is not a replacement but an add-on to our existing Constitution. The upcoming Budget could probably initiate this debate.

The writer is a former Director and CEO, IDBFT, and former Chairman NPCI

Why SEBI's regulatory sandbox is still struggling

Apart from taking a more lenient approach towards innovation, there is a need to amend the statutes

M Chandra Shekar
Abhishek Kajal

Despite India's capital market booming after Covid-19, the regulatory sandbox introduced by SEBI in 2020 has struggled to gain traction even after almost four years. SEBI introduced the regulatory sandbox framework to encourage innovation in the securities market, providing a platform for experimenting with solutions in a live market environment with a limited set of real users and a specific time-frame for testing. One of the primary advantages for entities participating in the sandbox is relaxation of stringent regulatory requirements and testing in a live market environment with certain restrictions.

SEBI introduced it initially in a June 2020 notification. In this initial framework, only entities registered with SEBI were allowed to apply for testing in the regulatory sandbox. As of April 7, 2021, only eight entities had applied to SEBI under the regulatory sandbox framework. Only one application was approved, three were rejected, and four were withdrawn. After the initial struggle, SEBI introduced a revised framework for the regulatory sandbox on June 14, 2021. This revision allowed registered entities to apply independently or in partnership with

other entities. The framework introduced two stages of testing. In stage one, the number of testing users would be limited, with a further increase in stage two by allowing a more extensive set of testing users.

STAGES I AND II

In the initial stage of evaluation, entities applying for the regulatory sandbox are required to demonstrate a genuine need for testing by providing comprehensive details on the relaxations sought under the framework, anticipated benefits to users, the readiness of the proposed solution, and the risk safeguards incorporated by the entity.

After the successful passage of stage I, stage II requires entities to showcase the progress achieved during the initial testing phase and an understanding of observed risks, strategies to mitigate them, user feedback received, and a well-defined post-testing implementation strategy. This multifaceted evaluation process aimed to ensure a thorough examination of the entity's preparedness and the potential positive impact of the proposed solution.

Even though SEBI made careful improvements to the framework, only four entities applied to test new financial ideas from June 2021 until now. Unfortunately, two of these ideas were rejected; one entity changed its mind and withdrew, and another still needs to



INNOVATION. Must be encouraged

be reviewed. Surprisingly, only one idea has been given the green light by SEBI so far, and this comes almost four years after the whole programme started. This suggests that despite SEBI's efforts to improve things, not many entities are willing to try their financial innovations.

The possible reasons for this, as cited by SEBI Chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch at the Global FinTech Fest in Mumbai, are that entities are not submitting any new ideas or the ideas submitted are not permitted under the existing laws. Fractional shares was quoted as an example, where she said that SEBI is willing to implement that concept, but the Companies Act and SEBI Act prohibit it.

This further underscores the need to amend the statutes to welcome innovation in the Indian capital market. If we compare SEBI with RBI's

sandbox facility, the latter has approved many fintech innovations. For instance, in December 2023, HDFC Bank was allowed to operate its offline (without internet) retail payments facility, enabling customers and merchants to transact in offline mode.

Furthermore, in its notification on February 28, 2024, the RBI included provisions of the Digital Data Protection Act of 2023, demonstrating its responsiveness to changing technological trends. The RBI has updated its framework three times since 2019 (in 2020, 2021, and 2024), highlighting its effectiveness and willingness to contribute to advancing FinTech innovations in the country. In contrast, SEBI has not kept pace and remains tied to a traditional approach towards innovative ideas by maintaining status quo for four years.

To address this, SEBI could reconsider its current approach and be more lenient and friendly towards innovation, especially in capital markets, while making statutory changes wherever required. This shift could better align with the objectives of the regulatory sandbox and foster a more conducive environment for financial innovations in the capital markets.

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Health insurance

It refers to 'Why not have a health insurance regulator?' (July 12). The criticality of health insurance can never be overemphasised. It's unfortunate that as many as 40 crore people in our country do not even have basic government insurance. Establishing a separate regulator for health insurance is a good suggestion as it could act as a bridge between the insured and insurer and motivate insurance companies to expand their base and cover as many people as possible. Yes, tools like AI and data analytics can play a big role in taking insurance to the masses. Unlike in the West, with no social security system in place, India should

aim at health insurance for each and every citizen.

Bal Govind
Noida

Airport at Hosur

This refers to 'The potential of new Hosur airport?' (July 12). The Tamil Nadu government's announcement of establishing a new international airport on the TN-Karnataka border town of Hosur appears to be more political in nature. The international airport at Bengaluru is just about 60 km from Hosur town, and the new airport should satisfy the minimum distance criteria of 150 km between two airports. Besides, Hosur town is located at a

very sensitive zone. Political rows over issues between the two States at times escalate into clashes, *bandhs*, riots and in suspension of road and rail transport between Hosur and Bengaluru. This being the case, will international travellers prefer the proposed airport? Tamil Nadu must drop the plan and divert its time and energy to improving road infrastructure and maintaining water bodies within the State.

K Venkatesan
Coimbatore

Thrust areas for Budget

'Ahead of full Budget, PM meets leading economists' (July 12), gives a view of the customary brainstorming

sessions over the past few weeks after 'Modi . 3.0' assumed the reigns. The goals for the economy — \$5 trillion soon and \$30 trillion by 2047 — are laudable. More meaningful would be a thrust on sustainable job creation to reap the dividends of the favourable demographic composition our country is blessed with. And as we cater to that, the goals above would naturally be achieved. Rural India, agriculture and the informal sectors face a multitude of problems which need government intervention to help achieve their potential. Personal income tax slabs need upward revision, and rates, a reversal. Savings need a fillip, with tax

on interest and capital gains being done away with or reduced.

Jose Abraham
Vaikom, Kerala

Boost informal sector

Apropos 'In shrinking informal economy, small units take biggest hit' (July 12), it is painful that manufacturing units and the number of workers in the informal sector have declined. The time lag in data compilation reduces the scope for timely remedial policy action. The upcoming Budget must address the issues facing unincorporated enterprises.

Angara Venkata Girija Kumar
Chennai

Are Americans ready for the US-China trade war?



KENNETH ROGOFF

It is hard to think of an issue that brings together the United States' deeply divided political class more than the need to contain China's growing influence, whether through trade restrictions, tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs), or banning TikTok. But while the national-security argument for such protectionist measures is undeniably compelling, it is unclear whether US political

leaders and the American public are prepared for the potential economic fallout.

The prevailing belief among policymakers is that the surge of Chinese imports into the US market during the 2000s hollowed out America's manufacturing base, making the kind of rapid military build-up that enabled the Allies to win World War II all but impossible. In US policy circles, the "China Shock" is often portrayed as a massive error that devastated towns across the Rust Belt and led to a sharp increase in inequality.

Consequently, there is widespread agreement among policymakers and commentators that the US must prevent a "China Shock 2.0" by imposing massive tariffs and trade restrictions on Chinese technologies such as cell phones, drones, and, crucially, EVs, solar panels, and green-energy equipment. President Joe Biden and his predecessor, Donald Trump, the presumptive

Republican nominee in November's presidential election, disagree on most issues. When it comes to dealing with China, however, both appear to be competing for the title of America's most protectionist president.

But the China Shock narrative that underpins current US trade policy is deeply flawed. While competition with Chinese producers has adversely affected some manufacturing jobs, free trade has undoubtedly created more winners than losers. To be sure, the economic impact of US trade restrictions could be minimised by rerouting Chinese imports through third-country suppliers, enabling Americans to buy Chinese-made solar panels as though they were produced in India, albeit at a higher price. But while this tariff theatre may be popular with voters, it is hard to see how this would improve national security any more than rerouting

Chinese fentanyl into the US through Mexico helped solve the opioid crisis.

Moreover, it would take years for "friendlier" countries to develop their own manufacturing bases that can compete with China's, especially at the low prices offered by Chinese producers. In some sectors like EVs, China's production capacity has given it an almost insurmountable lead over Western countries. Given this reality, the United Auto Workers' goal of having Americans buy electric cars produced in high-wage, unionised US facilities will be extremely difficult to achieve. A more targeted approach would ideally distinguish between trade involving sensitive military technologies and other goods, but doing so is more complicated than many seem to realise. The convergence of military and civilian technologies has become painfully apparent during the Russia-Ukraine war, with low-cost

drones originally designed for carrying packages being repurposed as bombers and private mobile networks playing a pivotal role in major battles.

For those of us who believe that multilateral cooperation is necessary to address the world's most pressing problems, from climate change to regulating artificial intelligence, the escalating rivalry between the world's two major powers is deeply troubling. From the US perspective, China's authoritarian government undermines the foundational liberal values that underpin the global economic and political order. China's relentless cyberattacks continue to pose an immediate threat to the US economy and American companies, and a potential Chinese blockade or invasion of Taiwan would have far-reaching global consequences.

From China's perspective, the US and its allies are cynically trying to maintain

a world order established through centuries of European and American imperialism. Much to the chagrin of US diplomats, many other countries appear to share this sentiment, as evidenced by the widespread disregard among developing and emerging economies for Western sanctions against Russia. Some may hope that China's economic slowdown will curb its geopolitical ambitions. But its ongoing difficulties are just as likely to push China toward a confrontation with the US as they are to foster cooperation.

Nevertheless, despite what many in the US may think, economic decoupling is not a viable option. Although the Biden administration's trade restrictions and bellicose rhetoric are a response to Chinese provocations, both countries must find a way to compromise if they want to achieve stable, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth.

The writer is former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund.
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ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Where play meets politics



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

Every four years when the Olympics come around, the world's politicians mouth absurdities about how "sports and politics should not mix". And, every Olympics emphasise that sports is definitely politics by other means.

Apart from now-forgotten idiocy about "amateurism", previous Olympics are remembered for showboating by dictatorial regimes (1936, 2008), the massacre of athletes (1972), Black Power protests (1968), post-war triumphalism (1948), boycotts triggered by geopolitical events (1980, 1984), etc. The upcoming Paris Olympics also has plenty of noise and fury centred on Russian and Belarusian participation, or the lack of it.

But Paris 2024 could also be controversial in terms of gender politics. Before getting into this subject in any detail, definitions may be necessary. "Sex" refers to biological characteristics, whereas "gender" refers to socially constructed roles and identities. The two usually coincide — say, someone with male sexual characteristics usually identifies as male by gender.

But in a small but not insignificant number of cases, somebody who is born into one sex identifies as a member of the other gender. Then, we have complications. That

somebody may wish to "transition" — going through surgery and hormonal therapy to switch genders. Or, they may simply choose to identify as the other gender.

At scale, this is a 21st century phenomenon because medical science has progressed to the point where gender transition is relatively easy, allowing for switches. In tandem, the laws and social acceptance of transgender people have become more flexible in many places, and gender-fluidity is an accepted concept in many geographies. The usage of pronouns such as "they" allows for this ambiguity too.

Trans-people often inspire violent hatred and may be targeted by regressive laws. In India, for example, they may stand for election, or possess a driving licence or passport, but they would find it very hard to marry.

The rights of transgender people is among the most complicated and controversial subjects in modern jurisprudence. In most professions, gender doesn't make a difference. In professions like lawyer, politician, scientist, writer, pilot, and historian, gender is orthogonal to competence. But in areas like inheritance, it can cause complications since gender is treated differently in many laws of inheritance, such as India's personal laws.

Sports is at the cutting-edge of the trans controversy. An individual who is born with male sexual characteristics and hits puberty before transition, is likely to be stronger and faster than somebody born with female sexual characteristics.

Any male tennis player in the ATP top 100 can serve faster than the top women tennis players. No woman has ever run 100 metres in under 10 seconds — the record is 10.49 seconds — whereas over 150 men have

sub-10 second timings. The women's world record in the marathon is 16 minutes more than the men's record. There are similar disparities in disciplines like swimming, weightlifting, discus throwing, cricket, and football, and let's not even get into the differences in contact sports.

In various geographies where, for example, athletics scholarships are available, there may be a great temptation for an athlete to make the cut as a woman. This has happened multiple times in the US, for instance, with non-binary individuals competing as females in school and university-level athletics. There are ongoing cases in various US states to try and resolve this situation. But laws banning transgender athletes from competing as female may run afoul of other laws banning discrimination on the grounds of gender.

As of now, various athletics associations have tried to adjust for this situation by banning individuals who have transitioned from male to female using age as a cut-off. The FINA (World Swimming Association) distinguishes between athletes who have transitioned by using the cut-off age of 12. Anybody who has transitioned from male to female after age 12 (most countries don't allow earlier transitions and that's another can of worms) cannot compete as a woman. The World Athletics Federation has a similar cut off. But non-binary individuals have competed in the women's events in football (Quinn won a gold medal for Canada), and in weightlifting.

Most laws that guarantee rights to trans-people don't distinguish between sports and other activities in banning discrimination, which means that bans could be legally unsustainable. It is likely that this would be the next frontier where sports and politics will collide.

Modi & 'jai jawan, jai kisan' trap

Modi govt will need to address massive challenges without the total power it got used to, in the face of relentless electoral challenges, one after another

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's third term is well under way. He knows better than any other that this term is fundamentally different from the first two, sort of *sui generis*.

His political training and experience haven't prepared him to run an arrangement like this. The lack of a majority isn't the issue. He has enough in 240, especially as none of his allies can pull down his coalition. That's why he's started as if this were just another, normal term. That pretence is vital for him.

The change for Modi 3.0 comes not from numbers, but from the new environment of contestation, something I anticipated in a piece on the day of the election results. To try and understand this better, we will mix metaphors from different sports. Contact sports first, because that's what politics is.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and partners won a points victory as if in a boxing match. The victory wasn't narrow. But it was no quick knockout like the last two. Their rivals were able to land some punches, are still in the ring, on their feet, and fighting.

They also believe the reigning "champion" is beatable. This is the change now. You can see it in how Rahul Gandhi and others in the INDIA bloc are already in the political street. In 2014 and 2019, they had melted away to lick their wounds or were in some deep, distant spiritual contemplation. Now we switch from contact sports to the more familiar cricket.

Think of the 2024 verdict as a qualifier in which the Opposition earned the right to challenge the title-holder in a kind of Test championship final.

Test cricket is played one session at a time. In this Test, the first session will be the three state elections later this year: Maharashtra, Haryana, and Jharkhand. In each, the rivals are resurgent. We are not listing Jammu and Kashmir here. It brings formidable but different challenges.

As soon as this session ends, the buildup begins for the next — Delhi at the start of next year. The incarceration of Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia has given the contest a special edge. There will then be a

bit of a breather before the final session of this "day one" begins in Bihar in September. Whoever wins at least two of these three sessions will have momentum towards 2029.

Mr Modi enters this term with multiple new challenges continuing from the election campaign. Among the many adjustments the party will need to make is a change in its approach to lawmaking. The era of passing important laws by shock and awe has gone into a hiatus. Constitutional amendments, even where needed and justified, might need to wait.

After the "400 paar" call caused widespread insecurity about the Constitution, the government will be wary of even proposing any amendments for some time. Of course, one solution would be to consult the Opposition and take them on board. That would call for a change in the basic structure of BJP politics in the Modi era.

The first Parliament session did not hold out any such comfort for now.

If anything, it indicated a phase of the two sides being locked in a bitter tussle, like constant combatants with no flexibility, no back channel and zero trust.

Of all of the political challenges for the new government, there is nothing stronger than what we might call the "jai jawan/jai kisan trap". For two decades, Mr Modi built for himself the image of a champion of farmers and the armed forces. This election showed it unravelling as the party suffered its biggest reverses in agricultural and soldiering powerhouse states like Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Haryana, and Rajasthan, and even Punjab.

The initial promise of doubling farmers' income by 2022 fell by the wayside, and the discourse on farm reform was ruined by the farm laws (however virtuous) brought in via the ordinance route and then railroaded through Parliament. Can Mr Modi revisit those and engage with the Opposition? And if he does, what will his base think?

It's also unlikely that a rejuvenated Opposition will respond constructively. Not



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Change of guard

EYE CULTURE

VISHAL MENON

If Gautam Gambhir, the newly appointed coach of the Indian cricket team, sets his mind to it, he could be the frontrunner to become the next Rakesh Jhunjhunwala.

The late Jhunjhunwala, known as the "Big Bull," had famously invested in Titan Company in 2003 when it was just a penny stock. Like most of his diverse investments, this purchase was not based on research or a tip-off. It was governed purely by instincts.

Like the billionaire investor, Gambhir, the tenacious former opener-turned-coach, also seems to be governed by instincts while picking unheralded players and turning them into match-winners.

During Kolkata Knight Riders' (KKR's) emphatic title-winning march at the Indian Premier League (IPL) this season, Gambhir as the franchise mentor, hedged his bets on two players — a relatively obscure all-rounder named Ramandeep Singh, and Sunil Narine, the mystery spinner from the Caribbean islands considered to be past his prime.

Singh, entrusted with the role of the finisher, walloped crucial runs at the lower middle-order. Narine, known to bamboozle batters through spin and guile, would turn into a prolific opener, providing blistering starts for KKR.

Without fancy analysis and number-crunching, but through frank, candid conversations and by providing clarity, Gambhir turned

these penny stock cricketers into blue-chip stocks. Delhi cricketers who have played under him in Ranji Trophy assert that Gambhir is not the sort of a person to get swayed by a player's reputation. It comes from his deep-rooted insecurities as an international cricketer.

"If I don't score runs in two or three games, I start getting the feeling that I'm going to get dropped," he had said. As the KKR mentor, he believed in giving players a long, sustained and an uninterrupted run.

As the youngest India head coach, Gambhir, 42, will bring with him this rare quality to the dressing room. He will also bring searing intensity, ultra-competitive and hyper-nationalistic vibes. Gambhir takes over from Rahul Dravid at a time when the team is riding high on the euphoric success of the T20 World Cup win.

The team is also well on course to their third consecutive World Test Championship final next year. As he takes guard, Gambhir will have to navigate through a tricky transition phase in Indian cricket with the retirements of Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli and Ravindra Jadeja from T20Is.

A bevy of other stars like R Ashwin, Cheteshwar Pujara and Mohammed Shami are also nearing the end of their long and fruitful international careers.

Gambhir's three-and-a-half-year tenure begins with the limited overs series in Sri Lanka later this month.

But there could be potential speed bumps along the way. Taking charge of a national team replete with superstars is inherently different from that of leading an IPL franchise, which

comprises players from different nationalities. Managing their egos will be as important as helping youngsters fine-tune their skills.

In the past, Gambhir was involved in much-publicised, TRP-generating on-field scuffles with a certain star player from West Delhi (read Virat Kohli). In the days ahead, there will be considerable interest in how the dressing room equation evolves between Gambhir and Kohli.

Gambhir cares less about the superstar system, which he believes has distorted the country's cricketing ecosystem. His challenge will lie in the ability to view these superstars with the same lens as some of the less celebrated ones, while maintaining a healthy dressing room ambience.

As a player, Gambhir was not the most talented, nor did he possess strokes of geometric precision like Dravid, his predecessor.

Nevertheless, by notching up the highest scores — 97 in 2011 World Cup and 75 in T20 World Cup in 2007 — in a winning cause in the finals, he has set a template for his batters to emulate.

The highest run-scorer in India's two World Cup wins could turn out to be the big brother to his teammates. Someone who can put an arm around a player and have honest conversations.

Perhaps, therein lies Gambhir's biggest strength, the ability to systematically puncture the star system and turn it into a cohesive unit of free-spirited individuals.

Gambhir is not the coach the Indian team deserves, but the coach they need.

An unfair landslide?



TICKER

MIHIR S SHARMA

The past fortnight has shown us that our electoral system can appear fundamentally unfair. Constituency-based first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting, the electoral process used for legislatures in India, England, and the United States (US), seems to be only marginally reflective of real preferences in countries with only two real parties, like the US. But the moment that you have a more fragmented polity, this begins to fall apart.

In the United Kingdom's general election, for example, the Labour Party won a historic majority of 412 seats out of 650. That's over 60 per cent, closing in on two-thirds. Yet they won only 33.8 per cent of the vote. In other words, their share of seats was 1.9 times their share of votes — far more than is normal.

Meanwhile, the new anti-immigrant Reform Party had an excellent night: Its leader Nigel Farage finally won entry to Parliament on his eighth try. But the party

won only five seats in spite of getting over 14 per cent of the vote. Its predecessor in 2015, the United Kingdom Independence Party, had won over 12 per cent of the vote but won a single seat.

The most ironic successes were achieved by the centrist Liberal Democrats. The Liberals have long argued for proportional representation: They have been England's third-largest party for much of their existence, but have remained a marginal force in politics. In the last election, in 2019, their leader Jo Swinson attempted to stand on an equal footing with the larger parties. She presented herself as a potential Prime Minister and focused on competing in every possible constituency. The Liberals increased their vote share by four percentage points — but actually reduced their number of seats from 12 to 11. In 2024, by contrast, the party ruthlessly focused on fewer than 100 winnable seats. They transferred resources there, and named their candidates well in advance of their rivals. The party's leader avoided presenting himself as a potential Prime Minister and instead focused on a few, but emotive, policy issues.

Incredibly, the Liberal Democrats' share of the vote went up by only 0.6 percentage points, but their seats in Parliament went up six-fold, to 72. They won the most seats that they have in a century. And yet FPTP is so fundamentally

stacked against smaller parties that even after this focused and historic performance, they only have a share of seats in the House of Commons that is broadly equivalent to their share of the vote.

Keir Starmer of Labour now has an unarguable mandate to rule — on only a third of the vote. The comparison to England's neighbours across the channel is stark. There, in another unexpected and early election, the centrist coalition associated with President Emmanuel Macron lost a large number of seats. In the final outcome, neither the left-wing coalition, nor the centrists, nor the right-wing populists — who unexpectedly came third — have a majority.

France also has constituencies with FPTP, but has two rounds of voting. In the second round, only a subset of candidates who did well are eligible to run. This allows for votes to shift from less to more competitive candidates. The French left and centre, who have spent years at each other's throats, essentially agreed to block the far-right in the second round. Almost all of the left's voters voted for the centrists, while a smaller set, but still a majority, of the centre's voters voted for the left. This was enough to relegate the right, which had topped the first round, to third place. The question of "who won" this election is therefore very con-

fused, and is still being debated.

In some sense, the French system turns the generally opaque question of tactical voting into something transparent and easy to understand and discuss. The reason that both the Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the United Kingdom appear to have done so well on such a limited vote share is because their voters behaved very tactically. Liberals in Labour-dominated seats voted for the left, while Labour supporters in Liberal heartlands did the opposite. They did this without needing to have a second round that made preferences clear — because it was usually clear to constituents which of the Conservative Party's opponents had the best shot of unseating them in a particular area. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats' campaign slogan in such areas was simply: "Liberal Democrats are winning here", a signal that it was safe to vote for them.

The fairness or unfairness of FPTP cannot be judged, in fact, merely by looking at vote shares. The question of whether voters have enough information to vote tactically also matters. In India, it is usually far from clear who is competitive in a particular area. This means that tactical voters can struggle, especially in four-way contests like Uttar Pradesh. Pre-poll coalitions tend to be a greater feature of Indian elections than elsewhere in the world precisely for this reason.

when there is another session in the match to play out after every break. It will be a disappointment, on the other hand, if the government now responds with more agri-populism: Higher and wider MSP (minimum support price) offers and loan waivers, while at the same time submitting to the Swadeshi Luddite veto on biotechnology, especially GM (genetically modified) seeds.

This week's courageous report by State Bank of India's (SBI's) economic research division shows the way on agriculture. SBI underlines how the MSP approach works for too few farmers and accounts for no more than 6 per cent of our farm output, and that the future lies in much bolder reform, a move to the markets and away from MSP, not the other way around.

Has this BJP's politics left it room for manoeuvre on an issue like this? In Shivraj Singh Chouhan, at least the party has made a good choice for agriculture minister. In nearly two decades as chief minister, he turned around agriculture in Madhya Pradesh. He is also generally seen as affable, conciliatory, and politically deft. He's among the last in this BJP to have been moulded in the Vajpayee era. It will be tough but a pleasant surprise if he is given a wide enough mandate on this.

If the setbacks with the kisan issue emerged from the failed farm laws, the negativity on the jawan issue also emanates from similar arrogant haste. A shorter tenure of service for the armed forces, especially for "Other Ranks", is an idea whose time had come three decades back.

It does indeed control spiralling pensions, sparing room for modernisation. But its larger gain is also in keeping the armed forces younger (today's average age, 33, is too old) and more in tune with changing technologies. Further, it gives more young Indians an opportunity to serve in the armed forces and come out more employable and skilled.

Like the farm laws, it is also blighted by a lack of discussion. Much will be changed with Agnipath now. How do you, for example, justify two sets of soldiers from the same unit in the same bunker, hit by the same bomb, and their families drawing different compensation? Was it necessary for them to wear different insignias, thereby creating two classes?

There was a ready model available in the emergency and short-service commission for officers, where everybody was the same while in service, but had different tenures and terminal benefits based on the length of service. A massive change like this will always bring challenges, but a more patient and all-stakeholders approach would have minimised these.

This Modi government will need to address these massive challenges without the total power it got used to, under relentless attack, one session after another. And we know the pitch often deteriorates with time. That's why this third term is nothing like the first two.

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OPINION

The
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OUR TAKE

NATO@75 faces hard questions

The alliance made plans and promises. But it is struggling to respond to Trump's rise in the US and the China-Russia axis at its borders

That the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has lasted for 75 years is a reflection of the endurance of the US-led Trans-Atlantic security order that came into being after World War II. That erstwhile adversaries of Eastern Europe were keen to join the bloc shows the appeal of the US security umbrella that comes with its provision of collective defence. And that mainstream political opinion, on both sides of the Atlantic, for most of these seven-and-a-half decades, saw merit in this alliance reflected both the elite and popular legitimacy of the project in the western world.

But when NATO's leaders met this week in Washington DC, these features were under strain. The US-led security order is confronting its most serious challenge in Europe from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and in the Indo-Pacific from China — and both adversaries of the Western bloc are now closely coordinating with each other, with a little help from Iran and North Korea. The entry of Eastern European States served as a constant reminder to Moscow about the presence of the West at its borders, led to insecurities, and made Russia particularly sensitive to Ukraine's status vis-à-vis NATO, eventually leading to Vladimir Putin's invasion. And the rise of Donald Trump shattered the consensus in Washington DC on European security. If one cuts through his extremist rhetoric, Trump was asking a set of questions that resonated with a large segment of his country — why should American citizens care about developments at the far end of Europe; what does the US get for assuming global security responsibilities; why fight Russia when China is the main adversary; why aren't European States paying more for their security?

The Washington summit aimed to address these concerns and insure the alliance against shocks. US President Joe Biden used the moment to celebrate NATO, explain how the US gained from the alliance, and outline the additions in its membership, and the increased budgetary spending of European States on defence. These messages were largely intended for a sceptical domestic audience in the US about the continued relevance of the bloc and that burden sharing was fair. NATO called out China for being the "decisive enabler" of the Ukraine war and warned Xi Jinping of the consequences if Beijing continued offering Moscow political and material support. This was a sign of how the West viewed the European and Asian theatre as an integrated whole after the China-Russia "no-limits" partnership. The alliance assured Ukraine it was on a path to "irreversible" membership of NATO, offered tangible security assistance and stepped up funding. This was both a recognition that Kyiv needed more sustained help to resist Moscow and also a pre-emptive move to strengthen Volodymyr Zelensky's hand just in case of a possible Trump presidency.

Yet, it was hard to miss the sense of gloom that permeated the summit. If Trump returns to office, the bloc's best-laid plans may not even be considered. If Russia makes gains on the Ukrainian battlefield, while western societies continue to get tired and lose the appetite to support Kyiv, all bets are off about the future of European security. A persistent policy of support to Ukraine and its incorporation into NATO doesn't really offer a pathway for a resolution either. NATO faces a political challenge at home and strategic challenges at its borders, and it doesn't have easy answers for either.

Apex court's final word on law and redress in alimony

There was a need for a clear-cut ruling that the option to seek relief under either of the two laws — personal or secular — lies with the aggrieved women. The verdict in *Abdul Samad* fulfils this pressing need

Are the provisions of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) relating to married women's maintenance rights applicable to Muslims? This question, basically erroneous, has been raising its head ever since these were initially incorporated in the old CrPC of 1898 (Section 488). The CrPC is a non-religious law of general application the provisions of which cannot be selectively used for various religious groups of citizens. Great judges of India have been clarifying this since the early years of the post-Constitution era. Once again it came up before the apex court this year, and once again it has answered it in the affirmative in the *Abdul Samad* case decided on July 10.

The applicability of the CrPC provisions to Muslims had been affirmed first by the Kerala high court (*Badruddin*, 1957). In a later case, Justice VR Krishna Iyer (then in the same court) strongly supported the decision saying "I have no doubt that it behoves the courts in India to enforce Section 488 of the CrPC in favour of all Indian women, Hindu, Muslim or others." (*Shahulameeda*, 1970). Next year, Iyer, as a member of the Law Commission of India, strongly recommended that under the new CrPC (then being drafted) the relief provided for married women be made available to divorced wives as well. The government of the day proposed to accept his recommendation but faced stiff opposition from Muslim religious circles and eventually incorporated it into the 1973 CrPC with some concessions to partly accommodate the contrary rules of personal laws and custom. On being elevated to the Supreme Court, Justice Iyer tried to miti-

gate the effect of the said concessional provisions by subjecting them to strict conditions (*Bai Tahera*, 1979). In a subsequent case, he even reprimanded a high court for not following his ruling (*Fuzlunbi*, 1980). As these cases led to simmering discontent among Muslims, the next case on the issue was referred by Justice Mur-taza Fazal Ali to Chief Justice YV Chandrachud for a decision by a larger bench. It was this reference that led to the constitutional bench decision in the celebrated *Shah Bano* case of 1985.

Muslim leaders of the time vehemently opposed *Shah Bano* and, on their demand, the government chose to enact a remedial Act in 1986, which, in the sight of those leaders, made the new ruling almost ineffective. Several high courts did not agree with this understanding and interpreted the new Act so as to keep *Shah Bano* alive. The constitutional validity of the new Act was challenged soon but the matter was decided 16 years later, by another Constitution bench headed by Justice Rajendra Babu (*Danial Latifi*, 2001). He wily-nilly upheld the disputed Act but decisively ruled that it had to be applied strictly in accordance with the *Shah Bano* judgment. During the years that followed, in several cases beginning with *Khatun Nisa* (2002), the apex court treated the CrPC provisions and

the Act of 1986 as parallel legislations in *pari materia*, and did its best to harmonise them in letter and spirit. Yet there remained a need for a clear-cut ruling that the option to seek relief under either of the two laws lies with the

CRPC IS A NON-RELIGIOUS LAW THE PROVISIONS OF WHICH CANNOT BE SELECTIVELY USED FOR VARIOUS RELIGIOUS GROUPS OF CITIZENS. GREAT JUDGES OF INDIA HAVE BEEN CLARIFYING THIS SINCE THE EARLY YEARS OF THE POST-CONSTITUTION ERA



Tahir Mahmood



Justice Nagarathna's judgment in the case exhibits her deep concern for those married women who are not breadwinners but just homemakers

aggrieved women. The verdict in *Abdul Samad* eminently fulfils this pressing need.

The story of this case has virtually been, and remains, a routine in Muslim households — relations between a couple coming under the weather, the wife going away from the matrimonial home and initiating criminal proceedings against the man, he, in turn, unilaterally divorcing her and then trying to defeat in the court her claim for maintenance by taking recourse to the popular understanding of Muslim law on the subject. This is what a Telangana man did and, when the trial court decided the wife's claim in her favour, appealed to the state high court with a plea that the dispute had to be adjudicated upon not under the CrPC but exclusively under the 1986 Act, which according to his counsel's knowledge had more or less enforced the traditional Muslim law and remains in force in that sense. Failing to get relief there, the man knocked at the apex court's doors. An *amicus curiae* appointed by the court submitted to it a summary of all the past cases on the issue, and the two judges on the bench wrote separate but concurring judgments. Both made it clear beyond doubt that the CrPC law is as much available to Muslim women as the Act of 1986, and that they can avail either of these laws as they wish, or even both.

To put the issue in its historical perspective the two learned judges, AG Masih and BV Nagarathna, took pains to narrate in their respective judgments the four-decade-long story of judicial approaches to the contentious issue —

from Krishna Iyer's *Bai Tahera* decision of 1979 to R Bhanumati and Indira Banerjee's conflicting rulings in the *Rana Nahid* case of 2020. Together, they dismissed the husband's appeal against the Telangana high court verdict.

The judgment of Justice Nagarathna in the case exhibits her deep concern for those married women who are not breadwinners but just homemakers. She writes, "In the case of a woman who has an independent source of income, she may be financially endowed and may not be totally dependent on her husband and his family. But what is the position of a married woman who is often referred to as a homemaker and who does not have an independent source of income whatsoever and is totally dependent for her financial resources on her husband and on his family?" I do humbly share her fervent appeal that "an Indian married man must become conscious of the fact that he would have to financially empower and provide for his wife who does not have an independent source of income."

The CrPC law on maintenance has been substantially retained in its new version, the Bharatiya Nagrik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) of 2023, which came into effect early this month. The apex court decision will apply to the new equivalent provisions as well.

Tahir Mahmood is former chairman of National Minorities Commission and ex-member of the Law Commission of India. The views expressed are personal

For biomedical research, a compass of practicality

The relationship between investment in high-quality biomedical research, population health, and a country's economic growth is well established. At no time in recent history has this link been appreciated better than during the Covid-19 pandemic. But unlike the shortened timelines during the pandemic, there is a long lag period between the time investments in research are made and benefits are observed. Therefore, policymakers are uncertain about the areas to which scarce funds should be diverted. Nevertheless, drawing on past national and global experiences, a few broad recommendations can be made.

In India, there is little money available for investment in health research. A decade ago, it was estimated that the funds received in research grants annually was about \$200 million, nearly two-thirds of which came from the Union government. Assuming that investment has continued commensurate with Gross Domestic Product growth, the current figure is still likely to be less than half a billion dollars annually. For comparison, in the United States (US), public and institutional funding in health research is nearly \$85 billion annually. From all sources, the US spends nearly \$250 billion annually on biomedical research compared to about \$1.4 billion by India. Therefore, for our research dollars to be competitive, we simply cannot allow any waste at all. How do we ensure this? A few simple principles can help.

Most importantly, we should not fund "me-too" research purporting to generate "India-specific" data. For the majority of diseases that are of public health importance around the world, research done elsewhere is good enough to guide practice. In general, the development and progression of diseases, and their response to treatment vary little between populations. For the vast majority of diseases, clinical practice in India reflects this reality. Another category that should seldom be supported is projects that are far removed from clinical utility (unless there is a plausible path for further development, or it is student research). It would also be best to avoid funding research involving expensive treatments for common diseases. As a general rule, newer, more expensive technologies and treatments offer far less incremental benefit compared to the additional cost. A wiser use of money would be to focus on finding better ways to implement existing effective treatments.

Research is most useful when its design and focus allow for the results to be immediately deployed in the clinic or community. These are usually randomised clinical trials, focused on two broad categories of disease conditions. First, common diseases for which effective treatments are already available, and second, diseases that are disproportionately more prevalent in our country. For the first category, funding should be prioritised for trials that aim to find the best ways to implement already known effective treatments.

For diseases in the second category, effective treatments are often not available. These are generally diseases of poorer countries and are seldom the targets of serious research in the rich world. Supporting research to understand and treat such diseases would not only help our own population but also help people in other poor countries and serve as a testament to our scientific leadership.

In post-war US, there was a concerted push towards prioritising problem-solving, "strategic" or "translational" research over pure "curiosity-driven", fundamental research. Proponents illustrated this by citing the work of Louis Pasteur (multidisciplinary, problem oriented research) over the "pure science" of Niels Bohr. Adopting an integrated, translation-oriented research template is widely believed to have contributed to the rapid strides in science and technology made by Japan in the decades after the war, and by China more recently.

In contrast, the vast majority of research done in India is fragmented and does not progress far enough to yield tangible benefits to patients. This is partly because of siloed institutional structures. Most often, basic scientists work on questions guided by their own understanding, without inputs from clinical scientists. Clinicians working in hospitals have neither the incentive nor the training to understand basic science research. As a result, the leads from basic research often die in the translational 'valley of death' as they fail to make the

jump to a marketable product. How can this situation be righted? The long-term solution perhaps lies in embedding medical schools within multi-disciplinary science campuses to foster the development of an interdisciplinary mindset. Meanwhile, research funds should preferentially be allocated to disease-focused, goal-oriented, multi-disciplinary, translational research with clear deliverables. (such as develop an effective, affordable medicine for drug-resistant TB).

The areas of priority should be identified by the public funding agency, guided by metrics such as the burden of disease in the population. The funds should preferentially be disbursed to teams consisting of basic scientists, clinicians and trialists, and industry partners. This would require funders to give out larger tranches of money to fewer research groups, unlike the current practice of giving small amounts of money to a large number of individual researchers. As the amount of money needed for mission-mode projects would be large, there should be an explicit mandate to secure co-funding from industry and other donors. It would encourage the reorganisation of academia and industry into virtual biomedical research clusters that would help streamline the process of translating fundamental science to health benefits for the population. As the central agencies fund most of the research, they have the power to nudge academia into reorganising, by preferentially funding multi-disciplinary teams to tackle the most important health problems facing the nation.

Karthikeyan is executive director of the Translational Health Science and Technology Institute, and professor of Cardiology at AIIMS, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal

A Swedish template to achieve net zero goals

The climate crisis remains the most pressing challenge of our time. Some of the biggest contributors to the climate crisis are sectors that emit large amounts of greenhouse gases. As one of the largest sources of emissions, the industrial sector plays a central role in tackling this challenge. According to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), achieving net-zero emissions from industry is possible but remains a significant challenge. To make substantial progress, hard-to-abate industries must transition to more effective, low-carbon operations.

The discourse on the decarbonisation of industry is becoming increasingly urgent, especially after the global stocktake published by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the 28th Conference

of the Parties (COP 28), which highlighted the shortcomings in mitigating the climate crisis. Industries, particularly hard-to-abate sectors such as iron & steel, power, and cement play an important role in the transition.

Industrial decarbonisation requires a significant expansion of infrastructure for electricity, hydrogen, recycling and carbon capture use and storage, as well as the conversion or phasing out of current industrial facilities. Sweden has emerged as a major player in the development of low-carbon industrial technologies for a greener future. One notable example is HYBRIT, a joint venture between three companies, SSAB, LKAB and Vattenfall, which has set a milestone by producing fossil-fuel-free steel using hydrogen



Jan Thesleff

instead of coal. This achievement represents a vital step towards carbon neutrality. The HYBRIT technology uses hydrogen from water and renewable energy instead of coking coal, which is traditionally used in ore-based steel production. This technology has the potential to revolutionise industry globally, including in India.

India, with its large industrial base and ambitious climate goals, is an ideal partner for the introduction of such technologies. The opportunity to introduce Swedish innovations in India could set a precedent for bilateral cooperation that deploys advanced technology for significant environmental benefit. The Leadership Group for Industry Transition (LeadIT) is a collaboration between India and Sweden to achieve net-zero emissions in hard-to-decarbonise sectors. The project, with 18 countries and 20 companies involved, includes a commitment from the members to jointly develop technologies, collaborate on research and innovation, and mobilise investments for the transition. At COP28, the India-Sweden Industry Transi-

tion Partnership was also launched to accelerate decarbonisation of steel and cement sectors. Other initiatives, such as the India-Sweden Innovations Accelerator and the Sweden-India Innovation Partnership, aim to accelerate the pace of green transition between key players from India and Sweden.

These collaborative efforts can serve as a blueprint for countries on green, clean transition. While India is well-equipped to manage its emissions, climate change is a challenge that requires global cooperation. Sweden is dedicated to supporting India in reducing emissions and decarbonising hard-to-abate sectors. By working together, we can make a meaningful impact on this critical issue.

As India and Sweden mark more than 75 years of diplomatic ties, we are happy to co-create solutions and exchange technical know-how for a carbon-neutral, resource-efficient society. Let us embrace our embassy's motto for the year 2024, Building a Sustainable Tomorrow, embodying the spirit of unity and innovation that drives us to create a lasting impact.

Jan Thesleff is ambassador of Sweden to India. The views expressed are personal

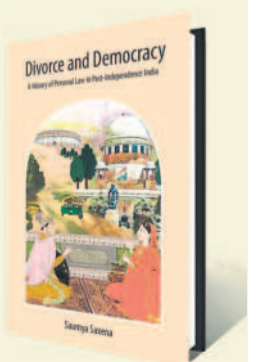
{ EDITOR'S PICK }

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

THE DIVORCE DIVIDE

A divorced Muslim woman is entitled to maintenance under the Criminal Procedure Code's Section 125, the Supreme Court ruled on Wednesday, citing the 1985 *Shah Bano* case that was countered a year later with the enactment of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act. The Court said the 1986 law does not take away rights that divorced women have either under personal law or Section 125.

This week, HT recommends legal historian Saumya Saxena's *Divorce and Democracy*, tracing the history of personal law in post-Independence India. The book covers the relationship between law and religion, democracy, gender, minority rights, and their impact on personal law. The book looks at how the State has dealt with divorce mediated largely through religion. *Divorce and Democracy* analyses Hindu, Muslim, and Christian marriage and divorce laws and helps situate them in current politics, even as it historicises the legislative and judicial response to debates over personal law.



Divorce and Democracy: Saumya Saxena
Year: 2022



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EXPLAINED LAW

In Kejriwal bail, lens on ED's power to arrest

SC ruling is essentially on the ambit of Section 19 of PMLA. While this is taken up for consideration by a larger Bench, Kejriwal has been released on interim bail

APURVA VISHWANATH
 NEW DELHI, JULY 12

THE SUPREME Court on Friday granted interim bail to Arvind Kejriwal in the case brought by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in the alleged Delhi excise policy scam. The Chief Minister of Delhi, who was arrested on March 21 this year, had challenged the legality of his arrest.

The order has ramifications beyond Kejriwal and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). In its 66-page ruling, the SC raised some crucial concerns over the ED's power to arrest under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA), and the way the agency uses that power.

What does the interim bail in the ED case mean for Arvind Kejriwal?

It is a shot in the arm for Kejriwal and AAP. A trial court had granted regular bail to Kejriwal in the same case but the Delhi High Court had stayed the order. However, Kejriwal will remain in jail for now, since he is also under arrest in the Central Bureau of Investigations' (CBI's) case in the same alleged scam.

A special CBI court is likely to hear that case on July 17. What happens then will dictate when he can be released from custody. The bar for bail in a CBI case is lower compared to an ED case.

On what grounds has the SC granted Kejriwal interim bail now?

The SC did not really make a finding on whether Kejriwal's arrest was legal or not — but it did find sufficient grounds to question how the ED uses its power to arrest. This issue required "in-depth consideration" by a larger Bench, the court said.

Therefore, until the larger Bench decides this question, Kejriwal who "has suffered incarceration of over 90 days", must be released on bail, the court said.

In 2022, a three-judge Bench headed by Justice A M Khanwilkar (now retired) in *Vijay Madanlal Choudhary v Union of India* had upheld the PMLA and virtually all of the ED's powers, including its power to arrest. However, the ruling did not specifically address the principles on the necessity to arrest. A Bench of five judges will now have to hear the issue.

What is the Enforcement Directorate's power to arrest under the PMLA?

The SC's ruling on Friday is essentially on the ambit of Section 19 of the PMLA, the provision in the law from which the ED draws its power to arrest.

Section 19(1) reads: "If [the authorised officer]...has on the basis of material in his possession, reason to believe (that reason for such belief to be recorded in writing) that any person has been guilty of an offence punishable under this Act, he may arrest such person and shall, as soon as may be, inform him of the grounds for such arrest."

The benchmark for arrest that can be distilled from this provision is that the ED officer must, from the "material in his possession", have "reason to believe" that the accused is "guilty" of the offence — and then record his reasons and share them with the accused at the time of arrest.

These words are crucial since the PMLA is a departure from ordinary criminal law. While the threshold in ordinary law is far lower, getting bail is also not as difficult. Under Section 41 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPc), police can arrest a person without a warrant when a "reasonable suspicion exists" that the person has committed a cognizable (serious) offence.

The bar for bail under PMLA, which imposes a reverse burden of proof — which means that instead of the prosecution having to prove their accusation, it is the accused who must prove their innocence — too, is different from ordinary criminal law.

Under PMLA, the test for bail is a *prima facie* finding by the court that the accused is not guilty. In *Vijay Madanlal*, one of the grounds on which the SC upheld the stringent bail provisions was that the power to arrest is also narrow compared to ordinary law.

So what was Kejriwal's case?

Kejriwal's case was essentially that the ED had "no necessity to arrest him" on March 21. His lawyers argued that the ED's "reasons to believe" selectively refer to the implicating material, and ignore the exculpatory material.

Kejriwal's lawyers argued that the ECIR (Enforcement Case Investigation Report, akin to an FIR) was registered in August 2022, and the material that the ED relied on for the arrest was available to it by July 2023 — but the arrest finally happened in March 2024. The ED's "material" was basically the statements of approvers, and Kejriwal argued that the agency relied upon only those statements in

which he was named. The legality of arrest is not just a technical aspect. Since stringent laws such as the PMLA and the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) impose a high bar for bail, the procedural safeguards become the test against arbitrary arrest. Since getting bail is so difficult, due process requires the agency to scrupulously follow the rigours of the law in arresting an individual.

And what did the court find?

The court has a primary finding on how it interprets the words "reasons to believe". Since Section 19 states the "reasons to believe" must be to establish a finding of "guilt" and nothing less, the SC held that the ED must have a higher bar for what it considers reason to believe. Essentially, the reason must virtually be "evidence admissible in court", because that is what is needed to establish guilt — and not just a subjective finding of the ED.

"DoE (ED) has drawn our attention to the use of the expression 'material in possession' in Section 19(1) of the PML Act instead of 'evidence in possession'. Though etymologically correct, this argument overlooks the requirement that the designated officer should and

must, based on the material, reach and form an opinion that the arrestee is guilty of the offence under the PML Act. Guilt can only be established on admissible evidence to be led before the court, and cannot be based on inadmissible evidence," the SC said.

"Arrest, after all, cannot be made arbitrarily and on the whims and fancies of the authorities. It is to be made on the basis of the valid 'reasons to believe', meeting the parameters prescribed by the law," it said.

What is the upshot of the ruling?

Although the issue has to be debated before a larger Bench, Friday's ruling essentially restricts the ED's scope for arrest. The criticism that the ED has over the years used its powers arbitrarily, and that jail under PMLA means bail is virtually impossible, will now face fresh judicial scrutiny.

"The language of Section 19(1) is clear, and should not be disregarded to defeat the legislative intent — to provide stringent safeguards against pre-trial arrest during pending investigations. Framing of the charge and putting the accused on trial cannot be equated with the power to arrest. A person may face the charge and trial even when he is on bail," the court said.

EXPLAINED HISTORY

PLAGUE LED TO LATE STONE AGE POPULATION CRASH IN EUROPE: STUDY

AROUND 5,000 years ago, the population in northern Europe collapsed, decimating Stone Age farming communities across the region. The cause of the 'Neolithic decline', has remained a matter of debate.

A new study, "Repeated plague infections across six generations of Neolithic Farmers", published by the journal *Nature* on Wednesday, suggests that disease, specifically the plague, may have been the primary driver.

How was the study carried out?

The researchers involved in the study analysed DNA obtained from human bones, and teeth excavated from ancient burial tombs in Scandinavia — seven from an area in Sweden called Falbygden, one from coastal Sweden close to Gothenburg and one from Denmark.

The remains of 108 people — 62 males, 45 females, and one undetermined — were studied. Eighteen of them — 17% — were infected with plague at the time of death.

The researchers were able to chart the family tree of 38 people from Falbygden across six generations, spanning about 120 years. Twelve of them — 32% — were infected with plague. Genomic findings indicated that their community had experienced three distinct waves of an early form of plague.

What were the findings?

The researchers reconstructed full genomes of the different strains of the plague-causing bacterium *Yersinia pestis* responsible for these waves. They determined that the last one may have been more virulent than the others, and identified

traits indicating the disease could have spread from person to person to cause an epidemic.

"We learned that the Neolithic plague is an ancestor to all later plague forms," said Frederik Seersholm, geneticist at University of Copenhagen, and the study's lead author.

A later form of this same pathogen caused the Justinian Plague of the 6th century AD and the 14th century Black Death that ravaged Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Because the strains circulating during the Neolithic decline were much earlier versions, the plague may have produced different symptoms than witnessed in the epidemics millennia later.

The study demonstrated that the plague was abundant and widespread in the area examined. "This high prevalence of plague indicates that plague epidemics played a substantial role in the Neolithic decline in this region," said Martin Sikora, geneticist at University of Copenhagen and co-author of the study.

The Neolithic, or New Stone Age, saw humans switch to settled farming and animal domestication, from a roving hunter-gatherer lifestyle. The Neolithic population crash in Northern Europe occurred from about 3300 BCE to 2900 BCE. By that time, cities and sophisticated civilisations had already arisen in places like Egypt and Mesopotamia.

The populations of Scandinavia and Northwestern Europe disappeared entirely, only to be later replaced by the Yamnaya people who migrated from a steppe region of present-day Ukraine. They are the ancestors of modern Northern Europeans.

REUTERS

EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

Deregulating non-subsidised fertilisers

The industry is pitching for deregulation of non-subsidised fertilisers as the first step before decontrol of politically-sensitive urea and NBS. A relevant model is available in water-soluble fertilisers



HARISH DAMODARAN

WITH THE BJP having failed to secure a majority in Parliament and facing an electorally rejuvenated Opposition, the Union Budget on July 23 is not likely to contain big reform announcements for the fertiliser sector. No significant increase in the maximum retail price (MRP) of urea is expected, let alone bringing it under the "decontrolled" nutrient-based subsidy (NBS) regime. The MRP for urea has been fixed at Rs 5,360 per tonne since November 2012, and for urea with neem oil coating at Rs 5,628 from January 7, 2015.

Nor is the Centre likely to allow companies to freely set the MRPs of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP), muriate of potash (MOP), and other non-urea fertilisers — including complexes that contain varying proportions of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), potassium (K) and sulphur (S) — covered under NBS.

NBS fertilisers are technically decontrolled: manufacturers or importers only receive a per-tonne subsidy linked to their N, P, K, and S content. But in the last two years, even these have been brought under informal price control.

Effective from April 2023, the Department of Fertilisers has prescribed maximum profit margins over cost to determine the "reasonableness" of MRPs. Companies charging more can't get subsidy from the Centre under NBS. The informally-fixed "reasonable" MRPs are now Rs 27,000 per tonne for DAP, Rs 30,000-31,000 for MOP, and Rs 11,000 for single super phosphate (SSP). They are Rs 24,000 for 20:20:0:13, and Rs 29,400 for 10:26:26:0 and 12:32:16:0 NPKS complex fertilisers.

A pathway to reform

The table shows all-India sales of fertiliser products on which the Centre extends subsidy,

ALL-INDIA SALE/ CONSUMPTION OF FERTILISER PRODUCTS			
Product (NPKS ratio)	2022-23	2023-24	
NPKS Complexes	100.74	110.73	
(a) 20:20:0:13	49.19	52.16	
(b) 10:26:26:0	13.47	17.09	
(c) 12:32:16:0	6.92	10.33	
(d) 15:15:15:0	8.74	7.68	
(e) 28:28:0:0	4.86	5.85	
(f) 14:35:14:0	4.89	4.33	
(g) 16:16:16:0	2.9	4.25	
(h) 16:20:0:13	2.5	1.51	
(i) 14:28:0:0	2.33	1.35	
(j) 24:24:0:0	1.87	2.27	
(k) 20:20:0:0	1.23	1.78	
TOTAL*	638.45	648.37	

*Figures in (lakh tonnes). *Includes other products with sales/consumption below one lakh tonnes; **Mono-Ammonium Phosphate; ***Ammonium Sulphate. Source: Fertiliser Association of India.

whether with controlled MRP or "decontrolled" pricing under NBS. Almost 94% of overall sales in 2022-23 and 2023-24 (April-March) comprised just seven products: Urea, DAP, SSP, 20:20:0:13, MOP, 10:26:26:0, and 12:32:16:0.

There isn't much fiscal pressure on the government to hike the MRPs of these fertilisers. The Centre's fertiliser subsidy outgo for 2024-25 is budgeted at Rs 1,63,999.80 crore, down from Rs 1,89,487.44 crore in 2023-24, and Rs 2,51,339.36 crore in 2022-23.

Landed prices of imported urea, DAP, and MOP have fallen to around \$350, \$560 and \$319 per tonne respectively from their corresponding recent highs of \$900-1,000 (in Nov-Jan 2021-22), \$950-960 (July 2022), and \$590 (till Mar 2023). The prices of key inputs, phosphoric acid and ammonia, have fallen as well.

So, what reforms are realistically possible? A low-hanging fruit could be to deregulate fertilisers that aren't covered under any subsidy.

Registering a new fertiliser product takes 804 days in India on average, according to the

World Bank's 'Enabling the Business of Agriculture 2019' report. This is against 570 days in Russia, 356 in Pakistan, 270 in China, 210 in Argentina, 100 in Thailand, 90 in the US, 30 in Japan, and zero in the EU countries.

"The government should grant automatic registration for any new product that meets two criteria — a minimum content of plant nutrients, and a maximum limit of heavy metals and contaminants. This, along with mandatory label claims (open for testing by agencies), is what most advanced countries follow. They do not have agronomic or bio-efficacy trial requirements," said Sanjiv Kanwar, managing director, Yara Fertilisers India Pvt Ltd, the Indian subsidiary of the \$15.5-billion Norwegian crop nutrition major Yara International.

Water-soluble fertilisers

Automatic registration subject to the product conforming to basic quality parameters and truthful labeling, is already being implemented in water-soluble fertilisers (WSF).

In October 2015, the government issued "general specifications" for the commercialisation of these fertilisers, which can be applied to crops through drip irrigation or spraying directly to leaves, instead of normal field application in the soil. The specifications required WSFs to have a minimum 30% content of total nutrients, and maximum prescribed limits for contaminants (lead, cadmium, arsenic, total chloride and sodium).

"The WSF model can be extended to all fertilisers on which the government pays no subsidy," Kanwar said.

Since the October 24, 2015 order was issued, more than 100 WSF products have been launched by the likes of Deepak Fertilisers and Petrochemicals Corporation, Coromandel International, Yara, ICL, Zuari FarmHub, and Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative.

These products are targeted at high-value crops such as grapes, pomegranate, papaya, ginger, turmeric, capsicum, tomato, onion, cucumber, gourds, cotton and sugarcane, while applied through drip irrigation systems (fertigation) and for meeting the nutrient requirements specific to each growth stage.

High-value nutrients

"The absorption of nutrients by plants is higher when delivered through WSFs than the normal bulk field-applied fertilisers," N Suresh Krishnan, chairman of the Fertiliser Association of India, said. WSFs, however, are more expensive. The MRP of regular 19:19:19 NPK fertiliser is about Rs 31,000/tonne, whereas the same for WSF 19:19:19 is Rs 1,25,000.

But the uptake of available nutrients by crops is only 30-35% from field-applied fertilisers, compared to 60-70% from WSFs. The nutrient use efficiency is even higher (80-90%) for liquid fertilisers like urea ammonium nitrate. These come in dissolved solution form requiring further dilution, unlike WSFs that farmers mostly get as water-soluble crystals.

There is a proposal to deregulate liquid fertilisers on the lines of WSFs, with a minimum content of 15% total primary nutrients, and the same heavy metal contaminants limit.

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Why the Centre's proposed system for Delhi's urban land records matters

DAMINI NATH
 NEW DELHI, JULY 12

THE UNION Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry is working on a law that would bring all urban land and building records in the national capital under a single Delhi Urban Lands and Immovable Property Records Authority headed by the Lieutenant Governor.

All notified urban areas within the geographical boundaries of the National Capital Territory of Delhi are proposed to be covered by the Authority. As per the Economic Survey of Delhi 2022-23, the National Capital Territory sprawls over 1,483 sq km, of which 1,114 sq km is designated as urban, and the rest as rural.

Since land in Delhi is a central subject under Article 239AA of the Constitution, the proposed law will not fundamentally change who controls land policy in the capital.

Current situation

There is currently no urban land and buildings records law or system in Delhi.

Rural land records are maintained under the Delhi Land Reforms Act, 1954, and the Punjab Land Revenue Act, 1887. The 1954 Act does not, as per both the Act itself and subsequent court rulings, apply to urbanised villages in Delhi, or to land owned by a municipal corporation (MCD or NDMC) and the Cantonment Board, or land acquired for public purposes. The records under the 1887 and 1954 laws contain details such as *khasra* number or list of fields, and *khatauni* or list of cultivators, which only apply to agricultural land.

This situation is seen in several other states as well, and some like Gujarat and Maharashtra have already created a separate system for urban land records.

Also, multiple agencies are responsible for land in Delhi. For instance, the Revenue Department of the Delhi government maintains the Record of Rights (RoR), a legal docu-

ment that contains information about the ownership of land parcels in villages.

Property tax records are maintained by the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) for their areas.

The Land & Development Office (L&DO) under the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) has land records dating back to the acquisition of lands for the establishment of New Delhi by the British in 1911. Over the years, the L&DO has leased land for various purposes, but it does not maintain records once leasehold land is converted to freehold.

The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) has records for the land acquired by it for development.

The proposal

According to MoHUA's draft Bill, the Delhi Urban Land and Immovable Property

Records Authority chaired by the Delhi LG will include officials from the DDA, MCD, NDMC, Delhi Cantonment Board, the L&DO and Revenue Department as members. The Authority will frame the guidelines for creating and maintaining urban land records.

The Authority will appoint officers to survey all urban areas, including land, buildings, apartments, etc. It will have the power to carry out inquiries into property rights, and impose penalties for concealment of information.

The proposed Bill will have provisions for an urban RoR that have the names of all holders, occupants (other than tenants), owners, or mortgagees of the land, or assignees of the rent revenue from it.

The proposed RoR will also have the names of all government lessees or tenants, along with the nature and extent of their interests and liabilities, if any, with respect to the land or immovable property.

The significance

Accurate and updated maps, and detailed and robust land records are essential for proper urban planning. The NITI Aayog's September 2021 report, *Urban Planning Capacity in India*, found that accurate and usable maps for many major cities "do not exist with their functionalities or in the public domain".

This, the report said, is a "major impediment in the planning processes as well as planning capacity", because "the successful implementation of spatial plans depends to a great extent on how well they stay in sync with the land records".

A policy brief on India's urban land records prepared by the nonprofit Indian Institute of Human Settlements (IIHS) in 2023 said the RoR in some states are either non-existent or not updated after areas are declared urbanised because Revenue Departments believe that maintaining urban records is the responsibility of the mu-

nicipality or urban development authority.

"...The Revenue Department of the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi ceases to maintain land records for villages once they are formally brought into the urban fold. A similar practice is followed in states such as Karnataka, Rajasthan and UP," it said.

In another policy brief on Delhi's urban land records in 2019, IIHS had argued that having such records would help in taxation and dispute resolution.

"With no single custodian for the NCT of Delhi, there are no uniform records across various governance and planning typologies; varying formats are followed within as well as across institutions, making the process of property title search extremely cumbersome," the 2019 paper said.

The proposed Bill is aligned with the BJP's Lok Sabha election promise on the "creation of Digital Urban Land Records System", sources in the government said.

11 BIG PICTURE

THE REPUBLIC OF ACs

Intense heatwaves followed by extreme humidity are driving AC sales across the country. ALIND CHAUHAN on how India's already booming AC market is now breaching new territories and fuelling an unstoppable demand for cooling

IN MAY, as his three-room house in Siyana tehsil of Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh, turned oppressively hot, Rajpal Singh, an electrician with a housing society in Ghaziabad near Delhi, took a decision he had been putting off for a while — he bought an air conditioner (AC).

"I got a second-hand window AC for Rs 6,000. The heat was unbearable and our cooler had become ineffective," says Singh, who is in his 40s and earns Rs 12,000 a month. "It's a good AC and cools the room well. But I got a chance to sleep in the AC room for only two days. I had to return to Ghaziabad for work," he adds.

His rented room in Ghaziabad's Vaishali neighbourhood only has a fan. But he is glad his wife, two sons and the occasional guests who come to his village home can sleep well at night.

In another part of the state, 77-year-old Babu Ram Verma, who has settled down in Gonda's Itraur village after his retirement from a government job, is considering buying an AC for the first time in his life. He has reached out to his relatives to help him get one for a reasonable price. "It's so hot... room coolers and fans are now useless. It gets especially difficult at my age and with all these health issues. Earlier, one could spend the day under trees in orchards. But now it has become impossible to do so," he says.

This year so far, as temperatures broke all records — at least eight states recorded their highest number of heatwave days since 2010 and two states, Himachal Pradesh and Kerala, recorded heatwaves for the first time this year — India's already booming AC market got another boost, breaching new territories and fuelling an unstoppable demand for cooling. Rising humidity levels that accompanied the rains have added to discomfort levels.

Once considered a luxury appliance, the demand for ACs rides on the back of rising incomes and rising temperatures associated with climate change.

Since 2010, air conditioner ownership in India has increased threefold, reaching 24 units per 100 households in 2023, according to the World Energy Outlook 2023 report by the International Energy Agency (IEA).

Even the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data shows a jump in the number of AC owners. Speaking to *The Indian Express*, Shalu Agrawal, Director of Programmes, Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW, a public policy think-tank in India), said, "While the 2011-12 NSSO report, which captures the combined ownership of air cooler and air conditioners, shows that 12% of the households had these appliances, the 2022-23 report reveals that this number has reached nearly 24%."

This number is expected to only increase in the following years. According to the IEA report, household air conditioner ownership in India is estimated to expand ninefold by 2050, reaching more than 1 billion.

Though there is no pan-India data for AC sales, every indicator — from retail figures to trade body estimates, surveys and research papers — points to what's now an irreversible

appetite for cooling.

An unstoppable demand

At Aircon Paradise, a Ghaziabad-based AC retail showroom that caters to a clientele across Delhi-NCR, owner Aryan Malhotra says he has sold at least 25% more AC units this season when compared to the last three years.

"There has been a huge jump in demand. That's because unlike in 2023, this year, it did not rain at all during May, April, and most of June. None of the AC manufacturers expected this demand. As a result, there has been a shortage of ACs in the market since May. We have had people from all income groups coming to buy ACs — both window and split ACs are in demand. Most people have bought ACs on EMIs or have got it financed from the AC company," says Malhotra, adding that the overall AC sales may have gone up by more than 100% this season.

To boost sales, AC manufacturers have come up with different schemes: from cash-back offers on credit cards to low-interest EMI options and paper finance schemes, which, unlike credit card EMIs that typically offer six-month-long EMIs, allow the buyer to pay the full amount within 18 months

from the date of purchase.

Not far from Malhotra's shop is an AC repair and rental shop owned by Ankit Gupta. He says that this season, he has rented out more than double the number of ACs than he usually does. "If I was giving 10 ACs on rent till last year, this time, I would have given at least 25 ACs...I have also got a lot of calls for AC repair. Most peo-

ple think their ACs are not working properly because of some technical fault, but the reality is that ACs can be effective up to a certain point only — given the unusually high heat and humidity this season, the smaller ACs were not very effective," he says.

The AC wave has washed up on new shores to include small towns India and Tier 2 and 3 cities such as Dehradun, where once even air coolers were a rarity, and Lucknow.

OLX, an online platform for selling and buying used goods, too has recorded this spike in demand for ACs. In a statement issued in June, Amit Kumar, CEO and MD, OLX India, said, "Air conditioners have registered more than a 3X spike in demand, and the demand for coolers has also more than doubled. In Tier 1 cities, the demand for air conditioners almost doubled (89%), while in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, we witnessed a 150% growth, reflecting the sudden change in consumer needs... Notably, the growth rates in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities have significantly outpaced those in Tier 1 cities, with demand in Tier 2 cities witnessing a 5X spike in demand for air conditioners." The data provided by OLX compared the sales in March 2024 to the previous three months.

Amit Behl, owner of Behl Associates, Dehradun's leading electronics distributor, says he had a good year, with his AC sales breaking all previous records by a significant margin. When compared to all of last year, he has seen an almost 100% increase in AC sales in the three months starting April. "This time, we experienced an extended summer

without any rain. For many people in Dehradun, air conditioners are no longer a luxury but a necessity. May was particularly strong in terms of AC sales, with most buyers being first-time AC consumers. We have got business even from remote villages," says Behl, who has been in the business for nearly 15 years.

In Bhopal, where AC dealers claimed to have sold 50% more units than the previous year, retailer Jagat Sinha says there was a considerable shift in the demographics of people who bought ACs this year. "A lot of lower middle-class and middle-class people bought ACs. The preferred choice is the split AC," he says.

In April Voltas, a leading AC brand owned by the TATA Group, released a statement that said, "The company achieved over 2 million AC units during fiscal 2023-24, the highest ever sale of ACs by any brand in a financial year in India, with a volume growth of 35 per cent."

The cost of cool air

The insatiable demand for cooling, however, comes at a cost. Experts point out how the large-scale use of these appliances is, in fact, counterproductive and ends up fuelling the climate crisis.

What is immediately evident is the stress on power generation. "The impact of cooling needs on electricity consumption is already clear. Electricity demand is sensitive to temperatures, and in India's case, there is a sharp increase in demand as temperatures cross the 25-degree Celsius threshold. Electricity consumption due to space cooling increased 21% between 2019 and 2022, and today nearly 10% of electricity demand comes from space cooling requirements," the IEA report revealed.

Amid extremely high temperatures, Delhi's peak power reached new heights on June 18. It jumped to 8,647 MW, breaking the previous record of 8,000 MW, which was registered in May this year.

Similarly, in April, Kolkata witnessed an increased load on the power grid, which officials attributed to additional consumption from 1.5 lakh AC connections that were added without "proper authorisation".

"CESC (Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation) is urging people to get proper authorisation before using ACs. A small number of ACs is manageable, but when a significant portion of residents use them without authorisation, it creates a huge strain on the system. If the overload is too high, the smart grid will automatically shut down to prevent damage. We want to appeal to people to take sanction and then use ACs," CESC Executive Director Avijit Ghosh told *The Indian Express* in May.

A large part of this energy demand is being met by electricity generated by fossil fuels such as coal — in India, the share of coal-fired power generation stood at 75% of total power generated from all sources in FY24.

Experts worry that with the growing energy demand, countries like India may continue or even increase its reliance on coal — India's coal-fired thermal capacity grew to 218 GW in FY24 from 205 GW in FY20, a 6% growth, data on NITI Aayog's energy dashboard in May showed.

"More ACs mean more electricity demand. At least in the medium term, when the electricity grid is predominantly powered by thermal power, it means more [GHG] emissions," according to Agrawal.

But it is not just the electricity used to run ACs that is contributing to the climate crisis. The appliance has refrigerants, also known as coolants, which, if leaked, add to global warming. Currently, these coolants in ACs are generally either hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) or hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs).

ACs also contribute to the 'urban island effect' — a phenomenon that occurs when a city or certain pockets within a city experience much warmer temperatures than their surroundings or nearby rural areas on the same day. As ACs work like a heat pump, they cool the room by releasing the heat outside. Thereby, making the outside temperature warmer.

A 2014 study, 'Anthropogenic heating of the urban environment due to air conditioning', published in *AGU Journal*, found that excess heat generated by a city's worth of air conditioners can increase the outside temperature by 1 to 1.5 degree Celsius at night.

The solutions

Prima Madan, director, cooling and efficiency, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), told *The Indian Express*: "In India, the cooling demand is still increasing and it gives an opportunity to meet this demand in the most climate-friendly and sustainable way."

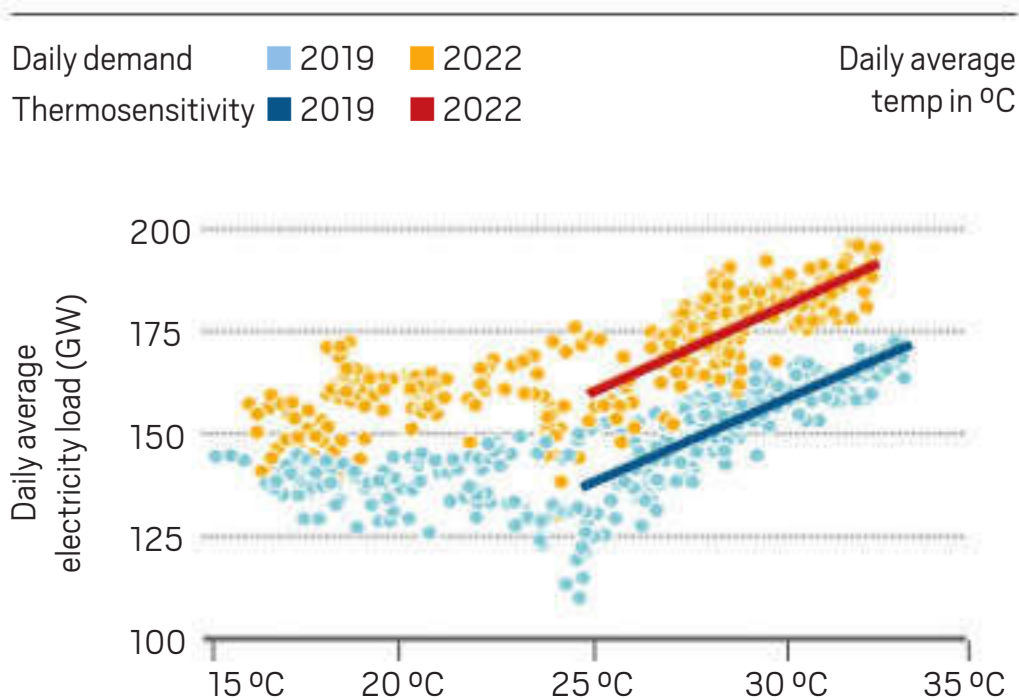
To do so, Madan emphasised that the country needs to take a "whole systems approach", which relies on not only ACs for cooling but also natural cooling-friendly architecture.

"There are adaptive thermal comfort approaches such as a cool roof (built to reflect more sunlight than a conventional roof, absorbing less solar energy) that can reduce dependence on mechanical cooling," Madan said.

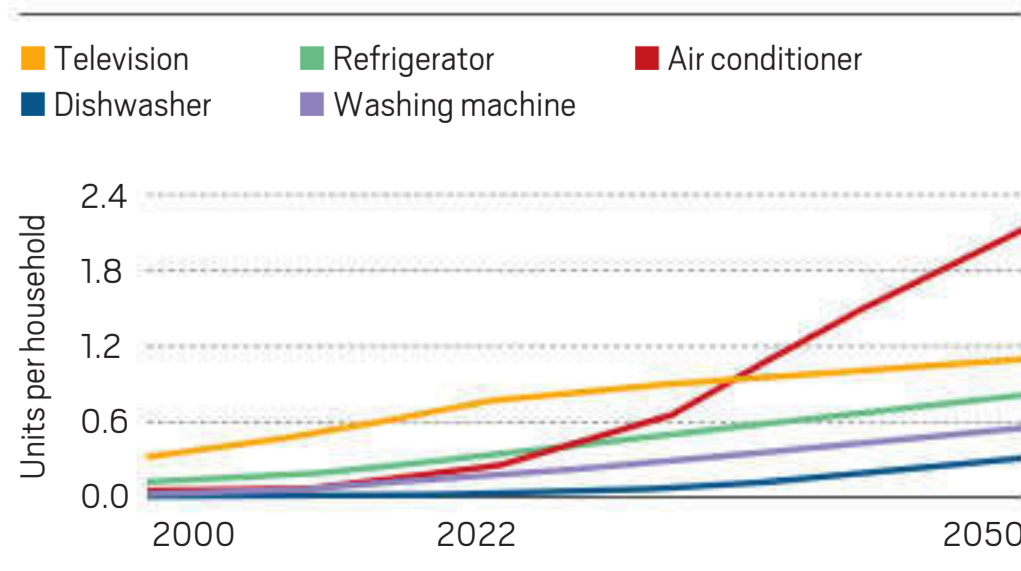
Most agree on how at least in the longer term, there is no alternative to better urban planning to cool our homes — better architecture, more trees, vegetation, and water bodies.

(With inputs from Avaneesh Mishra and Anand Mohan J)

ELECTRICITY DEMAND RISES SHARPLY WITH TEMPERATURE ABOVE 25°C



AIR CONDITIONERS ARE PROJECTED TO BE THE FASTEST GROWING HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCE



Source: World Energy Outlook 2023 report by the International Energy Agency (IEA).

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Just a bargaining chip

Demands for special category status are more about politics. States can get benefits through other means



AMITABH KUNDU AND GOVIND BHATTACHARJEE

FARM AS FACTORY

Agriculture's unexplored potential for employment generation needs to be tapped — not on, but near and outside the farms

THE NUMBER OF workers employed in unincorporated sector enterprises across India has fallen from 11.13 crore in 2015-16 to 10.96 crore in 2022-23, according to a comparative analysis of the National Sample Survey Office's data by this newspaper. The drop has been entirely in manufacturing (from 3.60 crore to 3.06 crore), while the workforce engaged in trade (3.87 crore to 3.90 crore) and "other services" (3.65 crore to 4 crore) has marginally gone up. That, on the face of it, is disturbing. The informal sector has traditionally acted as a shock absorber and "employment sink" for the large masses of unskilled/semi-skilled labour that cannot be productively engaged either in formal firms or agriculture, more so in years of crop failure. In this case, these enterprises — whether own-account establishments or run with some hired hands — were themselves seemingly victims of the triple shocks of demonetisation, goods and services tax rollout, and the pandemic-induced economic lockdowns between 2016-17 and 2021-22.

The reduction in the number of workers in unincorporated non-agricultural establishments may have been, to some extent, offset by an expansion in formal sector employment. If such formalisation has happened — there's no reliable data on that — it's probably not a bad thing. Informal firms are, after all, characterised by small scale of operations and low productivity that also translates into workers being paid little: The annual emoluments per hired employee in unincorporated sector enterprises averaged just Rs 1,24,482 during 2022-23. India, it's well known, has too many people in agriculture. If the jobs being generated outside agriculture are mostly in the informal sector and construction having the same characteristics — low output per worker and paying just-about subsistence wages — it does not amount to genuine structural transformation. The transfer of surplus labour should, ideally, be from informal (including agriculture and construction) to formal (manufacturing and high-productivity services).

Therein lies the challenge. The manufacturing sector is becoming increasingly capital-intensive, with the deployment of both labour-saving and labour-displacing automation, artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies. IT, accountancy or financial services, on the other hand, demand skills that a majority of India's working population lacks. That leaves agriculture and tapping its unexplored potential for gainful employment generation. Such jobs can be not on, but "near and outside" the farms — in the aggregation, grading, processing, packaging, transporting, warehousing and retailing of produce or the supply of inputs and services to farmers. It requires re-imagining agriculture and a vision of the "farm as a factory" producing crops that are raw material for further value addition. Converting onion and tomato to paste and puree can do what sugar mills and dairies have done — not just adding value to produce, but also creating jobs in the countryside itself.

HER OWN WORKPLACE

SC's comments on menstrual leave should spur wider conversations on making places of work more inclusive

THE SUPREME COURT'S comment on Monday that a mandatory menstrual-leave policy might be counter-productive for women in the workforce is an intervention in what has proved to be a contentious issue not just in India but across the world. The three-judge bench, hearing a plea to implement menstrual leave for women under the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, urged the Centre to frame a model policy in consultation with states and stakeholders, ensuring that fear of its misuse as a basis for discrimination does not deter the entry of women into the workforce.

Working women are already set back by the motherhood penalty and workplace house-keeping — pregnancy and child rearing that stall their progress, and the assignment of menial administrative tasks that men at the same professional level would not volunteer for or be assigned. Menstrual leave runs the risk of becoming one more obstacle course that women have to navigate for employment and career advancement. In December last year, the former Union Women and Child Development Minister, Smriti Irani, had told the Rajya Sabha that she was opposed to the idea of a paid menstrual leave personally because she did not want women to face discrimination over "a natural part of a woman's life journey". There is some truth in her words. The pathologisation of a biological process can further the stigma instead of alleviating it. Yet, for those suffering from conditions such as endometriosis and dysmenorrhea, the discomfort that accompanies their menstrual cycles has a real impact on their performance at work. All these necessitate a careful calibration of how policy is framed, with guidelines and safeguards built in against misuse at either end.

While countries such as Taiwan and Zambia have instituted menstrual-leave policy, implementation has remained a hurdle. In June 2023, when Spain became the first European nation to introduce paid menstrual leave, it was seen as a move towards greater gender parity. In the year since, data has shown that very few women have availed of it, either because the process is onerous or due to a fear of discrimination. In Indonesia, the two-day menstrual leave has few takers as policy mandates a medical examination to avail it. The apex court's comment, therefore, comes as a welcome opportunity for greater deliberation on a policy that can strike an equilibrium between an acknowledgement of women's biological needs and an accommodation of workplace demands. The draft menstrual hygiene policy released by the government last year outlined the provision of flexible hours and support leaves: "... such arrangements should be available to all, to prevent perpetuating stigmas or assumptions about productivity based on menstrual cycles." It could be a starting point.

BETTER LATE

A new study champions night owls over the 5 am club. It won't settle the debate

IT'S A BORING question often asked on an uninspiring first date: Are you a night owl or a morning lark? It leads to a predictable conversation, almost as insipid as those about zodiac signs. A debate may follow about the benefits of joining the "5 am club" and just how important early morning "me time" is for pre-dawn enthu cutlets. On the other hand, the late-nighters romanticise the quiet of the night and how the creative juices flow better after a post-prandial drink. So the conversation goes, with an argument that cannot be settled hanging in the air. But perhaps, the matter can be settled through science.

A study by researchers at Imperial College London compared data from 26,000 people to understand how sleep timings, duration and chronotype (basically, whether a person is a night owl or a morning lark) affect cognitive functioning and reasoning. The worst off are those who don't get the right amount of sleep — both too much and too little are bad. Then come the much-vaunted early risers, who fall behind those who stay up late at night when it comes to brain functioning. Understandably, the study is being brandished on social media by those who like to sleep in. Long dismissed as lazy, they are citing science to defend their nocturnal leanings.

It might, however, be too early to call it a day on the sleep debate. Studies come and go, and there will certainly always be political leaders and corporate bosses showing off about how much they work and how little they sleep — unlike mere mortals who want less of the first and more of the second. Science can hardly hold a candle to such self-righteousness. Perhaps that's okay. Some pointless debates — whether there should be pineapple on pizza, if there can be such a thing as vegetarian biryani and, of course, night owls vs 5 am-types — are needed for those boring dates.

THE CONCEPT OF special category status was introduced in 1969 by the Planning Commission in the Fourth Five-Year Plan. It was an instrument of positive intervention for allocating higher plan assistance to a few states (through the National Development Council, NDC) that were handicapped due to location and socio-economic factors. Balanced regional development in the country was its prime objective. Initially, only three states, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam and Nagaland, were given this status. Later, all northeastern states and Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh were given special category status.

The NDC provided plan assistance to states by using the Gadgil formula — higher weightage to population and economic deprivation — after reserving 30 per cent of funds for the special category states (SCS). The Finance Commission (FC) also recognised J&K, Assam and Nagaland as SCS in 1969. More importantly, the Commission incorporated the essence of the formula in meeting the budgetary deficits of these states as well as in designing the criteria for devolution of taxes. This is reflected in higher per capita transfers to the SCS since the Fifth FC in 1969. The Centre pays 90 per cent to SCS in centrally-sponsored schemes as grants and the rest 10 per cent as loans, as against 60 or 75 per cent grants in the case of other states.

Significant concessions were also provided to them in excise and customs duties, income tax and corporate tax. The real benefit, however, accrued in the form of higher central plan assistance from the Planning Commission. Much of this is now a matter of the past with the Planning Commission being replaced by NITI Aayog. All the Centre to state transfers are being done through FC, except the central sector and centrally-sponsored schemes.

Notwithstanding these structural changes, the demand for securing the SCS status has gone up in recent years, especially

with the increasing presence of regional parties in the central government. It has, in fact, become a tool of political bargaining. This is an issue which must be amicably resolved.

In February 2014, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had announced in the Rajya Sabha that "for purposes of central assistance, special category plan assistance" would be extended to the successor state of Andhra Pradesh (the old state after excluding Telangana) for five years. Instead of announcing that Andhra Pradesh will be an additional SCS, it was mentioned that appropriate fiscal measures, including tax incentives, will be extended to it. Questions have been raised on whether this statement amounted to the government adding a new state to SCS, its constitutional and fiscal appropriateness and if the declaration of a Prime Minister is binding on a government assuming office after a decade.

The 14th FC did not consider special category states in its recommendations, although it analysed in detail the nature and rationale of the demands of the states and the alternate perspectives. In fact, it showed concern for these underprivileged states by making significantly higher allocation of funds to the NE, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. It proposed the continuation of higher grants and lower cost sharing for central government and centrally sponsored projects. The Commission also sanctioned special grants for meeting the specific challenges of these states.

The 15th FC made no mention of the SCS. However, the eight northeastern and two hilly states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh (J&K going off the list after becoming a UT), which accounted for only 5.2 per cent of the population, were assigned 10.5 per cent share of the devolved taxes, resulting in lower shares for the southern and western states. Further, besides the general norm of meeting the revenue deficit of underprivileged states, the 14th and 15th FCs

also gave weightage to ecology and area. This resulted in a large amount of divisible taxes coming into the kitty of these states. Importantly, the share of these states in the total allocation has gone up as per the 15th FC compared to that of its predecessor (as well as other states in the plains) due to a higher weightage assigned to ecology or forest cover. The increase is also because the 15th FC gave weightage to indicators as per the population of the 2011 Census and not that of 1971 — the population growth among the SCS during the interim period has been higher than the national average, except in the case of Himachal Pradesh.

Given the politically charged nature of democracy and the way autonomous institutions function in India, any change in the SCS list is likely to be controversial. The Planning Commission had proposed a framework for the identification of SCS, but updating that in the contemporary context would be extremely challenging.

The leaders of aspirant states generally stake their claims for SCS for political purposes, without any proper assessment of the net benefits. Studies have shown that the net benefits a state would get through SCS can easily be achieved through full and proper utilisation of funds under sanctioned projects and tapping existing opportunities, backed up by a reasonable package from the Centre. Given the stand of the NDA government in 2018, it is imperative that "the dream of inclusive development" is pursued through the provision of a package of strategic interventions and special budgetary allocations that are well-targeted and transparent about the costs and benefits.

Kundu is professor emeritus at LJ University, Ahmedabad. Bhattacharjee, former director general, Comptroller and Auditor General of India, teaches at the Arun Jaitley National Institute of Financial Management

Given the politically charged nature of democracy and the way autonomous institutions function in India, any change in the SCS list is likely to be controversial. The Planning Commission had proposed a framework for the identification of SCS, but updating that in the contemporary context would be extremely challenging.

CASTING THE NET TOO WIDE

Proposed Maharashtra security law will stifle peaceful protest and opposition



COLIN GONSALVES

IT IS IN the nature of government, particularly these days, that persons in high places suddenly come up with a bright idea and without much ado, draconian laws are pushed through Parliament without discussion. Such is the nature of the public security acts passed in Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. One such legislation has now been tabled in Maharashtra as the Special Public Security Act, 2024.

Reading the Bill through the eyes of a human rights lawyer, I could see how my participation in meetings to explain to social workers the provisions of criminal law and the Constitution could have terrible repercussions almost immediately. As a human rights lawyer, it is my duty to interact with members of the public throughout the country, particularly in tribal areas, conflict zones and places where atrocities on Dalits are taking place. In these meetings called by a wide spectrum of groups, I take the invitation at face value, participate in the meeting and advise social activists on the course they can take to engage in social movements within the contours of the rule of law. Since non-violent struggle is constitutionally protected, I can immediately see how my right to freedom of speech and expression can be crushed by this Bill.

If I encourage disobedience by peaceful means of authorities promoting illegalities such as tree cutting and environmental degradation, or if I innocently participate in a meeting of social workers protesting against torture by the police and fake encounters, I am immediately liable to be arrested and kept in jail for three years. It is no

excuse for me to say that I did not know the identity of some of the organisers who, according to the police, had dubious links with certain organisations. I will be caught nevertheless under Section 8 even if I am not a member of any unlawful organisation.

Things don't end there. In an evolving Kafkaesque situation, the police can notify my office and my home, evict me from there and take possession. They may also forcibly enter my home and grab whatever money and other assets — such as my computers — that they find. All they need to say is that my training of activists in the use of the law to, say, hold the police to account was for the purpose of aiding some unlawful organisations because its members, unknown to me, participated in the meeting.

"Urban Naxals", who our Home Minister is fond of mentioning, if they do exist at all, are an unverifiable lot. Moreover, I believe that as a lawyer, it is my duty to educate everyone, including a Naxalite, on the law and the Constitution irrespective of how that legal education will work out in reality — even a Naxalite has a right to know. On her arrest, she must know how to apply for bail. She must know how to register an FIR against a police person for torture. All such legal education programmes can now be perceived as aiding unlawful organisations.

The Bill is crudely drafted to crush freedom of speech and expression. It is meant to make a vigorous non-violent struggle against oppression impossible. All the provisions of the Bill are already contained in the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, the National Security Act and the Public Safety

Acts. Why, then, is it necessary? Because the state requires a statute that has nothing to do with terrorism but which will strike terror in the hearts of human rights activists and cripple their work. That is why the Bill is drafted vaguely.

I don't make this criticism without cause. We have gone through the experience of the arrest of the Bhima Koregaon lawyers and social workers, none of whom, even after five years of incarceration, could be shown to have engaged in any act of violence intended to overawe the state by warfare. All of them were denied bail by judges, up to the Supreme Court. After suffering incarceration, they were released by brilliant judges in the high courts and the Supreme Court with the finding that there was no material to show involvement in terrorist offences.

Not a single judge in the country has ever called an accused an "urban Naxal". Finding Leftist literature in a house was held to be not incriminating by the Supreme Court in Vernon Gonsalves's case. Yet it finds mention in the Bill. Mere participation is not criminal, said the Supreme Court in Shoma Sen's case. Yet even innocent participation will invite a three-year jail term.

Because the judiciary has let us down again and again, the government has become so bold as to draft a law to trap within its web all those who struggle peacefully for a better India for their children.

The writer is a senior advocate, Supreme Court, and founder-director of the Human Rights Law Network

JULY 13, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

CMS WALK-OUT

FOUR NON-CONGRESS (I) chief ministers walked out of the National Development Council meeting in protest against the unabashed display of authoritarianism by the Centre. The Prime Minister objected to political statements, saying the NDC was not a political forum. The PM allowed a resolution to be passed by the truncated NDC condemning the walk-out.

ASSAM VOTER LIST

THE ELECTION COMMISSION sought to ask the government to amend the Representation

of People Act as a special case for providing revision of the 1971 electoral rolls in Assam. If the revision is undertaken, it would mean the inclusion of all persons who attained the age of 21 after 1971, and who belong to families which find a place on the rolls, inclusion of persons who have migrated to Assam from other parts of India after 1971, and deletion of names of those dead or who have left Assam.

STATES DEMAND SHARE

THE SPLIT AT the political level in the NDC was evident in the sharp differences in the approach to planning, with the states calling for a greater role for themselves. The states

wanted limits to be set on the centrally sponsored schemes. The Prime Minister stressed that the plans were a joint venture between the Centre and the states.

INDIAN DISNEYLAND

TO THE PHILOSOPHICAL appeal made to the Haryana chief minister by Dhirendra Brahmachari, of the need for "leisure in life and life in leisure", he added a national interest. His dream of Indian Disneyland is beginning to take shape in Gurgaon. The Haryana government has set aside 400 acres of land for a city centre, with a giant amusement park as its intended highlight.



Inequity runs through it

Residential segregation of Muslim minority and resultant constraints on their accessing quality education and health services are accompanied by community's low representation in positions of influence



FARZANA AFRIDI

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING statistics about a minority group relative to the average of a country. One, the median years of completed schooling of a male household head belonging to this group is almost two years lower. Second, its urban infant mortality rate is almost 5 per cent higher than the average for the entire urban population. Third, a higher percentage of children under five years of age from this minority group are malnourished than the average under-five-year-old in this country.

These are statistics for Muslims in India from the most recent 2019-21 round of the National Family Health Survey. While it is rather obvious that on these metrics the community is worse off than the average Indian, you may ask: Have Muslims been catching up with the rest of the country? Even though these gaps in socio-economic indicators exist, if they have narrowed over time then the socio-economic status of Muslims could be converging with that of an average Indian. The short answer is: No.

These gaps in human development indicators between an Indian Muslim and an average Indian household have been mostly stagnant and persistent over decades. What, then, needs to be done if India has to progress collectively and carry everyone along the path of development, including 14 per cent of its population? Before we can get to any solutions, it is imperative to highlight the markers of disadvantage inherent in these statistics.

Residential segregation of Muslims in India is symptomatic of their low levels of socio-economic development. To some extent, it may be self-imposed — driven by fear of physical violence and riots — but stubborn and unrelenting discrimination in urban rental housing and land markets is primarily responsible for the ghettoisation of Muslims. The recent incident in Vadodara — of protests against a Muslim woman being allocated housing under a government scheme in a non-Muslim majority area — is a case in point.

Segregation not only makes minority communities easier targets during communal violence, it has strong negative implications for access to public goods and services. Anjali Adulka and co-authors, using the SECC and Economic Census data from 3,000 cities in 2012-13, document residential segregation of marginalised communities across and within cities in India. Not only do cities with larger Muslim populations have worse access to public health and education, but within cities too, the segregation of Muslim neighbourhoods results in lower consumption of public goods by this minority group.

Race-based residential segregation has been studied for decades in the US and has provided robust evidence that segregation of communities is a strong deterrent to upward socio-economic mobility of segregated communities, particularly of the Black population. While the ghettoisation of Muslims in urban India has been examined extensively through ethnographic studies, it has



CR Sasikumar

not been rigorously linked to their low levels of socio-economic development and continued marginalisation. Why and how does identity-based segregation of people to the "fringes" of our burgeoning cities relegate them to a life mired in poverty?

First, the importance of education as a precursor to accessing good and decent work opportunities cannot be emphasised enough. If access to good schools and educational institutions is limited due to segregation of Muslims, they are handicapped even when it comes to applying for good job opportunities. Unlike the general perception that Muslims prefer religious, rather than mainstream, education, the Sachar Committee report tabled in 2006 noted that "despite a common belief that a large number of Muslim children attend madarsas for primary education, only 3 per cent of Muslim children among the school-going age go to madarsas. Instead, many Muslim children are enrolled in maktabas, which provide supplementary religious education in addition to enrolment in public schools." It is entirely possible that madarsas crop up when access to mainstream and quality schooling is missing due to segregation.

Second, it is well-acknowledged that women's education is strongly, negatively correlated with fertility rates. Not only does the overall educational attainment of Muslims fall dramatically at the tertiary level, the gender gap in educational attainment within the Muslim community is larger. Not surprisingly, Muslims have higher fertility rates — a marker of poor education rather than prosperity — and consequently a higher share of the Muslim population is young. The cultural acceptability of low levels of education of Muslim girls gets reinforced when the norm within these segregated communities is to not educate girls. This norm is likely to become less acceptable in mixed identity communities where non-Muslim girls continue their education beyond middle and high schools.

The residential segregation of Muslims and the resultant constraints on their accessing quality education and health services are accompanied by shockingly low representation of Muslims in positions of influence, relative to their population. While discrimina-

Segregation not only makes minority communities easier targets during communal violence, it has strong negative implications for access to public goods and services. Anjali Adulka and co-authors, using the SECC and Economic Census data from 3,000 cities in 2012-13, document residential segregation of marginalised communities across and within cities in India. Not only do cities with larger Muslim populations have worse access to public health and education, but within cities too, the segregation of Muslim neighbourhoods results in lower consumption of public goods by this minority group.

tion against Muslims in jobs within the private sector is likely, Muslims are under-represented in the public sector. For instance, the Sachar Report noted that Muslims have constituted merely 3-6 per cent of IAS and IPS officers, district judges or judicial officers for decades. Invisibility in the public sector occurs alongside inadequate political representation relative to the size of the Muslim population — both in terms of the number of Muslim candidates who stand for elections and elected representatives. Only 4-9 per cent of MPs in the Lok Sabha since Independence have been Muslims, while constituting 14 per cent of India's population.

Desegregation and assimilation is hard to achieve — as the experience of the US shows. However, there have been effective policy experiments in other contexts, such as Singapore, where 80 per cent of the population resides in public housing based on an Ethnic Integration Policy. It mandates a balanced mix of the three ethnic groups of Chinese, Indians and Malays through quotas in public housing allocations. In the Indian context, policies that influence bank loans and sale of public land to housing developers and cooperative housing societies in residential complexes could work better than legal mandates.

While more data on the granular aspects of the lives of disadvantaged groups in India is urgently needed, our policies should include economic status as a criterion for receiving state benefits. Affirmative action policies in employment and education, besides housing, that account for economic disadvantage (that is, through the EWS category) can address systemic and deep-rooted cultural biases against disadvantaged groups.

When families belonging to different communities live next to each other, they not just tolerate each other but because their children go to the same schools and play in the same grounds, they can form strong bonds that help create more cohesive societies.

The writer is professor of Economics at the Indian Statistical Institute (Delhi) and visiting professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto

India and the global right turn

An alliance of conservatives is necessary to take on liberal Left's control of institutions. It should be based on respect for pluralism



RAM RAJYA BY RAM MADHAV

CONSERVATIVE PARTIES ARE on the rise in Europe. They have captured power in several countries in recent years, including Italy, Finland, Hungary, Croatia and the Czech Republic. They have also registered tremendous growth in others, especially the Netherlands and Germany. In the recently-concluded elections to the European Parliament, the Right has increased its numbers to emerge as a strong group.

In Rishi Sunak's "sorry" to the British voters after the resounding defeat of the British Conservative Party and Marie Le Pen's sobs at a Paris press conference after the National Rally party failed to retain its lead in the second round, one shouldn't see the defeat of conservative politics. The real story behind British election results was not the victory of the Labour Party, which won more than 400 seats with only a modest addition to its vote share, but the loss of the Tories to a party with a stronger conservative agenda — the Freedom Party led by Nigel Farage, which took a 14 per cent vote share.

In France, known for its liberal credentials, Le Pen made a strong statement about the rise of the French Right by winning more than 34 per cent popular vote in the first round, forcing the centrists and the Left parties to come together in the second round to deny her final victory. In the US, where elections are due later this year, given the current state of affairs in the Democratic Party, the Republican supporters are upbeat about President Donald Trump's prospects.

These results have boosted the confidence of conservative leaders and scholars of the West. Many of them assembled at Washington DC recently under the banner of the National Conservatism Conference (NatCon) to discuss, besides the recent electoral victories, ways to respond to the Left-liberal ecosystem's aggression. An Indian nationalist delegation, too, was invited.

Liberalism was once a respected ideology that stood up against Christian orthodoxy and religious fundamentalist control of the European political establishment. But, led by sections in France, it went on to reject all other established social institutions and the saner aspects of religion and tradition. It started rejecting national identities and sought to construct modern identities based on principles of internationalism and individual rights.

That was the moment of the birth of conservatism in Europe. Edmund Burke, a British philosopher, was the first to critique the French Revolution in 1789, advocating for gradual reform and the preservation of established institutions.

The conservatism-liberalism dichotomy is essentially European. In India, tradition and reform were never antagonistic. "Hinduism is human thought about God in continuous evolution," wrote the eminent philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Indian culture thought absorbed all ideals that were segregated as

liberalism and conservatism in Europe.

India is a deeply religious country. A PEW survey found that nearly all Indians — 97 per cent — believe in God and roughly 80 per cent say they are absolutely certain that God exists. Ideals that conservatives hold dear, like god, religion, tradition, family, patriotism and nationalism are dear to a majority of nationalist Indians.

Both the Western conservatives and the Indian nationalists face similar challenges from the contemporary Liberal-Marxist-Islamist axis. The Left liberals have created global networks, captured institutions like media and academia and spawned dubious global NGOs. They use these instruments to attack national identities, destroy family values, and ruin social and cultural fabric.

They promoted unbridled illegal immigration in the name of "multiculturalism", destroying the demographic and cultural balance in societies. "Demography is destiny," averred French philosopher Auguste Comte. This hard reality can be realised today in the streets of European cities. The Left-liberals took the human rights discourse to a dangerous level by promoting social promiscuity in the name of wokeism, tearing individuals, families and societies apart. Those who stand up to this mindless menace are subjected to a harsh "cancel culture".

In India, the nationalist government of Narendra Modi has framed stringent laws to check illegal infiltration. It has tightened the noose around terror outfits and their over-ground support mechanisms, championed by liberal elites in the name of human rights.

Western conservatives were not that successful. Hence, there is interest in collaboration with Indian nationalists. For the nationalists in the Global South, conservatism comes with the baggage of colonialism and a superiority complex. The trauma of centuries of European colonisation and the harsh treatment meted out to our religions, cultures and traditions is still fresh in our minds.

India is a land of many religions. At the root of Indian cultural thought is the belief that all religions are valid paths to the same eternal truth. We don't insist that everyone should follow only one "true" religion. We celebrate diversity. We consider religious freedom as the freedom to propagate one's religious beliefs, but not the freedom to deny or demonise others. Thus, while upholding the individual's freedom of religion, we hold institutionalised proselytism, especially if it is pursued using force, fraud or allurements, as alien. The Christian Right, an integral part of the Western conservative movement, may have to come to terms with it.

Beyond the conservative ideals, we consider climate change as real and disapprove of its denial. We are also not against human agency, including the choices made by sections like LGBTQ, as long as this does not violate social sensitivities and order.

A global collaboration of Western conservatives and Indian nationalists is possible. It must be based on principles of pluralism, inclusivity and respect for religious diversity — our religions should feel respected, societies should feel secure and governments should feel free to pursue their national agendas.

This was our message to NatCons at Washington DC.

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

Flourishing in chaos

Going by its history, France's recent election outcome is unsurprising



MANI SHANKAR AIYAR

THE CURRENT CHAOS in France, where the parliamentary elections have thrown up a House divided almost equally between the far Right, the far Left and the centrists, is par for the course if one looks at the history of democracy in France. Taking into account the political philosophy of Voltaire and Rousseau, whose radical thinking undermined monarchy and gave rise to the French Revolution in 1789, in many ways, France is the true mother of democratic thought and practice.

But it is typical of French political behaviour that within five years of the Revolution, France had become synonymous under Maximilien Robespierre with one of the most vicious dictatorships the world has seen. And within a decade, Napoleon had risen as a dictator and crowned himself Emperor in 1804. After his fall, for more than half a century, a democratically elected parliament "co-habited" first with the whimsical restoration of the Bourbon monarchy (1814-1830), then with the Orleans "bourgeois monarchy" till the street revolution of 1848. Four years later, it elected Louis-Napoléon as President, who declared the Napoleonic Second Empire from 1852 till France's 1871 defeat by the Prussians.

Twelve different ministries having failed to rule in the eight years that followed the humiliating military defeat and the consequent fall of the monarchy, attempts to restore the monarchy peaked in 1879. That was thwarted by the presence of three major con-

tenders for the position of monarch, causing untold political instability. That instability seemed to be resolved when the Minister of War, General Georges Boulanger, won an election in Paris against the combined Republican parties in 1889, a century after the French Revolution.

He was rapturously received by a huge crowd in the Place de la Concorde to take him to the Palace of the Champs-Élysées to out the President. Instead, Boulanger went off to see his mistress. By the time he returned, the crowd had dispersed — and he was never sworn in.

In the summer of 1914, France was on the edge of being swept into World War I. But the country was preoccupied with two other events that captured the public imagination. The first involved the mistress, and later the second wife, of the Minister of Finance, Joseph Caillaux. He was politically opposed by the editor of a conservative but highly popular newspaper, *Le Figaro*, who had a cache of love letters exchanged between Madame Caillaux and the minister when both were married to others. The paper was publishing them serially to much prurient public interest. She walked into his office on March 16, 1914, and seated herself as he was not in. When he arrived, she pulled out her revolver and, without a word, shot him six times. The French were riveted; the jury decided that she was not guilty of cold murder but a victim of a "crime of passion". Accordingly, they released her on July

28, six days before the German ultimatum ran out. The French public was consumed with this scandal and quite distracted from the impending war.

Three days later, on July 31, 1914, France's great socialist leader Jean Jaurès was at dinner at a Paris café when an assassin shot him. There were less than a hundred hours to go before the outbreak of World War I that, within its first month, was to take the lives of hundreds of thousands of young Frenchmen and the entire 1914 graduating class, bar one survivor, from the French military academy, Saint-Cyr, before Christmas.

Although "Tiger" Clemenceau had won the war for them, the French pushed him out of the presidency less than two years later. Five cabinets were thrown out between July 1929 and December 1930. With the onset of the Depression, five governments came and went between June 1932 and January 1933, when Daladier was elected the sixth prime minister of France in 18 months, just one day after Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor of Germany. Between them, they took their countries and the world to the disaster of World War II.

But, before that, France elected a Popular Front government under Léon Blum. It lasted only six months from June 1936 to January 1937 but turned out to be the most divisive government in a saga of divisive governments. France was without a government when Hitler annexed Austria (*Anschluss*) in March 1938 (as it had been when Hitler, in

1936, had invaded the neutralised Rhineland). While the annexation of Austria marked the inevitable march to mass death for Europe and much of the rest of the world, the French kept up with their record of whimsical governance, changing governments as if they were soiled table napkins. Blum was back as PM the day after *Anschluss*. A month later, he was out. Daladier again became PM.

When war came to France in May 1940, the French army folded in no time and Marshall Pétain became France's collaborator President, with a parliament and government in Vichy that actively supported France's submission to Hitler. The end of the war brought Charles de Gaulle to the fore but only briefly. There followed a revolving door of governments, one of which, Joseph Laniel's, fell along with Dien Bien Phu, and brought the pacifist, milk-drinking Pierre Mendès-France briefly to power but long enough to pull France out of the mess in Indochina. The hope he brought with him vanished like morning dew on the outbreak of armed insurgency demanding freedom in the French colony of Algeria. De Gaulle was restored and inaugurated the Fifth Republic which has now come to the pretty pass it has under Macron.

No one need be surprised at France's recent election outcome. They continue, as ever, to flourish in chaos.

The writer is a former Union minister

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DRAVID'S LEGACY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'One for the team' (IE, July 12). Rahul Dravid is the epitome of simplicity and integrity. As a player, he always put the interest of the team first and continued to do so as a coach. Despite many achievements, he hardly makes the tabloids. Both he and his wife seem to represent classic middle-class values. In the era of materialism and consumerism, where money reigns supreme, his refusal to accept the Rs 2.5 crore bonus reflects his moral integrity. The new generation must emulate his selflessness.

Satyendra Srivastava, New Delhi

EQUALITY VS RELIGION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Promise underlined' (IE, July 12). The Supreme Court's landmark judgment upheld Muslim women's right to claim maintenance under Section 125 of CrPc. This is a welcome reiteration of the earlier verdict on the *Shah Bano* judgment (2001). It upholds the Constitution's spirit and objective, guaranteeing equal rights to all, irrespective of religion. The Court has propounded that gender justice involving the right to equality cannot be limited by personal law, yet does not impinge on the freedom of religion. This is, hence, a progressive judgment.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Promise underlined' (IE, July 12). Justice B V Nagarathna and Augustine George Masih underscored that maintenance is not charity but a fundamental right, irrespective of religion. Despite the Muslim Women Act (1986), which initially sought to limit this right, the Court's decision reinforces the applicability of Section 125. The evolution of the Act and judicial precedents have expanded the rights of divorced Muslim women. Taken together, this ruling not only upholds constitutional principles but also strengthens the socio-economic security of Muslim women.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

A HOPEFUL TEST

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A timely warning' (IE, July 12). It is heartening news for Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers that a blood test has been developed at AIIMS to detect early-onset symptoms. Since the global life expectancy has risen from 35 years to 70 years since the disease's discovery, there has been a manifold increase in those afflicted with Alzheimer's. This blood test is a boon as this will enable early detection and prevention for the better management of the incurable disease.

Retheesh Balakrishnan, New Delhi

Opinion

SATURDAY, JULY 13, 2024



COOPERATING IN BAY OF BENGAL

Union external affairs minister S Jaishankar

Global and regional developments also make it imperative that we find more solutions amongst ourselves

Level playing field

As the EV vs hybrid debate rages, the govt must take a technology-agnostic approach in policy-making

THE UTTAR PRADESH government has taken a sensible step by grouping hybrid passenger vehicles with electric ones for concessions like no registration charge. A similar concession was earlier granted by the West Bengal government to compressed natural gas-run vehicles. Since electric vehicles (EVs) were already getting this benefit in UP since 2022, the choice before the consumers to go for environment-friendly cars will widen and so will the competition among manufacturers. However, more than the reduction of prices of environment-friendly vehicles, what's important is that the government — both at the Centre and states — should maintain an equidistant approach with regard to technologies in any area, and solely concentrate on meeting policy objectives. A technology-agnostic approach in policy-making ensures that the government does not get dragged into any intra-industry squabbles. In this regard, lessons should be drawn from telecom, where corporate fights over GSM and CDMA technologies did much harm to the sector. By the time a technology-agnostic approach was adopted much damage had already been done.

The auto sector is seeing a similar situation with a raging debate on EVs vs hybrids. So the best course for the government is to bring about a parity in terms of incentives it provides to vehicles that pollute less. If the objective is to reduce reliance on petrol and diesel cars, all technologies that fulfill the objectives of emission control and reduced fossil fuel consumption should be given similar incentives. The duty structure now is, however, loaded heavily in favour of EVs with hybrid vehicles being taxed along the lines of petrol and diesel ones. While 5% goods and services tax (GST) is levied on EVs with no additional compensation cess, on hybrid vehicles the levy is 28%, with a compensation cess that can be between zero and 15%, taking the total tax payable to 43%. Such a wide gap in taxation is not prevalent anywhere in the Western world where the range of differential taxation is a maximum 6%. In fact, in Europe, the tax differential (value added tax and carbon tax) between an internal combustion engine and a hybrid vehicle is only 1% as VAT is the same. It is similar in Japan too.

While the GST on vehicles is the remit of the GST Council, what UP has done is to waive off registration charge to level the field to an extent. It is expected that other states may also follow suit. Maruti chairman RC Bhargava told this newspaper that India cannot achieve carbon neutrality by relying solely on EVs as 75% electricity in the country continues to be generated through coal. For achieving carbon neutrality, the share of coal-based electricity needs to go below the 50% mark. Till that happens, the government needs to develop and promote all alternative sources of energy such as hybrid, ethanol, and bio-gas, rather than only EVs.

A technology-agnostic approach of the government is all the more necessary because the industry is divided on the matter. While Tata Motors and Mahindra and Mahindra are leading EV players who have ruled out launching hybrid vehicles, Maruti and Toyota are focusing on hybrid and plan to gradually launch EVs. As the government is close to presenting the Budget it should seize the opportunity by announcing its intent to promote all technologies. The GST Council will surely do its bit following this. Meanwhile, state governments should ensure that they unveil equitable measures as UP has done.

DRAGON'S AGENDA

THE THIRD PLENUM OF 2013 DIDN'T MEET WESTERNERS' LOFTY EXPECTATIONS

Don't be fooled by the Third Plenum

IN THE SO-CALLED Third Plenum to be held on July 15-18, China's senior leadership will have an opportunity to establish the broad outlines of a policy framework that could reshape the country's course for the next several years. Don't count on it. There is good reason to think that China watchers in the West have unrealistic expectations of what is to come.

Such was the case in late 2013 when the 18th Central Committee gathered for a Third Plenum of its own. That policy conclave was widely heralded as a historic opportunity for a new leader — Xi Jinping — to put China on a different path after the unfinished reforms of the Hu Jintao era. There was a palpable sense of excitement in the air, and at first blush, the plenum appeared to deliver. A final communiqué listed more than 300 reform proposals covering a broad range of areas — from state-owned enterprises, land policy, and foreign trade to investment reforms and environmental and social-welfare policies.

In the end, however, the Third Plenum of 2013 didn't meet Westerners' lofty expectations. The implementation of reforms was disappointing and that plenum came up short on its biggest promise: to give the market a decisive role in guiding China's economic development. Instead, Xi has presided over an increasingly state-dominated system. The intervening years have been shaped less by the successful execution of plenum-driven reforms, and more by the evolution of a leader-centric system of governance that quickly came to be known as Xi Jinping Thought.

This focus on governance followed a pattern established in earlier third plenums. The gathering in late 1978, for example, became a platform for the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping and China's pivotal moment of "reforms

and opening up". Similarly, the Third Plenum of 1993, under the leadership of Jiang Zemin, underscored the principles of the "socialist market economy". Judging by these earlier outcomes, there is good reason to think the upcoming Third Plenum will produce statements that bear more on ideology and governance than on a detailed set of problem-specific actions.

Thus, many hints by Chinese officials ahead of the 2024 gathering could well be misleading. There is considerable hope and hype for new reforms to address some of China's most serious problems, especially the property crisis and local-government indebtedness. At the same time, Xi and his leadership team have drawn attention to "new productive forces" and the imperative to drive progress in frontier technologies and advanced manufacturing.

But these important challenges are unlikely to be resolved at the upcoming policy conclave. As before, the emphasis will likely be on governance, consistent with pre-announced goals, such as "building a high-level socialist market system" and "deepening the comprehensive reforms to advance Chinese modernisation". Rather than dismiss such statements as slogans, we should take them at face value. Governance has been Xi's

primary focus ever since late 2012. What began in 2013 as a sweeping anti-corruption campaign quickly morphed into a comprehensive reworking of a leader-centric power structure. Not only has Xi published a four-volume series on Chinese governance; he has also effectively taken over all aspects of the Communist Party of China's decision-making process.

Nor should Xi's signature governance campaign be thought of in purely domestic terms. It is also being used to shape China's great-power aspirations. Gone is the low-profile modesty of the Deng era, when China would supposedly "hide its strength and bide its time". Instead, Xi is openly attempting to remake the international order through a three-pillar approach to global governance — framed around the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilisation Initiative. In effect, he is doubling down on the aspirational commitments he announced when he first espoused the Chinese Dream in late 2012. Xi believes that without further governance advances, China's emergence as a great socialist power will be stymied.

In one key respect, this is a disappointing conclusion. Westerners have long had a hard time understanding and accepting China's emphasis on

governance. That is because we tend to be more solutions-oriented in tackling specific problems. We see the upcoming Third Plenum as an opportunity for China's leaders to embrace a new strategy to fix a struggling economy. Governance, especially an approach steeped in the interplay between socialist ideology and a consolidation of power featuring "Xi Jinping at the core", is not the answer we are looking for. But as the late historian Jonathan Spence always emphasised, our answer is often not China's answer.

Yes, China has plenty of issues on its plate. In addition to the property crisis and local-government debt problems, it also must cope with containment pressures from the United States and its allies. And then there is my personal favourite: the imperative for a consumer-led structural rebalancing of the Chinese economy. This can happen only with long overdue social safety-net reforms of health care, retirement, and the hukou system of household registration (which undermines internal migration). All are essential if China is going to redirect the excesses of fear-driven precautionary saving toward fuelling a more robust consumer society.

But that's my Third Plenum agenda, not China's. Most China watchers are fixating on the problem-specific detail of what is likely to be included in another lengthy concluding communiqué. But don't be fooled. Experience shows that the Chinese leadership tends to overpromise. China's third plenums have long been about governance, and this one is unlikely to be different. For Xi, consolidating power through a revolution in Chinese governance remains the highest priority, and it is still very much a work in progress.

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STEPHEN S ROACH

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Westerners have long had a hard time understanding and accepting China's emphasis on governance — we tend to be more solutions-oriented

Capacity-building before arbitration



NAVAL CHOPRA YAMAN VERMA

Partners, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas

CCI market study is a welcome first step in regulation of artificial intelligence. But, given the issues AI raises, a multi-disciplinary approach is the need of the hour

LVMH has already won gold at the Paris Olympics

LVMH MOET HENNESSY Louis Vuitton SE has spent €150 million (\$163 million) to be one of the premium sponsors of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. It will also be the first-ever "creative partner", with its brands including Louis Vuitton and Dior intertwined with the competition, its locations hosting cultural events and a roster of French athletes as ambassadors.

It's an unprecedented intermingling of designer labelling and sports, underlining the increasing might of the bling behemoth, which enjoys sales now four times bigger than its nearest rivals and a market capitalisation of about €350 billion. Only Birkin bag maker Hermes International comes anywhere close to its value.

But LVMH founder Bernard Arnault can't afford anything other than a clean sweep of medals. After three years of blockbuster growth, luxury sales have decelerated. The political upheaval in France can't be ignored; some consumers are souring on top-end goods, while the dominance of the European luxury brands is being highlighted by Saks Fifth Avenue owner Hudson's Bay Co.'s \$2.65-billion acquisition of rival Neiman Marcus in an attempt to compete with them more effectively.

Arnault was initially reluctant to write a check to sponsor the games, *Bloomberg Businessweek* reported. Now, LVMH brands will be almost synonymous with them, designing medals, dressing French athletes, and providing the champagne for VIP events. Dior will even be involved in the opening ceremony, although the details remain top secret. Analysts at Bernstein describe the scale of the investment as "flabbergasting".

Such a barrage of publicity is needed. Although LVMH is expected to generate almost €90 billion of sales this year, up from €54 billion in 2019, even it hasn't been immune to the industry's slowdown.

Chinese VIPs are still spending, but the middle class is under pressure from a deepening property slump. Similarly in the US, as the super wealthy continue to splash on Hermes handbags and Brunello Cucinelli SpA cashmere sweaters, the simply comfortable are constrained by high borrowing costs and lingering inflation. Earlier this year, the hope had been that the luxury market would rebound in the second half of 2024, as his haggling over the price of Tiffany & Co. four years ago demonstrated. Now a recovery looks unlikely before 2025. That explains why shares in LVMH have lost almost all of their gains since January.

LVMH's visibility will beam its brands to viewers around the globe. They may not be in the market for a bag or wallet today, but when they are, they'll remember the trays in Louis Vuitton's iconic Damier check pattern on which medals were presented to winners.

And welcoming the world to Paris plays into another of Arnault's strategies: moving further into hospitality. The theory is that when Chinese travellers do return to Europe in significant numbers, they won't just be wearing the company's clothes, shoes, and jewellery, they'll be able to vacation in an LVMH-controlled ecosystem, spanning hotels, and restaurants. LVMH's recent purchase of old-school Paris bistro Chez l'Ami Louis, as well as reports that Arnault is among the bidders for Venice's Hotel Bauer, underline the intent.

But LVMH's Olympic sponsorship must run smoothly. It's not yet clear what flavour of government will emerge in France, and consequently what policies affecting luxury groups might result. The hope is that given the importance of the games to Paris, politics will take a back seat to spectacle. But this can't be guaranteed.

Despite being the third-richest man in the world, Arnault likes to get his money's worth, as his haggling over the price of Tiffany & Co. four years ago demonstrated. That investment has paid off handsomely. He will be hoping for a similarly sparkling return from going for gold at the first Luxury Olympics.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is increasingly becoming a cornerstone of technological advancement globally, and India is no exception. Enterprises are competing vigorously to launch their AI offerings in India and Indian start-ups have also launched large language model applications in sectors from agriculture and manufacturing to services and information technology. With the government investing in compute capacity as part of the IndiaAI Mission, and businesses — both large and small — adopting AI initially to differentiate themselves and eventually in order to remain competitive, India's AI growth story is being written now. One key aspect that will determine whether an AI revolution will boost the Indian economy will be the regulatory framework developed for the technology, and one regulator is looking to get a head start.

The Competition Commission of India (CCI) has invited proposals to conduct a market study on AI. The CCI should be commended in its desire to initiate this "knowledge-building exercise to develop an in-depth understanding" of "AI systems and implications of AI applications for competition, efficiency, and innovation in key user industries". This is because it is important to avoid the pitfalls of over-regulation, which can stifle innovation and economic growth. This risk of false positives is especially stark in

the field of AI, where, for example, independent decisions of enterprises can be easily confused with collusion due to the speed and analytical capabilities of AI algorithms that allow prices or terms to be adapted to follow competitors without there being any cartel agreement.

Global regulatory approach to competition and AI

The CCI's market study aligns with global moves to understand the interface between AI and competition.

The European Union, which was one of the first jurisdictions to develop AI-specific regulation (through the AI Act, which is expected to come into force later this year), has also initiated a consultation process on competition in virtual worlds and generative AI. The UK competition authority published a technical update report in April, identifying principles to guide AI development and deployment while promoting competition. These include access to key inputs such as data and computing power, flexibility and interoperability, and fair dealing. Canada, France, Hungary, Portugal, and other jurisdictions are also in the process of conducting similar market studies.

Focusing the lens on competition issues

Currently, regulators perceive that a small number of enterprises control key inputs necessary for the development of AI. Key inputs include AI chips, data, technical know-how, and computing power. Where few companies control the production of chips or have comparatively significant computing power, they could engage in tying and bundling. For example, a chip manufacturer could provide its own AI development arm disproportionate discounts and better terms than those offered to other AI developers. The best way to address such concerns is, of course, through market forces (that is building up capacity through competition). The Indian government's focus on investing in

computing power is an example of this. However, in situations with entrenched market power, regulatory intervention may become necessary, and the market study should help identify if that is indeed the case. Another emerging concern is that enterprises with access to large amounts of data could exercise market power and potentially abuse their dominance. However, it is important to note that data is replicable, easily avail-

able, and is not valuable in and of itself. Data sets are also substitutable in many cases. Thus, merely the ability to access data should not be seen as determinative of market power.

The use of AI also adds a layer of complexity to traditional collusion cases, and the market study is likely to explore these nuances.

How should India proceed?

The CCI's market study is a welcome first step in AI regulation in India. However, given the various issues that AI raises, from anti-competitive conduct to data protection and even ethical dilemmas, a multi-disciplinary approach where there is co-ordination among different agencies is the need of the hour. In addition, it is critical that India does not simply ape the West and our policies should be specific to the unique realities of the Indian ecosystem.

Finally, with the CCI being burdened with the enforcement of anti-profiteering provisions under the goods and services tax law and the proposed Digital Competition Bill, there is an urgent need to substantially increase the funding and staffing at the commission so that they have the capacity and tools necessary to effectively and efficiently enforce the law.

Coauthored with Sanjana LB, associate, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Growth with jobs

The Narendra Modi government should restrict the welfare schemes of free ration, et al to the extremely poor families along with providing a job or vocation, and do away with freebies to people with earning capacity. Instead, the welfare expenditure should be diverted to education and particularly skill education, with a vision to make it free of cost. A skilled person is never jobless. The job

creation data of 12.4 crore in the last 10 years is encouraging. The industry should be incentivised for doing so. Industrial estates should be set up in backward areas so that the exodus of youth to cities and metros is discouraged. Schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act should be encouraged only in highly backward and tribal areas, where the feasibility of any industry or other employment is low. The traditional and inherited

industries, vocations, and skills have ample job opportunities.
—Vinod Johri, Delhi

Being diplomatic

Apropos of "Time-tested ties" (FE, July 12), India will have to do a diplomatic tightrope walk to manage both Russia and the West. Russia has been a reliable friend when the West was firmly behind Pakistan. Though not entirely dependent on Russia for arms and other military supplies, it cannot

be ignored as a reliable supplier. However, in the war against Ukraine, Russia seems to be the aggressor. Putin and Zelenskyy have caused the entire world problems which show no signs of ending. India cannot afford to be seen to be supporting either of the warring sides. A diplomatic tightrope walk will be necessary to placate Russia and the West.
—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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

— Rammath Goenka

INDIA NEEDS TO CREATE MORE PRODUCTIVE, NON-FARM JOBS

INDIA'S unemployment data is back in the news again. While official data shows that the country has been generating jobs and creating opportunities, private estimates indicate otherwise. First up, a Citigroup report stressed that even with a 7 percent GDP growth rate, India can generate only about 80-90 lakh jobs a year at best, as against the needed 1.1-1.2 crore. To which, the Ministry of Labour and Employment issued a rebuttal stating that India generated over 8 crore jobs between 2017-18 and 2021-22. In other words, an average of over 2 crore jobs were created each year; notwithstanding the impact of the pandemic. The RBI, too, released fresh data that estimated 4.67 crore newer jobs added in 2023-24, while the growth rate doubled to 6 percent in 2023-24 from 3.2 percent a year ago.

In the five years between 2017-18 and 2022-23, the official data shows the labour force participation rate increased from 49.8 percent to 57.9 percent, while the unemployment rate among those 15 years and above fell from 6 percent to 3.2 percent. Helpfully, the number of women joining the labour market is rising and so is the self-employed category. What is upsetting, though, is the declining labour productivity, or the value added per worker. RBI data confirms that labour productivity stood at the lowest rung in agriculture, construction and trade—segments known for mass job creation. Separately, a recent survey of the unincorporated sector, too, points out that a sizeable section of the labour force continues to be engaged in the less productive informal sector.

In 2022-23, the number of informal sector firms stood at 6.5 crore, and roughly 11 crore workers were engaged in these units. However, the value added per worker stood at a fraction of that in the formal sector. The data also shows that informal sector employment rose from 97.9 million in 2021-22 to 109.6 million in 2022-23, but remains below the pre-pandemic level of 111.3 million in 2015-16. The opposition is hammering home the point that India is facing the highest rate of joblessness in 45 years, a claim they have been maintaining for the past five years; the government has been dismissing such claims. But what is undeniable is the need to create more productive, non-farm employment. The forthcoming Union Budget will be a good place to start.

PARENTS, SCHOOLS MUST BE ALERT ON DRINK-DRIVING

CHILDREN are not safe on the streets of Bengaluru—even when they are being ferried in school vans and buses. The city's traffic police conducted a surprise morning check of 3,016 school vehicles earlier this week and found 23 drivers under the influence of alcohol. This negligence has dismayed parents and led to a public outrage over the casual attitude of the school managements and transport firms. It heightens the risk of schoolchildren being involved in accidents. Bengaluru city reports an average of eight accidents a day—281 accidents claimed 291 lives from January to May 2024, while 841 non-fatal accidents left over 1,100 injured. It's also not the first time drink-driving checks were done on school-bus drivers. The authorities have charged the failing drivers under the Motor Vehicles Act (MVA) and seized their licences. School managements could be booked under Section 75 of the Juvenile Justice Act for endangering schoolchildren; it prescribes imprisonment of three years and a fine.

Drink-driving is explicitly forbidden under Section 185 of the MVA—drivers whose blood alcohol concentration exceeds the prescribed limit of 0.03 percent can be fined ₹10,000 or imprisoned for up to 6 months, or both. When a Maharashtra politician's son, Mihir Shah, recently knocked down a scooter with his BMW in Mumbai, dragged a woman for 1.5 km and then reversed over her, he was reportedly drunk. So too was the teenager who mowed down two techies with his Porsche in Pune. We can definitely do without such reckless drivers, especially when the passengers are children. School managements must take responsibility for providing safe transport and ensure that drivers undergo breathalyser tests, especially when they charge exorbitant fees for the transport.

It is not uncommon to see school kids packed like sardines in a van, hanging out of autorickshaws, or even riding bus footboards. There have been occasions when small children have been run over by school vans, or even sexually abused by van workers. A series of child rapes on Bengaluru's school campuses in 2014 had led to guidelines being drawn up, recommending the installation of close-circuit cameras on campus, GPS on schoolbuses and verification of staffers. In such a vulnerable scenario, it is also up to parents to be alert and engage with school managements and traffic authorities for their children's safety.

QUICK TAKE

LEVEL THE PLAYING COURT

WITH the Wimbledon finals drawing closer, we might want to look at a paper on tennis's inequality problem published in the *Berkeley Economic Review*. Calling it "the biggest unforced error in sports", it explains how uneven the income distribution among tennis players is. Novak Djokovic in 2014 earned 10 times more than Fernando Verdasco, another pro who had competed in all Grand Slams that year. The tennis field is much more unequal than the basketball or baseball ones, the paper shows. The trouble is in the prize money structures. It is yet another reason for governments to support athletes in individual sports as much as in team ones like cricket.

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Moscow attracted extraordinary global attention. It was his first visit after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the first bilateral visit of his third term. It roughly coincided with a NATO summit, which was formulating strategies to defeat Russia in Ukraine. It commenced on a day when a barrage of Russian missiles hit Ukrainian cities; one allegedly hit a children's hospital in Kyiv.

The timing of his visit, the demonstration of his personal chemistry with Russian President Vladimir Putin and fulsome praise for his contribution to the India-Russia partnership all sought to convey that the partnership—shaped by history, geography and economic interests—would survive the current global geopolitical flux.

The history is well-known: political, economic and military relations forged during Cold War. A legacy is Russian military equipment forms over 60 percent of Indian armed forces' inventory. The transfer of weapons and military technologies continued as the US and allies dragged their feet on lifting technology restrictions on India.

The geography is equally compelling. Russia straddles the Eurasian landmass from Central Asia to the Caucasus, which is important for India's security interests and strategic ambitions. Sandwiched between Russia and China, Central Asia is India's near-neighbour, bordering Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. It is dominated by Russia and China, but now has many regional and extra-regional actors jostling for influence. India needs to closely monitor the interplay of forces here, keeping Russia inside in this endeavour.

Connectivity is key for effective presence in this region. This explains the importance of the trade corridor from India to Central Asia through Iran—the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)—that India, Iran and Russia have been trying to operationalise for years. Refinement of logistical arrangements for this was discussed during Modi's visit. INSTC could boost India's trade with Eurasia to \$170 billion from under \$15 billion today.

Over the years, the Modi government has striven to broad-base the relationship to encompass energy, industry, agriculture, natural resources and niche technologies. Bilateral trade has burgeoned to over \$66 billion, though most of it is Russian export of hydrocarbons. Balancing this has been a subject of discussion. Payment difficulties arising from western sanctions are partly to blame. A bilateral settlement system using national currencies is a solution under discussion. Russia's huge rupee reserves open

The Modi govt has broadened India's relationships with Russia as well as with US & its allies. It's about protecting core national interests while building on convergences & managing differences

MODI EMBRACES THE BEAR AS THE EAGLE LOOKS ON

P S RAGHAVAN

Distinguished Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation, and a former diplomat



MANDAR PARDIKAR

the possibility of joint ventures in India for manufacture of a range of industrial products, including defence components.

Indian companies have invested billions of dollars in Russian hydrocarbon projects. Six nuclear power plants are being constructed with Russian collaboration in TN, of which two are already in operation.

The surge in Indian purchase of Russian oil over the past two years, after EU banned Russian imports, has fed domestic consumption and served demand for refined products in Europe, which continue to criticise India for "circumventing" sanctions. Modi subtly addressed this hypocrisy by remarking that India's imports of Russian oil helped stabilise the global hydrocarbons market.

Even while sustaining the Russia relationship, India has fast-tracked relations with the US and allies, which have acquired

extraordinary breadth and depth, embracing trade, investment, technology, defence and deep cooperation on a range of bilateral and international issues. Intensifying US consciousness of the Chinese challenge to its global dominance coincided with rising Indian concerns over border tensions with China and apprehensions of the latter's ambitions in our continental and maritime neighbourhood. This convergence forged a strong India-US strategic partnership (which is not entirely friction-free, as we saw in recent months). Engagement in the Quad and other cooperative mechanisms has cemented ties. Our expanding economy attracts international companies barred from Russia and discouraged from China.

These factors have expanded space for India to pursue its interests with Russia. In 2018, the US threatened sanctions if India

acquired the Russian S-400 air defence system. Modi went ahead with the acquisition. The sanctions did not materialise.

Meanwhile, India has diversified arms procurement to expand choice and promote indigenisation. Russia's share in India's arms imports fell from 56 percent in 2015-19 to 36 percent in 2019-23. France, Israel and the US occupied the vacated space.

Modi's visit was criticised abroad for undermining the international isolation of Russia and Putin. This narrative ignores the fact that countries like Vietnam, Saudi Arabia and UAE have recently rolled out the red carpet for Putin, and many non-Western leaders have been visiting Russia. The nation's political isolation does not extend much beyond the western world.

Modi addressed the Russian missile strikes in this meeting, when he invoked the ravages of war, including the heart-breaking loss of children's lives, and revealed it had figured in their discussions. Modi said he was encouraged by thoughts emerging from their mutually respectful conversation and affirmed India was committed to working towards peace. Speaking before Modi, Putin also referred to that conversation, thanking the Indian PM for exploring options to resolve the "Ukraine crisis" by peaceful means. It is not clear if this signalled the possibility of a breakthrough.

The elephant in the room, not recognised publicly, was China. It would certainly have figured in closed-door discussions. The Russia-China strategic partnership has been under intense focus, particularly after Ukraine's invasion. As Russia-West relations have plunged, its dependence on Chinese political and economic support has grown. Indian strategists worry about this dependence diluting Russian sensitivity to our interests. Russia has, by actions and in interactions, sought to assuage these apprehensions. India will continue to keenly monitor weaponry and technologies transfers, intelligence-sharing, and actions in international forums on India's core interests.

India-Russia relations will remain sensitive to the geopolitical flux. Geography, economics and Eurasian politics create overlapping interests. Both countries seek a multipolar world, though their definitions vary. Each pursues strategies based on opportunities and challenges. Unlike during the Cold War, their interests are not congruent. It means building on convergences and managing differences, so that they do not impact core national interests. Enlightened diplomacy should ensure India's shared interests with Russia do not clash with those of its other strategic partners.

(Views are personal) (raghavan.ps@gmail.com)

TOO OLD TO ROCK-N-ROLL, TOO YOUNG TO STEP ASIDE?

IN the US, rock music is a religion—and is perhaps the richest cultural field to mine for metaphors while discussing the controversies surrounding President Joe Biden's re-election hiccups. Biden, aged 81, is not exactly 'rocking' it, unless you take that to be a euphemism for doddering. However, his supporters, who seem to be dwindling, think he is okay to remain in the job as the world's most powerful man—a title that is as much in doubt as the current incumbent's capabilities. Biden is already the oldest serving president the US has had, beating Ronald Reagan, who was 77 when he left office.

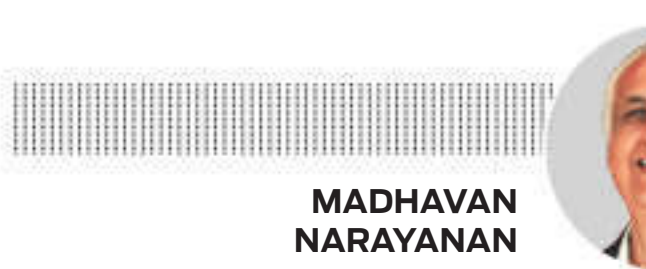
Biden must have chosen to ignore British rock group Jethro Tull's song of existential angst, 'Too old to rock-n-roll, too young to die', which takes a cynical-yet-hopeful look at an ageing rocker. It seems the Democratic leader prefers lyrics from Canadian rockstar Bryan Adams, whose song 'Eighteen till I die' starts with, "I wanna be young the rest of my life/ Never say no, try anything twice/ 'Til the angels come, and ask me to fly." And so, Biden remains a rockstar for his eager hangers-on.

Whether Biden is right to keep the job depends on who you are talking to and how you look at it. We live in the age of ageism as a scourge. Millennials and Gen Z-ers are constantly reminding those born before personal computers that they are of a different era. If we fight sexism, why not counter ageism?

Age, as they say, is only a number. At 78, Donald Trump, Biden's rival in the race to the White House, is not far behind the president. History books tell us that William Ewart Gladstone was 82 years and 231 days young when he took office as the British prime minister for the final time and retired only when he was 84. Morarji Desai became India's premier when he was 81.

But age is one thing, and fitness for the job quite another. That is where all the dank memes on Biden are at.

One newspaper report said that, at the 2022 G7 meeting, Biden had skipped a scheduled meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to "go to bed". After Biden's disastrous performance in the presidential debate against Trump last month, a White House physician was forced to clarify that a neurologist who had visited the presidential premises a number of times was consulted only as part of the



MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior journalist

REVERSE SWING

annual physical check-up routine. If Biden is indeed as fit as a fiddle—or a well-tuned electric guitar—we may link his debate disaster to the title of a Pink Floyd album, 'A Momentary Lapse of Reason'.

Well, it was not quite momentary. You only have to search "Biden forgets" on



Joe Biden is now a target of memes about his gaffes. Maybe the US president prefers the theme of Canadian rockstar Bryan Adams's song 'Eighteen till I die'. On the other hand, Kerala CM Pinarayi Vijayan remains a strong 'Marx-darshak' at age 79

Google News to realise that his forgetfulness has become quite memorable. The numerous lapses indicate his alertness requires some examination.

But he is doing fine as an older gentleman. It is the presidency, the so-called nuclear 'football' and the superpowerdom that worry Americans like Mark Warner, who is reported to be assembling fellow Democratic Senators to request Biden to step aside.

Then you have to look at Trump, as many do, to defend Biden. Trump faced 34 criminal charges of falsifying business records related to "hush money" payments made to porn star Stormy Daniels before the 2016 presidential election, and was found guilty.

The Biden camp may well declare him to be more "morally fit" than Trump, though the president's son Hunter Biden's misadventures on charges of drug use or gun possession are of political significance in this election season. In front of the charges Trump faces, Hunter's acts seem a minor misadventure. Substance use is seen by some in the US as regular rockstar behaviour. And, after all, you just cannot compare Jack Daniel's with Stormy Daniels.

But what can Washington possibly do to save its global superstardom? The US could swallow its pride and learn from its former rulers, the UK, to make Biden something like the departed British head of state, Queen Elizabeth II. He could be a non-monarchical figurehead and let someone else run the show while he presides over ribbon-cutting. Amiable and sharply-dressed, Biden can be majestic while waving his hand from a distance. He also has a lifetime of practice in saying warm things in a respectable voice. This political reverse swing would be the closest the Americans ever again get to royalty.

If this is too un-republican for the world's most prominent democracy, the US could pick a leaf out of India, the world's most populous if not the oldest. Biden may be made a *margdarshak* or guide for the administration, as we have referred to some senior leaders in India. One way or another, a ceremonial presidency may be a good idea over a unitary, all-too-powerful executive.

Whatever the way, age is not the issue. You only have to look at Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan. At 79 years, his moves are strong and at times even sprightly. In his party, the CPI(M), gerontocracy is a tradition respected by the young; though in 2021 the party spoiled the silver show by setting the retirement age for its politburo members at 75. But being a governing Marx-darshak at his age is apparently not an issue.

(Views are personal) (On X @madversity)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Politically aimed

Ref: *Rescuing India from the altar of bigotry* (Jul 12). The nation needs harmonious living of all citizens. Religious clashes were there in India before Modi became PM, but as they were daily occurrences, it didn't make news. The underlying intention of this article seems to be not solace but appeasement, and is politically aimed.

Asokakumar V, Thrikkunnapuzha

Balanced perspective

It is indisputable that during campaigning in Rajasthan's Banswara, Modi overstepped in his utterances. But it has to be remembered that it was not the Congress that was in power for many decades, yet the BJP-led government enacted the triple-talaq law, which is a big help for Muslim women. The title shows the author's earnestness to blow things out of proportion by painting the government with a wrong brush.

RSridharan, Chennai

Communities' concern

The author seems to be one-sided in his perspective and judgement of things, especially religious fanaticism and aggression, finding everything negative only among Hindus and seeing entire other communities as paragons of peace. One must understand that there are violent people in all faiths.

U Atreya Sarma, Hyderabad

Evolved jurisprudence

Ref: *Delhi Univ V-C nixes proposal to add Manusmriti readings in LLB* (Jul 12). This proposal of the Delhi University was regressive. The *Manusmriti* is an antithesis of the dictum that all are equal before the law. One need not be a legal scholar to understand that the laws of *Manu* will hardly be relevant to the present times. Modern-day jurisprudence is a product of evolution and is not static.

S Balu, Madurai

Against progress

It would have been disastrous if the *Manusmriti* were included in the DU's LLB course. It would be completely adverse to the progress and development of women and marginalised people. It would encourage casteism, the main reason for our backwardness.

B Chandra Sekhar Achary, Kesinga

Costly gaffe

US President Joe Biden's gaffe at the NATO summit in introducing Ukraine's Zelenskyy as Russia's Putin will be costly. There is already rising clamour in the US on his lack of fitness to contest the presidential election. Such repeated slips of tongue will certainly diminish the chances for his party.

DVG Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

Will Less (People) Bring More (Peace)?

Richer people, more productive machines

The world, according to a UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs report published on Thursday, is projected to reach its peak population at 10.3 bn towards the end of this century. Before then, Europe, Asia and the Americas would have experienced the phenomenon to varying degrees. Some countries are already dealing with declining populations. How does having fewer people who live longer affect an economy? For one, it makes people richer: With rising automation, improvements in productivity ensure economic output will keep climbing well after the workforce begins to shrink. Humans are unproductive for around half their lifespans. As productive activity is taken up by more efficient machines, the economic surplus accruing to the species will mount. Though how mankind divides the surplus among itself is a different issue.

Society will have to make fewer provisions to educate and keep a smaller population healthy. Poverty, hunger and disease will not be as grave as they have been for most of history. Cities would thin out. Inflation and unemployment could be relegated to the history books. Demands on the planet to feed, clothe and provide shelter will diminish. Resource exploitation will be driven by the needs of a growing machine population. But those resources will be prospected further afield in the solar system. The species that has contributed most to destruction of conditions that allow Earth to support life will eventually get around to restoring the natural balance. The pace of extinction of other species will slow after the human population reaches its peak around 2080.

What of the people who live in this Arcadian utopia? Would they be happier? Not if history is any guide. It would take a few centuries to turn the population clock back to the mediaeval age when human conflict began to acquire mass dimension. Even if affluence were to reduce the sources of conflict, there would be the matter of individual happiness. Lengthening lifespans and changing work-leisure trade-offs could make life less satisfying. Or not.

Plumbing the Depths To Scale the Heights

With pressure on finite resources increasing, oceans have become the new frontier for exploration. In 2021, India launched the Deep Ocean Mission, or Samudrayaan, to undertake deep-sea exploration to understand and use living (biodiversity) and non-living (minerals) resources. New Delhi also plans to develop ocean climate-change advisory services — important, because marine heatwaves are a reality — conservation methods for sustainable utilisation of marine bio-resources, offshore-based desalination techniques and RE generation. Setting up an underwater biodiversity research lab in the Indian Ocean to study seabed flora and fauna, and explore their potential for food consumption, is also being considered.

But biodiversity exploration is only one part of the story. India is also trying to reach huge deposits of mineral resources — cobalt, nickel, copper and manganese — that lie thousands of feet below the ocean surface. These can be used to produce RE, EVs and batteries, all essential for tackling climate change. India has two deep-sea exploration licences in the Indian Ocean and has applied for two more from the International Seabed Authority (ISA). GoI has initiated an ₹8,000 cr plan to explore the ocean's depths. These steps are not solely driven by the need for resources but also by geopolitical competition. China has four licences and is aggressively conducting similar explorations. ISA has issued 31 exploration licences, 30 of which are now active. With India's exclusive economic zone spreading over 2.2 mn sq km, it makes ample sense to explore. However, it must be done cautiously as the ocean ecosystem is fragile, and little is known about it. It also has implications for communities dependent on the sea for livelihood.

JUST IN JEST
World leaders, get back to those firm handshakes and formal namastes

Important Peeps, Selfies Are So Passé

It's high time that people close to global political leaders take them aside gently and break the news: the age of selfie diplomacy has officially jumped the shark. Gone are the days when a cleverly-timed selfie could save a floundering election campaign, or make a leader seem more relatable to her constituents, or a national leader turn into a statesman. But selfies are not just passé, they are now tedious and boring. Besides, it's become literally bad optics along the lines of photobombing. Who looks good under those harsh, unflattering conference room lights, forced smiles and awkward angles, enforced hugs, especially when taken by folks not quite equipped with Cartier-Bresson aesthetics? What used to be a novel way to show humility and 'I take selfies just like you' now looks a bit desperate, in an age where if a PM or prez behaves like a Kardashians, it gets little mileage.

We want those stiff, awkward handshakes and formal photo ops back. The highly-paid PR teams of these leaders should stop taking us for granted and cook up something new to grab our fleeting attention spans, a new trend that doesn't involve forced smiles and poor lighting. For a change, they can push leaders to be a bit more radical — put their phones down and sort out this messy world. Then, we won't need a selfie to prove that something important happened.

A proposed 'robot tax' could kill tech innovation, impede growth and complicate the tax system

Don't Hunt Down Progress



Aditya Sinha

It's often said that governments have a talent for taxing things. But the real jaw-dropper is when economists start cheering for more taxes. A group of economists met Nirmala Sitharaman recently for pre-budget consultations. What popped up on the agenda? The impact of AI on employment, with a proposal for a 'robot tax' to reskill displaced workers.

On the face of it, the idea sounds appealing. At its core, it's about philosophical questions about the nature of work, economic justice and societal progress. Proponents argue that a robot tax could ensure a fair distribution of wealth generated by automation, aligning with the 'difference principle' where social and economic inequalities are arranged to benefit the disadvantaged members of society.

This perspective suggests that as robots take over human jobs, a tax could mitigate job losses, provide funding for retraining programmes and support social safety nets, thus preventing the widening of the wealth gap and exacerbation of social inequalities. A 2020 study, 'Robots and Jobs: Evidence from US Labor Markets', by Daron Acemoglu and Pascual Restrepo shows that in the US, one more robot per thousand workers reduces the employment-to-population ratio by 0.2 percentage points and wages by 0.42%.

But won't job loss due to AI be a transitory phenomenon in the long run? This is where one should invoke John Maynard Keynes. In his 1931 essay, 'Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren', he asserted that technological unemployment — the loss of jobs caused by technological change — would be a temporary phase followed by a period of prosperity.

While technological unemployment can lead



Keep taxidermists and taxmen at bay

to increased productivity and economic growth in the long term, it poses significant challenges in the short term, including income inequality. However, there are several issues with introducing a robot tax.

► **Hampers growth** It penalises innovation and entrepreneurship unjustly, stifling growth and infringing upon market evolution. Robert Nozick's entitlement theory argues that wealth generated through free exchange and innovation should not be redistributed coercively, as this violates principles of justice in acquisition and transfer. Empirical research supports this, showing that robots, while displacing some workers, contribute to productivity growth and economic expansion, creating new opportunities.

Taxing robots distorts investment decisions, causing firms to favour traditional physical capital over automation, leading to higher costs for using robots. Initially, this boosts worker productivity, wages and aggregate income, temporarily elevating economic output. However, the long-term suppression of automation investment hinders sustained

growth, preventing the economy from leveraging automation for continuous progress. Thus, while a robot tax may improve short-term conditions, it fails to create a foundation for perpetual growth.

► **Bars investment** Taxing robots or AI differently from other capital assets will distort a business' production decisions. Peter Diamond and James Mirrlees, in their 1971 paper, 'Optimal Taxation and Public Production', argue that taxes should be structured to keep the marginal effective tax rate (METR) consistent across all capital investments, even in less-than-ideal situations.

This approach prevents inefficiencies and supports balanced growth. Empirical evidence from OECD and IMF shows that a uniform METR across sectors promotes economic efficiency and stability. Such distortions cause businesses to underinvest in crucial technologies. It can lead to capital flight, where firms move their automation investments to countries without such a tax.

► **A tangled web** A recent IMF working paper, 'Broadening the Gains from

Generative AI: The Role of Fiscal Policies', highlights the challenge of identifying technologies that might replace human labour and integrating this into tax policy. Codifying these distinctions is difficult because tax systems typically classify capital assets by lifespan and other characteristics, not by their impact on job tasks.

This ambiguity complicates defining a specific technology tax base. Additionally, varying tax rates for similar assets can lead to the relabelling of assets to evade taxes. Thus, robot tax will lead to complications in the tax system, increased litigation and eventually higher costs — even for the government. So, our robotic overlords may need tax advisers to navigate this tangled web.

► **Focus on reskilling, not robots** While the end goal is to invest in skilling the workforce, achieving this should not involve stifling innovation through additional taxation. Utilitarian thinkers argue that the efficiency gains from automation should be harnessed, not hindered, and that the focus should be on maximising societal well-

► **While displacing some workers, robots contribute to productivity growth and economic expansion, creating new opportunities**

fare through education and reskilling initiatives.

Empirical research supports this, demonstrating that automation can create new job opportunities and boost productivity if the workforce is adaptable. Governments should focus on enhancing existing tax mechanisms and improving tax efficiency as alternatives to a robot tax.

One thing is clear as we consider the future of robot taxes. If robots ever gain sentience, they'd probably form a union to protest being taxed. Imagine the headlines: 'Robots Demand Representation, Claim Unfair Taxation'. Amid all this, we could see the rise of the first robotic tax advisers — machines designed to help other machines navigate the labyrinth of tax codes.

So, while economists may dream up ways to tax our metallic friends, perhaps it's best to remember that innovation thrives when too many levies do not weigh it down.

The writer is a public policy professional



THE SPEAKING TREE

Why Do We Need a Guru

J KRISHNAMURTI

Why do we want a guru? We say we need a guru because we are confused, and the guru is helpful; he will point out what truth is, he will help us to understand, he knows much more about life than we do, he will act as a father, as a teacher to instruct us in life...

That is, basically, you go to a teacher because you are confused. If you were clear, you would not go near a guru. Obviously, if you were profoundly happy, if there were no problems, if you understood life completely, you would not go to any guru... Because you are confused, you seek out a teacher. You go to him to give you a way of life to clarify your own confusion, to find truth... That is, you choose a guru who will satisfy your demand; you choose according to the gratification he will give you and your choice is dependent on your gratification.

You do not choose a guru who says, 'Depend on yourself' — you choose him according to your prejudices. So, since you choose your guru according to the gratification he gives you, you are not seeking truth but a way out of confusion; and the way out of confusion is mistakenly called truth...

Can anyone clear up our confusion?... We have created it. Do you think someone else has created it — this misery, this battle at all levels of existence, within and without? It is because we do not understand ourselves, our conflicts, our responses... that we go to a guru whom we think will help us to be free of that confusion.



Mother Issues

Three ladies in Delhi Gymkhana are sitting around a table playing bridge and bragging about their sons. 'My Mukesh,' says Mrs Khanna. 'Once a week, he brings me a huge bouquet of flowers, he's constantly bringing me out to restaurants to eat.'

'That's very nice,' says Mrs Pasricha. 'But when I think about the way my Samir takes care of me, it just can't compare. Every morning as soon as I wake up, he brings me

freshly made idli and a cup of chamomile.' 'Well,' says Mrs Banerjee. 'This is not a competition, but my Subho pays someone ₹2,000 an hour twice a week just so he can lie on a couch and talk to him. And who do you think he speaks about at those prices? ALL HE SPEAKS ABOUT IS ME!'

The Great Salesman

Man: Could I interest you in a microscope?
Customer: No, thanks. I'd have no use for it.
Man: Here is my business card in case you ever do.
Customer: I can't read this, it's too small.
Man: Boy, have I got the product for you!

Chat Room

Strict Law on Maintenance

Appropos the Edit, 'Women's Right Over 'Rights' of Customs' (Jul 12), the verdict of the Supreme Court granting the right of maintenance to illegally divorced Muslim women is welcome. Still, it is not likely to benefit a large number who are little educated or are from poor or middle-class families. They are mostly illiterate or semi-literate, unaware of the law, subjected to obsolete rituals, are bound by the 'purdah' system and have little exposure to the outside world. Therefore, a support system for such women is needed at the administrative and social levels. At the legal level, since the punishment for non-payment under Section 125 of CrPc is imprisonment for just one month, it may be amended keeping the amount, status of the woman and the attendant circumstances in mind.

Y G CHOUKSEY
Pune

Raise the Spirits, Cheer the Air



Nita Kapoor

India is no longer just about volumes, when it comes to alcohol beverage sales. It has made significant strides in value, too. Among global market revenue contributors, it now ranks 5th at 3.1% market share, after China (21%), the US (17.6%), Japan (7.6%) and Britain (4%).

The Indian alcohol market is the only one alongside China that offers volumes to the world, with a consistently growing trend for premium products that mirrors the fast urbanisation of India and growing aspirations of young India who enjoy their tipples. A country with a median age of 29 years offers long-term growth in this sector, as in most others.

According to 2024 International Wine & Spirit Research (IWSR) data, the size of India's entire alcohol industry is 736 mn 9-litre cases. Nearly 2/3rd of the overall market is controlled by

brown spirits such as whisky, rum and brandy. Indian single malts have around a 50% segment share of the domestic single malt consumption, leading to an improved export footprint towards developed countries in the coming years. Six of the top 10 growing spirits brands in the world are from India.

Policy makers must recognise the economic value to the state in terms of excise collections, which average at 25-40% of the state's own income, its impact and interlinkages to employment (about 79 lakh livelihoods), agriculture (6.5 lakh farmers engaged), tourism (30% share of the tourism wallet) and hospitality (19% revenue share).

Policy makers must take a holistic view going beyond 'my state', 'my excise revenue collections', 'increase in MRP equals loss of volumes', 'reluctance towards offering relief to suppliers on inflation and cost operations', and trim labyrinthine levies and fees.

A few steps can unleash a rising star in the short run:

► **Consistent regulation** Given its nature, the industry realises that more-than-normal regulation is to be expected. But the least it can aspire for is a consistency of approach, rather than abrupt changes to, and turnarou-



Tip of the iceberg

nds in, state policy. Consistency of policy for a rational period and commonality of regulation across states — a national policy on non-tax aspects of alcohol — would facilitate ease of doing business and work wonders for investments, job creation and assured revenues. Overall, a win for all stakeholders.

The alcohol industry is governed by 30-plus masters. States — not the Union — have the powers of regulation and taxation. It's like dealing with multiple interests, each with shifting goals. It's time to consider a unified national policy on non-tax aspects of the alcohol industry.

► **Industry-based inflation model for supplier pricing** Most states want suppliers to offer them their lowest prices, nationally or in contiguous states, for the immediately preceding year(s). Not only does this policy not recognise inflation in costs but it also

ignores different operating conditions, or circumstances peculiar to the consideration set of states, such as differential licence fees, route-to-market differences with consequential impact on supplies, and ad-hoc extensions of policy due to specific conditions like elections.

In any emerging economy, it's important to look at where the headwinds are headed. The alcohol sector is an important indicator, as it points the way any large economy takes as per capita incomes grow and consumption demand of various luxury goods looks upwards. The path such sectors take indicate the strength of the economy, its ability to diversify its consumption basket and the manner in which disposable incomes grow.

Despite overregulation, the alcohol industry has come a long way in its overall development. But there is still a long journey left. Proactive government policies would ensure it gets there sooner rather than later. One hopes that state governments launch a reformist agenda with the same vigour as they have done till now in various other sectors.

The writer is CEO, International Spirits & Wines Association of India (ISWAI)

Why Disrupt Dispute Resolution?



Sriram Venkatavaradan & Saai S Sathiyamoorthy

In a move that signals a retreat from its commitment to alternative dispute resolution, GoI issued guidelines on arbitration and mediation in contracts for domestic public procurement earlier this month. The new guidelines recommend restricting arbitration when included in contracts, to disputes valued at less than ₹10 cr.

Instead, they recommend using mediation or conciliation to amicably settle high-value disputes. Additionally, they require the explicit approval of officers not below the rank of joint secretary for the inclusion of arbitration clauses, covering a value exceeding ₹10 cr.

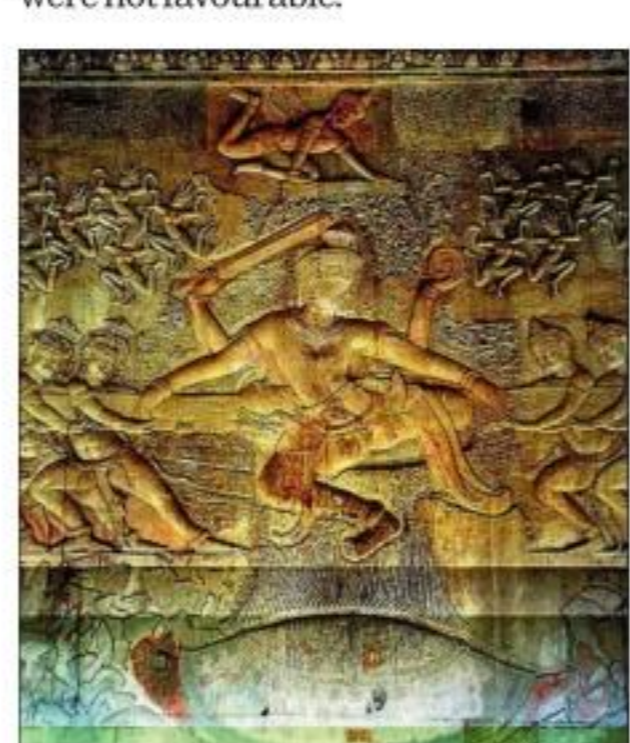
This regressive move contradicts India's goal of positioning the nation as an international arbitration hub. The guidelines are fraught with contradictions and questionable rationales. To justify its stance, GoI adopts a moral high ground, stating that challenges to an arbitral award burden the courts and, consequently, the arbitral processes don't relieve the burden on courts.

It will not help.

► It would increase the burden since the challenge to an arbitral award is only one facet. The entire adjudicatory process prior to the passing of award would now be conducted before courts, if amicable resolutions fail.

► The arbitrary cap will compel many large commercial disputes to go to courts and overburden the system. Moreover, GoI's projection of mediation as a viable alternative is unlikely to bear fruit.

It fails to understand that the success of mediation is premised on the acceptance of a settlement offer. No govt officer would explore the possibility of settlement with any party because they could be hauled up by the vigilance department for agreeing to terms that were not favourable.



Long live the resolution

A perusal of the guidelines would indicate that even the govt is cognisant of this fact when they quote instances of officers avoiding the route of amicable resolution and, instead, relegating the dispute to arbitration without applying of mind. With such a culture being prevalent within state institutions, the government's supposed act of promoting mediation would only render it as an academic exercise.

The guidelines also cite the protracted and expensive nature of arbitration and concerns regarding arbitrators' accountability as justifications for limiting its use. They fail to acknowledge the stringent standards and ethical guidelines that regulate arbitration proceedings on a global scale, as well as the significant number of Indian arbitrators who are predominantly retired judges. They also ignore that governmental actions, including those involved in decision-making during arbitration proceedings and litigations, often delay the process.

These guidelines are worrisome due to their protectionist undertone. Under the garb of criticising arbitration, the govt has sought to prioritise its protection from unfavourable arbitration decisions rather than promoting an effective mechanism for resolving disputes. This approach undermines India's support for the principle of legal governance and raises doubts regarding its will to accept responsibility in commercial disputes.

Although these guidelines seemingly acknowledge the efficacy of arbitra-

tion and the convenience of engaging technical experts to act as arbitrators for intricate commercial issues, they miserably fail to explain how the proposed move of restricting arbitration would improve the government's position in dispute resolution.

At a time when India is keen to attract FDI, these stringent guidelines could discourage investors who value effective and reliable methods for settling business conflicts.

The guidelines' attempt to depict arbitration as an inferior method of resolving disputes, vulnerable to prejudice and abuse, erodes trust in a process that many specialists consider vital for India's economic prospects.

While the promotion of mediation as a means of settlement is notable, the guidelines show a crisis of confidence in the arbitration process and have the potential to severely damage India's oft-repeated goal of becoming an international arbitration hub.

The Arbitration Council of India recently made a representation to the finance minister, meticulously outlining the issues associated with implementing the guidelines. Despite repeated calls from eminent legal experts to position India as a leading arbitration hub, these guidelines contradict the current narrative. It is sincerely hoped that the government either withdraws or reconsiders the implementation of these guidelines.

The writers are advocates, Madras High Court



A thought for today

They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

A Curious Bill

Maha's public security bill deserves close scrutiny

Maharashtra's Public Security Bill, 2024, per officials, is meant to "plug gaps" in anti-terror law UAPA. The bill is required for, purportedly, a "growing urban naxal menace", with all offences cognisable and non-bailable. It's curious a govt at the fag end of its term should table such a consequential bill, with election campaigning weeks away. There are three key issues to deliberate. First, what is govt's definition of "urban naxalism"? Second, if it can be defined, how is it measured? These should have been sorted out before the bill was designed. Third, leftwing extremism, India-wide, by GOI's data, is largely contained.



'Urban naxal' phenom | The umbrella term has been applied to activists, academics, politicians. In the 2018 CM-chief secretary spat in Delhi, BJP veterans called AAP/Kejriwal "urban naxals". Opponents of Gujarat's Sardar Sarovar project were "urban naxals". From academics to protesters, the "urban naxal" tag has sent people into gruelling prison terms on vague accusations. The term became a ditty in the Elgar Parishad case when Pune police arrested activists, all of whom had earned the "urban Naxal" moniker. In 2021, adivasi rights campaigner Stan Swamy died in custody, also regarded part of the "urban Naxal group".

Near wiped out | What's puzzling about the bill's raison d'être is that naxalism pan-India is on its last legs per GOI. Govt has repeatedly stated that over the last five years, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra, MP and Maharashtra had been freed from Maoist influence. That only pockets in Chhattisgarh remained as outliers. In Parliament answers in 2023, GOI said naxal incidents had reduced from 1,533 (2004) to 531 (2022), deaths from 566 to 69. Decadal comparison (May 2005-Apr 2014 to May 2014-Apr 2023) showed incidents reduced by 52%, and deaths by 69%. GOI told Parliament "districts reporting violence reduced from 96 (2010) to 45 (2022)".

For Maharashtra govt, though, urban naxalism is "growing". How it came to that conclusion, only the govt can answer.

Listen To Rishi

His post-defeat House speech shows what India's missing

As a new Labour govt takes charge of UK, Sunak's first post-defeat speech in Parliament is likely to have struck many as remarkable, in its ordinary civility. Despite what has happened in much of the world, and however heated the political fray, Parliament is a common project and democracy is coexistence. Sunak acknowledged his opponent Keir Starmer's victory, and the verdict of the people, to whom all parties are committed. He highlighted the role of legislators, whose constituents keep them grounded, and to whom they have the first obligation. In many ways, this was a departure from the norms we have seen shredded in India.



An election victory in a complex parliamentary system as ours, is an aggregate of many impulses rather than a single message. Every govt must know that its majority is partial and does not include all constituents, and engage with other views. Opposition, meanwhile, has to keep watch on the executive, and make sure it is heard by the strength of its argument. We have sharply differentiated political platforms, so a clash of ideas is inevitable. But it should not be a literal clash, or a matter of domination and subjugation. Sunak's speech gave us a few tips on how wins and losses should be handled in a democracy.

Deliberative democracy is an exercise in public reason. We, the people, are owed these debates, to see how various points of view are reconciled into legislation. Parliamentary civility is not about good manners, but about enlarging the space to make and hear arguments, without personalised attacks.

Why War Has Always Been A Fact Of Life

Its motives have been consistent across times and places

As violence riddles Gaza and Ukraine, *Why War?* by historian Richard Overly takes on this cruel face of humanity. Biological, psychological, cultural and environmental explanations have been proffered for why humans fight.

Freud, in a famous conversation with Einstein, concluded that it was a hardwired human impulse, the 'death drive'. Darwin spoke metaphorically of the struggle for survival, but biologists after him claimed that warfare had evolutionary utility, that imperialism reflected Western racial superiority. Generals and thinkers who drove the World Wars cast it as a logical instrument of selection, which subdued the weaker races. Violence was 'nature's scheme' to produce a higher form of humanity.

But the idea that hunting and fighting and killing were the way up the evolutionary tree was rejected by others as 'bio-babble'. They argued that it is not an innate trait but culture and environment that drive aggression.

Why do humans kill their own species? Because of a distinction between in-group and outsiders, says the book. In that sense, warfare is not in our genes, but for our genes. Aggressive raids on others and defensive protection of the warrior's own family and nation can be observed across conflicts. Hitler's blitzkrieg and tribal conflict share similar motivations.

Psychologists offered other angles into the riddle. War was seen as collective insanity, in the post-War West. The book argues that the cult of manliness in some societies, from Spartans to Vikings to modern Zimbabwe or America, has common features: fitness, willingness to engage in violence, discipline, emotional

control and high risk-taking.

We tend to divide the world into friend and foe. Dehumanising the 'other' precedes extreme violence, as is visible in the language used for out-groups. Massacres, atrocities and mutilations are routine, carrying no shame or guilt. Warriors experience fighting as exhilarating, not to mention the honour their societies give them. This emotional appeal of war deserves deeper study, the book says.

Anthropologists have questioned universal explanations of war. Some hold out the hope that war, like slavery, can be erased by wise collective decision-making. But warfare is too diverse and historically widespread to be cured by simple remedies, says the book.

Economic motives have always existed. A fight for salt or metals, gold and treasure, enslaved labour or access to trade routes, or oil and other resources has marked many of the world's violent conflicts. But ideological and religious confrontations have also driven war. Hubristic warfare from Alexander to Hitler was meant to establish dominion. The rise of Chinese power has provoked questions on whether potential conflict with US will descend into war. The search for security can be found in every warlike episode, as frontiers feel fragile.

Is war on the decline, with new forms of settling conflict, cyber-attacks, and so on? The wars of this very century belie that hope. An ecological crisis, resource stresses and clashes of beliefs are only too visible in the emerging international order. And so, the book concludes, the future of war might not look very different from its past.

mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



Walking Behind The Godman

Rationalists don't get why followers, rich or poor, continue to revere a guru even after scandals such as the Hathras stampede. But to ask why religious believers aren't scientific is a most unscientific question

Dipankar Gupta



Over a hundred devotees died last week in a stampede at Bhole Baba's religious gathering. The arrangement was for 80,000 attendees but eventually about 2.5L devotees turned up. It is not as if Bhole Baba is a household name. There are hundreds like him but they all have enough worshippers to water the gardens, fire the "havans" and keep the chants humming.

Such godmen/godwomen are not unique to our country, except they seem to sprout spontaneously in this tropical air. However, poverty is not the reason, for they are not to be found in villages. Magnum cults of the Bhole Baba kind have always been urban, both in terms of the worshipped and the worshipper. Villages don't have such godmen but, at best, lonely, dirt-poor ascetics.

We should now pause and reflect on the fact that, unlike other world religions, Hinduism doesn't need a communion. One can pray alone, even have a special family deity and not participate in collective worship. In a village, where social ties are firm, such a trait easily blends in, but city life breeds anonymity. It is this that creates the need for a collective buffer, also known as community.

In a village where social bonds are firm, lack of communion is not strong. In a city where one is alienated, the need for a collective gathering is felt. This is why all night "jagrants" and the thronging of godmen's ashrams come up to fill the vacuum. A guru's blessings and uplifting sermons provide a healing touch to urban souls who are dangerously cantilevered on shifting ground.

Such godmen are worshipped not because there is poverty for, if that were so, then the guru cult should have suffered with the steady percentage drop of the poor. On the other hand, such "divinities" are flourishing and their numbers may even be growing. This is because a different kind of poverty stalks our society and its presence had hitherto gone unnoticed.

Such gurus do well because there are millions who are precariously balanced on a tear drop and moments away from a heartbreak. A recent study, by Prof Sonalde Desai shows that while poverty has declined, more than half the current poor are actually "newly poor". These people have slipped down because of a catastrophic event such as illness or job loss.

It is this uncertainty, which exhibits itself primarily in urban India, that drives people to seek solace. After all, it is in towns and cities that fortunes swing to extremes. It is also in non-rural settings that you find most of the migrants in our country who are about 37% of the total population. That amounts to 45cr people in all. Hard to believe? Well, check the 2011 census.

Nor are the rich completely free of worries given the vagaries of enterprise and the fickleness of policies. When a lot depends on luck and less on self-confident skill, it is natural that beliefs in godmen will grow. There will be a persistent need to build stonewalls around sandcastles and have their ramparts guarded by "designer" gurus who have an exclusive pact with God.

Such a phenomenon, with slight variations, is also found in US. According to a 2019 Pew Research poll, America's church attendance fell sharply by 6% in 10 years. Yet, enrolments in evangelical colleges and "born again" churches are holding steady. In US, this gave rise to the phrase "church shopping", which is much like the "guru shopping" here.

Charismatics, like Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, led the American Evangelist

drive and they were quite like Bhole Baba or Osho. Evangelicalism and church shopping grew in Reagan-era US because old family churches were clueless about issues neoliberalism raised. Church shopping is now holding steady. Once our social conditions settle, our gurus may be right-sized too.

Finally, there is a problem of perception that particularly afflicts diehard rationalists. They cannot see a speck of scientific reasoning behind the adoration that godmen, like Bhole Baba, receive from their followers. To rationalists, these godmen are charlatans who swindle people blind. How then could good, decent folk block their reasoning faculties and not see through such obvious fakes?

Many gurus have lavish ashrams worldwide and some have also been convicted of rape and murder. Their followers are usually sceptical of these charges and that adds to the rationalists' bewilderment. How is it, they ask, that in spite of all the evidence these gurus still retain their flock? Rationalists commit a major error here in their reasoning because science is not everything.

Both Kant and Vivekananda argued, over the ages, that science and religion should not mix and must be kept separate. Vivekananda put it clearly when he said that "their methods are different". This is because, to quote Vivekananda: "Religion deals with the truths of the metaphysical world just as chemistry and the other natural sciences deal with the truths of the material world."

Vivekananda, like Tagore, another great spiritualist, was a fervent supporter of Jagdish Bose's scientific efforts. Rationalists go wrong because the lens they see the world with is not bifocal. They just know and see a single method.

To ask then why religious believers are not scientific is the most unscientific question of all.

The writer is a sociologist



It's Even More Of A Gamble Now

The question whether gambling is a game of skill or chance has been made more complicated by fantasy sports. But one thing's for sure, the odds are still heavily against bettors

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From dice duels in our epics, to Mughal court cockfights and card games, to the British-India era of horse races, matka lotteries and satta bazars, India's dalliance with games of chance is a tale as old as time.

Ramayan depicts gambling as a vibrant affair, with kings cheerfully wagering items from shoes to strongholds amidst celebrations. Contrastingly, Mahabharat reveals gambling's dark side, through Yudhishtir's successive bets leading to the Kurukshetra war. Some interpretations wax poetic about Shakuni's roll-tampering, while others chalk it up to skill. Yet, all agree that Yudhishtir's mix of feeble skill, foul luck, and rampant gambling instincts paved the path to calamity.

A gamble through time | In 1867, aiming to curb similar mini-disasters birthed by satta bazars, the British introduced the Public Gambling Act (PGA), which, even 150-plus years later, remains a cornerstone of Indian gambling law. PGA banned public betting, while sparing vaguely defined "games of skill". Post-Independence, the Seventh Schedule of India's Constitution gave states autonomy over gambling and betting laws, with PGA as a fallback option.

Dicey legislations | As India's gam(b)ling scene evolved, the legal framework mostly stood still, turning courts – mainly Supreme Court – into referees of each gambling game, tasked with ruling on instances as they arose. Each decision added a new card to the deck of legal precedents, shaping future judgments, as also to decks of companies on the winning side, to brandish their newfound "skill-based" blue-tick with pride, often with celeb endorsements.

For example, in 1967, SC ruled that while "flush", "brag" and so on are games of chance, "rummy" is predominantly a game of skill. So when 17 senior citizens were arrested in 2012, for playing rummy and

bridge at Andheri Gymkhana, Bombay HC stepped in, asserting that these skilful pursuits stand outside PGA's grasp.

And in 1996, SC held that horse racing is a matter of skill. So, a watchful officer could turn a blind eye to wagers on the calculated strategies of horse racing, yet remain ready to intercept a criminal engaged in dog racing – pending, of course, a future moment of SC wisdom that might elevate dog racing to a game of skill.

The Lotteries Act of 1998 then crafted a new playbook for a more orderly lottery scene, with 13 states keeping state-regulated ticket sales going, and the rest banning lotteries, to avoid ticket turmoil.

Draft day dreams | Fast forward to modern fantasy sports – every sofa strategist's field day, offering a chance to play team manager without the locker-room drama. Imagine orchestrating a chess game where real athletes are your pieces, moving autonomously based on their real-world performances – no strings attached! Here, you're the mastermind, *khelo*ing from your *dimag*, as these sports stars rack up points in actual games. Whether it's football, baseball, or cricket, fantasy sports blend sharp strategy with sports trivia, all the while you sit back and hope your armchair management stint lines your pockets up with more than just fantasy coins.

Chancing skill | The question of whether fantasy sports hinge on chance, or skill, has repeatedly reached multiple high courts, and indeed SC. If luck rules the game, who's to say the digital dice aren't loaded? It's common knowledge that the house always wins, but a sleight of hand from a 1% win chance to 0.5% goes unnoticed by

any individual, yet ensures the house's victory lap. This is why House of Lords banned loot-boxes in video games, which are random reward generators wrapped in pixelated promise.

However, SC maintains that fantasy sports are primarily skill – as flashy ads tirelessly proclaim. But if that's so, couldn't seasoned insiders like commentators, former players and relatives use their deep insights to outmanoeuvre the average tier-3-town bettor, without fail? Meanwhile, the ads weave a tempting tale of riches, supposedly within reach of every Arun, Varun, and Tarun. Perhaps that's why India has more Dream11 users (200mn) than demat accounts (151mn).

House always wins | Let's dissect the unit economics of a simplified fantasy game: 10 bettors toss in ₹100 each, eyeing an advertised ₹1,000 prize. Here's where it gets dicey: a 28% GST slice (courtesy 2023 update) reduces the pot to ₹720. The platform then claims a 20% share, cutting it down to ₹576. TDS then takes a 30% bite, leaving ₹403 for the winner.

With entry fees as low as ₹50, ₹25, ₹10, or even free sweepstakes, fantasy games tempt players with the promise of big wins. However, the complex math, or rather extraneous perception, needed just to break even – let alone turn a profit – often reduces the odds to a near-comical level, making the platform resemble more of a lottery than a 'game of skill'.

With the ₹35k or Indian fantasy sports market booming at a 38% CAGR, it's a gold mine for all but the players. Perhaps the real issue isn't the skill-vs-luck debate of the game itself, but how it's being used in reality. In the fantasy world, Shakuni isn't any one player; it's the system.



Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



We are lucky to live on such a planet, and we should not take it for granted. After my space experience, I am a lot more tolerant of people and opinions, of everything.

Sunita Williams

Discover Secrets To Fulfilling Relationships

Jaya Row

Do your relationships feel like a roller coaster ride? Are the amazing highs followed by the invariable lows in your relationships? The initial thrills don't last. Everything is not sunshine and roses.

Happy relationships cannot be attributed to luck. You need to work towards them. Begin with yourself. To the extent you get upset, you are the cause. Take responsibility and look within.

When you lack the self-sufficiency to be happy with yourself you need to lean on others. This is the starting point of a bad relationship. Only when you are happy within can you connect meaningfully with others.

Love tainted with selfishness is 'attachment'. You expect a return for your affection – tangible or intangible. You make demands on people and bind

them. The more people do for you, the more you want. The relationship thus becomes conflict-ridden. In the end, it breaks down and you lose the person.

The age-old philosophy of Vedanta steps in with new ways of defining ourselves, others and the world around us – ways that will appeal to the younger generation. It takes dedication, a leap of faith, and practice.

Expand your mind. Get attached to a wider circle of people – community, nation, humanity. Work for *loka sangraha* – welfare of the world. As you get attached to the higher, you get detached from the lower. True love is born and your relationships become free from the endless strife.

So get yourself out of the way. Rise above thought of self. Give of yourself

entirely to people around you. Then people will adore you, love you and cater to every wish of yours. Healthy interactions result in extraordinary success, enduring happiness and staggering growth.

Love others for what they are, not what you want them to be. Understand that people behave according to their nature. Do you hate a lion for its ferocity or a deer for its timidity? You love both creatures equally because you understand their nature. What prevents you from accepting people as they are? Why do you complain when a partner gets aggressive, or a child is timid?

As you develop true love you will focus on their best qualities and gloss over the negativities. You will see opponents as partners, competitors as comrades. However, use the intellect at



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Triple whammy

Informal sector reeling under job losses

In recent years, India's informal sector has faced significant challenges due to three major shocks: demonetisation in 2016, the rollout of the Goods and Services Tax regime in 2017 and the Covid-induced lockdown in 2020. These events have collectively led to the loss of 16.45 lakh jobs in seven years, according to the latest Annual Survey of Unincorporated Enterprises by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. The survey highlights the fragility of unincorporated enterprises. Operating outside the formal regulatory framework, such firms are particularly vulnerable to policy changes and economic disruptions. The employment in these enterprises fell from 11.13 crore in 2015-16 to 10.96 crore in 2022-23, marking a 1.5 per cent decline. This drop reflects the compounded impact of the three exogenous shocks on the sector's capacity to sustain employment.

Despite these challenges, the sector has shown resilience. The number of establishments increased by 5.88 per cent and there was a 7.84 per cent rise in the estimated number of workers between 2021-22 and 2022-23. The sector's Gross Value Added grew by 9.83 per cent, indicating some recovery. This was supported by enhanced capital investment and access to loans and greater use of IT.

In this context, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laying emphasis on job creation, especially in rural areas and the manufacturing sector, in the lead-up to the Union Budget assumes significance. The informal sector's ability to generate employment remains crucial for economic stability. For a more effective support of this sector, the Union Government must focus on improving Centre-state relations and enhancing programme implementation on the ground. To foster sustainable growth, it is imperative to address the systemic vulnerabilities exposed by the triple shocks. Strengthening the informal sector through targeted policies and ensuring a more robust safety net for workers can help mitigate future risks.

Highway hiccups

Punjab shouldn't let NHA projects flounder

THE termination of three national highway projects worth over Rs 3,300 crore by the National Highways Authority of India (NHA) is bad news for Punjab, which aspires to become a go-to destination not only for investors but also for tourists. The NHA, which has also initiated the process for scrapping four other projects worth over Rs 4,940 crore, has flagged a major roadblock — an inordinate delay in the possession of acquired land due to tardy declaration of compensation by the authorities. Farmers' resistance to land acquisition and disagreement over fixing of the award amount are the other contributory factors. Punjab has assured the NHA that it will expedite acquisition, but coming up with offers that are acceptable to all stakeholders is a big challenge.

Unfinished highway projects are an eyesore for commuters as well as visitors. The ubiquitous traffic diversions cause inconvenience to motorists day in, day out. It is difficult for the state government to improve ease of doing business when the work on highways drags on indefinitely or is discontinued abruptly.

Much depends on offering the rightful sum to landowners. Even as land is acquired under the National Highways Act, 1956, compensation is decided as per the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013. The award is supposed to be two to four times the determined market value of the land, but procedural anomalies and irregularities often lead to a stalemate or even litigation. These thorny issues must be sorted out in a time-bound manner. Punjab can take a cue from Telangana, one of the best-performing states in terms of providing a business-friendly environment. Earlier this week, Telangana CM A Revanth Reddy told district collectors to ensure that farmers who parted with their land for the construction of national highways got the maximum compensation as per law. A proactive approach can help Punjab turn a corner.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JULY 13, 1924

Implications of non-violence

THE fuss that has been made by the Anglo-Indian Press over what has come to be known as the Gopinath Saha resolution and the strength and earnestness with which that resolution has been condemned by the great majority of Indian-edited newspapers as well as by Mahatma Gandhi and his professed adherents make it pertinent to enquire if on either side there is a proper and adequate understanding of all the implications of non-violence as an effective political creed. It cannot be too often or too loudly asserted that just as the crying of peace when there is no peace is not the best way to bring peace into existence, so that crying of non-violence when the atmosphere is full of the spirit of bitterness and acrimony, the usual precursor to violence, is not the best way to promote non-violence in thought, in word, and in deed. There are two implications, two basic assumptions of non-violence, in particular which it is in the highest degree necessary for all those who are interested in promoting real non-violence to bear in mind, and to perpetually insist upon in all that they say and do. The more obvious one is that all those who profess to prefer non-violence to violence, especially the Government of the country and its habitual supporters, should in actual practice show their preference for non-violence over violence by treating the former on a differential basis as compared with the latter. It must be remembered that it is not everybody with whom non-violence is a matter of religion, who, like the Mahatma, would be non-violent not only under all sorts of provocations, but to the very end of the chapter.

A Jammu shift in Pakistani strategy

Moving the terror target area is clearly aimed at 'giving relief' to Kashmiri population



THE GREAT GAME

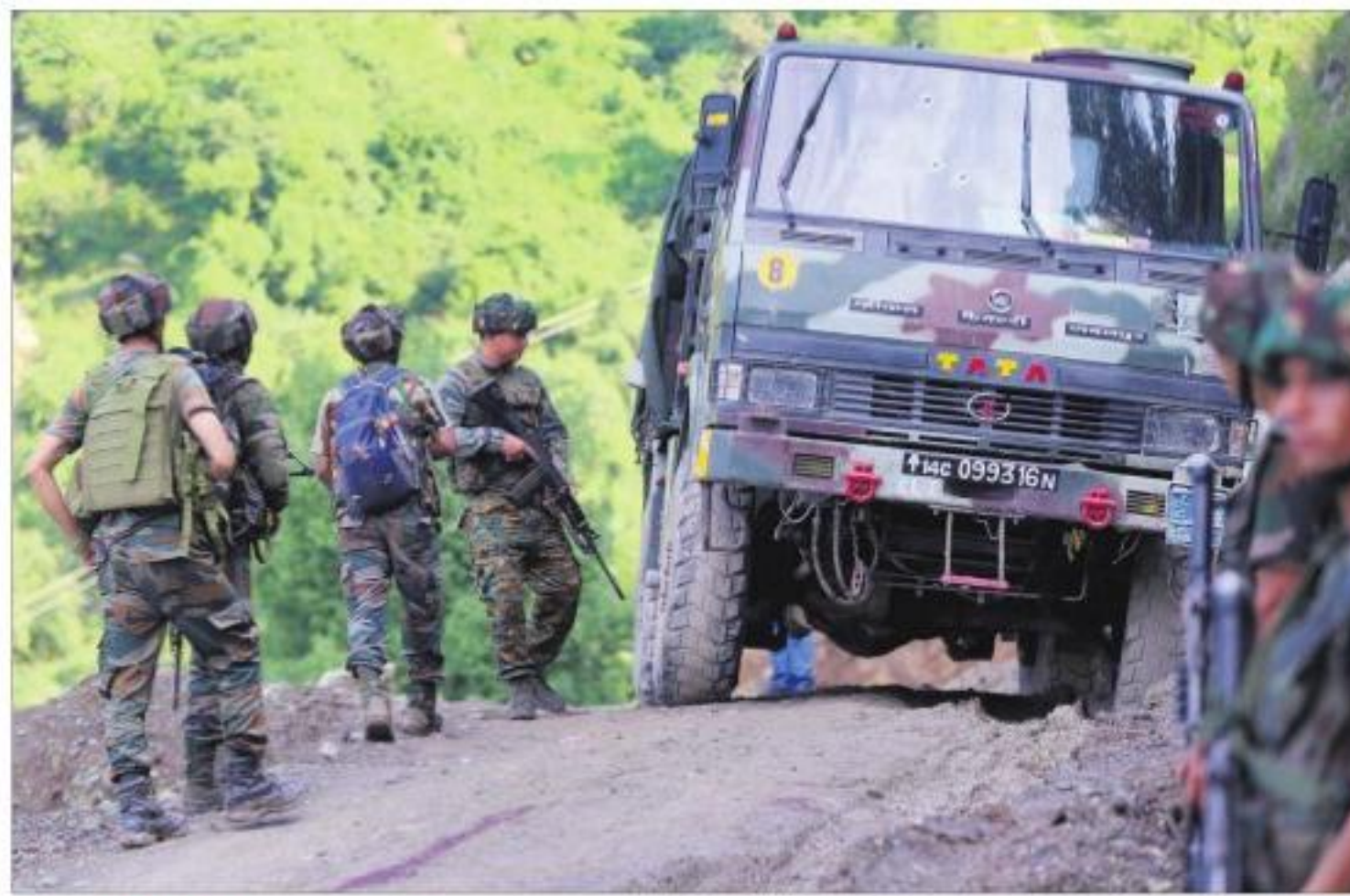
JYOTI MALHOTRA

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi is likely to inaugurate the first train run from Reasi in Jammu region to Baramulla in Kashmir later this month, across the world's highest bridge over the Chenab river — a sight to send the spirits soaring — but the question is, will the PM's presence reassure the region's gnawing anxiety triggered by the recent spate of terror attacks south of the Pir Panjal?

The last few weeks have reminded one of a blood-soaked metronome: Five soldiers killed in Kathua district on July 8. Eight persons, including six terrorists, killed in Kulgam on July 7. Three terrorists killed in Doda district on June 26. Nine pilgrims killed in Reasi district on June 9, the day PM Modi was being sworn in in Delhi.

Whatever happened to 'sab chhanga si'? As the BJP-ruled Centre prepares to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the revocation of Article 370 from Jammu & Kashmir less than a month from now, the question on subdued lips and depressed tongues is, why have terror attacks moved from the Muslim-majority Kashmir valley to Hindu-majority Jammu?

First, the facts. The terrorists carrying out the attacks are foreign, meaning, they are from Pakistan; no other foreign terrorists — whether Afghans, Chechens, etc — have been found here. Second, they carry sophisticated weapons, such as the US-made M4 carbine assault rifles, more often found in the Afghan theatre rather than in J&K. Third, they are



AMBUSH: A terror attack on an Army convoy in Kathua district killed five soldiers on July 8. PTI

highly trained to carry out the attacks. Fourth, these terrorists have infiltrated into the Jammu region from the forested, international boundary (IB) section — dotted by fast-flowing streams that they use to swim across — and not really across the Line of Control.

Don't be too surprised that the IB can be infiltrated. In Reasi, Doda, Kathua and Samba, the ground is soft, and in the past, terrorists have sneaked in via tunnels. In more modern times, Pakistani drones have done the job — including a drone attack over Jammu's airbase in 2021.

Most importantly, the shift in Pakistani strategy — shifting the target area from Kashmir to Jammu — has been clearly done with an eye to "giving relief" to the Kashmiri population. The Valley is so closely monitored that it is difficult for a leaf to fall without the security establishment knowing about the speed, angle and distance of the falling leaf from the ground well in advance. There is not an iota of doubt that large parts of Kashmir are among the most militarised in the world. The cost of

Pakistan's all-powerful military establishment cannot fail to notice that despite PM Modi's reduced numbers in Parliament, he is travelling the world and being feted by it too.

speaking up or against the establishment is so high that people would much rather mind their own business.

Not so in the Jammu region. The securitisation of these parts has been far more relaxed, notwithstanding the constant spate of attacks in the Poonch-Rajouri sector — Hindu-majority Jammu was seen to be more nationalist, less problematic. In fact, things were so laid back that in the summer of 2020, soon after the Chinese were dis-

covered trampling all over the Line of Actual Control, a brigade of the Rashtriya Rifles (RR) was moved to eastern Ladakh. The thinning out has cost Jammu dear. Only now has the brigade been replaced with some reservists.

Something else has also been happening here, though that isn't directly related to the security situation but gives you some idea of the shifting winds — the surprising weakening of the BJP, that too in the wake of the abrogation of Article 370.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. The abrogation was supposed to further integrate Jammu with the rest of the country. Instead, local residents are now complaining about increasing unemployment, rising inflation, the sale of land to outsiders, a rise in the liquor business as well as the shutting down of the 500,000-strong Durbar move from Srinagar which gave a shot in the arm to local business.

The recent Lok Sabha elections demonstrated some of that unhappiness. Although the BJP handsomely won the seats of Udhampur (Jitendra Singh

defeated Choudhary Lal Singh, 51.28 per cent votes against 40.11 per cent) and Jammu (Jugal Kishore Sharma defeated Raman Bhalla, 52.8 per cent votes against 42.4 per cent), their victory margins were much lower — less than 1.5 lakh votes each. Even the ruling party seemed a bit surprised that this was happening.

Perhaps, that is what the Pakistani terrorist was seeking to do — undermine the government's claims of normalcy, in the run-up to the fifth anniversary of the abrogation, even in Jammu. Some analysts point out that the level of the terror attacks is still more or less controlled, lest it invite greater retaliation, even if the tactics have changed (In Kashmir, the fdayeen attack was intended to cause as much destruction as possible, say in a camp site; but in the Jammu attacks, these have shifted to ambushes on armed patrols as well as civilian vehicles).

Perhaps, there is another reason. Pakistan's all-powerful military establishment cannot fail to notice that despite PM Modi's reduced numbers in Parliament, he is travelling the world and being feted by it too. Perhaps, Rawalpindi is hoping that these attacks will shake New Delhi out of its complacency and force it to recognise that the "Pakistani hand" is still integral to finding a solution and even lasting peace.

Still, it is amply clear that Modi responds much more to pressure within. Like from Punjab, which forced the opening of the Kartarpur Sahib corridor in 2019, Kashmir's opportunity will come when the Assembly elections are held in the next few months. No one will be able to ignore J&K's elected representatives from the Valley as well as from Jammu — neither Delhi, nor Rawalpindi. There will be a moment at hand. It may not come again soon. Both India and Pakistan should try and prepare for it.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

There are causes worth dying for, but none worth killing for. — Albert Camus

Education should go beyond employability

PRIYA S TANDON

LAST week, I attended the National Education Summit at Prasanthi Nilayam Ashram, Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh. It was hosted by Sri Sathya Sai Vidya Vahini (SSSVV), for which I volunteer as a 'language reviewer'. The SSSVV is the single largest contributor of free educational content to the Prime Minister's DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) portal. The event witnessed the attendance of many stalwarts from the field of education.

As the world has started to recognise that all children are not the same and that there are many who have latent deficiencies which need to be addressed, a paradigm shift in the mindset of educationists and policymakers who have designed the National Education Policy (NEP)-2020 and the National Curriculum Framework is apparent. The NEP-2020 talks about the need for integral education to become inclusive.

Ideas on how classroom content can be adapted so that all 'children with special needs' (CWSN) can fit in were discussed. If integral education becomes inclusive, inclusive education will become integral.

The education system should cater to the needs of CWSN. The nuances of education have changed. The focus is not on teaching methodologies — it is on learning outcomes. Whether the syllabus is covered or not, the learning outcomes at each stage/grade need to be achieved.

Years back, some children were labelled as dull, slow, careless, not interested, distracted, etc. But no one bothered to get to the bottom of why the child was what he/she was. Parents thought that these children would grow out of their 'idiocies' or, perhaps, did not even notice.

Those who had glaring disabilities got noticed. After the initial despair and disbelief, the parents started to address the problem. If a child has difficulty holding the pencil or forming speech sounds or memorising simple facts or is not able to eat with a spoon, these are regarded as minor disabilities. Early detection by the parents or teachers can lead to treatment that results in cure or improves the quality of the child's life.

The focus of education has earlier been on how to make students employable when they complete professional degree courses. The emphasis of the NEP-2020 is to make them not just employable but also to empower and enlighten them. Education should not be just a mountain of information that the student has to somehow digest. It has to be information that is implementable. Alongside, we have to teach students to value life and all things living — humans, trees, animals, vegetation, aquatic life, etc. As Sathya Sai Baba said, 'Education is for life, not merely for a living... The end of knowledge is wisdom.'

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Adding fuel to Russia-Ukraine fire

Refer to the editorial 'NATO at it again'; by pledging to Ukraine NATO membership and a minimum baseline funding of 40 billion euros in military aid within the next year, the Western Bloc has ensured that the war will not end anytime soon. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has rightly warned against a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia. NATO allies have announced they are transferring F-16 jets to Ukraine. US President Biden has reiterated that every inch of NATO territory will be defended. If all this is not provocation, then what is? The alliance must try to restore peace in the regions reeling from conflict and not use provocative rhetoric.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Don't let US dictate India's policy

With reference to the news report 'Can't take ties for granted: US envoy after PM Narendra Modi's Russia visit'; the threat of trade or military sanctions from the US-led Western bloc has failed to deter India from treading the path of strategic autonomy and choosing allies that serve its national interests. Gone are the days when the US could go on policing other nations and dictating what their foreign policies should be. India's growing global influence can no longer be denied.

ANIL VINAYAK, AMRITSAR

Old man in guise of a 'big boy'

US President Joe Biden mistakenly referred to his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as Russian President Vladimir Putin at a NATO conference. He also referred to Kamala Harris as 'Vice-President Trump' during the 'big boy' news conference. The twin gaffes come amid growing concerns about his ability to lead and take on Donald Trump in the November 5 elections. Just weeks ago, the 81-year-old had delivered a shaky performance during a debate with his Republican opponent. The series of flubs from the oldest US President in history — who is in the race for re-election — will certainly diminish the electoral prospects of his party.

DVG SANKARA RAO, VIZIANAGARAM

Restore normalcy on priority

Refer to the editorial 'Shambhu barricades'; the Punjab and Haryana High Court order to clear the blockade has brought much-needed relief to commuters and local businesses. This ruling not only vindicates the farmers' stance but also underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between civil liberties and public order. Both the Punjab and Haryana state governments must expedite the restoration of normalcy while ensuring that protests do not turn disruptive. This incident exemplifies that judicial intervention is crucial in safeguarding democratic rights and ensuring societal welfare. The episode holds a valuable lesson for both the government and the protesters — they must not take any step that causes inconvenience to the public.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

Govt must promote family values

Refer to the news report 'In Assam, spl leave to meet parents'; the Assam Government has taken a laudable step. It is distressing how many grown-ups often neglect their parents, leaving them lonely and vulnerable in their twilight years. There is an urgent need to reverse this trend, and the state government's move can go a long way in that regard. Other states must follow suit by announcing initiatives that will help promote family values and strengthen bonds.

JAGDISH CHANDER, JALANDHAR

Leaders must stay humble

Apropos of 'What Modi can learn from Sunak' (Trusts and Turns); the piece is a must-read. The writer has rightly brought home the point that a public figure receives more love and admiration when he stays humble, even after scaling the heights of fame and success. One does not need to shout about their achievements from the rooftop. Listening to your critics can actually help you learn and do better. Likewise, it is high time that the ruling regime understood the role of the Opposition in the lawmaking process.

SADHNA SAINI, BY MAIL

Set ethical, constitutional boundaries for AI



ASHWANI KUMAR
FORMER UNION MINISTER
FOR LAW AND JUSTICE

ARTIFICIAL Intelligence (AI), as the transformative technological revolution of our age, attests to humankind's unrelenting pursuit to understand, control and remake the world in the image of its changing aspirations, an endeavour not without its challenges.

The apprehended evisceration of core human values and dehumanising of society itself have invited a raging global debate about the ethical challenges posed by AI and the possibility of an effective international regulatory regime to discipline its deployment. Several regional and global initiatives have, therefore, focused on limiting the use of AI within the larger moral framework of human rights to harmoniously moderate technological exuberance with compelling moral restraints.

The Montreal Declaration on the ethics of intelligence systems; proceedings of the ACM FAccT conferences; UNESCO's Global Standards on AI Ethics ('Recommendation on the Ethics of

Artificial Intelligence'), adopted by all 193 member states in November 2021; the Biden administration's non-binding AI Bill of Rights; European Union legislation on AI; congressional hearings in the US and deliberations of national regulatory bodies confirm the seriousness of ethical challenges within the AI ecosystem. Initiatives such as the Global Observatory on the effect of AI, Global Forum on Ethics of AI, AI Ethics Experts without Borders and Women for AI Ethics have contributed towards a sharper understanding of the ethical issues involved.

History proclaims that at every step on the stairway to progress, humankind has made choices to define the progress of civilisation as the deepening of humanity and happiness of the people. The benefits of AI's positive contribution for the betterment of global health and educational systems, combating challenges of climate change, terrorism, cybercrime, pandemics, natural disasters, etc. are transformative in the progressive evolution of civilisation. Even so, there is an overwhelming consensus among stakeholders to tame the excesses of AI. It is rightly argued that the celebration of our technological triumphs cannot be a 'mourning amidst the ruins' of humanity. Since all knowl-



WORRY: Serious apprehensions have been expressed about AI's ability to effectively reshape history. iStock

edge must be measured in terms of the values it advances, the use of AI demands an evaluation within the framework of the prevailing ethical standards of humanity.

AI's known encroachment of our inalienable rights to freedom, privacy of emotions and intimate relationships, individual autonomy, sacrosanctity of mental processes and individual consciousness, now recognised as fundamental constitutional rights in democracies across the world, is viewed as 'part of the crisis of humanity'. Grave concerns about AI-enabled manipulation of behavioural and electoral processes, the hacking of language to dis-

The use of AI demands an evaluation within the framework of the prevailing ethical standards.

rupt a genuine democratic discourse, the challenge of deepfakes, intended and unintended biases for and against a class of people by exploiting their vulnerabilities, including age, gender, disabilities and ethnicity, and the compounding of prevailing inequalities (such as the digital divide) are real. Serious apprehensions have been legitimately expressed about AI's ability 'to effectively reshape history'. Concerns about 'overgrazing of the Internet commons by rapacious technology companies' to maximise profit at the cost of data privacy and transparency abound.

That the AI leviathan needs to be regulated across geographical boundaries by

an internationally enforceable legal code is evident in the recent comments of the principal AI entrepreneurs. Elon Musk is reported to have warned that "when we build AI without a kill switch, we are summoning the devil". Mark Zuckerberg has cautioned that "...the world will become more digital than physical. And that is not necessarily the best thing for human society." Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak has, in an open letter, suggested the acceleration of the development of a 'robust AI governance system'.

Evidently, such a mechanism cannot be limited to self-regulation and should have effective mechanisms to fix accountability for transgression of the mandated red lines. It is, indeed, necessary to navigate the shadows of science if we are to bask in the glory of its illumination.

Whether or not these concerns are exaggerated, the predominant opinion on the subject is that in crafting our perspectives on the future of AI, we must accept that the elevating advance of civilisation is located in humankind's unwavering commitment to the moral autonomy and rationality of the individual that recognises the primacy of the ideals of human dignity, inclusion, equality, freedom and justice. In the ongoing global debate on the ethical and moral framework within

which AI must operate, doubts have been expressed on whether the AI machines can serve as moral agents in "translating human moral complexity into an algorithmic form" or are capable of making ethical judgements as 'full ethical agents' with the human understanding of ethics. It is imperative to erect unbreachable boundaries around AI to ensure that man remains the master of his universe and that sacred private spaces of the head and the heart remain sacrosanct in an age 'which levels everything and reveres nothing'.

Hopefully, the recently concluded Global India AI Summit in New Delhi will generate ideas for the responsible development and deployment of ethical and inclusive AI. It is for us to reaffirm that civilisation at its peak is about the elevation of man in the fullness of human glory, not in a tragic, even though unintended, denouement of humanist morality. Our ability to secure a convergence in the prescription of scientists and philosophers for a humane world order will be an enduring contribution to this mission. And how we deal with this epochal challenge will define the quality of leadership and the hierarchy of moral values in which human dignity must remain at the pinnacle as the ultimate civilisational aspiration.

Views are personal

Sort out the urban mess to fuel economic growth



SUBIR ROY
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

A little over two-thirds of the Indians live in rural areas. However, in 2022, the urban population grew faster than the rural one. The trend is likely to remain unchanged. As more people are likely to gravitate towards urban areas in search of better incomes, there is bound to be greater pressure on such places.

The great contradiction is that just one-third of the total population — those living in urban areas — accounted for 63 per cent of the national GDP in 2023. And the projection is that by 2030, this share is likely to rise to 75 per cent.

The mega policy challenge is to focus on urban India in such a way that it can grow and prosper in a sustainable manner. As urban areas become home to more and more people, they must become more prosperous and habitable.

There is a complexity in urban India — not only are youngsters moving from rural to urban places, they

are also seeking to shift to top-tier cities that offer the most opportunities. To address the challenge, global consultancy BCG (Boston Consulting Group) has devised a plan so that 50 Indian cities with one million or more residents each live up to the ecosystems that are needed for them.

There are three critical areas that need to be addressed successfully in order to move forward. One, there is economic and social inequality across cities. This is highlighted when we compare, for example, Delhi with Bareilly and Patna. There is great inequality, particularly in healthcare and education infrastructure.

Two, things are getting worse. The quality of life is deteriorating in smaller cities. In particular, there is a shortage of housing and the commute is long. Hence, more people keep moving to larger cities. In Mumbai, over 40 per cent of the people live in slums. Delhi alone has as many as 750 slum clusters.

Three, air quality, water table and waste management are deteriorating. Extreme weather and global warming are impacting even large cities. Chennai's temperature has gone up by 1°C since 1960, causing floods.

Large cities need city designs and master plans, with 10- and 30-year visualisations. There is a need to



THE DARK SIDE: In Mumbai, over 40 per cent of the people live in slums. iStock

have separate plans for different economic sectors like manufacturing (factories), services (IT centres) and agriculture (local horticultural areas).

It is imperative to develop robust transport connectivity. One way to do it is by making it expensive to buy a private car space in city apartment areas. Further, Metro rail services should be made more efficient to ensure a faster and more reliable commute for more people. Mumbai has the oldest and longest history of Metro and suburban railway services. Delhi has also made great strides in taking

There is a need to have separate plans for economic sectors like manufacturing, services & agriculture.

forward the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation. The Kolkata Metro Rail Corporation is fast catching up.

As all these individual processes make progress, there is a need for an underlying enabler. There has to be a law in place to govern urban spaces. A step in the right direction was taken through the 74th constitutional amendment, with first- and second-tier cities having an institutional framework. But the third-tier ones have been lagging behind.

What is most important is not just to have laws and administrations in place but

also a system through which residents can keep communicating with the corporators and help find the right solutions. Perhaps the best way to describe the troubling reality is to outline what is happening in Mumbai's Dharavi.

Residents from city areas like Mulund, Kurla and Dharavi have formed a group to demand clarity on the Dharavi redevelopment scheme and the proposed Project Affected Persons (PAP) colony. They have come together as the Mumbai Bachao Samiti.

A bone of contention is the proposal to have a PAP colony in these areas that lie outside Dharavi so that the space that is thereby freed up can be used for the project to undertake development. Those from areas like Mulund are against the project; they worry that the infrastructure in their areas will not be able to accommodate the influx of new residents.

In particular, the residents are opposed to the idea of using the fallow area of the defunct dairy in Kurla for the project. Instead, they want to have the land converted into a recreational space. The most interesting part is that the people in Dharavi do not want to move out of there. They earn their livelihood by working at little workshops and factories based there.

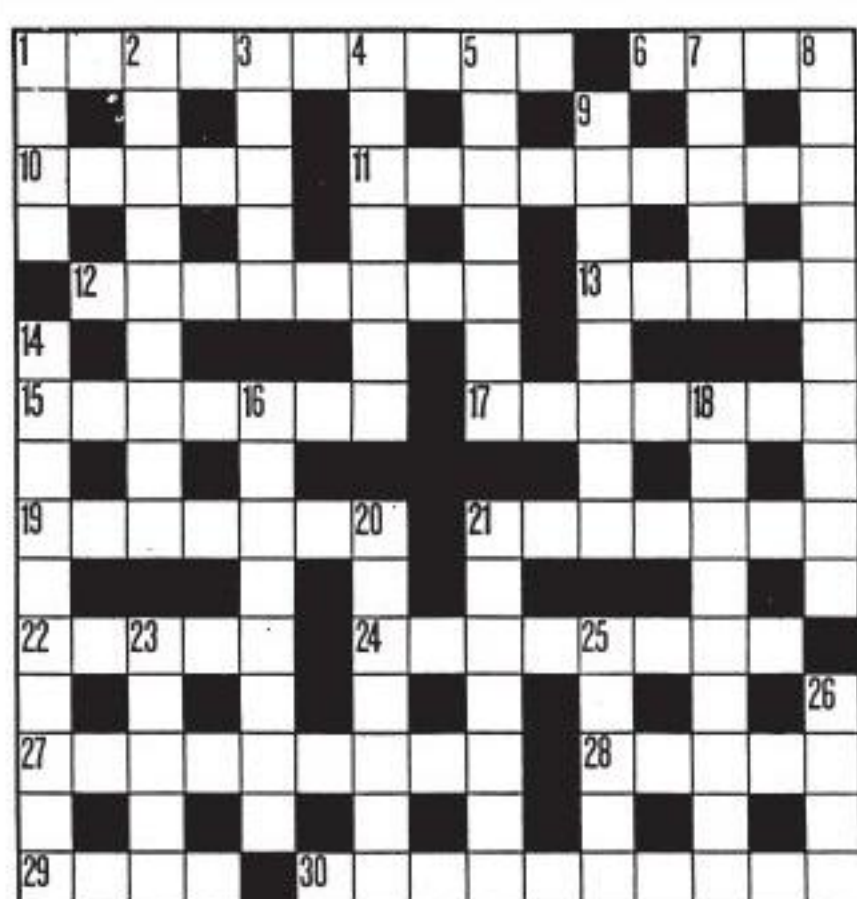
Coming back to the BCG, it makes three overall propos-

als. There needs to be a governance model that includes these stakeholders. There has to be a local government, municipal leaders and self-sufficient finances (in India through finance commissions). Second, the private sector has to be allowed to develop enterprises that will make money, employ people and help invest the surplus back into the city ecosystem. Third, and perhaps most important, there has to be a place for a civic society that fosters dialogue, ensures accountability and promotes the public interest.

I, however, have one grouse with the BCG. It is focused only on large cities, not paying attention to small towns and peri-urban areas. The people living on the outskirts of large towns and cities do not make as much money as city dwellers do. These smaller urban areas need both proper town planning and the commute facilities that will connect them with the heart of the cities.

If all that has been spelt out happens, urban India will grow the right way, enabling people to earn more and, in the process, helping the economy progress. Economists, in particular, will need to look at not just finances but also worry about how urban India can become the leitmotif of dense mixed living with adjoining parks and proper garbage and waste water management.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- An easy comfortable life (3,2,5)
- Tibetan spiritual leader (4)
- Of the moon (5)
- Estimation of quality (9)
- Under obligation (8)
- A classical language (5)
- Strong instinctive feeling (7)
- Involve in conflict (7)
- Cattle thief (7)
- While on the contrary (7)
- Venomous snake (5)
- Actor (8)
- Lacking information (2,3,4)
- Incidental remark (5)
- Negative voters (4)
- Immediately available cash (5,5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Gallant, 5 Occur, 8 On balance, 9 Rug, 10 Sofa, 12 Budapest, 14 Cartel, 15 Vestry, 17 Improper, 18 Myth, 21 Few, 22 Unheard-of, 24 Nurse, 25 Disobey.

Down: 1 Gross, 2 Lob, 3 Able, 4 Tongue, 5 Overawed, 6 Currently, 7 Rightly, 11 Firepower, 13 Resolute, 14 Chiffon, 16 Method, 19 Hefty, 20 Dais, 23 Dub.

DOWN

- Large mass (4)
- Unsafe (9)
- Relinquish (5)
- At tedious length (2,3,2)
- Cost incurred (7)
- Auseful quality (5)
- After much delay (2,4,4)
- Liable to error (8)
- Withdrawal of a statement (10)
- Hapless (3-5)
- A planned military action (9)
- Gone back over (7)
- Brought about (7)
- Wash with a liquid (5)
- A sacred song (5)
- Flock of quails (4)

SU DO KU

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

V. EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JULY 13, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Aashadh Shaka 22
- Aashadh Parvishite 30
- Hijri 1446
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 7, up to 3.06 pm
- Shiva Yoga
- Hast Nakshatra up to 7.15 pm
- Moon in Virgo sign

FORECAST

CITY	SATURDAY		19:26 HRS
	SUNRISE	SUNSET	
Chandigarh	34	29	
New Delhi	35	27	
Amritsar	34	25	
Bathinda	38	28	
Jalandhar	36	29	
Ludhiana	34	28	
Bhiwani	37	29	
Hisar	37	27	
Sirsa	38	29	
Dharamsala	29	20	
Manali	26	16	
Shimla	24	18	
Srinagar	32	18	
Jammu	36	27	
Kargil	32	15	
Leh	26	10	
Dehradun	32	23	
Mussoorie	23	17	

TEMPERATURE IN °C



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Do Democrats have a Plan B?

With Biden increasingly under attack for his lacklustre performance, Democrats must be exploring alternatives

The Democratic Party have to take a make-or-break decision— to continue with Joe Biden as presidential candidate or find an alternative. Both choices are difficult and have their pros and cons. Biden's age and performance might push the party to consider a Plan B. But the time is running out for Democrats and so are the options. It all began much earlier but the presidential debate was the proverbial last straw when Biden performed below par. However, Despite the challenges, there are strong arguments for sticking with Biden. He has overseen a period of significant legislative achievements, including the passage of a massive infrastructure bill, ambitious climate change initiatives, and a robust COVID-19 vaccination campaign. Biden's administration has also navigated complex international relations, working to rebuild alliances and address global threats, especially China and Russia. His centrist approach has aimed to unify a deeply divided nation, seeking to appeal to both progressive and moderate Democrats, as well as independents and even some Republicans.



However, concerns about Biden's age and cognitive abilities persist. At 81, he is the oldest president in US history, and questions about his stamina and mental acuity have been fodder for both political opponents and media speculation. Polls indicate a significant portion of the electorate is uneasy about his capacity to serve another four-year term. Furthermore, his handling of certain issues, such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan and ongoing economic challenges, has drawn criticism from both sides of the political spectrum.

These controversies have fueled speculation about whether Biden is the best candidate to lead the Democrats to victory in 2024. But with elections barely four months away Democrats would find a replacement rather hard. Even invoking the 25th Amendment, which allows for the removal of a president deemed unfit to serve, remains an extreme and unlikely scenario. Given the potential political fallout and the necessity for clear, indisputable evidence of incapacity, this route is rather a precarious one. If the Democrats decide to explore alternatives, several high-profile figures could emerge as potential contenders. As the sitting vice president, Kamala Harris is the most obvious choice. Her historic candidacy as the first female, first Black, and first South Asian vice president offers a compelling narrative, but her leadership and policy effectiveness will be under intense scrutiny. Next in line would be Pete Buttigieg, the Secretary of Transportation and former mayor of South Bend, Indiana. His youth, eloquence, and policy acumen make him a viable candidate. Then of course you have Gavin Newsom, the governor of California has been a vocal advocate for progressive policies and has shown resilience in the face of political challenges. The Democrats are caught between the devil and the deep sea. Ultimately, the decision will hinge on the party's assessment of Biden's ability to lead effectively and win re-election.

PICTALK



Priests of Shiva Temple perform 'pooja' at the reception of container ship San Fernando, in Thiruvananthapuram

Young philanthropists ushering in new age of giving in India

With a burgeoning startup ecosystem, India is witnessing a new generation of wealth creators who are passionate about funding impactful projects

Young philanthropists are playing a catalytic role in ushering in a new age of giving that underscores the need for scalable change and long-term impact. Having the third-largest startup ecosystem, and being home to 100 unicorns, India has given rise to a new generation of wealth creators who are young, tech-driven, and passionate about change. These 'new-age' philanthropists are transforming the country's infrastructure and bringing about long-lasting growth. Their efforts are not just about giving back; they are about driving systemic and sustainable impact across communities. For instance, initiatives like the Karnataka Model School Pathways Programme are redefining India's education system. In a world where socioeconomic challenges are pervasive, these young change-makers are bringing fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to philanthropy, making it not only a trend but also a powerful force for social change. Moving away from the traditional approach of philanthropy being seen as a post-retirement task, this genera-



tion of philanthropists is starting early, leveraging their wealth, influence, and technological savvy to drive meaningful change within their lifetime. Instead of adhering to traditional models of charity, young philanthropists are adopting a more entrepreneurial approach, seeking out innovative solutions and investing in new focus areas like climate change, mental health, sports for development, etc. The India Philanthropy Report 2024 shows how emerging issues like climate change and Gender, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (GEDI) have become the top three areas of interest apart from traditional causes for this new cohort of young entrepreneurs. Nikhil Kamath, CEO of Zerodha and one of the

youngest philanthropists is a strong advocate of climate change. A founder of YIPP which brings together young entrepreneurs to address pressing societal issues collectively, Kamath had started investing in environmental problems way back in 2019 with the launch of Rainmatter Foundation and recently invested in a charity that combats climate change in India. These new age givers are using technology to tackle some of India's most pressing problems, combining data-driven insights with a deep understanding of social issues to create long-term, scalable impact. Their approach has been guided by a blend of head and heart making their philanthropy more strategic and forward-thinking. Their willingness to collaborate and pool time, talent and treasure for collective impact is another characteristic of this new generation of philanthropists. Recognizing the complexity of social challenges and the need for coordinated action, they are forging partnerships with like-minded individuals and organizations to amplify their efforts. Collective philan-

thropy presents a dynamic approach to otherwise traditional models of philanthropy, opening avenues for innovative solutions to India's unique problems. This spirit of collaboration is exemplified by initiatives such as the YIPP which was started in 2021 to bring together young change makers below the age of 45 to create new-age solutions collectively. With a clear focus on accountability and scalability, this 15-member group aims to make their giving more structured, bold and innovative. Hailing from diverse backgrounds, experiences and philanthropic aspirations, they are collectively a motivated force keen to showcase the power of collaboration and strength in working together towards a set common goal. With their entrepreneurial spirit, technological acumen, and commitment to collective action, they are leading the charge towards a brighter tomorrow for India and the world.

(The writer is founding member, Young India Philanthropic Pledge and chief inspiration officer, Yuva Unstoppable; views are personal)



AMITABH SHAH

The Taliban's war on Afghan women

Despite denials by Taliban officials, the bravery of Afghan women coming forward underscores the severe and dehumanising treatment they endure

A piece in *The Guardian*, bylined Zahra Joya, Chris McGreal, Khodadad Poladi, Annie Kelly and Tom Levitt, datelined July 6, 2024, and published under the heading "Video appears to show gang-rape of Afghan woman in Taliban jail," makes horrifying reading. According to the report, the video recording, seen by *The Guardian* and Rukhsana Media, an online news agency focused on covering issues affecting women in Afghanistan, shows a young woman, a human rights activist, being gang-raped and tortured in a Taliban jail by armed men. It shows her being told to take off her clothes and then raped multiple times by two men. She is seen as standing naked, her face visible, and is identifiable during the attacks. The report cites the woman as saying that she was arrested for participating in a public protest against the Taliban and was raped in a Taliban prison. The video was sent to her after she had fled Afghanistan and spoken out against the Taliban, with the threat that it would be shown to her family and released on social media if she spoke against the Islamic Emirate in public. It also cites other examples of sexual abuse, beatings, and torture, including by electric shocks, of not only those protesting against the Taliban's squelching of women's rights but of young women and teenagers accused of violating hijab rules. Zabihullah Mujahid, Chief Spokesman and Deputy Minister of Information and Culture of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has, according to *The Guardian* report, denied the allegations of widespread sexual assaults on incarcerated women. While he could not have done otherwise, one can hardly doubt the women's versions, given the stigma attached to victims of sexual violence in countries like Afghanistan. It takes a massive amount of courage and resolve for a woman, or her relatives, to state that she had been raped or molested in custody. Even the UN has commented on the arrests and detentions. Under the heading "Permanent Darkness," Ajit



Kumar Singh has written in the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATPOR, Volume 22, Number 18) dated March 11, 2024, that the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) had expressed grave concern over the arrest and detention of women and girls for alleged non-compliance with the Islamic dress code. He has quoted Roza Otunbayeva, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and head of UNAMA, as observing that enforcement measures and physical violence were "especially demeaning and dangerous for Afghan women." Detention, she continued, carried "an enormous stigma that put Afghan women at even greater risk." The Taliban's war on women—perhaps the most diabolical feature of their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001—continues in their second innings with rape and molestation as a part of it. The process started in September 2021 when the Taliban removed the signboard of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul and replaced it with that of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the earlier incarnation of which had



IT TAKES A MASSIVE AMOUNT OF COURAGE AND RESOLVE FOR A WOMAN, OR HER RELATIVES, TO STATE THAT SHE HAD BEEN RAPED OR MOLESTED IN CUSTODY

earned widespread notoriety during their first stint in power, for arbitrary and savage enforcement—with particular harshness towards women—of the government's obscurantist diktats. A series of measures has followed. Women are not allowed to travel more than 70 kilometres without a male escort who is her husband or a mahram, a close blood relative—father, son brother, grandfather, great-grandfather, nephew with whom marriage is prohibited and, in whose presence, she need not wear a hijab. They are to wear "proper" hijabs, loose black garments, covering their bodies and faces, in public places and their male relatives have been made responsible under pain of punishment. They are excluded from education above the primary level and virtually every kind of employment. Worse, in a voice message broadcast by Afghanistan's state television on March 23, 2024, the Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, had said, "We will flog the women... we will stone them to death in public [for adultery]." The Taliban had started flogging women even before the announcement, administering at least 30 strokes for

"offences" like using cell phones, talking to men or being in love or relationships. All this was not unexpected given the Taliban's obscurantist beliefs and record in power during its first coming from 1996 to 2001. What is surprising is the silence—to say nothing of the absence of effective action—of the rest of the world, even the Western democracies, in the matter. The UN too seems to be falling in line. This is suggested by its surrender in the case of the recent conference of global envoys, held in Doha, Qatar, and attended by envoys of 25 countries including the US, Russia, China and the European Union. The conference, to promote engagement with the Taliban on a variety of issues, was the third of its kind. The Taliban, which had not attended the earlier two, attended it only after the organisers accepted their condition that women would not attend it. The UN's capitulation has been widely condemned by human rights organisations which rightly believe it would encourage the Taliban to further trample on women's rights. But who cares? (The author is Consulting Editor, *The Pioneer*. The views expressed are personal)



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FARMERS TO REIGNITE PROTESTS

Madam — The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), India's largest farmers' organization that led the historic 2020-21 protests, has announced plans to resume their agitation against the BJP-led NDA government to push for their pending demands. These demands include a guaranteed MSP law, loan waivers, and pensions for farmers and farmworkers. The General Body has decided to restart the agitation, demanding the implementation of the agreement signed on December 9, 2021, by the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture and other key demands affecting farmers' livelihoods. The SKM plans to campaign against the BJP in the upcoming assembly elections and intends to expose, oppose, and punish the party. The farmers' movement has significantly impacted Lok Sabha elections, defeating the BJP in 38 rural seats across Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra. Clearly, all is not well for the BJP.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

PRIORITIES OF GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Madam — Madam, This is in reference to the report, "Namami Ganga: Rs211 Crore Splash to Keep Maha Kumbh Eco-Friendly" (July 10). Whether the state government spends money on the Maha Kumbh Mela (MKM) at Prayag or not, the Modi government at the Centre is ready to pour money into the coffers of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's government months ahead of the function. The Government of India, which delayed the payment of flood relief money to Tamil Nadu for many months and finally released a small amount with great reluctance coinciding with the Lok Sabha elections, has now 'splashed' Rs211 crore to the UP government quickly for the Mela scheduled for January-February 2025. This money is intended for preserving the purity of the Ganga river and ensuring cleanliness throughout the mega event. Just a week ago, another annual global event, the Puri Jagannath Rath Yatra, was celebrated by the

World Population Day



World Population Day is observed with various programs aimed at achieving overall population control worldwide, and India is no exception. The focal theme

emphasises family planning to significantly improve the health of mothers and children. However, in India, discussions about controlling the population of over 1.35 billion people often meet with resistance from both the public and political leaders. Given the current growth rate, India is expected to surpass China's population by 2025, ahead of the earlier projection for 2028. This year's World Population Day on July 11 coincides with the anticipated birth of the Earth's eight billionth inhabitant. While this milestone celebrates our diversity and advancements in health that have extended lifespans and reduced maternal and child mortality rates, the uncontrolled population increase poses a significant threat. The situation demands urgent attention and action to avoid potential dangers.

Jayanthi Subramaniam | Mumbai

ISKCON organization in Odisha. It was also a mega Hindu festival, but the Centre did not choose to fund this festival. However, the core issue I wish to point out is the fate of the Clean Ganga project introduced by the BJP government in its first tenure, for which Rs 5,000 crore was allocated. It is not known if the cleaning project was completed, as no report was presented in Parliament. It is unclear whether sustained maintenance is regularly done by the UP government, whether a system has been put in place to guard against the misuse and overcrowding of the Ganga river, and whether steps are taken to prohibit the immersion and floating of dead bodies in the river. Protecting the holiness and purity of the Ganga river is the foremost duty of both the Centre and the UP government.

MANOHARAN MUTHUSWAMY | Ramnad

SUPREME COURT'S ALIMONY VERDICT

Madam — The Supreme Court's decision on alimony for divorced Muslim women is significant. The court determined that every woman, regardless of faith, has the

right to alimony. Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Augustin George Masih, though making independent decisions, ultimately reached the same conclusion. Both indicated that a divorced Muslim woman could file a lawsuit against her husband under Section 125 of the CrPC to receive alimony. The Supreme Court's ruling is admirable and consistent with the duties of a welfare state. This verdict mirrors the one handed down in the Shah Bano case on April 23, 1985. Previously, alimony for divorced women was determined by Muslim Personal Law, which allowed alimony only during the Iddat period. However, the Supreme Court declared that Section 125 of the Indian Penal Code is equally applicable to all women, allowing them to claim alimony even after Iddat. Many divorced Muslim women do not remarry, and receiving alimony only during the Iddat period does not resolve their issues.

Ahijit Roy | Jamshedpur

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FIRST COLUMN

BALANCING EMPATHY AND PROFESSIONALISM

While layoffs are challenging, there is room for improving how they are managed



RACHNA LAKHPATRI

Layoffs are never easy. The impact on the affected employees will be deep and most often devastating; it is a turning point in their professional and personal lives—a stressful one, of course. But what the majority of people are not aware of is that those tasked to deliver the message—the HR professionals—also carry an emotional burden. It may be the senior leadership making tough decisions, but HR bears the heart-wrenching job of communicating them. HR professionals are often the stoic face of the company during these times. But behind the professionalism of that stone exterior is a very real understanding of the weight of their actions. They, too, are humans.

They also carry the burden of those decisions. The difference lies in their need to balance empathy with the requirement of upholding company policies and procedures, often concealing their feelings in the process. When an HR professional sits down with an employee to discuss a layoff, how complicated the emotions in that moment can be is beyond measure. They know they are delivering news that will change a life. However, how that news is conveyed does indeed have an impact.

There are no ideal words to cushion the blow, but compassion can help ease the transition. Difficult situations present an opportunity for HR professionals to think of effective strategies. They can understand and relate to the challenges faced by their staff, while also providing a positive outlook and potential for growth. They could say, "I do appreciate that this job may be a priority to you, but on the other hand, this could be one of those opportunities for upskilling to do something you are passionate about." I mean, such words, though they don't diminish the hardship—can usher in a glimmer of positivity.

This compassionate attitude toward the situation epitomises how such initiatives can give hope and dignity to the employees during this painful process of transition. It is important to keep in mind that neither the employee nor the organisation wants to end their



relationship on a sour note. By approaching layoffs with professionalism laced with humanity, HR can help ensure a transition to be as respectful and supportive as possible, even while it remains painful.

That being said, while layoffs can be one of the more challenging aspects of corporate life, there is certainly room for improvement in how these transitions are handled. Showing empathy, fostering clear communication, and providing support can greatly improve the experience for those undergoing layoffs. In times of uncertainty and change, it's important to remember that even small acts of kindness can make a difference.

Moreover, providing outplacement services, career counseling, and job search assistance can help laid-off employees find new opportunities more quickly. Encouraging networking and offering workshops on resume writing and interview skills can also make a significant difference. HR departments can collaborate with local businesses and employment agencies to create a support network for those affected.

By taking these extra steps, companies can demonstrate a genuine commitment to the well-being of their employees, even in difficult times. This holistic approach not only aids in the immediate transition but also helps maintain a positive company reputation in the long term.

(The writer is a motivator; views are personal)

NATO: A legacy of conflict and controversy



NILANTHA LANGAMUWA

As the alliance celebrates its 75th milestone, it faces scrutiny for its violations of international law and its failure to protect civilians in numerous conflicts

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), widely regarded as the most notorious and venomous military alliance in history, celebrated its 75th anniversary in Washington this week, amidst claims of establishing global peace. However, NATO's actions have often spread war across continents in pursuit of supremacy. Following a disastrous performance in the presidential debate, President Joe Biden unsurprisingly announced increased military aid to Ukraine, targeting their 'designated enemy' at the expense of this small European nation. NATO's ambitions are clear: to weaken Russia through proxy wars and to provoke China into potential conflict in Asia.

However, finding examples where NATO has truly ensured peaceful lives for ordinary people, rather than pursuing its broader goal of supremacy through alliances with enemies of its enemies, remains challenging. NATO must be held accountable for its violations of international law and its failure to protect unarmed civilians in nearly every conflict it has engaged in since its inception. While NATO celebrated its 75th anniversary, mainstream media barely acknowledged the 25th anniversary of NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia—a glaring failure of this war-oriented alliance. June 10 marks the 25th anniversary of the end of NATO's bombing campaign in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, initiated without UN Security Council approval and lasting 78 days. NATO dropped 22,000 tonnes of bombs, including 15 tonnes of depleted uranium, resulting in over 2,500 deaths, including 79 children, and displacing over a million residents. The aftermath included long-term health and environmental impacts from depleted uranium munitions. In the decade following the bombing, approximately 30,000 people in Serbia developed cancer, with over 10,000 deaths. Studies indicate increased cancer rates and other serious health issues among children born after 1999. Three thousand victims have filed lawsuits against NATO, despite the alliance claiming immunity based on agreements with Serbia and Montenegro.

Serbian experts dispute this, stating that no agreements grant NATO immunity for past war crimes. NATO's attempts to evade accountability only accentuate its war crimes and the suffering it caused. Since its establishment, NATO's military operations have frequently resulted in chaos and trauma rather than peace and stability. From April 1992 to December 1995, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina erupted among its three main ethnic groups over their future and territorial divisions. Shortly before the outbreak of war in Bosnia, NATO hastily recognised Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence, exacerbating ethnic conflicts in the region. NATO launched extensive airstrikes against Bosnian Serbs, eventually compelling the three ethnic groups to sign the Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As a consequence, 278,000 civilians perished, over 2 million people became refugees, and the war inflicted more than \$5.1 billion in direct economic losses, with the majority of economic facilities destroyed. The Kosovo War, ignited by ethnic tensions and led by the US-backed NATO without UN authorisation, lasted from March 24, 1999, to June 10, 1999. The three-month bombing campaign caused 1,800 civilian deaths, 6,000 injuries, and sub-



stantial infrastructure damage, amounting to economic losses of \$150 billion. This marked NATO's first offensive war against a sovereign state without UN approval, marking a shift towards interventionism and expansionism.

NATO's actions violated international law, including the UN Charter and the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, through the use of force against Belgrade. Despite this, no NATO member has been fully held accountable for their actions, in stark contrast to incidents involving their erstwhile 'puppets', such as the swift hanging of Saddam Hussein of Iraq by Western forces or the extrajudicial killing of Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, famously remarked on by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when, 'We came, we saw, he died.' In Afghanistan, the US-led NATO coalition launched a war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban on October 7, 2001, in response to the September 11 attacks.

The two-decade-long conflict ended abruptly with the withdrawal of US and NATO forces in May 2021, resulting in 241,000 deaths, including 71,000 civilians, and displacing millions.

The war generated significant economic losses, averaging approximately \$45 million per day, and led to social disorder in Afghanistan, with 72% of the population living below the poverty line and 3.5 million children deprived of education. A new report issued this Monday by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) revealed shocking statistics: over 24% of Afghan children aged 5-17 experience anxiety, while 15% suffer from depression in this war-torn country.

This is the legacy left behind by those who claimed they could guarantee a peaceful life under a rule-based system founded on democratic norms. During this period, terrorist networks such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and Al-Qaeda expanded, worsening regional instability. This pattern of devastation persisted in Iraq and Libya, where NATO interventions

resulted in substantial civilian casualties and prolonged instability. NATO's actions consistently undermined peace and security, earning it a reputation as a war machine rather than a force for peace. However, in Ukraine, NATO finds itself in disarray, having underestimated Russia's determination to defend its interests while overestimating its ability to expand its military alliance to Moscow's doorstep. The strategy of flooding Ukraine with weaponry for swift victory has backfired, with Russia proving resilient in defence.

As the conflict drags on, NATO member states face escalating costs and inflationary debt, while Ukraine depletes its fighting-age soldiers. Western leaders, deeply invested in the conflict, encounter diminishing confidence in Ukraine's capacity to reclaim territories without escalating the conflict and potentially involving NATO troops—a move that lacks public support. In recent months, Russia has made incremental territorial gains, advancing in the Kharkiv Oblast and compelling Ukrainian forces to retreat from a neighbourhood in Chasiv Yar, Donetsk.

However, the lack of significant progress has raised doubts about Russia's capabilities. While struggling to maintain the frontline, Ukraine has targeted Russian ships, energy depots, and border regions with drones, resulting in casualties. Two and a half years into the conflict, neither side appears capable of achieving a military solution. Ukraine faces substantial challenges in reclaiming captured territories, while Russia's aggression has bolstered NATO's resolve, which now pledges long-term support for Kyiv. A viable resolution entails bringing both parties to the negotiating table. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi have expressed support for dialogue. Russia's allies should urge President Vladimir Putin to cease hostilities and engage earnestly in negotiations, while Ukraine's supporters should encourage Kyiv to consider peace talks—although NATO vehement-

ly opposes this idea. With American elections looming, a Trump victory could pave the way for a negotiated settlement, whereas a Biden re-election might prolong the conflict, potentially transforming Ukraine into another Afghanistan or Vietnam. Meanwhile, Russia's economy has strengthened despite sanctions, buoyed by trade partnerships with China and India.

Historians might view the US-led NATO expansion as a strategic failure that catalysed the formation of an alliance among BRICS nations to counter NATO. President Xi Jinping perceives Putin as pivotal in opposing the United States and its allies, although a new Trump administration could potentially avert broader conflict and repair relations with adversaries. The summit's news report highlighted NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners—Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand—launching four joint projects aimed at deepening cooperation, announced by US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan at the NATO Defence Industry Forum. Amidst the celebration of this military alliance, Asia faces the daunting task of safeguarding its position against a coalition adept at leveraging proxies to achieve its objectives. This historical pattern resonates with poignant examples throughout history.

Asia's imperative now is to cultivate robust trade relationships and settle territorial disputes through constructive dialogue, preempting external interference. History presents a stark choice: yield to foreign ambitions, akin to the post-World War II tragedies and subsequent killing fields from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and West Asia to present-day conflicts in Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, or thrive together in dignified coexistence. The path to a peaceful future hinges on a unified commitment to peace and saying no to NATO and its proxies. Better the devil you know than the angel you don't.

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

AMIDST THE CELEBRATION OF THIS MILITARY ALLIANCE, ASIA FACES THE DAUNTING TASK OF SAFEGUARDING ITS POSITION AGAINST A COALITION ADEPT AT LEVERAGING PROXIES TO ACHIEVE ITS OBJECTIVES

Modi-Putin summit revives India-Russia relations amid global tensions

The meeting underscored India's strategic balancing act between global powers while prioritising its own economic and security needs

Just when there was a growing perception that ties between India and Russia were losing momentum, even stagnating, the summit-level meeting between PM Narendra Modi and President Vladimir Putin should help impart a fresh impetus to bilateral relations.

Held after a gap of over two years, amid the ongoing geopolitical churn, the 22nd summit saw the two sides resolve to unlock the full potential of their strategic partnership. The summit's outcomes conveyed New Delhi's intent to continue to forge closer ties with Moscow, notwithstanding the widespread Western opprobrium Putin has drawn after Russia invaded Ukraine and the consequent sanctions slapped on



PARUL CHANDRA

his country. With Putin preoccupied with the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, now into its third year, the summit-level meetings had fallen by the wayside. The last summit was held in New Delhi in December 2021.

The summit indicated eagerness on the part of both sides not to just reinvigorate the 'Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership', but also make economic cooperation

the lynchpin of the relationship. This was reflected in a separate joint statement spelling out nine key areas for economic cooperation, with a new bilateral trade target of \$100 billion being set for 2030. While the Modi-Putin Summit left Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressing "disappointment and a devastating blow to peace efforts to see the leader of the world's largest democracy hug the world's most bloody criminal", it's unlikely to hurt New Delhi's close ties with Kyiv. Modi did tell Putin "there is no peace on the battlefield" while reiterating India's position on the need for dialogue. While Washington also expressed its displeasure over the Modi-

Putin meeting, it is unlikely that will allow this to impact the trajectory of its ties with Moscow, propelled as they are by India's strategic imperatives. One of them, of course, is the tightening Russia-China embrace. The thrust on closer ties with Russia will also help address Moscow's concerns over New Delhi's decidedly pronounced tilt towards Washington. India has so far managed to do a fine balancing act between the two geopolitical rivals and should continue to do so.

India sees Russia as a time-tested trusted partner. Much as the Western world would like to keep a sanctions-hit Russia isolated over the Ukraine war, India's push for broader and deeper economic linkages reflects its own strategic



needs. India's purchase of Russian oil despite the sanctions will not just continue but is expected to increase further. Crude imports from Russia have increased from 2.5 million tonnes in 2021 to 90 million tonnes in 2023, with India being clear this is vital for its energy security. Investments in the energy sector by both sides also remain a top priority.

Fertilizer imports from Russia, too, are seen as vital for India's agriculture sector. Russian oil imports have helped push the bilateral trade figures to \$65.70 billion. But while Indian imports were worth \$61.44 billion, its exports accounted for a mere \$4.26 billion. While happy to import Russian oil at discounted rates, New Delhi will need to address this trade imbalance by widening the trade basket with Russia. Among the major export items from India are pharmaceuticals, organic chemicals, iron and steel and electrical machinery.

That the two sides agreed to look at the possibility of eliminating non-tariff trade barriers and the setting up of a Eurasian Economic Union

(EAEU)-India Free Trade Area shows the seriousness of intent to promote bilateral trade. The nudge to begin full negotiations for a free trade agreement between India and the EAEU too should lend a fillip to trade ties. Connectivity too remains a priority for both sides. It would mean access for Indian goods to the Eurasian markets. However, the proposed INSTC (International North-South Transport) Corridor is still a long way away from becoming a reality. While there is renewed interest between the two sides to establish a Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor, which was first mooted in 2019, it also remains to be seen whether it will fructify. The summit, of course, also emphasized

the importance of robust cooperation in the defence sector, which is an important element of India's security paradigm. Russia remains India's biggest arms supplier despite New Delhi's continuing efforts to diversify by turning to others like the US, France and Israel to meet its requirements. India would have undoubtedly sought to address its concerns over the delays in the supply of Russian military hardware and spares owing to the Ukraine war. The Modi-Putin Summit may have left the West flummoxed, but it's fairly obvious New Delhi will plough its furrow so long as it serves its strategic priorities. The writer is a senior journalist who writes on foreign affairs. (The writer is a senior journalist; views are personal)

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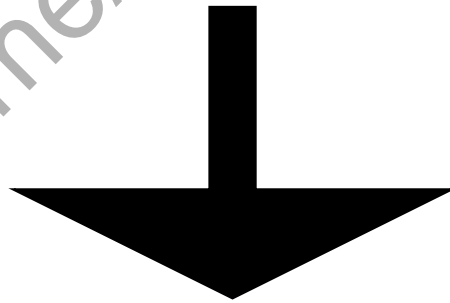
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